

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

#### 1.1.1 The Context of Vietnam after *Doi Moi*

Since the 1986 *Doi Moi* economic reforms which translate as “Renovation”, 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 turned to be an increasingly dynamic and active player on 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 of 1995 marked a milestone when Vietnam became the seventh member of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. Naya and Plummer (1997) claim that Vietnam's accession to ASEAN has important real as well as symbolic value. 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 increasing dominance of pop culture in the 1990s (Le 2011). Attracting and satisfying 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 (2014) also indicates that from the early 1990s, a significant number of videos from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the USA entered Vietnam; and particularly, young Vietnamese people started

embracing the new types of music, dance and drama flowing into the country. 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 the markets for Korean popular cultural products (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 made advantages by the development of mass media, especially television and the Internet. In Vietnam, television is assessed as the most powerful and effective form of mass media, with 85 per cent 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 two hours a day (Vietnam Plus.vn 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.vn 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.vn 2012). In term of using the Internet, Vietnam first connected to the World Wide Web (Internet) in 1991, but only since 1997 has the Internet been officially used and developed in Vietnam (International Telecommunication Union 2002). By 2011, the whole country had 26.8 million netizens out of a total population of 91.5 million people, more than one-third of the population used the Internet and around 95% of those people were between 15 and 24 years and living in urban Vietnam, mainly Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Cimigo 2011).

Concretely, the booming of television channels and internet service in parallel with the competition in the field of visual media to satisfy audiences' demand for entertainment content create 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 Co. - a Vietnamese film importer and producer, there are not enough Chinese and Korean dramas to satisfy local demand; hence the importers or TV channels in Vietnam have turned to films from other countries (www.talkvietnam.com 2013). In addition, Vietnamese audiences have been well-familiar with Chinese and Korean television dramas for a long time; and 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 Co. - a company providing media service in Vietnam, the quality of Vietnamese soap operas remains relatively low (www.talkvietnam.com 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 (www.talkvietnam.com 2013).

Generally, the emerging 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 into global cultural products. Vietnam’s participation in ASEAN has also provided better opportunities to promote economic collaboration and cultural exchanges between 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.

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

The primary background worthy to noted 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 the two nations of 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 (2007), bilateral trade between Vietnam and Thailand exceeded US\$4.2 billion in 2006. Furthermore, in 2007, Thailand was ranked third in ASEAN and twelfth

among 77 countries/territories investing in Vietnam. Vietnam and Thailand are known as the two biggest rice exporters in the world, and two sides have agreed to conduct rice export co-operation in order to co-ordinate in 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 signed an agreement to establish a joint commission on economics, science and technology between the two governments and implemented four sessions up to 2008 (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Republic of the Philippines 2007). Moreover, two-way trade reached US\$1.12 billion 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 per-cent 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-operations between Vietnam and Thailand, as well as between Vietnam and the Philippines in various fields provide conditions to facilitate the flow of products, including current cultural products between Vietnam and the two ASEAN countries. Particularly, 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). Moreover, 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 (ASCC Blueprint 2009).

The ASCC Blueprint (2009) 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. This policy is likely to promote free flows of cultural products among ASEAN nations. Cultural products are considered to be a means to enhance the international image and prestige of a country (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 (2009) 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.

Today while the popularity of Korean popular culture remains high, both Thai and Filipino television series have been welcomed by Vietnamese audiences. 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 has come at the same time that the AEC focusing on and promoting deeper understandings and integrations among ASEAN. Thus, it can be said that the 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 both 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 chapter, the progress that 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 a few 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 have been daily household entertainment for a long time (tinviet.net.vn 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)* (tinviet.net.vn 2013). Due to the popularity of these shows, the cable channels have scheduled specific show-times for broadcasting Thai soap operas (tinviet.net.vn 2013). 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 given 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.

Moreover, with the advent of digital technology, the past few years have seen a new phenomenon characterized by fans of Thai dramas beginning to subtitle their favorite series in Vietnamese and upload them on the Internet. Several web pages, such as: Kites.vn, SIAMovies.vn, and ChuonChuonCanhSen, were started by the 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 which share their wishes to keep watching Thai dramas, and encourage 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 keep closely following 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 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 (phunuonline.com.vn 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 (phunuonline.com.vn 2013). Generally, Filipino soap operas are broadcasted mainly on the cable TV channels of SCTV4, SCTV5, SCTV6<sup>1</sup> and Today TV and are dubbed in Vietnamese (phunuonline.com.vn 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 *lakorn*, 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.

## **1.2 Statement of Research Problem and Justification**

As mentioned, unlike Korean or Chinese dramas which have already been familiar with 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. 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 which is more familiar to the tastes of Vietnamese viewers. In other words, they are more “proximate” to the Vietnamese life.

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<sup>1</sup> SCTV4, SCTV5 and SCTV6 are channels provided by Saigon Tourist Cable Service (SCTV) which is one of famous cable TV networks in Vietnam.

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 (tinviet.net.vn 2013). Compare 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 (tinviet.net.vn 2013). Moreover, the topics exploited in Thai series are more diverse, such as family relationships, class conflict, or 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 (tinviet.net.vn 2013). In addition, Thai soaps portray images about Thailand – a country with famous destinations for travelling (tinviet.net.vn 2013). Also, Thai producers are notably good at depicting special cultural features of Thailand on screen (www.nld.com.vn 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 by the participation of many beautiful actresses and actors with "Western facial features" and good acting skills (www.talkvietnam.com 2013). The portrayal of female characters with personalities of meekness and devotion (living their life for their loved ones) is close with the Vietnamese concept of "good women". Filipino producers also create several sequencing climaxes in their series which effectively perpetuate the audience watching the series (giadinh.net.vn 2014). In addition, Filipino dramas are set in beautiful locations such as in the forests or at the beaches (giadinh.net.vn 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 (phunuonline.com.vn 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 in the Vietnamese market (www.talkvietnam.com 2013).



In her study about the Thai cultural industry in relation to intra-Asia flows of popular culture, Siriyuvasak (2010) 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. 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 (2010: 174) stated that the situation of the “‘weaker’ cultural economy in Southeast Asia” may be on the progress of well-changing, especially with the rise of Thai dramas in Southeast Asia and mainland China. The broadcasting of *Battle of Angels* by Anhui Satellite TV in 2009 has 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 China TV stations because of their competitive prices. 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 (2011) hence presumed that Thai popular culture, particularly its TV dramas, could possibly become the next wave in the largest TV market in Asia. Although it still faces problems and shortcomings, the Thai cultural industry may gain transformation 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. This flow is partially attributed to the strategy of promoting cultural exchange between ASEAN nations, which is one of the crucial tasks for integration of the ASEAN Community. Vietnamese audiences gain advantages from the flow when they can both enjoy and interpret Thai series to get more knowledge and understanding about another ASEAN nation.

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 survival of big TV companies (Pasadilla and Lantin Jr. 2005). Therefore, the opportunity for TV broadcasting in the Philippines lies in expanding their TV viewers - both local viewers and international viewers, especially overseas Filipino contract workers 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, 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 diaspora groups (Hookway 2004). Therefore, many Filipino migrant workers send monthly remittances to their families in the Philippines (Hookway 2004) and also frequently return to visit home between overseas jobs (Hookway 2009). At this time, they become fans of shows broadcasting domestically on TV; hence, when they come back to their works in abroad, they expect 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 station 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: 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 (2009), 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. 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 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 that the big TV networks in the Philippines promote their cultural products transnationally, Hookway (2002) 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. The recent appearance of Filipino soap operas in Vietnam lies under the strategy of widening their TV viewers market. 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 (2008), cultural products can be one of soft power's sources when they are usually

employed by great powers to advertise their international image and prestige, and they are always attached with political context. Achieving soft power through the spread of cultural products aims to change the perceptions, preferences, interpretive frameworks, and emotions of “recipient” (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 (New York Times 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 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 especially, the Thai *Full House* remade version has enjoyed impressive 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 the 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 2008 research on the consumption of Thai TV dramas among the Shan community in Burma or Yongye's 2012 work on the consumption of Asian series, including Thai series, among the Hmong community in Laos. In the present study, 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 the Vietnamese audiences gain understanding about the two countries, which partly contributes to the regionalization process driven by 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 help audiences to move through great distances without physically travelling from local sites; therefore, media are seen as "...crucial components of transnationalism; stationary audiences in effect become transnational" (Amporn 2008: 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 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 Vision 2020 1997). In order to motivate cultural integration, it is necessary to increase people-to-people contacts among ASEAN member nations (ASCC Blueprint 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 study 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 coming of the AEC.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study concerns the flows of media products (soap operas) from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam and seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1.3.1 What are the factors that help facilitate the flows of Thai and Filipino dramas to Vietnamese audiences?
- 1.3.2 How do Vietnamese audiences perceive Thai and Filipino series in relations to national image, culture and gender?
- 1.3.3 How has consuming Thai and Filipino cultural products changed perceptions of Vietnamese viewers towards Thailand and the Philippines?

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

This research paper aims to explore two main points, as follows:

- 1.4.1 To analyze the rise of Thai and Filipino dramas and their success across the ASEAN region, specifically in Vietnam.
- 1.4.2 To investigate the influence of such soap operas towards Vietnamese people's perception about Thailand and the Philippines.

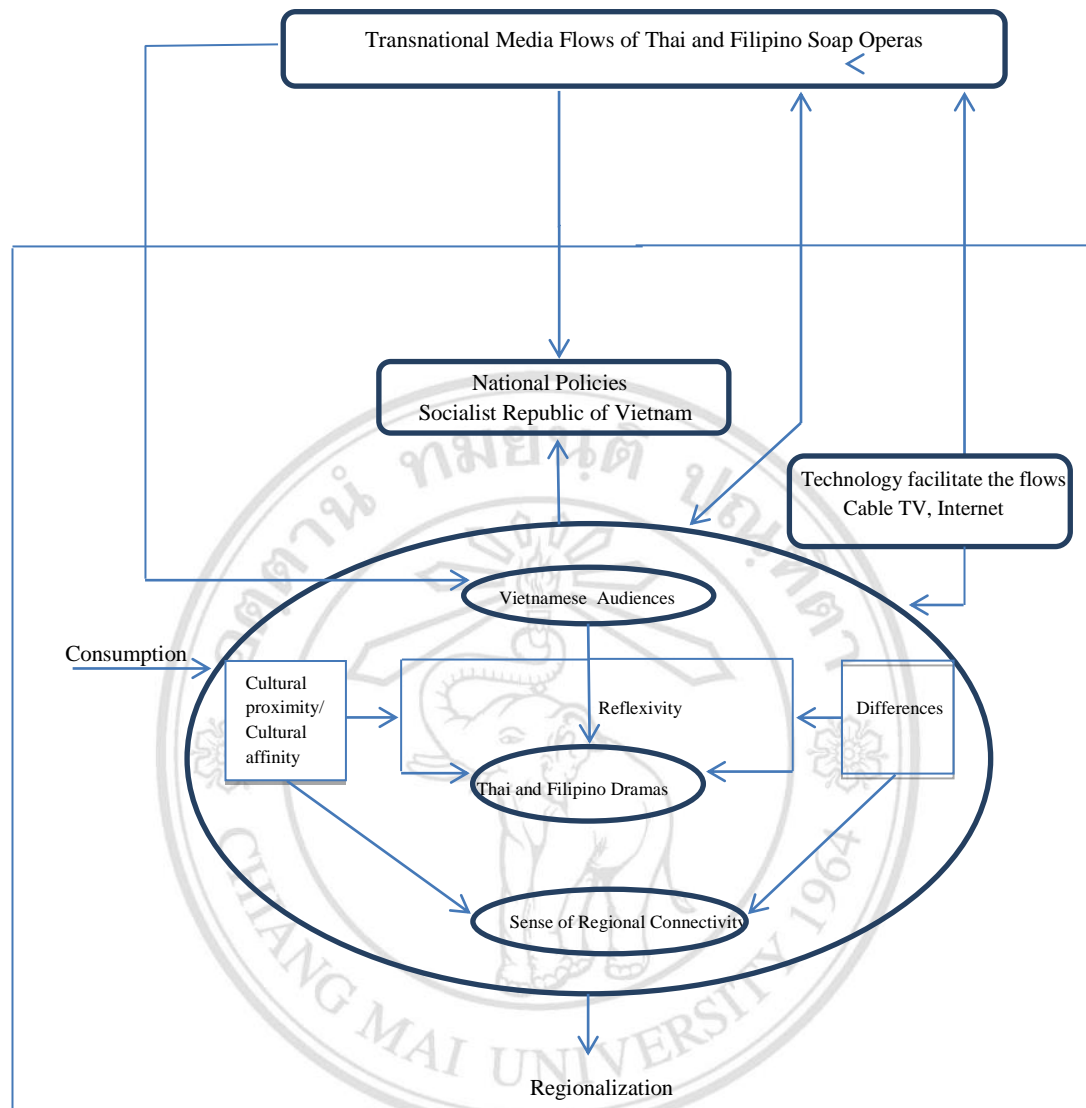
### **1.5 Conceptual Framework**

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 product 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". Vietnamese viewers' perceptions towards the other two ASEAN nations of Thailand and the Philippines through consuming their series will be operationalized by applying the notion of cultural proximity, cultural affinity and reflexivity.



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**Figure 1.1** Conceptual Framework of the Study (by the author)

## 1.6 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 these two cities. Thus, people living in the cities have advantageous sources to approach with 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 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* through cable TV channels. However, according to a survey implemented by GALLUP (2013), 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. Moreover, these two metropolis locate 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 s, 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 can be seen 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 to their interpretations to *lakorns*. As such, choosing the research sites in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City provided for the researcher an advantage to approach people for the interview and 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 images. 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 connection at home, audiences can access to the Internet in many public places as they own mobile electronic equipment such as smartphone, ipad, tablet, laptop and notebook with functions of 3G and Wireless connections. Thus, they can 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. It can be seen that the

audiences are manipulated by TV when watching the series on this equipment while they can have more active manipulations on what they want to watch when following the series on the Internet. Moreover, on the Internet, it is known that there are tons of foreign dramas uploaded. Hence, it can be said that Thai and Filipino series uploaded and updated (for *lakorns*) on some web pages and many audiences choosing to watch the series on the Internet partially reflects to the popularity of *lakorns* and *teleseryes* in Vietnam nowadays. For *lakorns*, choosing the source to watch affects the perceptions of audiences towards Thailand. As indicated previously, the cable TV channels usually airs old Thai series originally produced a few years back while some Internet sites update the latest dramas. Thus, images on Thailand in the *lakorns* broadcasted on TV are old and not updated as those aired on the Internet. This leads to different perceptions towards this country because the audiences watch Thai dramas having different points of time settings. Nonetheless, nowadays, the cable TV channels attempt to broadcast Thai and Filipino series which their originally produced times are not too far with the present in order to capture more viewers and improve competitive strength.

#### **Unit of analysis**

In this study, 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 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 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 study 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 year olds watching Thai and Filipino dramas in Vietnam. However, they mostly follow the series on TV, not on the Internet. Many of them access to the Internet every day for different purpose but it is rare for them to spend time on 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, a translator for Filipino series 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 also locate 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 staffs in private companies.

In-depth interviews were applied using a set of questions (see Appendix A) 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 working 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 are 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 the websites SIAMovies.vn website, but just met with the producer of the ChuonChuonCanh Sen<sup>2</sup> page in Ho Chi Minh City. The group discussion method were 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 basing on the questionnaire for casual audiences (see Appendix A). 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

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<sup>2</sup> ChuonChuonCanh Sen have a face-book page in the address <https://vvn.facebook.com/ChuonChuonCanhSen>, and You Tube page in the address <https://www.youtube.com/user/ChuonChuonCanhSen1>

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 (see Appendix B).

*Audiences – The TV channel Let's Viet's staff:* This channel does not broadcast Filipino dramas. Five staff members who 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 were 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 lots of understanding about Thailand before. 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 (see Appendix C)

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 actually 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 (see Appendix A). 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.

### **1.7 Organization of the Thesis**

This thesis comprises six chapters, based upon main concepts of the following: (1) Transnational media flow, (2) Media consumption, and (3) Cultural proximity, cultural affinity and reflexivity. Each chapter in this thesis deals with materials, processes, institutions and issues central to understanding the consumption of Thai and Filipino TV soap operas among Vietnamese audiences in relation to the regionalization process in ASEAN. The introductory chapter provides a general background to support readers in comprehending the current flows and popularity of Thai and Filipino cultural products in Vietnam, as well as in the region. It introduces the phenomenon about the appearance and recent spread of Thai and Filipino TV dramas and the importance of discussing them in the Vietnamese context, as well as the key theoretical concepts and keywords addressed by the thesis and research method. The related scholarly literature on Thai and Filipino cultural industries, regional media flows, and the construction of understandings towards Thailand and the Philippines among the audiences after they consume and interpret their TV series is also briefly discussed, in order to extend the argument more broadly to include the issue of regionalization in the large context of promotion of the ASEAN community building with deeper integrations among regional countries in economic and cultural fields.

Chapter 1 here has provided crucial information about the context of the study, and has introduced the key terms used and discussed in the research problem, research questions and objectives. The conceptual framework has also been presented, along with the methodology applied and the organization of this thesis.

In Chapter 2, the literature review and the theoretical concepts of the study are presented.

In Chapter 3, “Transnational flows of media products from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam” are discussed. This chapter indicates institutional factors facilitating the flows of Thai and Filipino series to Vietnam, which are assisted by the collected data. It illustrates the main theoretical points introduced in Chapter 2, with a more expanded discussion of the relevant scholarship.

Chapter 4, entitled “Audience Interpretations of Thai and Filipino Television Dramas”, shows the data obtained in order to describe and explain in more depth the relevant scholarship about perception of the audiences towards Thailand and the Philippines after watching their dramas, which contributes to bringing about understanding for Vietnamese viewers on the two ASEAN countries and facilitating the regionalization process driven by the men.

Chapter 5, “Audience Perceptions on ‘Cultural Proximity’ and ‘Cultural Differences’ towards Thailand and the Philippines in Relation with ASEAN Connectivity”, discusses more key theoretical points introduced in Chapter 2. It analyzes both similar and different characteristics between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines which the audiences perceive from consuming *lakorns* and *teleseryes*. Furthermore, it discusses opportunities and challenges to widen and increase 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. It covers the major findings of the research, plus focuses on the issue to construct sense of belonging into the community for ASEAN citizens, particularly for Vietnamese citizens, which is regarded as one of the important factors promoting regional integration among Southeast Asian countries.

Chapter 6 concludes crucial findings of the study. It also mentions some of the limitations of the research, and addresses the contribution of the thesis in terms of the current academic environment. Policy suggestions are given in this chapter. Future study recommendations are also briefly described that might be implemented on the thesis topic.