

Chapter 5

Audience Perceptions on “Cultural Proximity” and “Cultural Differences” towards Thailand and the Philippines in in Relation with ASEAN Connectivity

This chapter analyzes deeper about perceptions of “proximity” and “differences” towards Thailand and the Philippines which are based on the audience interpretations on 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 on cultural proximity and differences toward Thailand and Philippines after watching their dramas facilitate the regionalization process motivated by men in the way that they both provide understanding about the two countries for Vietnamese audiences.

5.1 Audience Perceptions on “Cultural Proximity”

It is clear that 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, which are not proximate with Vietnamese. However, Thai and Filipino dramas are translated into Vietnamese once they are exported to Vietnam. Therefore, language is not a dominant factor affecting Vietnamese audiences’ interpretations of cultural proximity toward Thailand and the Philippines. 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. Respect for family values is primarily recognized by the viewers because it is close to the 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 obligation is understood as family members need to take care of each other. The mutual obligations with defined tasks of 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 they get married and have their own families, they are expected to assist younger siblings with school and work after graduation (family.jrank.org 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 (family.jrank.org 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 makes Vietnamese audiences easily accept the dramas when they show a similar cultural background that helps to understand the context where those dramas’ stories take place.

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 attach with the role of housewife and mother, which is very similar with the ideology about the roles of men and women in Vietnamese culture. The highest status in Vietnamese families belongs to men; thus, they generally have absolute authority in the household. As men provide the main source of income for their family, they are never expected to work in the kitchen or cook. Because they are also the head of the family, they can make final decisions in all matters, although they may consult with their wife or children. In contrast, Vietnamese women have limited rights and take a secondary place in the family. After marriage, women have to take responsibilities of housewife and mother. Today in Vietnam women have more freedom to study and establish their

career, but 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 combats because of war, and women look after children, family and all kinds of farm work as Thailand is mainly agricultural economy (www.ukessays.com 2015). For Thai women, when they work out of the domestic sphere, they are often seen as deviant. On the contrary, when they act as mothers, they receive considerable respect and are even to be more moral than men (Alcano et.al. nd). As for the importance of the elderly in Thailand, younger people listen to older people, 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 (www.ukessays.com 2015). Similar to Vietnam and Thailand, in the Philippines, men are traditionally more dominant than women in society (voicelab9.wordpress.com 2015). The men are expected to have more freedom and provide for their families, while the women usually are usually occupied with housework and taking care of the elderly as well as children of the household (cgacadthephilippines.weebly.com 2015).

Along with family values and gender roles, Vietnamese audiences also realize 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 challenges. In Thailand, Buddhism is the national religion with around 95 percent of the population following Buddhism (www.buddhanet.net. 2015). In Vietnam, although Buddhism is not the national religion, it is a popular religion where there is a high percentage of Buddhists in the country at 55 percent (www.buddhanet.net. 2015). The interviewees did not talk about their religions, but 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 live whereas bad characters would be punished strongly. 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 the individual actions and their 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 previous cruel actions.”

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

“I see that in Thai dramas bad people are usually punished by dead 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 are worthy 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 on 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 their own ways in Korean series. Vietnamese audiences are familiar with this ending format, so when watching *lakorns* with “heavier” endings they may feel scary but in parallel they feel more interesting and attractive as it presents a different thing with Korean dramas.

5.2 Audience Perceptions on “Cultural Differences”

In terms of cultural differences, the audiences show four points which are: behaviors between children and parents in the family, gender equality, attitude to third-sex issue, 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 more independent with 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 what 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 pressed to be tightly attached to the family and are active in their 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 also are 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 center in both *lakorns* and *teleseryes*. Being the center, they usually have advantages of 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 that Thai and Filipino women have 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 with the context in the former time when women in the countries were heavily subordinate to men. Moreover, this results from their society characteristics. In an online research paper about gender in Southeast Asia implemented

by Alcano et.al. (nd), it is shown that Thai women certainly have better social and economic positions in comparison to other Southeast Asian countries. Dolan (1991) also accentuates that women in Filipino society have always had more equality with men than was common in other parts of Southeast Asia. It may be explained by considering the relationship between the kinship system and gender in the region. According to Hirschman and Edward (2007: 4378), 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”. 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 north-eastern Thailand that standardly practice matrilocality (Dube 1994). With the bilateral kinship system, women in Southeast Asia are generally appreciated for their crucial economic roles when along with being wives and mothers they have always contributed to income-earning activities (Dube 1994). Participation in a wide range of tasks has helped Southeast Asian women’s economic autonomy and power; and this is truly seen among most Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian and Filipino women (Dube 1994). It is also worthy to note that Southeast Asian women have had a crucial presence in trade in both rural and urban markets when 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 have their own business and “are deeply involved in management” (Dube 1994: 7). The engagement of Southeast Asian women in many activities of income earning certainly brings to them relative freedom in their lives. Moreover, Southeast Asian countries including Thailand and the Philippines have a constitution which 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 (Romanow 2012); 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 (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 were imported into Vietnamese society, which led to a 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; and 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: 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 (2000) 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, care for and help each other; and husband and wife have equal obligations and rights in all aspects of their family. Especially, the *Mở Cửa* (Open Door) and *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) Policies have brought opportunities for women in terms of work force, 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. (2001) 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. 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 (1992) comments that the standpoint for thinking highly of men and subordinating women is a product of Confucianism, which has led to the deep implication for the tradition that has given greater domination, dignity and power to men and has limited women at home and bearing the children. Pham (1999) also concludes that it is difficult to develop the concept of equality in Vietnamese society.

The communist revolution, the Renovation Policy in the globalization process, along with the promotion of socialist-oriented market economy have contributed to add 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 Thai and Filipino men are depicted as not very patriarchal and more respectful 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 vision mirror which reflects society and in turn is modified by society, and fiction in dramas is "interwoven with events in the 'real' world" (Ahmet 2012: 4). The images of women and men in Thai and Filipino TV series are somewhat fictionalized as fiction can entertain audiences (Hall 1997) and it is a fantasy, imaginary solutions, some excitement and relaxation for viewers (Spence 2005). 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 basing 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, but mostly gay. This partially reflects to 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 from 2 March to 1 May 2013 in 39 countries with 37,653 respondents reveals 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 with 78 percent (UNDP and UNAID 2014). These figures are clear evidence for the increasing acceptance toward homosexual people in the Philippines, but it does 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). In fact, 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: 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 the people having homosexual orientation. Most people in Vietnam still stigmatize homosexuals as well as 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 of 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 those 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 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 above 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 for a long time, 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”, and “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 (2011) indicates that Filipino educational systems have mostly adopted American curricula even though it may not necessarily be relevant to their culture. 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 the control of 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.jrank.org 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.jrank.org 2015).

The points just analyzed can 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, for 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 see 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 just 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 closer affinity with Thailand and the Philippines.

5.3 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 of 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 large context of the coming AEC, there is entertainment demand of the Vietnamese audience 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 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” (ASCC Blueprint 2009: 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 more understanding about Thailand and the Philippines in different aspects of gender roles, cultures and national images. It is one of the ways to make people-to-

people links which 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. This, as analyzed above, is the progress to make citizen connectivity among ASEAN 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; and the last of these pillars is assessed as the most challenging one (Acharya 2008). In order to promote cultural integration in ASEAN, it needs to make 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, it is not equal for media flows 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 direction 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.eco.ku.ac.th 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 which 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, still 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 (2013) 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”. Mr. Vu Dang Dung, Vietnam’s Permanent Representative to ASEAN support this point and acknowledges that it is very hard to build a community if the 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. The sense supports to promote regional integration in ASEAN with the target “One Vision, One Identity, One Community” (ASEAN Annual Report 2008). 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 in his speech accentuates the importance of ASEAN citizens’ sense of belonging in promoting 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 (www.asean.org 2014). In the present 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 coming AEC at the end of 2015 through TV news or academic lessons in university. However, until now, they did not feel that AEC will affect them 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 pulls

Vietnam and the audiences themselves as one of Southeast Asian countries' citizens 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 feeling 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 come to the thought that they are Thailand and the Philippines and they 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 web page for Thai film SIAMovies.vn commented as follows:

"We have heard about the AEC and known 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 is 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 which 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 the sense of belonging to ASEAN. It is true when Esther et.al. (2014) 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. 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 (Hill and Menon 2010), ASEAN cannot successfully build up the ASEAN Community without the involvement of ASEAN citizens along with the attempts of political elites (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).

5.4 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 (2002), cultural proximity with Japan that Taiwanese audiences interpret through their consumption of Japanese cultural products comes from a sense of “coevalness”. 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 attractions. Looking at Korean dramas, they certainly show proximate “Asian” values but they also concentrate on drawing on their own traditional culture, which creates curiosity and attraction to 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 and keep them follow with Thai and Filipino dramas. 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 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 toward 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.

ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่
Copyright© by Chiang Mai University
All rights reserved