Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Major Findings of the Study

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

Another institutional factor facilitating these flows is Vietnam's policy to promote *Doi* Moi (*Renovation*) with economic reform implemented by the Vietnamese government in 1986. Vietnam has opened to the world, which not only helps to develop its economy but also promotes globalization taking place in the field of culture. Many foreign cultural products are imported to Vietnam. Today Vietnamese audiences can consume various cultural products from Hollywood, East Asia, and most recently from

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Southeast Asia – specifically Thai and Filipino TV dramas. The government in Vietnam has encouraged media development because they consider media as a means to broaden understanding about the world for its people. The encouragement for media development results in the spread of both cable and digital television and the Internet, which all facilitate people in the country to approach and consume diverse foreign entertainment programs. At the same time, it leads to strong competition between TV channels to capture TV viewers by satisfying their diverse entertainment demand. This complex demand is intertwined with the situation that in Vietnam nowadays Korean dramas are being degraded after having kept the dominant position for more than a decade. Korean TV series are no longer as popular as in previous periods and have to deal with the rapid change in the audiences' tastes. Moreover, it has been shown that the copyrights for Thai and Filipino dramas are cheaper than Korean ones. In addition, domestic cultural products in Vietnam have not yet been able to gain appreciation of audience. These factors clearly give Thai and Filipino series a competitive edge when entering Vietnam.

The appearance of Thai and Filipino media products in Vietnam is evidence for contra-media flows. In her research about East Asian cultural industries, Siriyuvasak (2010) argues that the rise of the flows of East Asian cultural products across Asia could be seen in terms of counter-hegemony to the West. The frequent depiction of East Asian mega-cities such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Seoul in the Asian popular cultural products might help to demonstrate and reinforce the cosmopolitanism of a new East Asia and its people. Iwabuchi (2004) also makes an argument that the inter-Asia flow of Japanese pop culture is considered to be influential force because it could counter the hegemony of the West and at the same time create a new image of "Asian modernity" for young consumers. Although Thai and Filipino media flows (soap operas) have not yet gained wide and long-standing popularity in the region as East Asian media flows have; in my point of view they can also be seen as counter-hegemonic flows to the West. The portrayal of big cities in Southeast Asia of Bangkok and Manila in Thai and Filipino TV series provides additional images of "Asian modernity" in general and of Southeast Asia in specific for regional consumers, including Vietnamese audiences. Moreover, along with the portrayal of cosmopolitan urban areas, Thai and Filipino dramas also depict images of mountainous and rural areas with rough roads and old ill-

equipped houses without modern cars and buildings, which is a notable feature in most countries in Southeast Asia.

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

Vietnamese audiences can make interpretations of proximate and different features towards Thailand and the Philippines through watching their dramas. Thai and Filipino series creators, in fact, learned experiences from Korean series when they both expose 'Asianess' and introduce their own culture to Asian audiences. This technique helps to create a feeling of familiarity and curiosity in audiences. As there has been a undeniable popularity of the Korean Wave in Asia, it has made wide effects on the cultural industries in Southeast Asia. *Lakorns* and *teleseyes* portray Asian values in their dramas. At the same time, they also expose their own cultural characteristics. This

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

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

The interpreted differences between Vietnam and these other two nations include the behavior among children and their parents, the equality between men and women, the third-sex issue, and cultural characteristics. It is indicated that in most Thai and Filipino soap operas, children respect and listen to their parents while parents also respect and listen to their children. This dynamic is different than in Vietnam where children are required to absolutely obey their parents. Many viewers agree that although Thai and Filipino women still have to implement their traditional roles as wives and mothers, they can gain more equality to men than Vietnamese women can. They are more independent, are quite free to pursue their careers, and get more respect and open

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

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

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live in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, two biggest cosmopolitan urban areas in Vietnam. The image of modern cellphone, luxurious houses and cars were thus not strange to them. All of the interviewed audience members use smart phone; and they may or may not experience living in nice houses or driving cars; however, they can easily see these things around them in the cities and thus have become familiar to urban modernity. The local economy in Vietnam has been able to partly provide experiences for the audiences in consumption of new technology, or Western commodities as a result of progress liberalizing and marketizing its economy.

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

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people are not yet able to do the same thing via Vietnamese series challenging the balance of the integration process.

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

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

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

6.2 Policy Recommendations

Based upon the analysis on transnational media flows from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam and the consumption of *lakorns* and *teleseryes* among Vietnamese audiences, the researcher have recommendations which are hoped to contribute to the progress of broadening circulation of cultural commodity in the region and promoting cultural integration through media consumption among ASEAN people. The recommendations are as follows:

For Vietnam, the government should be more aware of the important role of cultural industry. They need to build up policies for cultural industry development. Cultural products need to primarily gain appreciation of domestic audiences and this base would help to improve competitive strength for Vietnamese cultural industry in the region. Plans to increase the quality for media producing, specifically for producing TV series should be included crucial tasks of applying new technology in making dramas, training skills for actors and actresses and choosing quality drama scripts.

For Thailand, as Thai cultural products have entered intra-regional flows, Thai government should reinforce legal frameworks which can facilitate more for the transnational flows of their cultural products. Especially, Thai government should also encourage TV channels or media corporations establish advertise strategies for their products in foreign markets. This helps to increase the popularity and a number of fans for Thai cultural products internationally.

As Thailand, Filipino media products have joined the intra-regional flows. Hence, in order to increase the popularity of Filipino cultural products in other markets, Filipino government needs to consolidate official frameworks which support effectively for their cultural industry development. Moreover, broadcasting companies should be encouraged to continue advertising and exporting their media products internationally. However, Filipino producers need to improve cinematography technique for having better pictures on screen, and at the same time necessary to enrich contents on cultural characteristics in their soap operas, which helps audiences to know more about the national culture.

6.3 Limitations

Due to time and financial constraints, it was difficult to collect all of the required data. Among the methods used to collect data in the field, participatory observation and group discussion were not implemented as effectively as expected. Participatory observation could not be conducted with the majority of audience members because of their limited time and personal reasons. For group discussions, there were challenges of how to keep conversations on track with the expected topics and how to inspire people in the group to share their ideas enthusiastically. Moreover, this study could not cover the audiences who are housewives or workers in factories because of time and social network limitations. In addition, this research was conducted in specific areas, and because of that, the findings and recommendations may not be applied generally and to other places, as they may be dependent on the context.

This study should be considered as a beginning and one that can provide a good foundation for further and related research to explore more specific data and a more in-depth picture of the realities and complexities of this phenomenon. Thus, while the generalization of this study might be open to question, the value of cultural approach in interpreting cultural understanding has been demonstrated. Nonetheless, more research is needed, which should be based on empirical data collected from participation, interaction, and involvement with people in different places in order to develop greater understanding of this phenomenon.