

# The Effects of the Memorandum of Understanding to Televising Thai Soap Operas in P.R. China

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## **Abstract**

Thai soap operas have become increasingly popular among Chinese TV and Internet audience in recent years. As China is a massive potential market, introducing Thai soap operas to China is an important business opportunity for Thailand. In order to support the Thai entertainment business, the Thai and Chinese governments together signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, whereby Thai soap operas would be broadcast through China Central Television (CCTV) and each provincial television stations. The objective of this paper is to analyse the range of effects resulting from this co-operation. The study showed that Thailand benefits by this MOU. Conversely, Thai producers have been affected negatively by Chinese audience. It was found that consuming styles of the audience was only a negligible influence.

**Keywords:** Thai soap operas, Chinese audience, MOU

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## ผลกระทบจากข้อตกลงสนับสนุนการเผยแพร่ละครไทย ในสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีน

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### บทคัดย่อ

ละครไทยได้รับความนิยมในกลุ่มผู้ชมชาวจีนเป็นอย่างสูงในช่วงระยะเวลาสองสามปีที่ผ่านมา ทั้งที่รับชมผ่านทางสถานีโทรทัศน์และทางอินเทอร์เน็ต เป็นที่ทราบกันดีว่าสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนเป็นตลาดขนาดใหญ่ การนำเสนอละครไทยจึงเป็นอีกโอกาสในการทำธุรกิจอีกแบบหนึ่งของผู้ผลิตละครไทย ดังนั้น เพื่อที่จะส่งเสริมกิจกรรมบันเทิงไทยในสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนอย่างเป็นทางการ รัฐบาลไทยและจีน จึงได้ร่วมลงนามความตกลงและความตั้งใจร่วมกันที่จะส่งเสริมละครไทยในจีน โดยการเผยแพร่ทางสถานีโทรทัศน์ CCTV และทางสถานีโทรทัศน์ท้องถิ่นของมณฑลต่างๆ เมื่อวันที่ 12 พฤศจิกายน 2553 ที่ผ่านมานี้ความต้องการนำเสนอผลกระทบที่จะเกิดขึ้นจากบันทึกกล่าวดังกล่าวต่อผู้มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องภาคต่างๆ จากการศึกษาทำให้พบว่าผลกระทบที่เกิดขึ้นมีได้ 3 ทางคือ ทางบวกที่เกิดต่อประเทศทั้งในด้านเศรษฐกิจ สังคม และความร่วมมือกับสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนรวมถึงผู้ชมชาวจีน ในขณะที่ผู้ผลิตจะได้รับผลกระทบทางลบบางส่วน และไม่เกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงใดๆ ต่อลักษณะการเลือกรับชมของผู้ชมชาวจีน

**คำสำคัญ:** ละครไทย ผู้ชมชาวจีน ข้อตกลงสนับสนุนการเผยแพร่ละครไทย

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Following a decade of the Korean wave, Thai soap operas are currently all the rage amongst Chinese audience. Anhui Television of Anhui province has already purchased the rights to air nearly twenty Thai TV series in mainland China. Since then there have been some discussions on the Internet as to whether or not the upcoming Thai broadcasts will soon nudge the Korean shows out of the market. This popularisation of Thai TV shows has led both government and private entertainment companies to pay more attention to this new market.



Figure 1 Head line news from Hainan newspaper website

As illustrated in Figure 1, “8部泰剧明星月底来华” was posted on the website of a Hainan newspaper. It said that eight famous Thai actors are to visit China at the end of this month. It also says that they are going to hold a publicity campaign for their series, which will be broadcast by Anhui Television within the coming year (2011). (钟新, 2010)

## Background Regarding Thai Soap Operas in P.R. China

The first two Thai soap operas to be made available to Chinese audience were Sapai Gon Krua (Thai: สะใภ้กำนันครัว, Chinese: 俏女佣) and Luad Hong (Thai: เลือดหงส์, Chinese: 凤凰血), which were both aired on CCTV8. The third, a romance entitled The Princess (Thai: เลือดขัตติยา, Chinese: 出逃的公主), was the first to make a substantial impact on Chinese viewers, and attracted much more attention for both the stories and the actors coming out of Thailand. As a result, Tik Jessadaporn, the main actor of the drama, has become one of the best-known Thai actors in China. He has been dubbed the Thai Wang Leehom by his Chinese fans.

The second show to be noticed by Chinese viewers was War of Angels (Thai: สงครามนางฟ้า, Chinese: 天使之争), broadcast by Anhui Television. The first two soap operas were all romantic love stories, 天使之争's thrilling storyline showed other variety of Thai soap operas, which is different from the previous ones.

Beginning with the well-known Love of Siam (Thai: รักแห่งสยาม, Chinese: 暹罗之恋 or 爱在暹罗), Thai cinema has enjoyed a simultaneous peak in popularity lately. Love of Siam was followed by A Bangkok Love Story (Thai: เพื่อน ภูรักมิ่ง, Chinese: 曼谷之恋), Art of the Devil (Thai: ลอของ, Chinese: 恶魔的艺术), The Shutter (Thai: ชัตเตอร์, Chinese: 鬼影), Ong Bak (Thai: องค์บาก, Chinese: 拳霸), and Tom Yum Kung (Thai: ต้มยำกุ้ง, Chinese: 冬阴功). Because of its unique style, Thai cinema has become even more popular than Korean cinema and has helped to boost Thai soap operas viewing figures in China significantly.

## Popularity of Thai Soap Operas

Very soon after the first series were broadcast in China, interest in Thai entertainment grew dramatically with audience of between 700 and 800 million (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, 2011) tuning in on CCTV 8 and via satellite, namely Anhui Television. This is some ten times the population of Thailand itself. There is also a healthy number of online viewers. Youku, for instance, is the favorite video-hosting site in China, and comes back with over 120,000 results for the keywords " 泰国电视剧 " (Thai drama) " 泰国连续剧 " (Thai Series) and " 泰剧 " (Thai drama in short)<sup>3</sup>. Table 1 showed the number of video retrieved from www.youku.com, which were compared the numbers of videos produced by the first four countries which are available in China. Moreover, this figure does not account for the total number of clicks for each video; it can therefore be inferred that website views exceed 10 million.

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved in February 2011

**Table 1 Comparison of the Amount of Videos Originated in Four Countries Retrieved from www.youku.com**

Thailand	Korea	Japan	United States
124185	352610	213053	4501

(source: www.youku.com, retrieved on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

The reasons that Thai soap operas become more popular are described as follows.

Firstly, there is unanimous agreement that Thai actors and actresses are extremely attractive. One of the issues arising among TV soap operas viewers is that there are few accusations of doing surgery among Thai stars comparing to those of Korean. This is significant evidence to compliment and support the belief that the nature is better. Besides, most of well-known Thai stars are the mixed decent which differentiates their appearance. After long time of seeing the Korean surgery-beauty style, the audience then found that Thai nature-beauty style is even more interesting (Hua, 2010).

Secondly, Thai soap operas have been composed of new and interesting plots. Zhang Ying (2010) has analyzed the main reason for the decline in popularity for Korean soaps as follows: The audience's expectation to follow the trials and tribulations of new characters is not being met; viewers are finding that the "new" characters are too similar to those of previous series. Additionally, and probably unsurprisingly, storylines are not fresh or engaging enough, either. Both the plots and the characters stick to previously successful forms; production teams don't dare challenging themselves or their audience. Thai soaps generally are no greater than those of Hong Kong, Taiwan or Korean, but their plots, arising as they do from a different culture, combined with talented actors and actresses, make them more appealing. They attract audience who want to watch something a little more exotic.

Thirdly, the regulation of intellectual property rights is weak in China. Another important reason for this huge audience is not only because China is so populous, but because Internet providers in China are not regulated enough. File-sharing is rife, with most TV programs being available on the Internet; viewers can watch the shows whenever they like without having to endure any intrusive commercials. PPS 影音, one of the most favorites TV and movie online program of China, shows its program has been downloaded about 749 million times<sup>4</sup>, while PPTV, its competitor, shows the downloaded record of about 1,293 million times so far<sup>5</sup>, it illuminates the enormous number of online viewers in China.

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved in April 2011

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved in April 2011

Finally, there are a devoted translation teams. Behind the scenes, the people contributing most to the widespread popularity of Thai soap operas are the translators. There are lots of people whose hobby is translation for Thai soap operas' subtitles before they are uploaded to the websites. According to some informal data, there are now more than 70 Thai series already translated into Chinese ( 中唱艺能 (北京) 音乐有限公司, 2010).

### **Effects of the MOU on the Parties Involved**

Owing to the popularity of Thai drama in China, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva of Thailand and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao together signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the national and provincial promotion and broadcast of Thai soap operas through China Central Television (CCTV) right after the opening ceremony for the 16<sup>th</sup> Asian Games in Guangzhou on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010.

#### **Three aspects of this MOU were analyzed in order to determine its effects.**

##### **1) Positive effects**

Of course, reaching an accord between two or more organisations aims to improve and deepen the relationship between the signatories. In this case, both parties enjoy the following advantages.

##### **1.1 Thai production teams will receive remuneration for selling copyright**

As we know, there are lots of Thai soap operas available to Chinese audience via the Internet. Some people record series from Thai TV channels then send it to a translation team; after it has been translated, the show will be uploaded to a website ready to be watched across China. Such activity is of course illegal as the producers never receive payment. Now, however, the commitment of the two governments to support Thai soaps requires Chinese broadcasters to buy the copyright; Thai production teams can now receive the remuneration as usual.

##### **1.2 Thailand welcomes more Chinese tourists**

Shot in absorbing locations, Korean soaps attracted tourists who wished to take in the country's beautiful scenery for themselves. For a Thai soap opera this is a by-product rather than a main objective of the enterprise. Thousands of Thai soap opera fans fly to Thailand hoping to meet their favourite entertainers. Many of them wish to go to the actual locations shown on their television. Thai soap operas are therefore likely to aid in reaching the target of three million Chinese tourists in Thailand soon as outlined in the 2007 agreement between the nations.

##### **1.3 Chinese audiences can enjoy Thai soap operas with Chinese dubbing**

Internet video-hosting sites don't need acquiesce to tyrannical scheduling, so their audience can enjoy their shows whenever they want. The downside is that stolen

series have no Chinese dubbing and so those who do not speak Thai have to read the Chinese subtitles. Following support from the government to broadcast Thai soap operas on Chinese TV, the TV channels, with their own translation teams, will make both Chinese subtitles and Chinese dubbing. The audience then has another choice to watch the drama.

1.4 A new important source of Thailand's GDP will come across with this path

Beside tourism which is a major source of the country income from foreign countries, as a copyright owner, drama copyright assignment will be a new proportion of the country income. Although there is a little amount of earning recently through this path comparing to other major export products, similar to Korea, contractual agreement between the copyright owner, Thailand, and users will grow larger after the completion of getting rid of copyright-violating products.

1.5 The co-operative of Thailand and China will be strengthened.

As a very long relationship between Thailand and China since 1975 when Thai-Chinese diplomatic relation has been established, the cooperative of both countries has been also expanded political and trade-oriented to many kinds of development such as tourism, cultures, society, education, technology, and communication. Additionally, an entertainment industry is the latest one, which is highly possible to expand co-producers from China, alike Thailand has been doing with Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

1.6 Thai soap operas have been promoting Thai cultures

According to Thai Wave rising in China, Thai language becomes one of the hottest small languages among the Chinese. Hence, many Thai drama fans begin studying Thai language through the Internet. For instance, YY, which is a communication tool providing a group chatting, has been playing an important role on a cyber world as a class of language teaching. Recently, Thai language is one of classes on YY, which gathered over three hundred members into seven groups of Thai language teaching as shown in Table 2. As a result, an official support of the government of P.R. China will lead to a huge number of Thai language learners in China, including growing an interest in Thai cultures such as food, traditional dance and music.

**Table 2 Thai Language Groups Found on YY**

Group	Member
泰语交流 (Thai language communication)	31
泰语中级 (Intermediate Thai)	2

中级泰语 (Intermediate Thai)	2
泰语学习群 (Learning Thai language Group)	70
泰语学习与交流 (Learning and Chatting in Thai)	190
09 泰语三班 (Class C of 2009 Thai Program)	17
泰语进阶 รักไทย (Advanced Thai)	70
Total	382

(source: [www.yy.com](http://www.yy.com))

## 2) Negative effects

In an attempt to limit the intellectual and philosophical enquiries of its citizens, the Chinese government has prohibited three themes in Thai soap operas: superstition and black magic, featuring a homosexual character as the main actor, and unrest or violence caused by students in uniform.

These limitations mean of course that some shows will never be broadcast on Chinese TV. This strict censorship may be a wall against the audience accessing various types of the shows. As drama producers, censorship is also a rejection of shows to be broadcast in China. Ultimately, very few Thai storylines involve these banned themes. The aim of producers is to reflect the real lives of people in their communities.

Typically, evil-doers are punished; black magic displays a belief of Thai people; and homosexual themes in the plot aim to send a message of toleration and respect for others, and to increase openness and awareness in society. Eventually, at the end of Thai soap operas, the audience will get the message of that doing good things, which will lead them to a pleased ending.

To maintain business relationship with China in a long-term, Thai producers avoid introducing these kinds of soaps; hopefully one day the Chinese government will be more reasonable and amenable to discussion.

## 3) Neutral effect

In spite of the government's repression of such themes on state TV, all soap operas are available on the Internet, as outlined above. In fact, the Internet community really is the vanguard of the Thai Wave, from niche to mass market, from serials to feature films. Thai people's favorite movies explore the themes prohibited by the Chinese government. In China, *Love of Siam* and *Bangkok Love Story* were two very important movies because they deal with homosexuality. The Thai Wave which followed *Love of*



Siam is evident in the volume of QQ conversations concerning the film in China: There are about 160 Love of Siam-related groups made up of approximately 10,000 members. The result from searching " 暹罗之恋 " (Love of Siam in Chinese) in Baidu's<sup>6</sup> discussion board reaches 50,139 discussion topics, and 2,405,294 comments!<sup>7</sup>

Art of the Devil ( 恶魔的艺术 ) alerted Chinese people to the great level of superstition in Thailand and there are lots of discussions concerning sorcery and black magic scattered across the Internet. Besides, this Thai horror film was praised by the Chinese fans as one of the best horror film ever.<sup>8</sup>

Since Thai Wave has been resulted of the Internet community, the MOU, therefore, can limit the kinds of Thai soap operas, which only being broadcast on Chinese television; however, this limitation cannot prevent people to access prohibited shows available on the Internet.

### **Recommendations for Further Issued Policy of Thai Government**

It is impossible for Thai government to intervene Chinese government to launch more Thai soap operas. Those three main censorships don't affect on the core of Thai soap operas. Other types of Thai soap operas are fully good to be broadcasted without any limitations. However, the government of Thailand can only keep cooperating closely in this entertainment policy in order to establish closer relationship between two nations, as well as to promote qualified soap operas of both countries.

### **Managerial Implications**

In expanding the market in China, copyright violation still seems to be a major problem. On the other hand, it was noticed that many international entertainment firms have been starved of such a big market in China. This is because China is the largest market of the world with approximately thousand million consumers. Even though those companies may face severe copyright violation problems, they don't hesitate to push themselves to Chinese market. Additionally, brilliant firms are always looking forward to sizing their market shares meanwhile income from copyright assignment may be a bit tiny compared to other business opportunities. Thus, in this case, Thai entertainment companies can serve the market by providing meetings, arranging concerts, and/or offering Thai stars to be product presenters.

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<sup>6</sup> Baidu (www.baidu.com) is the number one Chinese search engine.

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved in April 2011

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/free/1/1651423.shtml>

In conclusion, the MOU signed by the two governments endeavors to promote Thai soap operas in China and, by extension, deepens the relationship between the two states. It also ensures that producers will be paid for their work. What's more, Thailand will earn more GDP by copyright trading and more Chinese tourists visit the nation. Negatively, since the Chinese government has banned certain themes, some Thai series will not be shown on TV; however, the huge number of Internet users in China and the unstable laws regulating guarantees that some parts of Chinese society will be able to consume any and all online series.

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