

# EVERYDAY DRAMAS

## Television Soap Operas in Thailand

By Sara Van Fleet



Source: The BBC News Web site coverage of the soap opera violence. This photo of the Thai television actress, Suvanant Kongying, was also included in the BBC article. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2717783.stm>



On the evening of January 29, 2003 an angry mob stormed the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, setting the building on fire and sending the Thai ambassador and embassy employees running for their lives. By morning, the building was severely damaged and more than twenty Thai businesses throughout the city had been looted or burned. Authorities still don't know who was behind the attacks, but it was a Thai television soap opera star who ignited the incident by allegedly claiming that Angkor Wat, the historic Cambodian temple complex, was stolen from Thailand by the Khmer. The television star's comment and the violent reaction that followed arise, in part, from the historical

claims by both Thailand and Cambodia to Angkor as a symbol of national heritage and identity.<sup>1</sup> A regional crisis ensued as Thailand threatened to go to war with Cambodia unless the Cambodian government issued a full apology and reparations.

**H**ow could a soap opera star trigger such chaos? Thai television soap operas, known in Thai as *lakhon* (pronounced *la cawn*), are broadcast widely throughout much of mainland Southeast Asia and take center stage in the daily lives of millions of people.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, *lakhon* resembles television soap operas in the west, but unlike most western soaps, which are broadcast during the daytime hours and literally go on for years without ending, *lakhon* series air during prime-time evening hours and continue for three to six months from when the story begins. *Lakhon* stars often mean more to viewers than does the prime minister, and large numbers of fans flock to see their favorite stars when they appear in public. Because *lakhon* has become so popular in Thailand and has gained such a powerful influence in people's lives, we can use it as a window into some of the current beliefs, societal trends, values, and attitudes of contemporary Thai culture.

Television and television *lakhon* developed in Thailand during a period characterized by experiences of rapid economic and social change, and heightened tensions in class and gender relations.<sup>3</sup>

Thailand's efforts at modernization and development in the past fifty years have led the country into its present "Newly Industrialized Country" status and have offered new opportunities to people throughout the land, especially for women, which is reflected in the rising number of women pursuing graduate degrees and climbing the ranks in business and government institutions. Yet these opportunities also remain out of reach to a large number of Thai women who work at low-paying, unskilled, or semi-skilled jobs. These women make up the majority of *lakhon* viewers in Thailand.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1997) argues that our lives today are more often motivated by the possibilities that the media suggest are available to us than by the reality of things. Media industries like television are no longer what they were in the past, namely just "leisure industries" (Mattelart 1990). Instead, television produces new forms of knowledge and new kinds of control that make a mark on society and on individuals. Television does not simply mirror what already exists, it also shapes the kinds of individuals and citizens we are and influences how we see ourselves and relate to others and to the world.

Although modern in its setting and bearing little resemblance to the theatrical forms of entertainment that preceded it, many of television lakhon's underlying narrative themes are not new to Thai audiences. Tensions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, jilted lovers, major and minor wives, and poor children who discover their noble birth are only a few of the themes that have provided entertainment for Thai audiences for hundreds of years.

Nevertheless, how television changes viewers depends in part on the viewers themselves. Consuming television's texts and messages is often misunderstood to mean that the viewing public is molded by products and ideas imposed on it. However, it is not difficult to see that audiences do not necessarily take in what producers intend—that the story viewers “receive,” the one they repeat and talk about, can depart radically from the scripted story. In my eighteen months of fieldwork with the audiences of television lakhon, I came to understand the varied and sometimes contradictory stances that people took toward the stories, themes, and characters of their favorite series. The ways in which these stories were used—to talk about difficult personal circumstances, to make political statements, to pass the time, and to escape the reality of their lives—were as diverse as the 137 viewers who were generous enough to allow me into their lives and tell me their stories.

Television lakhon is almost instantly recognizable as a kind of “soap”—characterized by its relatively low-quality production standards, the shot/reverse-shot camera technique common to “soaps” worldwide,<sup>4</sup> and the excess of strong emotion and moral polarization displayed through facial expressions, bodily gestures, and the dialogue of central characters.

The widespread popularity, excess emotionalism, and prime-time viewing hours of Thai television lakhon actually make it more closely related to Latin and South American telenovelas than to U.S. or European soap operas. The lakhon industry, like that of the telenovela industry, generates a cast of stars that permeates just about every other aspect of the entertainment industry and sometimes spills into other realms of social life and even politics, as demonstrated so clearly by the riot in Phnom Penh. In Thailand, when a major disaster strikes the off-screen life of a lakhon star, it often becomes a major news event, featured on the front page of the local newspapers and discussed in the markets and at workplaces.

A lakhon series characteristically revolves around the intrigues and struggles of romance and family life, but is typically punctuated with incidents such as accidents, hospitalizations, murders, and illnesses to propel the story forward or to create twists of fate that must be dealt with in the context of relationships. The stories often focus on the plight of a woman who must overcome difficult circumstances to

reach the final resolution of the story, which might include true love, emotional security, or discovering the heroine's rightful place in society. Suffering, especially suffering on the part of female characters, is a central feature of television lakhon. Suffering in a lakhon series is often linked with Buddhist notions of *dukkha*, a kind of suffering that comes from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, and from the human tendency to cling to situations and conditions that we believe will make us happy.

One of the most popular lakhon series in Thai television history, “Water Crumbles Sand,” revolved around the accumulated suffering brought about when a married man falls in love with his wife's best friend.<sup>5</sup> The title refers to the notion that we build our lives and our sense of security around things that we think will make us happy, like building a castle in the sand only to have it washed away by the changing tide. Security, like all things in life, is impermanent. As characters seek happiness without considering the consequences of their actions, they are frequently drawn into a growing web of mutual unhappiness.

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throughout Asia where there is an established tradition of the repeated performances of classical literature, religious tales, and folk dramas. People are exposed to these stories as children and grow up hearing these stories at home, in schools, at temple celebrations, and on radio and television

But modern television lakhon puts a new spin on age-old themes, often placing the characters in Bangkok high-rises and having them drive luxury cars, carry cell phones, or vacation in Europe. Add to this the integral part played by commercial advertising and you have a unique kind of popular cultural storytelling device, perfectly suited to the development of a market economy and followed by fans and casual observers alike, who often turn

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to local papers to get glimpses of upcoming episodes and dialogue, or who tune in to talk shows that reveal the real-life secrets of their favorite stars.

When I first started watching lakhon, it appeared that most women portrayed were victims, or individuals who accepted their fate without a struggle, beaten down by society, an abusive husband, or the stern gaze of a harsh mother-in-law. The stories also seemed empty of politics. Absent were any direct references to political figures or events, and most stories seemed to revolve around typical plot devices and issues such as love triangles, which were punctuated by commercial advertisements selling products such as shampoo, fast food, whiskey, or automobiles. But as I became more familiar with the stories and how these stories were used by viewers, I began to think in new ways about how television and television “entertainment” shows like lakhon might have something important to say not only about gender in Thai society, but also about the broader processes in which the Thai nation, the economy, commodity goods, and representations of women are locally and globally produced and circulated.

I also came to see how entertainment shows like lakhon—often referred to by many Thais as being “nonsense”—effectively acted to distract, pacify, and shape viewers to become modern consumers for a growing market economy. I arrived in Thailand in 1992, just two months after “Bloody May” which left forty-eight pro-democracy demonstrators dead and hundreds more wounded. During that time, government and military-controlled television censored news of the violence, feeding the public the usual array of lakhon series and game shows with periodic pro-military, pro-government advertisements.<sup>6</sup> The people I spoke with described to me the odd and infuriating experience of hearing about the demonstrations and the massacre through informal media such as faxes and cell phones while turning to their television sets only to find lakhon, game shows, commercial advertisements, and patriotic messages about the Thai state and monarchy.

Over an eighteen-month period, I interviewed 137 lakhon viewers, many of whom invited me into their homes and lives for extended periods to watch and talk about lakhon. They came from a variety of class and educational backgrounds, men and women alike, although societal norms gave me much greater access to the private lives and stories of women than of men. What I discovered was

that lakhon was an ideal way through which to view the rapidly shifting values and beliefs sweeping across Thailand in the late twentieth century. For women in particular, whose traditional roles were often defined by their relationships to their families, lakhon served as a means through which many women examined their changing circumstances, and came to understand such circumstances in a new light, sometimes accepting their “fate” and, at other times, questioning the costs associated with the rapid economic and social change that Thailand was experiencing.

Television lakhon was a perfect medium through which I could explore potentially sensitive or emotional subjects with people because they felt comfortable talking about television and popular culture. Difficult issues like AIDS, poverty, and prostitution, for example, could be discussed openly without having to reveal anything personal about one’s family life. Lakhon’s treatment of these subjects often became a natural jumping-off point for viewers to talk about their own experiences and opinions. In fact, the lines between lakhon stories and viewers’ personal stories frequently became blurred as viewers moved back and forth between them, making reference to one and then switching to talk about the other.

For example, “Water Crumbles Sand” became a flash point for public discussions about the state of Thai marriage and relations between men and women in Thailand. As usual, the story involved a love triangle. The leading male character falls in love with his wife’s best friend. He eventually leads a double life with both women, prompting viewers to openly discuss and debate the issue of “minor wives” in Thai society.<sup>7</sup> But something about this lakhon was different. The response to it was overwhelming, even among popular series. It dominated prime-time viewing, and the story, its characters, and the stars who played them were featured in newspapers and entertainment magazines. Part of the series’ appeal came from the fact that the major wife was played by a well-known movie star, television talk show host, and model, and the minor wife was played by a former “Miss Thailand” winner. But the way in which the major-minor wife tension was portrayed in the story was the real reason behind its appeal. People spoke of how real-to-life the characters were, and I was often told to pay particular attention to the suffering of the major wife because this was a common experience for many Thai women. As the story unfolded, so

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In premodern Thailand (known until 1939 as Siam), powerful and wealthy men had multiple wives, which was taken to be a sign of prosperity, mystical power, and magical virility, as well as a sign of great positive *karma* (Reynolds 1977; Sukanya 1988). By one account, King Mongkut (C.E. 1851–68) had 600 wives and concubines (Reynolds 1977:936). But it was also during Mongkut’s reign that unprecedented changes in the notion of individual rights and the status of women in Siamese society began to occur. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the practice of polygamy eventually came to be perceived (by Europeans, Americans, and some Thai) as a major barrier preventing Siam from becoming a modern, civilized nation. Polygamy became illegal in 1935 following the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932 and the implementation of a national educational system that included women in 1934. However, the practice continues to persist with serious financial and emotional consequences for the legal wife and her children.

It was clear from viewers’ responses to “Water Crumbles Sand” that the subject of minor wives was still of great interest and concern to many people. I heard countless tales of women in similar predicaments, worrying for their families’ financial security and for the future of their marriages. Many women used the story to discuss the traditional aspects of Thai marital and gender relations that they would like to change. Sometimes this spilled into conversations about the new Thai “super woman,” who is expected to work outside the home while also being solely responsible for child-rearing and the daily requirements of running a household (a description that fit the poor suffering major wife in the story). The men who responded often just shook their heads, never claiming to be like “that guy,” but saying they feared their wives would kill them if they ever chose to follow in his footsteps. The series became a window into issues regarding changing social values of modern life in Thailand.

“Water Crumbles Sand” was popular partly because of its ability to tap into deeply felt values and conditions that continue to exist in Thai society. It was a complex story that lacked a happy ending (unlike many lakhon series), but it was precisely for this reason that viewers found it so compelling. Among other things, the story acted as a catalyst for discussion about gender and family relations, as a distraction for people who wanted to forget their busy work days, as a tool for selling consumer goods, as an example of middle class lifestyles and habits, and as instruction on the proper roles and behavior of modern Thai women. Television lakhon addresses all these issues and more, and in so doing, helps to shape Thai society as it moves into the twenty-first century.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Popular culture can provide exciting opportunities for introducing students to another culture or it can help deepen students’ understanding and appreciation of a culture they may have studied in more traditional ways. Assuming that students learn where Thailand is on a map, it is likely that many of them view it as an exotic culture with little in common with life in the U.S. Introducing them to the fact that soap operas are a popular form of television entertainment in Thailand could help to combat their tendencies to see Thais as “the other” and help them to see what similarities exist between their own lives and that of those living in contemporary Thailand.

The study of popular culture is also an excellent method of introducing students to issues of globalization. Soap operas, like film and the modern novel, are popular cultural forms that originated in the west. It would be interesting to demonstrate how such forms are modified to serve the interests and entertainment styles of other cultures. Since the late 1970s, there has been extensive research and scholarship concerning the production and viewing of soap operas around the world. A comparative look at the popular pastime in different cultures would be a good way to examine how different cultures take an entertainment form and make it their own. Thai soap operas are not subtitled in English, but showing them in the classroom could still prove to be an interesting and productive exercise. Videos of popular Thai television lakhon series can often be obtained at Asian grocery stores in most large cities, or in areas where populations of Thai, Lao, or Cambodian immigrants have settled. These series are instantly identifiable as “soaps” to most western viewers. Ask your students to identify the features that characterize a television soap opera. What do they find familiar, and different, about what they see?

If more in-depth viewing is desired, popular Thai films, many with English subtitles, are also available in the U.S. “Khu Kham” (subtitled in English as “Sunset Over the Chao Praya”) is a favorite feature film among Thais and is available at Asian or specialty video stores in the U.S. Based on a Thai novel (which later became a series of comic books as well as a television lakhon series) and featuring a popular Thai singer in the male lead, “Khu Kham” is set in Thailand during WWII, and features a love story between a Thai village woman and a Japanese officer. You could use this film to examine the Japanese occupation of parts of Southeast Asia during WWII.

Students might also like to research the January 29, 2003 riot in Phnom Penh by examining newspaper articles covering the incident and its aftermath. Have students compare the role of celebrities who impact social and political life in Southeast Asia and the U.S. How much influence outside of entertainment should celebrities have? They could write a letter to the editor of one of

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the Thai English language newspapers reacting to an article and stating their opinion. They could also investigate the history of Angkor and the various claims made to it by the Khmer and the Thais over the centuries. There are some wonderful Web sites about Angkor where students could go on a virtual expedition to the ruins, imagining the kingdom in all its glory during the eleventh century C.E.

Using popular culture in the classroom provides new approaches for looking at culture, modernization, globalization, and the mass media. In getting our students to look at different forms of pop culture from around the world, we are helping them to develop critical skills vital for developing media literacy, a process that will hopefully help them to navigate their own media-saturated world more successfully. ■

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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#### NOTES

1. Angkor remains the dominant symbol of Khmer national heritage, but the Thai claim to Angkor can be traced to the Ayutthaya Period of Siamese history (1350–1767 C.E.). By the 1420s the once vast kingdom of Angkor, which had at one time encompassed large parts of present day Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, was in decline (Wyatt). The Siamese took control of Angkor and surrounding areas in the 15th century and modeled many aspects of their kingdom on Angkor. These areas remained under Siamese control until 1907 at which time Siam ceded the territories to the French. However, Angkor never disappeared from Thai national heritage claims and historical consciousness (See Keyes; Thongchai).
2. With the popularity of television viewing growing throughout the region, the dominance of the Thai television industry in countries such as Cambodia and Laos is a politically charged issue. Discussions, criticism and debates about the potential loss of cultural and linguistic heritage were common in Laos and Cambodia when I traveled throughout the region from 1992–94.
3. The first television set was brought to Thailand in 1952 by a Thai medical doctor returning from the U.S. The first television lakhon series aired in 1956 and was titled “Suriyani Doesn’t Want to Get Married.” However, it was not until major government efforts at rural electrification and the advent of nationwide television broadcasting in 1979 that substantial numbers of households outside the metropolitan areas had access to television and the popularity of television lakhon grew. The impact on rural life has been enormous, with the introduction of luxury goods through commercial advertising and the representation of urban values and behaviors. In 1998, Thais owned an estimated forty-two million television sets (total population of sixty-three million).

4. Shot/reverse-shot is a standard device used in most popular films and television programs today. The camera moves back and forth between the person or character speaking and the person being spoken to, creating a sense of visual relationship between the two actors as well as the expectation of dialogue.
5. Like so many popular lakhon series, “Water Crumbles Sand” began as a popular novel, was later made into a film, and then became a television series.
6. Thailand’s five television stations are operated in one of three ways. They can be entirely government owned and run; they can be owned by state enterprises; or they can be state-owned and privately run under franchise. While the Thai Army leases one station to private enterprises for a contracted number of years, like the other stations, final control over content and broadcasting remains in army and government hands.
7. A *mia noi* or minor wife refers to what most readers in the west would understand to be a mistress rather than the second wife in a polygamous marriage. The category is not so clear-cut in Thai, both for historical as well as socioeconomic reasons.

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