

Transnational Cinemas in Southeast Asia:

A Case Study of *Good Morning Luang Prabang* (2008),
Pleasure Factory (2007) and *That Sounds Good* (2010)

ภาพยนตร์ข้ามชาติในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้:

กรณีศึกษา สบายดีหลวงพระบาง (2551) โรงงานอารมณ์ (2550)
 และเราสองสามคน (2553)

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Abstract

This study is aimed to examine the core and artistic composition of three films: *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (*Good Morning Luang Prabang*), *Rong-Ngan Arom* (*Pleasure Factory*) and *Rao Song Sam Khon* (*That Sounds Good*). The concepts of transnational film and the film genre are applied to analyse the film content and social condition at the time when and the place where the films were made and shown.

The findings are as follows: *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* and *Pleasure Factory* are the international co-productions that present transnational elements which are culture, beautiful natural settings and history of each country through romantic-comedy film genre. The productions' casts and crews are mixed nationalities from different countries. The films are full of transnational films elements, that is, the themes of memory and nostalgia. Due to restricted rules

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in each country, the plots of *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* and *That Sounds Good* are simple and do not touch any sensitive issues of Lao People's Democratic Republic and Socialist Republic of Vietnam. However, an exception is *Pleasure Factory* since the film presents sexual taboo through the art cinema genre. This specific film was produced and allowed to show in Singapore; however scenes of male homosexual intimate relationship were removed.

Keywords: Transnational Cinemas; Film Genre; Romantic Comedy Film; Southeast Asian Film; Art Cinema

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาแก่นและองค์ประกอบทางศิลปะของภาพยนตร์สามเรื่อง ได้แก่ *สบายดีหลวงพระบาง* *โรงงานอารมณ์* และ *เราสองสามคน* โดยใช้แนวคิดเกี่ยวกับภาพยนตร์ข้ามชาติและตระกูลภาพยนตร์ เพื่อวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาภาพยนตร์และสภาพสังคมในช่วงเวลาถ่ายทำและจัดฉายในแต่ละประเทศ

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า *สบายดีหลวงพระบาง* และ *โรงงานอารมณ์* เป็น ภาพยนตร์ที่สร้างโดยการร่วมทุนระดับนานาชาติ นำเสนอเรื่องการข้ามพรมแดนโดยแสดงวัฒนธรรม จากธรรมชาติอันงดงาม และประวัติศาสตร์ของแต่ละประเทศผ่านตระกูลภาพยนตร์ตลกโรแมนติก ใช้นักแสดงและทีมงานหลายสัญชาติจากหลายประเทศ มีเนื้อเรื่องที่สะท้อนลักษณะของภาพยนตร์ข้ามชาติคือ สะท้อนความทรงจำและโหยหาอดีต และด้วยข้อจำกัดของกฎเกณฑ์ของแต่ละประเทศ โครงเรื่องของ *สบายดีหลวงพระบาง* และ *เราสองสามคน* ไม่ซับซ้อนและไม่กล่าวถึงประเด็นอ่อนไหวของสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาวและสาธารณรัฐสังคมนิยมเวียดนาม ยกเว้นกรณีเรื่อง *โรงงานอารมณ์* ที่นำเสนอเรื่องต้องห้ามทางเพศผ่านตระกูลภาพยนตร์ศิลปะ (Art Cinema) แม้ภาพยนตร์เรื่องนี้ได้รับอนุญาตให้สร้างและฉายในประเทศสิงคโปร์ แต่จากความสัมพันธ์ทางเพศระหว่างชายกับชายกลับถูกตัดออก

คำสำคัญ: ภาพยนตร์ข้ามชาติ; ตระกูลภาพยนตร์; ภาพยนตร์ตลกโรแมนติก; ภาพยนตร์เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้; ภาพยนตร์ศิลปะ

Introduction

In Europe, transnational cinema has started as early as the sound film era, that is, 1920s-1930s (Uhde and Uhde, 2010: 5). The transnational cinema was increased at the end of World War II, in which migration of the European casts and crews to the US occurred. Today, the impact of globalization and advanced technologies has enhanced the trend of international co-productions all over the world. Works of film casts and crews from different nations have, more or less, created unique aspects to the films. Academic discussions on transnational cinema, however, revolved around Hollywood, Bollywood, European, Latin American and Pan-Asian cinemas (Shaw and De La Garza, 2010: 3-6). This article is aimed at analyzing Southeast Asian transnational cinema focusing on three films: *Sabaidee Luang Prabang/Good Morning Luang Prabang* (Anousone and Sakchai, 2008), the first private funded Lao film in 33 years; *Rong-Ngan Arom/Pleasure Factory* (Ekachai, 2007), the co-production of Singapore and Hong Kong-Dutch companies; and *Rao Song Sam Khon/That Sounds Good* (Kittikom, 2010).

Objectives of the study are to analyse details of the transnational cinema in various film genres. The thematic and cinematic elements of these films are also examined. The research covers a thorough analysis of three films in relation to their genres and styles, focusing on their texts and contexts of the countries they were filmed. In terms of approach, this study uses textual analysis by looking at multiple significance of discursive structure in the films, such as narrative formulae and cinematic techniques. Genre analysis is also used to examine the films which range from romantic-comedy, road movies to art cinema. In addition, in-depth interviews with the film producers and actors are also used to clarify cultural, political, and industrial determinants of the chosen films.

In examining transnational films, this research uses a number of guidelines from Deborah Shaw and Armida De La Garza (Shaw & De La Garza, 2010: 5-6). Shaw and Garza provide thorough principle to study films through the lens of transnational cinema. The topics from the guideline that are relevant to analyze the selected films are:

- Modes of production, distribution and exhibition
- Migration, journey and other forms of border-crossing
- Exilic and Diasporic filmmaking
- Film and Language
- Question of authorship and stardom
- Cultural Exchange
- Cultural and political policy

Regarding films' contexts, this study uses the model constructed by Pam Cook and Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (Higbee & Hwee, 2010: 12) to study the context of the selected film as follows:

- Nostalgia and Utopianism
- Recognizing the dynamic and fluid relationship between center and border
- Desire for a space of creative possibility outside the mainstream that will destabilize the field of cultural production and displace the hegemony of the center

Next, the article looks in to *Sabaidee Luang Prabang*, the first private funded Laos film in 33 years.

Sabaidee Luang Prabang

Sabaidee Luang Prabang is a co-production of Lao and Thai companies. The film was warmly welcomed by Thai and Lao audiences. It was also

screened at International Film Festivals in Rotterdam, New York Asian Film Festival, Pusan Film Festival, and so on. In terms of text, the film is full of elements constructed to reach the international film audience's taste. The elements include stunning scenery of Laos, appealing utopian lifestyle, and beautiful Lao culture. The leading actors are from a different nationality: the Laotian, Khamly Philavong and the famous Australian-Laos Bangkok based actor, Ananda Everingham, to attract wide range of audience. The uniqueness of the Thai-Lao co-production is later discussed.

As for international audiences, *Good Morning Luang Prabang* employs many aspects of world cinema that would please filmgoers outside of Laos. The uniqueness of locality obviously stands out in the film. Adding to that, Anousone Sirisakda of Laos Art Media, the Lao co-producer of the *Sabaidee* film stated in an interview on 13 September 2010 that the film has its own strength. It does not have to imitate other films. It fulfills what the world has missed out today such as unique cultures, gentle manners and beautiful landscapes.

Luang Prabang town, the world heritage site, is obviously the central motif of the film. It appears in the film title and the place is where the two protagonists move around. Upon discussing the film title, the similarity of the languages between Thai and Lao should be examined. The film title *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* in Lao means 'Hello Luang Prabang,' as the film translation in English, *Good Morning Luang Prabang*. When the film was shown in Thailand, the filmmakers still used the same title as in Lao, *Sabaidee Luang Prabang*. *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* is understood by Thais as '[I am] fine, Luang Prabang.' or in interrogative sentence 'How are you?'. Even though the literal translation of the film title into Thai and Lao languages is not exactly identical, the term 'Sabaidee' can be used as a greeting word for the two nations. The title of the film thus evokes the similarity of the language and culture. The connection of

language and culture between the two nations helps Thai-Lao casts and crews understand each other to a great degree.

In terms of pre-production process, Anousone said that the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture had to inspect the film script before the shooting. The sensitive issues were then removed. The Lao female protagonist has to be demurred to resemble a proper Lao lady (*Mae Ying Lao*). The Lao producer added that when the film respectfully represented Lao culture and landscape, it could be used as a great tool to strengthen good relationships between Thailand and Laos. Ananda asserted that the film is Lao first film in 33 years so he would like to respect the opinions from the Lao authority (Gershon, 2010).

In much the same way with the cultural representation, the sceneries of Laos are not there by coincidence. One of the comments made by Ananda is that the authorities wanted the film to be more commercial so they wanted to add more scenery. Lao Tourism Authority prefers that the term “*Sabaidee*” is used in the title to suggest the theme of their promotional strategy (Gershon, 2010). Every time the protagonists move from one town to another, the caption will be shown to make sure the audiences know exactly where the places are. In some scenes the maps of the places are shown to explain how to get there. Since Noi, the female protagonist, is a tour guide, her role is to explain about the significance of natural and historical places where the two protagonists travel to. Moreover the male protagonist, Sorn, is a professional photographer on his job, therefore a number of still pictures of beautiful scenery are also illustrated on the screen.

According to the Thai director Sakchai Deenan's interview with *The Independent*, the reason why the plot has to be as simple as 'a boy meets a girl and they fall in love' is that “We wanted a soft storyline so it would not be too

hard to get approval from the Lao government". *The Independent* further states that "a member of the government was on the set at the time of the shooting to ensure that Lao culture was portrayed appropriately and the film editor removed a number of scenes they believed might be controversial (Buncombe, 2008).

In the film Sorn played by Ananda, talks to his parents in English, Lao and Thai. Conversations of the characters in the films are mostly in Lao and Thai but occasionally English is used. Using different languages in the film is another aspect representing the transnational characteristics of the film. Obviously, globalization does not affect only the culture but an individual as well. Ananda is an interracial of Australian and Laos. He grew up in Australia and Bangkok and has made his career as a famous actor in Thailand and Asian region. His identity is, as Sorn states many times in the film, ambiguous. With globalization effects, the nationalities of films become ambiguous just like other kinds of art forms, culture or a person like Ananda and many others.

Pleasure Factory

This part aims at analyzing an international co-production film *Pleasure Factory*. The film depicts taboo subjects in Asian society, such as prostitution, female sexual pleasure and same sex relationship. *Pleasure Factory* was selected for the "Uncertain Regard" competition at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, and was the second film from Singapore that entered the category (Arnold, 2007). The film was later shown at international film festivals around the world and later released in the United States. *Pleasure Factory* is also acclaimed by a number of critics.

In terms of production, *Pleasure Factory* is a co-production of Singapore based Spicy Apple Films, The Hong Kong-Dutch company *Fortissimo* Films and Singapore's InnoForm Media.

Besides the international co-production, *Pleasure Factory* employs actors from different countries, such as a Taiwanese actress Yang Kuei-mei. Yang has worked with a number of internationally acclaimed directors, such as Ang Lee's and Tsai Ming-liang. Similar to the *Sabaidee* film, the leading male character of *Pleasure Factory* is Ananda Everingham. Adding to the casting list, a mainland Chinese actress Xue Er also plays one of the main characters. New face actors were recruited from Geylang, Singapore's Red Light District, and elsewhere in Singapore to bring a sense of realism to the film. The film director Ekachai Uekrongtham was born and raised in Thailand and has lived and worked in Singapore.

The variety of actors' nationalities and diasporic characters of Ananda and Ekachai are evidence of the interaction and increasing globalization of trade, business, migration, education, communication, and so on. Given that globalization has increased interaction among people in the world, this cultural assimilation continues to constantly increase in these active cultures. With The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), the flow of people and culture in the region would be accelerated.

In *Pleasure Factory*, Ekachai uses the 'art cinema' style with reference to the area of narrative structure and cinematic style, which is obviously against the classical cinema convention. Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink (2006) describe that transnational cinema as "desire for a space of creative possibility outside the mainstream that will destabilize the field of cultural production and displace the hegemony center". *Pleasure Factory* seems to embrace the idea-characteristics of art cinema include unset location, purposeless characters and discontinued storyline.

The film is set in Geylang which is the Red Light District in Singapore, similar to De Wallen's fish tank in Amsterdam and Patpong in Bangkok. According to the well-known travelers' guide book *The Lonely Planet Singapore City Guide*, "... this district [Geylang] behind the open-air market is filled with a Dante-esque assortment of brothels, girlie bars, cheap hotel and alley after alley lined with prostitutes from all over Southeast Asia in all times." (Oakley, 2009: 77). The film represents the bustling place from a distance in a documentary-like style. The long shots are often used with handheld camera which corresponds to documentary realism. In a number of scenes, the camera honestly moves past the area without concentrating on any particular object. The use of real location and available lighting represents a realistic range of space and time continuum (Arnold, 2007).

At Geylang, the film illustrates lives of sexual pleasure providers and pleasure seekers along with other kinds of seekers and providers. In the film, Geylang could be somewhere or elsewhere in Southeast Asian countries that characterizes the vibrant of cultural exchange. In one scene, a man is offered a service of women from different countries, leaving the question of national specificity. Since sexual pleasure is universal, the globalized commercial culture has created new identities that are no longer connected to any specific nation or place of origin.

The fact that the film runs at a slow pace, lacks causality in the narrative and goal-oriented characters marks its position of counter-cinema. Unlike Hollywood or mainstream films with goal-oriented characters, most of the characters in *Pleasure Factory* move around pointlessly. Three interweaving stories of pleasure seekers and providers during the same night in Geylang are added in a vague narrative and discontinued editing.

One of the three stories is about a young soldier, Jonathan. The film focuses on his *rites de passage* into manhood. The young soldier seems to be the only character that has a clear purpose in the film. Later, Jonathan finally finds his sex mate, a girl from Mainland China. Xue Er is represented as having more sexual experience than Jonathan. The representation of Xue Er's experience advancement is contrary to the masculinity of Asian male as a leader, if not males in general. We have seen that eroticism is part of reality, an essential element of art cinema, since eroticism violates the code of the classical norm. Erotic scenes between Jonathan and Xue Er thus add realism to the film.

In the film, a young man Chris (played by Ananda Everingham) follows a pair of mother and daughter prostitutes around in a meaningless way. Chris is projected as an outsider English speaker who speaks English only. The trio is therefore having a problem with communications. Hence their conversations convey limited dialogue. The limitation of communication and the alienation of Chris are parts of art cinema narrative (Bordwell, 2002: 96). Like the *Sabaidee* Film, adding another language into the film is also resonance of transnationalism. Considering the world market, using English and Chinese languages in the film would exhibit the film to larger groups of audience.

During the disoriented narrative of the three stories, the director inconsistently adds documentary style such as interviewing Xue Er and other characters. In the interview footage, these characters talk about themselves looking at the camera. As Bordwell explains, characters of art cinema always tell the story of themselves through an account of their childhood, fantasies and dreams. The use of documentary style like interview shots emphasizes the director's intention to insert more reality to the narrative.

In Singapore where nudity and excessive profanity are removed from a number of media, the making and releasing of *Pleasure Factory* revealed the

modification of value toward films. (Arnold, 2007). Although the rigorous censorship in Singapore is less rigid than before, it is still there. In *Pleasure Factory*, some scenes are cut off. An interview with one of the film leading actors Loo Zihan, on the 6 of October 2011, reveals that there is a scene of intimate same sex relationship when making *Pleasure Factory* but in the VCD released in Singapore, such scene is not seen.

That Sounds Good

Unlike the first two films analyzed in this study, *That Sounds Good* was made by a solid Thai production company, M 39. The storyline is based on border crossing, leading the characters and the audience to Southeast Asian's unseen locations through the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) from Thailand to Laos and Vietnam. The crossing border scenes manifest the film's transnational position. In the midst of the film's road movie together with romantic comedy genre, the plot is simple but the scenery illustrates attractiveness of the locations. The film is therefore analyzed in terms of its transnational components, in relation to the use of the road movie genre to relocate the characters into the specific landscape.

That Sounds Good is about a caravan of offroad jeeps that venture on an Indochina road trip. Like other road movies, *That Sounds Good* uses its specific location to express national imaginary land, to reinforce the sense of "regional and local belonging; the disappearance of (some) customs and borders,..." (Mazierska and Rascaroli, 2006: 2). Their trip from Thailand through Laos and Vietnam is presented in the road movie style and carries implications of the genre. As Sharon Willis suggests, in the road movie convention characters are different from the community where they travel (Willis, 1997). Distinctive from *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* and *Pleasure Factory*, the film

characters of *That Sounds Good* are alienated to the locals and rarely show interest in local cultures or people.

Moving from place to place, activities of the caravan members that seem to be closest to the locals are eating and shopping in local markets. Relationships of the film characters and the local people are strictly the economic exchange rather than the cultural one. As Uhde and Uhde state in their study, there is also disadvantage in transnational film, including the limitation in terms of the production scale that it could reduce or ignore the specific local culture, ethnic and characteristic of the local people (Uhde and Uhde, 2010: 5).

Even most of the film casts are Thai, the leading actor, Jay Montonn Jira has diasporic background similar to that of Ananda Everingham. Jay was born in Hong Kong to a Thai father and a Thai-American mother. He had studied at international schools in Hong Kong, Thailand and The US. Additionally, a Vietnamese actress Elly Tran is employed in a small role. In the film, Elly's image is shown with prominent breasts. With compliments from the male characters in the scene, her breasts serve as the sexual desire and relate to fetishism. In the scene the entire concept of female identity is reduced to the breasts. She is seen standing and smiling with limited dialogue. Here, the male characters and audience are given the power of looking at her. The male characters also have power over her by their conversations about her in the language that she does not understand. The concept of reducing Elly into her breasts is also emphasized in the behind-the-scene clip. The clip is exhibited outside the cinema theatres, at the film's promotional screenings and on YouTube. In the clip, the Thai female spokesperson even compares Elly to a cow. A numbers of online comments also refer to Elly in the same way (M39thatsoundsgood, 2010).

Since the film uses romantic comedy genre, the role of Vietnamese female character could be explained by Andrew Horton's study. Horton states that the humiliation of the others with regard to their gender or ethnicity has long been exploited in comedy (Horton, 1991: 15). The comedy functions to challenge customary social norms. The film's exploitation of Elly's image could be read as exploitation of female sexuality even in with the comedy genre, the seriousness of sexual exploitation is somewhat lessened.

Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik state that in comedy films, genders are rehearsed, explored, endorsed or undermined (Neale and Krutnik, 2006: 224, 223-225). In the film, the other female characters are also characterized as stereotypical female: nosy, bossy, emotional and irrational. Through their journey, none of the female characters is seen driving or navigating the trip nor having any knowledge about automobiles. At various points, the female characters are projected as subordinates to the males.

Adding to that, the two Thai female protagonists are disabled in certain ways. One has a severely short eye sight and the other is hearing-impaired. To my knowledge, the space for disability characters in Asian films and other entertainment media is limited. The representations of these two leading female characters are then examined.

In relation to Nicole Markotic's study, he explains that a number of contemporary films represent disability in three ways: "a moral metaphor, extraordinary heroic, or a punch line of a gag". Generally, Thai media seem to unapologetically represent disabled characters in a humourism way. Looking at perception of disability in the media, Markotic adds that the satisfaction of the representations make the audience feel "apprehensible and hilarity." (Markotic, 2008: 2).

In terms of film techniques, the filmmakers use sound and images to represent perception of how the two girls see and hear the world. Here, their perceptions are represented through the art of film representations. The film shows blurry images to demonstrate how a short sighted person sees the world. Squeaking sounds are also used to demonstrate how a hearing impaired person hears music and conversations. The representations of the world through the disabled lens rarely exist in mainstream media or other kinds of art forms. The filmmakers make their best attempt to present the two girls' viewpoints in accurate manners. This is evident in the list of sign language trainers in the film's end credits.

Conclusion

The transnational age has changed the economic structure of the film industry, including marketing and distribution, which consequently affects film texts and their production culture. Since Asian market has a massive body of consumers with substantial income, there are increasing trends of transnational castings and co-productions. Numerous elements in the films, such as international casts and attractive locations, evidently aim at attracting the international markets. The phenomenon of international co-production makes cinema develop into "a global cultural form, however different its local manifestation". (Roberts, 1988: 62).

Sabaidee Luang Prabang is an exception due to the similarity of the countries' cultures and languages. This connection facilitates the communication between casts and crews of the two nations. The diasporic background of the co-producer and actor, Ananda Everingham, also manifest that today nationality of a person is also blurred. After the long pause, the film is made in a respectful way. Under the control of the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, the film

producers secure their position by producing the second and the third *Sabaidee* Films with the same plot, casts and locations. The audiences however do not appreciate the repetition of the plot. In the future the co-producers of Thai and Lao film will find the way to compromise their creativities with the Lao authority.

For *Pleasure Factory*, the film uses its Art Cinema genre to challenge its audiences and Singaporean authority. Producing film in Singapore, the country is rich of diverse cultures, languages and ethnic backgrounds; it becomes a transnational film. Bravely, the film represents sexual subjects that are tabooed in Southeast Asian society such as prostitution, female sexual desires and same sex relationships in an explicit art form. Although the rigid censorship of Singapore seems to be less meticulous, the media there are not totally free.

Looking at *That Sounds Good*, the film uses road movie genre to gain the position of transnational cinema. Unlike *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* nor *Pleasure Factory*, *That Sounds Good* interacts with the locals to the minimum and mostly in views of economic exchange. The film does not feature the cultural and historical backgrounds of the film locales. One of the local female characters is exploited by the male gazes that is not found in the *Sabaidee* film. The different representations of females from these films signify that the film texts could be different when they are made in different countries. What make the film interesting are the disabled characters in the film. The disabled characters are not represented as a moral metaphor nor extraordinary heroic, but a comedian. The romantic comedy genre is also represented the difficulty of their everyday lives in a light approach.

In sum, with an economically optimistic and culturally vibrant scenario, the future of the transnational Southeast Asian film industry is something to look forward to. Firstly, the mixture of backgrounds and experiences among filmmakers

should allow audience the pleasure of a variety of outcomes. The flow of technologies and funding from more powerful sources could turn production companies in a small film industry to international companies. The co-production between different countries with a strong marketing strategy for national and international markets should be resulted in wider audiences.

Filmography

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