

An Analysis of the Popularity of Thai Television Drama in China, 2014-2019

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ABSTRACT

China and Thailand have maintained friendly relations for 45 years since the establishment of their diplomatic relations, and have close contacts in economic, political and cultural aspects. Among them, cultural communication is of more concern to people, and the transmission of TV dramas is an essential way for Chinese people to understand Thailand and the Thai people.

It has been 17 years since the first Thai drama was introduced into China. Although there was a downturn, the spread of Thai drama in China has been given new vigor since 2014. This paper focuses on an analysis of the spread of Thai drama in China in the past five years. The shift of broadcasting platform from TV channels to online platforms facilitated the dissemination of Thai TV dramas, and the vigorous development of Thai Boys Love dramas attracted a larger audience in China. Also, governmental policy support and some other factors increased the cultural communication between China and Thailand.

Keywords: *Thai TV drama, Chinese video platforms, restrictions on Korean TV drama*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, Thai dramas began to enter the Chinese audience's field of vision, from being unknown at the beginning, to the ratings boom in 2009, followed by a period of silence, and then to vigorous development after 2014. Thai drama is another popular TV drama genre besides TV dramas from America, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and it is still popular amongst Chinese audiences. The broadcasting of Thai dramas has also changed from TV stations to online platforms, and the crowd watching Thai dramas has changed from housewives over the age of thirty to students around twenty years old. Thai dramas, which are beloved by Chinese audiences, have also changed from the early romantic dramas such as *Battle of Angels*, *Wanida*, and *A Human's Value*, to special themes such as *Lovesick the Series*, *Tharn Type The Series*, *The Fallen Leaf*, and *Hua Jai Sila*.

However, after the Korean restrictions and the release of the One Belt One Road policy, the market for Korean dramas in China has become smaller, which has promoted the development of Thai dramas in China.

The development of Thai drama has also inspired the development of Chinese TV drama.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

At present, there are relatively few studies on the popularity of Thai television dramas in China, and most of them were either written before 2014 or focusing on the period before 2014. In 2013, Suwannamat Nun analyzed

the situation of Thai dramas entering the Chinese market through four aspects: economy, politics, culture and the decline of Korean wave. It also pointed out the transmission effects of Thai dramas in the Chinese market from the audience ratings of Thai drama broadcast in China and analyzed its influence through other data. It also analyzed the network, TV and mobile phone channels of Thai dramas broadcast in China, as well as China's policy of introducing overseas TV series [1].

Lanchakorn Saphonglang's paper described the production mechanism and management mode of Thai TV dramas in great detail. The production and broadcasting of Thai TV dramas, the star-making mechanism and the focus on output helped the spread of Thai TV dramas in China. This paper also mentions the history, methods and effects of the spread of Thai opera in China. By analyzing the Chinese audience's preference for overseas TV series, the unique charm of Thai drama and the commercial operation of Thai drama, the paper concludes with reasons as to why Thai drama could be successfully spread in China [2].

Li Min analyzed the communication of Thai dramas in China from the two aspects of the communication channels and star effect of Thai dramas, and analyzed the development of Thai dramas in China from 2003 to 2014 [3].

Amporn Jirattikorn pointed out in his article "Thai Popular Culture: A New Player in Asia Media Circulation and Chinese Censorship" in 2017 that the new generation of audiences is the younger generation, which is different from ten years ago when it mainly consisted of housewives. The new generation of audiences prefer to search for Thai dramas on the Internet. Their favorite themes are usually teen TV dramas, and it is mentioned that younger audiences like mixed-race actors and

actresses. In this article, the author highlights the popularity of the BL series amongst the younger generations of Chinese audiences. However, the author also described the limitations posed by control of the copyright of film and television resources by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in China, negatively impacting the dissemination of Thai drama [4]. In the previous literature on the popularity of Thai drama in China, the author's analysis of the reasons for the popularity of Thai opera is relatively one-sided, and the time at which they were written is relatively long ago, so they are unable to analyze the spread of Thai drama in China in the past five years. On the basis of the previous articles, I have focused on the reasons for the popularity of Thai dramas in China in the past five years, and put forward my suggestions on how to better spread Thai dramas in China in the future.

3. THE DISSEMINATION SHIFT TOWARDS ONLINE PLATFORMS SINCE 2014

The first Thai TV drama introduced in China was “A Pretty Maid” on CCTV-8 in 2003, but it did not attract much attention at that time. In 2009, when the “Battle of Angels” was broadcast, Thai drama began to draw attention from Chinese audiences. At the beginning, most of the Thai TV series introduced in China were produced by CH5, and gradually CH3 and CH7’ s series were introduced. The main TV stations that broadcast Thai opera in China are CCTV-8, Anhui Satellite TV and Jiangsu Satellite TV. Among them, Anhui Satellite TV plays the most. After 2014, Chinese people's attention to Thai drama gradually shifted from TV to the Youku and Bilibili video network platforms.

This shift of platforms in reality largely facilitated the dissemination of Thai TV dramas in China during the past five years. Firstly, the timely feedback on Thai drama allows interaction and communication, which can lead to increasing attention. People that watch TV series from TV channels cannot share their views on TV series in real time. But those watching TV series on the internet can express their opinions in the comment area. Given the popularity of bullet subtitles, multiple video apps have increased the bullet subtitles function, spectators can clearly express their views on the content of the video at any time and many viewers can discuss the story together, instead of being limited only to their family members to share opinions whilst watching TV.

Comments and bullet subtitles give the audience a sense of integration, that they are not watching TV alone. It is a good way of interaction. You can also share your views on the TV series in the comments and bullet subtitles. Some people who are very knowledgeable about Thai dramas or Thailand will also talk about Thai dramas and Thailand in the comments and bullet subtitles. Some Thai drama fans will also share other good Thai dramas, which will arouse

the interest of the audience. This interaction and information sharing can facilitate the spread of Thai drama [5].

On the other hand, this shift of platform can also provide more choices for watching Thai series. In the past, people watching Thai dramas on TV could only be forced to accept the episodes selected by the TV station. The choice of TV dramas was very limited. But if the audience use internet platforms, they could search for any Thai drama that they are interested in. The choice of the Thai drama is up to the audience.

In 2017, due to copyright issues, most of the TV series and movies in Bilibili network platform were deleted, including a large number of Thai dramas. After that, the Diyidan app to some extent replaced Bilibili. Many Thai drama resources can be found in the Diyidan app. This indeed affected the spread of Thai dramas to some extent. Many Thai drama fans were very anxious because they could not see these Thai dramas on the previous websites. Many subtitle groups began to look for other ways to play videos, such as Diyidan app, Baidu Disk, Weibo and so on.

4. THE RISE OF THAI BOYS LOVE DRAMAS

After 2012, the popularity of Thai opera in China decreased significantly, because most of the Thai drama introduced in China at that time was relatively old Thai opera. From the unclear picture quality to the cliché plots, the Chinese audience's passion for Thai drama had been significantly reduced.

However, in 2014, starting with the popularity of Lovesick The Series, many genres that were not common in China appeared in Thai dramas, and some were even banned in China. People paid much more attention to novelty than to common things. So since 2014, Thai drama reached a climax again.

“Lovesick The Series” was the first Thai drama that really took homosexuality as the leading role. Because this drama received widespread attention in Southeast Asia and China, the production companies of Lovesick The Series focused on the market and continuously launched a number of boy love dramas, which have received strong attention.

Due to the translation of “Lovesick The Series” in 2014 and “Lady Boy Friends” in 2015, by the former Tianfu Thai drama (later CFan Group), a new climax of Chinese audience’ s love for Thai dramas was reached. Following these two TV dramas, the preference of Chinese audiences on Thai drama had changed. Before 2014, the focus was mainly on idol drama; but after 2014, it mainly focused on Boys Love (BL) TV series.

The widely popular “Love Sick: The Series” was broadcast in 2014. This was truly the first Thai show to give priority to homosexuality. Previously although there are some Thai shows mentioning gays, mostly homosexuality was not the main plot. After being translated by Tianfu Thai TV series, this TV series quickly

became popular amongst Chinese audiences. As part of the consequence, the Tianfu Thai drama subtitle group became famous after translating “Love Sick: The Series”. They later on set up a bullet screen group in 2017 and changed their name to “CFan Group”. Since then, Thailand has launched a series of BL TV dramas, which have been welcomed by a large number of Chinese audiences. It can be seen that the current focus of Chinese audiences on Thai dramas is mainly on these BL dramas. In 2020, there are a pair of gay couples from BL TV series in the top three of ‘couple’ (CP) super topics on Weibo. From the number of people followed on Weibo, we can see that most Thai stars with large numbers of fans are active in Chinese activities and acting in homosexual dramas [6]. The CFan Group no doubt has promoted the dissemination of Thai dramas in China. It was also in the first batch of subtitle groups translating Thai BL TV dramas. Although there were other similar subtitle groups, the audience still tended to look at the Thai dramas translated by CFan Group. They are a non-profit subtitle group. At present, the translation team is mainly engaged in Chinese translations of Thai gay drama, romantic TV series, films, micro films, variety shows, and songs. According to Sina Weibo TV super topic, eight of the top ten south east Asian TV series are gay dramas, and a translation by the “CFan Group” took the first place.

In recent years, Thai local audiences and Chinese audiences like different types of drama. In 2018, “Love Destiny”, considered a “phenomenon Thai drama”, has not attracted much attention in China. I was a teaching assistant at Lanna International School in Chiang Mai during the drama broadcast. Almost everyone, from the adults to the children, liked it very much. They even made related merchandise to express their support for the TV series. However, in China, there are not as many viewers of “Love Destiny” as in Thailand, and not more than those of “Tharn Type The Series”, a Thai BL drama. Taking the broadcast volume of the Diyidan app as a reference, a single episode of “Love Destiny” has a broadcasting volume of about 300,000, whilst that of “Tharn Type The Series” is more than 2 million.

5. THE CHANGE OF POLITICAL PATTERNS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND THAILAND

In recent years, people's enthusiasm for Thai dramas has increased, which has been related to a series of political issues and international affairs. Political conflicts between China and Korea led to more space for Thai drama. In 2016, as a tough response to the Korean government's deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in Korea, the Chinese government unofficially carried out a series of restrictions on Korean performing arts activities in China, including Korean TV series. The THAAD incident aroused the national

sentiment of the Chinese people. The serious imbalance and inequality of cultural cooperation between China and South Korea had long aroused dissatisfaction between the domestic film and television culture industry and ordinary Chinese people. Even many fans of Korean dramas have expressed the sentiment that “there is no idol before the country”. Since then, people's enthusiasm for the Korean Wave has decreased, so they began to turn to other popular culture. Many Chinese companies also thought that the Southeast Asian recreation industry, including the one in Thailand, would be a safer choice to disseminate [7].

The spread of Korean dramas in China's mainstream network platform is clearly restricted by the Korean restrictions. Checking through the three major video platforms in China, there are only seven Korean dramas on Youku, eleven on Tencent video and eight on iQIYI. All of them are from before 2016 [8]. On the contrary, there are thirty-nine Thai dramas on Youku, fifty-eight on Tencent videos (including twenty-one Chinese dubbed versions), and fifty-one on iQIYI (including sixteen Chinese dubbed versions). This shows that after the Korean restrictions, the mainstream video platforms in China found it hard to introduce Korean dramas, and even those previously introduced were deleted. However, the number of Thai dramas introduced is increasing year by year.

Besides, with the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China and Thailand are more closely connected politically and culturally. As part of the BRI policies, the Chinese and Thai governments agreed to provide more preferential policies and convenient conditions for China-Thailand tourism cooperation, such as providing preferential customs clearance policies and improving basic port conditions. They also intended to build a China-Thailand tourism cooperation platform to realize resource and market sharing, in the long term to remove barriers for Sino-Thai tourism cooperation and establish close cooperative relations. The construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is conducive to the establishment of an effective connection mechanism between the two parties to ensure the safety of tourism cooperation between the two parties, thereby promoting the long-term stability of the tourism cooperation relationship between China and Thailand [9].

In overseas tourism, Thailand tourism has advantages in both price and distance. After the restrictions on South Korea and the launch of BRI, the number of Chinese tourists to Thailand has gradually increased, and Thailand became the top destination for Chinese tourists traveling abroad in the 2019 National Day Week [10]. In 2017, the total number of Chinese tourists reached 9.8 million, an increase of 11.5% compared with 2016, and total revenue already accounted for 17% of Thailand's GDP [11]. As a mainstay industry in Thailand, Thailand's tourism industry is very developed and mature. Most tourism practitioners can speak Chinese, which is more attractive to Chinese tourists. This will further stimulate the Chinese people's curiosity about Thai culture, which will be transferred to watching Thai movies and TV programs. And in return, through the TV series, Chinese audiences would have a

strong interest in the similarities and differences between Thai and Chinese culture, including Thailand's history, religion, diet, clothing, customs, and natural and cultural scenery [12]. A research in 2015 showed that more than 51% of the Chinese tourists in Thailand have watched Thai TV dramas [13].

The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in China announced that there will be more cooperation with film and television works of countries along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in May 2017 [14].

With the implementation of the Initiative, cultural exchanges between China and Thailand have been further promoted. Under the favorable influence of policies, the Sino-Thai film and television cooperation model has moved in a more diversified way. China's frequent trade in the copyright introduction of Thai TV dramas has also promoted the development of Chinese Thai co-productions and Thai Star acting in Chinese dramas.

6. OTHERS

Thailand and China are both Asian countries with geographical proximity and many cultural similarities. The Chinese and Thai Chinese who have lived in Thailand for a long time have passed down the traditional culture of the Chinese nation from generation to generation, penetrating into every aspect of Thai life. The themes of family affection, friendship, love, justice, morality, kindness, harmony and tolerance shown in Thai films and television programs can resonate with Chinese audiences. Everybody including foreigners can understand and relate to the situation easily with no culture barriers [15].

However, what attracts the audience more is the cultural difference. As an Asian country, Thailand has a colorful foreign culture, such as the primitive local customs, religious beliefs, royal etiquette, Thai boxing, supernatural, ghost, transsexual, and other foreign cultures in Thailand, which are regarded as "exotic" by Chinese audiences. In a survey on the motivations of watching Thai TV dramas in China, around 16.5% of the people said they watch to know more about the exotic culture of Thailand [16]. "Exoticism" here generally refers to the strangeness of life scene and aesthetic spirit with original meaning of nationality or country, which is the result of cultural diversity. In film and television creations, national culture is always the unique cultural characteristics of each country. To fully explore and effectively use it, it can not only win the psychological identity of domestic audiences, but also satisfy the curiosity and desire of foreign audiences for multiculturalism. Movies and TV dramas convey the commonness and difference of different cultures of different nations and countries in a form of perfect integration and subtle influence. When audiences accept and identify with them, they actually identify with the culture contained therein [17].

Furthermore, compared with Korean dramas, the introduction price of Thai dramas is much cheaper. For Chinese video websites, Thai drama is a cost-effective drama genre. The single-package version of Thai drama

imported is around a few hundred thousand RMB, compared with the copyright fee for one episode of "Descendants of the Sun", as high as 1.5 million RMB. Thai drama therefore can be said to be very cheap. Meanwhile according to incomplete statistics, the ratings of the main Thai drama on Douban broadcasting in China in the past two years have fluctuated between 7.5 and 8.5, with very good reviews. As far as the ratings are concerned, the quality of Thai dramas is much higher than that of domestically-broadcast dramas in the same period. Cheap prices can receive higher ratings – Thai dramas should be a very good choice for long-term loss-making video sites [18].

A short clip will be played at the beginning of many Thai dramas, indicating the classification of this drama. The content is generally divided into two types. One is that the next program is rated to be watchable by the age group over 18 years old. Inappropriate images, sounds, and plots may appear in the program. Viewers under the age of 18 must only watch with the accompany of an adult. The other type is those that are watchable by the age group over 13 years old. Viewers under the age of 13 should watch with their parents. The Thai dramas that are suitable for all ages do not have such clips before the start and are able to start directly.

The classification system of film and television can play a role in promoting the prosperity and development of television dramas and movies, and the restriction on it can be relaxed in the creation of film and television works. Good film and television classification can make the audience alert before watching. In addition, the grading system can also curb piracy. When importing foreign film and television works, because there is no grading system, some good works may not be able to be imported, and some sensitive content will be deleted and then imported, which may lead to the prevalence of piracy. Apart from Thailand, many countries have TV series classification systems, such as South Korea, Japan, and the United States. This might be an important aspect for Chinese TV series to improve on in the future.

In addition, Thai makeup is becoming popular in China in 2020, and videos of Chinese people wearing Thai makeup can often be seen on websites such as Bilibili. If you search for Thai makeup on Bilibili website, there are 50 pages of Related videos. In these videos, the creators are imitating the makeup of Thai actors. The background music is also the music of some Thai TV dramas. In the comments below and bullet subtitles, many would say that the video reminded them of a Thai drama after hearing particular song or seeing the uploader with Thai makeup, and then they go to watch the Thai drama again. Most of the videos are played at around 100,000 views, they do increase people's interest in watching Thai dramas.

7. CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGES OF PROMOTING THAI TV DRAMAS IN CHINA

Thai dramas have become popular again in China in the past five years. Especially on the Internet platform, they have repeatedly appeared as a Sina Weibo trending topic, and they are no less popular than Chinese TV and Korean dramas. A large number of Thai celebrities set up accounts on Weibo to interact with Chinese audiences and have gained many fans. With the growing development of the Internet and the efforts of the Thai subtitles team, Chinese fans can watch Thai dramas with Chinese subtitles within a few hours after the TV series are broadcast.

This article has analyzed the reasons for the popularity of Thai dramas in China in the past five years and draws the following conclusions:

(1). The rapid development of online video platforms has made it easier for Chinese audiences to access more diverse Thai dramas. (2). Thai dramas with more diversified themes attract more Chinese audiences. (3). The promulgation of Korean restrictions and the One Belt One Road policy further promoted the spread of Thai dramas in China. (4). The unique exotic culture of Thailand. (5). Thai drama has the advantage of cheap import price but high quality.

However, there are also some problems in the Thai TV series imported from China: first, most of them are old dramas, which may lead to unclear picture quality. Secondly, due to the content problems, the plot content will be deleted and modified in the subtitles, resulting in some plots being incoherent. Thirdly, due to the problem of content, some Thai TV dramas can only be watched on the internet. However, because of the copyright problems, the subtitle group and the online video platforms have never reached a consensus. Almost all the Thai drama resources in Bilibili were removed in 2017, and in 2020 the Diyidan app could not be used. Fourthly, the lack of publicity of Thai drama and website design problems. Take Mango TV as an example. In Mango TV's TV series classification, there is no classification of TV series countries. Only by searching can original Thai dramas be found. If these problems can be solved, Thai TV drama can be more popular in China.

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