



## Portrayal of Thailand in Films: A Comparative Study of American and Chinese Films

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how Thailand is portrayed in American and Chinese films. Textual analyses of eight films from the period of 2000 to 2015 was conducted based on Hofstede's 6-D Model© and the two-dimensional coding scheme (visual/audible and scene/character) for 12 social-cultural elements. The analysis results indicate both differences and similarities in portrayal of Thailand. American films portray Thailand in more negative ways than Chinese films by emphasizing prostitution as well as drug issues of Thai society and by depicting Thai people as poor, quiet and having dark skin. On the contrary, Chinese films portray Thailand as a beautiful travel destination associated with seafood, and depict Thai people as kind, friendly and peaceful. Nonetheless, similar patterns such as hot weather, exotic scenery, and transgender male were found in the films of both countries.

**Keywords:** Portrayal, Thailand, Film

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## Introduction

The relationship between film portrayal and national image of one country has always been a thriving academic pursuit. Vösu, Joosepson (2005) pointed out film serves as public and popular forums for reflecting, discussing and interpreting national identity by communal creation and reception. In Thailand, local films are the main source for international audiences to learn Thai culture. However, foreign films portray Thailand from different perspectives. That is the reason why The Tourism Authority of Thailand appointed the Thailand Film Office to assist foreign filmmakers in finding the right local services and producing films in Thailand. They desire to promote Thailand on the global stage further and deeper.

According to the Thailand Film Office (2015), Thailand has been presented in many American and Chinese films. As a tourism-dependent country, the benefits of international film production for Thailand are obvious. Jewell, McKinnon (2008) proved that film tourism could contribute to the country's economy. It could further be perceived that film is connected with nostalgia and identity of the destination country. The analysis of film contents is the interpretation of how filmmakers might think about Thailand. In other words, that signifies what kind of stereotypes they hold about Thailand.

The past research involved investigations of western films, especially American film representations of Thailand and Thai people. However, one missing puzzle piece remains regarding how non-western films, such as Asian media, perceive Thailand and Thai people and what the major differences and/or similarities between them really are. Due to the inequality of global

communication flow, Thailand receives relatively less attention from the Chinese media than American media. Thanks to the great success of *Lost in Thailand*. Film industry of the People's Republic of China has become more involved in Thai cinema through co-productions and distribution deals nowadays. Thus, finding out how Chinese films portray Thailand is important for the advancement of cross-cultural communication field.

## Objective of the study

This study aims to examine the intercultural communication and stereotyping in films by comparing the portrayal of Thailand in American and Chinese films.

## Literature Review

### Semiotic Analysis of Films

To understand the portrayal of Thailand in films, this paper draws upon the semiotic theory. Symbols become meaningful in discourse. Semiotics analysis has been applied, with interesting results, to film for a long time. The filmmaker has a lot of options and possibilities to communicate messages and meanings through symbols and semiotics. Thus, film analysis always provides means to interpret these decisions, find the intentions of the filmmaker and judge them (Biemann, 2015). The use of available signs and symbols in cultural encoding and decoding is an issue of a filmmaker's competence. In order to enter the international market, American and Chinese films have been incorporating more exotic cultural elements that are acceptable and appealing to global viewers. In Thailand, these elements include using local film stars and filmmakers, involving diverse cultures, traditional customs, language

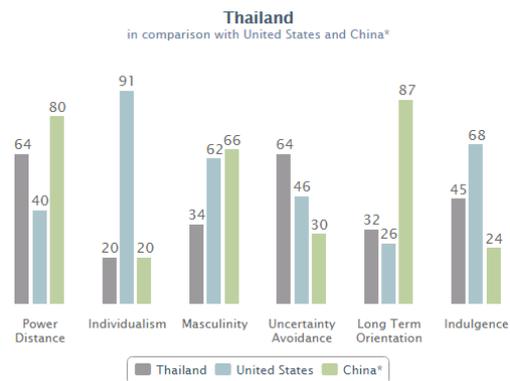
accommodation and other semiotics.

### Stereotyping in Films

Stereotypes are typically considered to be detrimental to intercultural communication. The past findings support the notion that the American films often create negative stereotypes rather than promoting positive perceptions of Thailand. Ngampornchai (2007) found that Americans' stereotypes about Thailand and Thai people are fairly deep. Based on the Americans' perception, Thailand is a beautiful country, mainly associated with spicy food and exquisite temple. Nonetheless, there are also negative images such as poverty and prostitution. On the other hand, whether Chinese films portray Thailand more positively or neutrally is unknown. Aside from third gender character, Thailand was simply not represented for many years in Chinese films. In the twenty-first century, China film industry is booming, more and more Chinese films have been filmed in Thailand. They offered a different angle to discover Thailand. Such new phenomenon challenges the stereotypical portrayal of Thailand in western films.

### Culture of Thailand, the U.S., and China

To better understand the portrayal of Thailand in foreign film, it is also important to understand cultures of Thailand and relevant foreign countries. The analysis of the films has been used to underline the fact that cultural differences between countries exist. American and Chinese films are selected on the base of two cultural reasons; the first reason is that they are highly different based on cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede; and the second reason is that they represent the western and eastern cultures.



**Figure 1** The comparison of Thai, American and Chinese culture

Through the lens of the Hofstede's 6-D Model©, figure 1 clearly shows the differences between Thai culture, American culture and Chinese culture (The Hofstede Centre, 2015). The contrasts between American/Chinese and Thai culture are depicted through differences in language, food, costume, religion, etc. These differences may sometimes lead to confusions in understanding the messages from other cultures, like Thai culture. Cultural differences reshape and develop an idea of the movie's themes. Different speakers use different discourses to speak the same idea in different domains (Tsz, Fong, 2010). According to this model, a western filmmaker would not understand Thailand as the same way as an Asian does because of his/her cultural background is totally different. Based on this conceptual framework, one can assume that Thailand in Chinese directors' perceptions may be different from their American directors' ones.

On account of the literature reviewed above, three research questions are developed. Firstly, how do American films portray Thailand? Secondly, how do Chinese films portray Thailand? Finally, what are the differences and similarities between American films' and Chinese films' portrayal of Thailand?

**Research Methodology**

**Research Design**

With the use of a qualitative approach, a textual analysis of selected films was conducted to find out the underlying assumption for the selected American and Chinese films. The coding scheme was developed from the past researches by Landucci, Supadiloke, and Punnahitanond (2013, April) and Ramasubramanian (2003, May).

The target population of this study has been selected in view of the two parameters: the essentialities of Thailand elements and the worldwide influence of production. Among those films released during 2000 and 2015, eight films are purposively selected as samples of the study. They include four American films -- *The Beach*, *Bangkok Dangerous*, *Rambo*, and *The Hangover Part II* -- and four Chinese films -- *Go LalaGo*, *Bring Happiness Home*, *Lost in Thailand*, and *Death Trip*.

**Procedure and Measurement**

This study consists of three steps. The first step aims to create a film list about Thailand through reviewing the ranking and grossing in film websites (www.IMDb.com and www.Mtime.com). The next step is concerned with textual analysis of the selected films to look for general stereotypes. All relegated dialogues and images are examined and all cultural semiotics are organized in the second step. The last step involves comparing the American and Chinese films based on the Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions 6-D Model©. This Model is used to test the relationship between cultural background and the stereotypes in intercultural communication.

Based on Ramasubramanian (2003), two dimensions of the films -- visual/audible and scene/character were examined. A 2 by 2 factorial

design was used to create the coding scheme for examining 12 social-cultural elements in both American and Chinese films. In the following table, those social-cultural elements are divided into four groups.

**Table 1** A 2 by 2 Factorial Design/Category of Social-cultural Elements

	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Character</b>
<b>Visual</b>	Environment	Animal role
	Location	Religion
	Event	Social status
	Transportation	Costume
	Food	Gender
<b>Audible</b>	Music	Language

To ensure the validity of this research, secondary data from the third sources such as movie review articles in UK's biggest selling film magazine *Empire* are also used to analyze the selected films and crosscheck the textual analysis findings. As the source is from another country beyond Thailand, China and The U.S., its standpoint is considered much more impartial. The second coder also coded about 30 percent of the sampled films. The inter-coder reliability is 91 percent.

**Results**

A three-level analysis -- the semiotics, stereotypes and cultural dimensions was conducted. Summary of findings was presented in Table 2 and Table 3. In terms of intercultural understanding, the results are supported by Hofstede 6-D Model©. There is a potential correlation between cultural background

and the stereotypes in intercultural communication context. By using different semiotics, American films portray Thailand more negative ways than Chinese films.

**Table 2** The Social-Cultural Elements of Thailand in American Films

Elements	American Films
Environment	The climate is extremely hot and unpredictable.
Location	The geographic range is more diverse, vary from jungle, island, and beach to luxurious hotel.
Event	Political situations.
Transportation	Diverse transportations: Airplane, boat, and train.
Food	Exotic food
Animal role	Elephant and aggressive animals (e.g., shark, monkey, snake)
Religion	Temple appears a lot, showing the contrast atmosphere.
Social Status	Western characters play the main role whereas Thai characters play the supporting role (e.g., drug dealer and pole dancer).
Costume	Western characters barely wear traditional Thai dress.
Gender	Emphasize third gender.
Music	Modern Thai music
Language	Most Thai characters speak accented English.

**Table 3** The Social-Cultural Elements of Thailand in Chinese Films

Elements	Chinese Films
Environment	The climate is extremely hot and unpredictable.
Location	The geographic range is narrow, focus on beach, urban, temple, and China town.
Event	Thai festivals.
Transportation	Diverse transportations: Airplane, train, tuktuk, taxi, and boat.
Food	Delicious food
Animal role	Elephant and adorable animals (e.g., dog and pigeon)
Religion	Temple exists everywhere. Thai characters are full of Buddhist practices.
Social Status	Chinese characters play the main role whereas Thai characters play the extra role such as street vendor, driver and monk.
Costume	Chinese characters wear traditional Thai dress.
Gender	Emphasize third gender.
Music	Traditional Thai music
Language	Few Thai characters speak basic Chinese.

As for the research question # 1, the portrayal of Thailand in American films is abundant and complicated. Thailand is another place different

from their own country. The films emphasize distinguished points. Thailand is a far away adventurous travel destination. It is not only portrayed as a beautiful country, but also a chaotic place. What is worse, even the animals in Thailand are treated as a sort of brutal and aggressive entities for the people. Thai people have no exception; they are portrayed as poor, smart, and friendly figures. However, they have taken strange occupations, such as drug dealer and thief, wearing both western and traditional Thai costumes, believing in Buddhism, and speaking accented English.

As for the research question # 2, the portrayal of Thailand in Chinese films is relatively small and simple. Neighborhood is the best and proper word to say about the relationship for the Sino-Thai. Importantly, they share some common values and common sense; thus the films from both countries mainly emphasize the similarities. Therefore, Thailand is portrayed as a beautiful travel destination. Thai people are portrayed as friendly. They having traditional occupations, such as street vendor and driver, wearing both western and traditional Thai clothes, believing in Buddhism, speaking accented Chinese. The animals are depicted as cute animals.

As for the research question # 3, the findings reveal that American films and Chinese films' descriptions of Thailand overlap in three aspects: a) acknowledging Thailand as a hot and rainy country; b) considering Thailand as a popular travel destination, and c) referring Thai men as "transgender" or "lady-boy". On the contrary, the findings reveal that American films and Chinese films' descriptions of Thailand differ in three aspects: a) the tone in Chinese films remains steady at neutral and positive, while

American films portray Thailand in perhaps a more negative light; b) the perception of Thailand is different. In Chinese film, Thailand is "land of smile" while in American film, Thailand is "city of sin," and c) the portrayal of Thailand in Chinese films is relatively simple and monotonous whereas that in American films is more complicated and more diverse.

### Discussions

The visual representation of Thailand as a magical place can be mapped in the scenes from luxurious hotels to red lights districts, from beach to jungle, from animal to people. Undoubtedly, these different portrayals are related to the culture. Through the lens of Hofstede Cultural Dimension 6-D Model©, common values are found in all Thai, American and Chinese cultures, but differences exist in the scores and the degree of importance. Differences in cultural dimension among the three countries provide pretty interesting implications for international cooperation in film industry. For foreign filmmakers, respecting cultural differences is the top priority. As the U. S. is the dominant country in the world, stereotypes in American films not only become their domestic public opinion but also international opinions. For people who have never been in Thailand, its portrayal in Hollywood films might be their first impression toward Thailand. Unfortunately, this portrayal is always associated with negative stereotypes. For instance, the film *Rambo* is a reiteration of the white man saving the Asian people from an uncivilized world. Under this context, Chinese films provided an option for international audiences to access to less negative stereotypical portrayal of Thailand.

It is very difficult to test the historical or cultural accuracy in films, but directors and producers should stand on a new perspective and employ the advanced methodology to portray and discourse Thailand. In the future, it will be interesting to see whether a more positive Thai image will erase cultural stereotypes in global discourse. By then, cultural differences might not be cultural barriers in intercultural communication anymore.

Another responsible cause of these differences is the maturity degree of industry. American films and Chinese films are in the different stages. American film has a long history of international cooperation, but Chinese film industry just began to enter into the Thai market. Dozens of American films have been shot in Thailand before 2000. For example, *Rambo* (2008), but *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and *Rambo III* (1988) also partially shot in Thailand. The Chinese film industry started to grow fast, begin to foster and develop the international audiences. Chinese films start to build common values through localizing landscape and using exotic symbolic method to reduce the deep essence of culture and enter the oversea film market. Only few Chinese films were shot in other countries before 2000, but more and more films were shot in Thailand nowadays.

This study only uses Hofstede's model to analyze how culture influences the stereotyping in films. To get more convincing result on the role that culture may play in shaping of portray of Thailand in films, future studies may consider using different theories such as Hall's "high versus low-context culture" theory to test relevant variables. Another limitation concerns sampling and the film selecting process. Although the samplings of American films

are from a vast population, the samplings of Chinese films are merely from a small amount of films. Significantly speaking, this study covers a small number of samples. As this research is based on limited analysis of selected films within 15 years, the conclusions should be viewed as preliminary in need of future data as new films continues.

Further research could be conducted to examine the portrayal of Thailand from other foreign films such as India. The Thailand Films Office reported that Indian filmmakers shot more movies in Thailand than any other country during the past two years. Another way to broaden this research is to study how other media portray Thailand. In the years ahead, the cultural differences may become less distinct with the advent of global communication. It would be worthwhile to reexamine the portrayal of Thailand by American and Chinese films.

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