

A WESTERN TREATMENT OF NONWESTERN NATIONAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF *THE KING AND I*

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ABSTRACT

The essay demonstrate on *how* and *why* Thai identity was distorted in the film, *The King and I*. It provides the background information about the American film *The King and I*; examine the performance in the film that *how* the nonwestern, Siam, culture is distorted within the 'Orientalism' theoretical framework; analyze why the film perverts Thai culture with regard to its embodiment of intercultural relations. The attention is paid to recurrent imperialist and exoticising strategies for dealing with the 'other'.

Keywords: Western, Nonwestern, National Identity, *The King and I*

INTRODUCTION

Performances represent cultural ways of life of people in cultures. In other words, a performance is a culture itself, therefore a culture is always reflected in the way they perform: they are telling to themselves about the story of themselves. However, what can happen if a performance from one culture presents another culture's story? Does the maker's identity pervade the representation? How then would the maker's treatment still exist within the "other" culture? To examine this question, I select one of the American famous film, *The King and I*, which the story is dealing with Siam culture, as a case study in order to pinpoint what is the appropriate answer. Apparently and inevitably, there are tremendous numbers of cultural distortion appearing in the film. Therefore, this essay will demonstrate on *how* and *why* Thai identity was distorted.

Background Information

Originally, *The King and I* is a musical play in two acts by Oscar Hammerstein II based on Margaret Landon's novel, which had been adapted from "*The English Governess at the Siamese Court*" by Anna Harriette Leonowens. It was first produced in 1946 as a film named "Anna and The King of Siam". In 1951 it was first performed as a Broadway musical and ran for over three years. In the meantime, the film version, which used almost the entire original score without interpolation and with the same leading actor, was enormously successful. It was also performed in a few nation-states namely, England, Australia, German, and France. Over the years the story has been given several revivals, and the latest film is a non-musical version named "Anna and The King" starring Jodi Foster. However, all versions are banned in Thailand

A theory of Orientalism

According to Edward Said, although colonialism has been formally demolished since the second half of the twentieth century, cultural imperialism still continues in various forms which is shaping the relationship between the West and the non-West. Hence, because the idea of imperialism still exists, Said points out that, the Colonizers are likely to regard the colonized as inferior, irrational, depraved, childlike, and everything that the Colonizers were represented as Not. In other words, the non-West was always represented as an "Other".

A particular form of imperialism that exists today has come to be called "Orientalism". Orientalism is the construction that the West creates the East by 'orientalized' them. It is the portrayal of the East as the 'feminine Other', inferior but at the same time exotic and mysterious.

Therefore, according to the Orientalism theory, such representation that the West crates the images of the East in *The King and I* is prevailed throughout the film. By this, it can be said that *The King and I* is one of an imperialism ideology presenting in form of entertainment media. Therefore, in the following examination, I will apply the Orientalism theory to the analysis of the film.

Distortion of Thai Culture: Orientalized Story & Westernized Characters

There is a number of interesting cultural-identity distortions. Regarding the content of the film, it is obvious that although the film is dealing with Thai culture, the representing culture in the play is not Thai. There are something missing, something changing, and something adding which I would call: omission, intervention, and addition.

1. Omission

It is interesting that there were a few *vital* Thai cultural identities omitted in the film: language and race. No Thai language is spoken in Thai nation-state! Since the very first arrival of Anna, most of the main characters seem to know English quite well beforehand and could communicate with her in English even though she is sent to teach English to them. Besides, apart from the strange Thai accent, when the characters have to speak Thai, they speak unevenly and unconfidently in comparing to speaking English – which is the language they are just learning. Moreover, it is interesting to note that even when Thai people want to communicate to each other (in private), they also use ‘English’. For example, the scene that the King talks to Crown Prince, Chulalongkorn, in person, they are talking in English and then he sings the song ‘to himself’ in English again, “A Puzzlement”. However, I would draw to a conclusion, the reason that the film omits Thai language by regardless about realistic portrayal is because the audiences that the film communicates with are English speakers -- not Thai!

‘Race’ is another aspect in the play that is totally omitted as all non-Thai cast portrays Thai people. In terms of appearance, although most of them look Asian-like, specifically they are quite distinct from Thai. In this sense, it should be noted that, due to the race differences, it effects the way that the characters perform enormously. The acting styles of female characters seem rather like western romanticism than Thai gestures. Their expressions are totally different from Thai people. No one in the film walks, smiles, stands, crap hands, sings, and so on like Thai people, especially facial expression -- which I considered as exaggerated than Thai usually do. The most interesting example is the way they sing a song. It is because the film is a musical film so a song is the important element, but the way they sing is quite distinctive. Apart from singing in English only, the characters always walk and stand while they are singing, which is opposite from genuine Thai singers who have disciplined to sit singing¹. Besides, Thai singers have trained to sing by throat rather than by stomach like the way they sing in the film. Therefore, in terms of casting, I would note that the film are portraying the Siamese nation as exotic “Other” by representing something imagined and contrived and quite unlike them. As Bruce McConachie remarks about theatre versions of *The King and I*: ‘*The casting of the three shows also encouraged American audiences to believe that Asian culture was only skin deep and easily shed.*

2. Intervention

There were a number of Thai cultural features that were inserted into the content and elements of the film. The characters were westernized and some life styles were contrived. Moreover, it is interesting to note that since Anna came to Siam, she always interposes her perspective and value on them. In other words, she symbolizes the idea of western imperialism that still exists.

The first obvious one is ‘Thai theatre’, which is performed in the film. The intervention of the west is not only in the story of the performance, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but also forays into the style of Thai theatre – they mixed Thai performance with Broadway-like theatre. Seemingly most theatrical elements on stage -- such as costume, music, dance -- seem Thai, but they are not Thai at all. For example, Thai traditional performers never ‘jump’ on the stage with two legs especially for female as it is implied to be impolite. However, it is important to note in this point that within the sense of the film, such ‘jumping’ no longer means ‘impolite’ but rather ‘civilized’ for it is western style -- which is approved by Anna (and the audience). In turn, in some customs of Siamese, which Siamese believe it is polite (such as people have to stand in the lower position than the King’s head) has been discriminated by Anna as a backward rule and she never tries to follow it. By this, it is clear to conclude that the film is regardless about Thai context, norms, values and so on but rather invading the western perspectives into it.

Moreover, it seems to me that as far as being an “Other” identity, Siamese just could be presented by stereotyping them as something ‘Asian’. For example, it is incorrect that the King uses chopsticks, for Siamese did not use chopsticks but hand!

Furthermore, the map in the film is another metaphoric example of cultural invasion when Anna rolls out her own western ‘scientific’ map to cover the old ‘childlike’ one. Such action of Anna evokes an audience to consider Siam culture, *the other*, as ignorant and childlike. Liken to the above mentioned about orientalism, while Anna represents a scientific person, Siamese royal students resemble irrational ones.

Besides, the characters’ characteristics are also raided by western: they become western-like. For instance, As influenced by Anna, the King becomes materialism when he tries to impress the English representative by ordering ‘western’ spoon to use in the palace at the party dinner. As McConachie observes that ‘*in matter of materialism... despite his barbaric habit, The King of Siam recognizes his needs for western goods*’ Likewise, Anna also suggests that the royal wives have to wear ‘*western costumes*’ in the welcome party so that they can be regarded as more civilized.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the film also presents that the way characters express their love by kissing is quite different from Thai culture but rather western-like (in the scene that the King concubine, Tub Tim, clandestinely meets her lover, Lun Tha.)

Moreover, the praying scene of the film seems far distinct from the real praying ritual of the King and his royal family. Firstly, the rhythm and melody of the pray sounds like Western’s opera rather than Buddhist prayer. Secondly, the ‘ludic’ western feature is also interplay in the King’s characteristic. The way that he playfully mocks with Anna while he is praying in a sacred place is extremely far from the Siamese customs but rather westernized – mocking someone with good intention is an American culture not Thai’s King characteristic.

3. Addition

Both conscious and unconscious addition presenting in the film embodies the way Western’s hegemonic culture put on to the Thai identity. As the aforementioned about Orientalism, it can be seen that Siamese culture is portrayed not only as an inferior, childlike, or barbaric culture, but also is aligned to a feminine the ‘Other’. As such, I found that while the King’s characteristics represent depraved culture, the other Siamese people represent feminine submissive features. By contrast, in comparison with the King’s personality and attitude, Anna is an embodiment of the superior western hegemonic culture.

In considering to the King’s characteristic showing in the film, I found that the film totally disregards about the ‘reality’ of Siam King’s manners at all. According to Thai context, belief, and customs, King is certainly the most respectful and beloved person of the people in the whole country. This part of Thai culture is the hardest one to be totally understood or absorbed by an outsider, I believe: how immensely the King is important to all Thai is very hard for anyone could imagine. As the matter of fact that Thai people are one of the most royalist nations in the world. However, certainly they are not innate royalists, but this kind of national attitude is a culture, I believe. As drawing from James Spradley’s Concept of Culture, it should be noted that this is because the way Thai *learn* and *share* their culture make them wholeheartedly love their King and pay most respect to him naturally without thinking about reasons why: loving the King become ‘*reality*’ to Thai people.

Although it seems that Thai people were born with loving their King, that is not a blind love. The King is the person who is educated to love and care his people and he does immensely indeed. That is the reason why ‘everyone’ loves him. Besides, according to Thai traditional customs, the King has to be strictly trained to ‘behave’ extremely polite. As a matter of fact, I would possibly say that no one in the country could ever be as polite as the King. Therefore, the King *must* certainly *not* perform like the portrayal in the film. This is the reason why all versions of *The King and I* were banned in Thailand: it seemed like the King’s images are contaminated totally (without truth) which is, absolutely, intolerable for Thai people who love him.

Over to the film, apart form being an embodiment of all kinds of inferior culture -- barbaric, comic, and childlike, the film portrays the King’s attitude as quite unpleasant, though not so serious, in order to make Anna’s seems better. He is quite self-centered as seen from when he wants to see her she has to come

to see him no matter when, how, and why. Besides, he also seems rather unreliable because he breaks his promise to her that he will give her a house.

Importantly, a barbaric character is predominating the King's characteristics throughout the film. He orders the execution even to his concubine and her lover, which is regarded as morally repugnant by Anna (and, of course, the western audience.)

Ironically, due to these presenting identities, rather than giving respect to the King and Siamese people, the audience were drawn to take Anna's side and respect her instead – she has more power than him. Moreover, instead of reproaching her for the fact that she never learns Siam's customs before her arrival (eg. no standing higher than the King's head, have to crawl when approach the King), an audience is inevitably drawn to the conclusion that the Siamese customs were backward.

For Siam people, they were portrayed as subservient, wild-mannered, and depraved (from the view of the Western author as same as a western audience.) Even though it was the fact that they wore half-naked costumes and no undergarment, in their context it was not rude. However, in the sense of the play such activities are provoked (by Anna's point of view) as backward culture. However, if we view the film without the constructed ideology of the West, it seems to me that half-naked is appropriate for Siamese because of the hot weather and they do not consider it as impolite as Anna do. Therefore, it is clear to me that these kinds of social values are constructed by each society, the conclusion that Siamese culture is backward is shaped by western values not by Siamese themselves. However, quite cruelly, Hammerstein also satirically delivered these words from the King's mouth – “England (people are wearing undergarment) is a backward country”.

Besides, in the scene that the King's wives approach Anna and try to ransack her possessions, the film invoke us to feel that they are very wild-mannered. Again, this is one-side perspective of Anna, the West. In turn, if considering about Thai context, this manner represents their welcome and friendship they give her. However, Anna herself seems to realize about this cultural difference as well. As seen from she attempts to suppress herself and tries to talk to them nicely.

For Anna, she is apparently an embodiment of western culture: superior, hegemonic, scientific, rational, humane, and masculine. Firstly, as seen from her role, she is a teacher who came to this country in order to ‘educate’ them. Beside, she is always taking the dominating and leading role in many matters. For example, actually her job is a royal governess and a King's secretary, but she has become as if a King's counselor. She is also the ‘director’ of the play that she suggests the king to make it in order to show the British embassy. It seems to the audience that her suggestions to the King sound as rational as a ‘universal truth’, while the Siam's belief is too irrational to accept. By this it is clear to the point that if reason is represent the West's characteristic, they have to create something different from them in order to portray the ‘Other’: irrational. Likewise, these kinds of binary features are utilized throughout the film in order to distinguish Siamese from Anna: East from West. For example if Anna is civilized, Siamese should be uncivilized. If Anna is humane, Siamese should be inhuman (the King). If Anna is rational, Siamese should be irrational. If Anna is dominant, Siamese should be submissive, and so on.

Moreover, by being called ‘Sir’, it should be noted that Anna's characteristic also represents as masculine but Siamese is rather feminine. While all of the King's wives are very obedient and subservient, Anna seems independent and attempts to against the rules. While the King's wives seem very shy, Anna is rather confident and has a leadership characteristic as a man. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the film also empowers Anna by portraying that she influences over the Crown King, Chulalongkorn, who would be the ‘great King of Siam’ in the future.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that even though the story is ‘oriental’, the film is still making for a western audience. As a result, there should be mutual message that could be shared. In other words, the play was created by American composer and performed by American actors for an American audience.

In summing up, referring to my original question as to whether western identity exists in the film or not? Yes, is my answer. The film not only shows the way the West ‘orientalizes’ the East (through the distorted cultural presentation) but also tries to ‘westernizes’ them, more or less, by invading the western attitudes and values toward them. As Edward Said states: “European culture gained in strength and identity

by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.” In short, The way people perform about the others, is the way that they *think* about the other. And such way definitely represents *the way they are*.

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