

# **Cultural control and globalized culture**

May 2000

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## Introduction

Modern mass media, both in the private and public sphere, have become much of our real and symbolic consumption and production. These everyday life technologies of information and popular entertainment are linked, inside the nation-state, by way of socio-politics and economic systems which, at the same time, are connected to the networks of globalized political economy. But more importantly, these relationships are determined by the degree of 'open and closed' cultural borders inside and outside each nation-state.

This paper discusses how the Thai society is ambivalent to the modern form of mass media such as fiction, drama and the performing arts. The role of the state in controlling the influences of 'corrupted ideas' transferred through the mass media, in particular, will be explored. In the past, the court sanctioned only certain kinds of dance and theatre, ritual and literature. Contemporary history informed us that other forms of popular theatre such as Monkey play, Lamtad and Sepa Ram, were forbidden during Luang Phibunsongkram's government (B.E. 2481-2487 or A.D.1938-1944). The obvious reason was that these performances used vulgar language (of the commoner) and would debase the arts of theatrical performance. The state was in the position to up-hold the national culture against popular degradation. But the fact is popular theatre which are open to improvisation are at once open to commentaries and critical expressions by the artists and, in turn, shared by the audience. Although they are seen by the state as morally wrong, destructive to the national heritage their popular existence and strength is something the state could not simply ignore.

In the final section, the paper discusses the juxtaposition of the popular hybrid of television drama and Likay with advertisement. The discursive practice of state control and popular acculturation vis-a-vis global homogenization of culture will be explored.

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The idea in this paper was inspired by Jiraporn Witayasakpan's presentation on "The cultural policy of Field Marshal Phibunsongkram" in the seminar "Field Marshal Phibunsongkram and modern Thai politics" (1993). The first section drew heavily from her paper and I am grateful for her kind permission.

## Controlling the Popular Imagination

Luang Wichit Watakarn, former Director of the Fine Arts Department (B.E. 2477 or A.D.1934), Minister of Foreign Affairs (B.E. 2485 or A.D.1942) and Chairperson of the National Culture Committee (B.E.2482-2485 or A.D.1939-1942) during Luang Phibunsongkram's government, <sup>1</sup> spoke of the power of popular entertainment such as novel, play and poetry in one of his public lecture that;

*"Novel and popular fiction are not unimportant when compared with academic writing. In fact, academic writing go out of date easily and there are often new ones that kill the previous ones. The author died a quick death if he/she did not revise what's contained in the book. By contrast, the author of popular writing such as novel lives on although his/her work has been published many years. Take Sunthorn Pu, for example, his poetry is still cherished after two hundred years. The authors and his/her work never die. This is true also in England and France where the works of Shakespeare and Mollier remain popular to this day.....It should be understood that popular fiction is very useful and is an extremely powerful tool for persuasion. Look at the revolutionaries, those who wish to change the hearts and minds of the masses. They do not write books. They write novels and plays. Belgium became independent from Holland because of a single play. Therefore, novels and plays are very powerful. They conquered the hearts of the people. Hinduism in India, for instance, is based on all kinds of mythologies on the gods and goddesses. Myths and stories are easily reproduced and they live on eternally."*

(Luang Wichit Watakarn, lecture on playwright and drama, 18 July, 1956)

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<sup>1</sup> Luang Wichit Watakarn, well known for his patriotic plays, songs and music, also wrote numerous novels, radio and television dramas, essays and books as well as public speech and radio lectures. For more detail on his work, see a list of bibliography in 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Luang Wichit Watakarn, 1998.

This was exemplary of Luang Wichit Watakarn's attitude on popular arts for which he was well versed in a variety of forms. He had worked closely together with Luang Phibunsongkram, Prime Minister between B.E.2481-2487 (A.D.1938-1944), in popularising the new government cultural modernization project during B.E.2482-2485 (A.D.1939-1942). It was clear that both Luang Phibunsongkram and Luang Wichit Watakarn believed in the power of the mass media and popular theatre in winning the hearts and minds of the masses. But let us first look at some of the details of this project to unravel how the state controlled and suppressed popular theatres and other popular media. During this same period, the government had made serious attempt to create a range of popular art form to accommodate its effort to define modern nationalism in the wake of Western and Asian expansionism (prior to WW II) vis-a-vis internal power struggle.

### Licensing popular theatre and the artist

The National Cultural Project was launched on 24<sup>th</sup> June B.E.2482 (A.D.1939), seven years after the political disjuncture of 1932 which ushered in a constitutional parliament in place of an absolute monarchy. During B.E. 2482-2486 (A.D.1939-1943) twelve Announcements which were the core for the cultural transformation were put into practice.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Project started off with the first National Culture Announcement regarding the name of the nation, the people and the nationality. The subsequent 11 Announcements were concerned with the following cultural areas; 1. The name of the nation, the people and the nationality (24/6/1939) 2. Prevention of national threat (3/7/1939) 3. The name of the Thai people (2/8/1939) 4. The national flag, national anthem and the royal anthem (8/9/1939) 5. The consumption of goods produced in Thailand (1/11/1939) 6. The melody and lyrics of the national anthem (10/12/1939) 7. The effort of the Thai people to build the nation (21/3/1940) 8. The the royal anthem (1/4/1940) 9. The Thai language and Thai books and good citizenship (24/6/1940) 10. The attire of the Thai people (15/1/1941) 11. The daily routine of the Thai people (8/8/1942) 12. The social welfare of children, the elderly and the disabled (28/1/1943).

Jiraporn Witayasakpan (1993) contextualized how these Announcements laid the basis for the cultural transformation and the rise of nationalism. And how these changes bore particular impact on popular music and drama in the years that followed. Her argument is that the control of culture during the early years of the newly established political regime has eventually transformed the aesthetic worldview of dramatic arts since then. On the one hand, it rejected court theatre and its aesthetic tradition which was ritualistic, refined, excessive and slow in its movement and narrative. In its place, the new government introduced Western drama into the society in a systematic way. They were made into the official standard of aesthetic values in arts and drama. On the other hand, popular performing arts were marginalised and some were entirely prohibited. Hence, Western culture (which stands for global culture in the official worldview) has been at the heart of the power play as the discursive practice for a new nation-state culture.

As the prime measure to set new aesthetic tradition the government appointed Luang Wichit Watakarn as the chair of the committee to revise the standard of Thai drama (and to a lesser extent, music) in order to improve upon the standard of Thai drama to a universal level. Secondly, the committee was to conserve what was available and to transform the performing methods to suit the modern era. Luang Wichit was entrusted by the Prime Minister, Luang Phibunsongkram, to translate the European classification of drama into Thai. These classifications were proclaimed in the Decree on Artistic Culture on Drama Theatre, B.E.2485 (A.D.1942). The ideal types were grouped into 3 major categories;

1. Opera - Grand Opera, Musical Drama, Operetta, Comic Opera and Opera Bouffe
2. Drama - Tragedy, Drama, Melodrama, Comedy, Farce
3. Musical - Musical Comedy, Revue, Pantomime, Variety Show

The Decree caused a lot of confusion after it came into effect. It was the first time that any public performance of

popular theatre throughout the country must receive a license from the Department of Fine Arts. In addition, the Department must lay out licensing rules and performing rules for music and drama theatre, and must provide training for performers (Jiraporn, 1993). This Decree and the legal role of the Department of Fine Arts to regulate the content of music and drama performances, and the licensing and training of artists is the precursor to other censorship organ of the state, such as the Film Board, the Radio and Television Board, in the pursuing years.

From the start, the question was how could one classify 'local drama' or Thai drama to match the same official/European categories ? If any of the Thai drama did not fall inside the official classification would they be licensed to perform ? And did all of them have to be licensed ? <sup>3</sup>

Amidst the confusion, especially from artists in the country side and provincial governors (who must regulate accordingly), the Department of Fine Arts constantly wavered between yes and no without any clear cut rule. But the suggestion would be to discourage local folk dance, music or popular theatre because they were against state policy. Folk theatres were seen as primitive and uncultured. The Department of Fine Arts preferred the types of Lakorn Rong (singing drama) and Lakorn Pud (spoken drama) developed during the reign of King Rama VI as opposed to popular or folk drama, such as Lakorn Chatri. <sup>4</sup>

Although the Department of Fine Arts was rather confused on how to classify Thai popular theatre into the Western ideal

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<sup>3</sup> The state was not only unclear on how to classify music and drama it could not classify puppet theatre into any of the categories drawn from the West. Puppet shows such as Chinese puppet, Nang Talung or leather puppet adapted from the Javanese leather puppet, Wayang Kulit, and marionette were not classified and hence, must ask for special permission to perform.

<sup>4</sup> The new government rejected much of Lakorn Ram or court dance which is used for royal ritual or entertainment. Court dances have been choreographed in a certain style and do not allow re-interpretation.

types it was able to set detailed guidelines on the licensing and controlling process for public theatre performances. In order to get the permission to perform the troupe must follow these steps (Regulation on Licensing and Controlling of Drama Performance, The Department of Fine Arts in Jiraporn, 1993);

1. The organiser have to apply for a permission 15 days in advance, the script and a list of names of the performers must be attached with the rationale to apply for a permission,

2. If the script is not available, the type and the method of performance must be declared,

3. The script must be screened and might be altered/censored by the Department of Fine Arts,

4. The Department of Fine Arts might send its officers to observe the rehearsal as part of its screening process,

5. The suitability of the location of performance will also be taken into consideration, it must not go against the national culture, unhealthy or dangerous to the audience, the Department of Fine Arts might suggest a change of location or forbid the performance from taking place there,

6. The application must identify its audience and the Department of Fine Arts would decide if the performance is suitable for the intended audience or not.

Furthermore, the Government stipulated that commercial performers must be professionally trained in order to upgrade to the same level as international performers. A professional performer meaning an artist who received a certificate from the Department of Fine Arts or an accredited certificate. The qualify artist must be trained by the Department of Fine Arts for at least 48 hours and not more than 90 days. The course was consisted of the following subjects; dancing, music, literature, history, law on the arts and culture and the Constitution, which were equivalent to the music course of the Department of Fine Arts.

In sum, the licensing process was aimed at screening;

1. The types of performance (what were allowed or not allowed)

2. The artists (who were allowed or not allowed)
3. The aesthetic dimension (what types of theatrical presentation were allowed or not allowed)
4. The content of the performance (what kinds of story were allowed or not allowed)

Despite stringent control by the state Likay thrived as the major popular theatre as opposed to the national theatre. Likay was originally Hebrew (Zakhur) and Arab (Zikir) religious chanting. It was brought into Thailand through the Muslims in the Southern peninsula (some record said it came through the diplomatic corp in the Ayudhaya period). Likay was transformed into secular chanting and later, into Likay Banton and Likay Lukbot with musical instruments and poetic narrative. The court appropriated Likay and modified it to its taste which was known as Likay Song Kruang. Likay is a genre known for its stylized movement, excessive costume such as head dress, and poetic dialogue and singing (Surapone Virulrak and Jenpob Jobkrabuanwan, 1995). But in addition to its aesthetic virtue its popularity was a combination of good singing (rhythmic and good voice), pretty costume and a quick story line and narrative. And at the heart of it all was the comedian who improvise and made the story relevant to the audience. He crossed over between the narrative and the audience. It was clear that

Although the detailed regulation on public performances and the artists demonstrated the high degree of control the state placed on popular culture popular theatre such as Likay was already adapting to the new socio-cultural environment. The state, on the other hand, attempted to built up its newly defined cultural aesthetic to compete with popular forms and the ebbing court drama as we shall discuss later.

### The exclusion of popular and folk theatre

Three types of popular theatre, Monkey play, Lamtad and Sepa Ram, were completely forbidden by the Decree on Artistic

Culture on Drama Theatre, B.E.2485 (A.D.1942). They were seen as 'vulgar and un-artistic'. However, these are the kinds of popular theatre with a loosely written (or memorized) story that open to artistic improvisations and audience direct interaction.

If we look at each type of the popular theatre we would find that the stories were mostly relevant to the lives of the people. They talked about local/popular events and human emotions. Most of these performances were witty and comical in order to entertain. Monkey play, for example, was restricted because it was seen by the Department of Fine Arts that the play was cruel to use animals to perform. But for the audience this is a kind of circus act which needed artistic skill to train the animal. Monkey play also combines circus with story-telling. The artist/trainer must play with the monkeys and narrate the story or many short acts that make up the whole play. The enjoyment of monkey play depends a great deal on the artist's skill and imagination.

Lamtad is a kind of singing theatre with rhythmic physical movement accompanying the beat of Ramana drum (Indian drum). It was adapted from Suad Khaek or Malay chanting that the Malay prisoners brought along from Kedah or Saiburi (in Thai) to Bangkok during the reign of King Rama III (B.E.2367-2395 or A.D.1824-1852). In the popular theatre, the original Suad Khaek or religious chanting was transformed into secular singing in Thai language with a Malay tune. Once became a secular theatre Lamtad performance was turned into rhythmic dialogue between two groups of men and women instead of chanting. The performance is not based on a written script but on an open plot which the duet would improvise with their artistic skills (Surapone Virulrak and Jenpob Jobkrabuanwan, 1995). Lamtad is well known for its argumentative dialogue and sensuous expressions.

Sepa Ram or Lakon Sepa is a type of drama developed from popular story-telling Sepa. To make the narration interesting some artists narrated in poetic style with the beat of a 'krab' (small

hand-held wooden beat instrument) accompanying the rhythms of the verses. The court of King Rama III and V brought in a full classical band and dancers to visualise the narration. This became Sepa Ram (Dancing Sepa) or Lakon Sepa (Sepa Drama). There were two types of Sepa Ram, standard and comical Sepa. The former was polite and well scripted and the latter was humorous (Sumonmarn Nimnethipan, 1989). Khun Chang, Khun Pan, the story of a hero and a warrior, was one of the most popular Sepa performed in court. This popular theatre has, thus, been transformed into a court theatre. Although Sepa or popular story-telling in casino theatre remained a liberal form for the artist to improvise his narration the stories written for court theatre were also performed in some popular theatres. The stories performed by Sepa artists were drawn largely from popular literature such as Khun Chang, Khun Pan or from folk tales. The aesthetic virtue of Sepa lied with the artist's skill of emotional improvisation. It was lively with sobs and laughters, praise for the hero and heroine and scolding for the villain as much as the audience responded. Suchit Wongtes (1985) called this the free spirit of popular theatre of Sepa.

Both Lamtad and Sepa are simple story-telling art form with only basic rhythmic instrument accompanying the performance. The entertaining value lies in the stories and the way they are narrated. The creativity of each artist could open the mind and the imagination of the audience. In a sense, they communicate and entertain through an interactive style of performance. The important point that Lamtad was forbidden was its simplicity and liberal form that could entertain an open-ended story. On the contrary, Sepa Ram was transformed into court theatre and the theme of the stories were mostly related to the main characters' loyalty to the King. In the popular theatre, however, Sepa remained an open theatrical form and the artist could make it comical or critical which could nullify the power-that-be. As a popular theatre Sepa is much similar to Moh Lam in the Northeast and Kab Saw in the North (Suchit Wongtes, 1985).<sup>5</sup>

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Apart from Monkey play, Lamtad and Sepa Ram there were certain types of folk dance and plays at local festival, religious celebrations or ceremonies which must seek a permission in order to perform. They come under a separate Order on the Control of Folk Dance and Play (The Department of Fine Arts Regulation on the Control of Folk Dance and Play in Jiraporn, 1993). Permission were given by the village head or district head. In this Regulation there were 18 types of dance and play which could perform without a permission.<sup>6</sup> The Regulation put in place both a control on popular dance and play as well as a clear division of state/official culture as opposed to folk/popular culture. It also signified that the realm of popular imagination, cultural expression and physical expression was under-going a process of colonisation by the power at the centre. At the same time, the Department of Fine Arts worked studiously to create a new national theatre on dramatic arts and music.

### National culture and national theatre

The National Culture Policy with the 12 Announcements (B.E. 2482 or A.D. 1939) as its prime instrument to propagate a new national culture has its underlying discursive practice. It was a policy to control popular theatre on the one hand. And on the other hand, Luang Wichit Watakarn and the Department of Fine Arts created new dance and plays and music for the promotion of

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<sup>5</sup> Suchit Wongtes wrote Sepa Prai or Sepa of the Commoner (1982), Sepa Padetkarn or Sepa Against the Dictator (1983), Sepa Nam Tuam Habrae or Sepa on the Hawkers Who were Flooded (1983) to tell the stories of commoners affected by the socio-political conditons in contemporary society. His works attempted to draw the comical and critical style of Sepa to identify with the modern popular audience.

<sup>6</sup> These 18 types of dance and play were; permission. These were; Kula Ti Mai, Ngu Kin Haang, Chui Chaai, Chuang Chai Ram, Chak Cha, Saw Muang, Pleng Rabam, Pleng Puang Malai, Pleng Kiew Kao, Pleng Rua, Pleng Prob Kai, Fon Serng, Mae Sri, Moh Kan Moh Lam, Mong Krum, Rabeng Rong-ngeng and Ram Koam.

nationalism and a new national culture. These are the ideal modern national plays or better known as 'patriotic drama'.

It could be seen that the first Announcement provided a new definition which conceptualized the 'new nation' according to the idea of the modern nation-state. For him, the symbols of the nation encompassed the national flag, the national anthem and the royal anthem. Luang Phibunsongkram set the new National Day on 24<sup>th</sup> June and added the Constitution to the sacred list of national symbols to signify the shift of power from an absolute monarchy to the regime of constitutional rule in 1932.<sup>7</sup>

Luang Phibunsongkram's worldview, especially his political project on nationalism and militarism, was starkly different than his predecessors, King Rama VI and VII. The global power which the Siamese monarchy always looked up to was the Western power, England in particular. Luang Phibunsongkram's worldview was also contradicted to that of the civilian leadership of Kana Rasadorn, Pridi Panomyong. Pridi organised the Free Thai Movement (an underground liberation movement) with the aids of the Alliance and the Siamese royalties and elites while Luang Phibun sided with Japan during WWII. It was clear, then, that Luang Phibunsongkram could not have achieved his political project without the basis of a deep cultural shake up.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The former National Day was on 6<sup>th</sup> April, the founding of the Chakri Dynasty. Both the National Day (24<sup>th</sup> June) and Constitution Day (10<sup>th</sup> December) were declared official holidays and public activities were organized to commemorate these important events.

<sup>8</sup> These Cultural Announcements are not only symbolic but highly strategic. As Charnvit Kasetsiri (1993) argued Luang Phibun was set on the grand project of nation-building to secure the new ruling power from the old regime. And since he preferred the idea of a strong military state he already had his eye on Japan and her Pan Asia movement prior to WW II . When war broke out on Thai soil in B.E.2484 (A.D.1941) he sided with Japan and declared war against the Alliance.

While Luang Phibunsongkram placed a great deal of emphasis on nation-building his legitimacy seemed to lie with his cultural politics. On the one hand, his strategy to promote himself as the new leadership was seen as not only a game of personal politics (amongst the inner circle of revolutionaries) it was understood as a scheme to further limit the power and influence of the monarchy (Charnvit, 1993). On the other hand, he sought to establish a new Thainess or Thai identity (disconnected to the royal identity) by promoting the production and consumption of Thai goods (not imported and luxurious goods). And most important of all, Luang Phibunsongkram changed the alphabets of the Thai written language into a more simplify version while declaring the central Thai vernacular to the status of official spoken language. However, the alteration of the Thai language was unwelcomed. Journalists and the educated class were opposed to the change and some openly resisted the policy.<sup>9</sup>

On his music and drama policy Luang Phibunsongkram sought to create a new culture which could be both Thai and universal (read Western) at the same time. The Department of Fine Arts and the newly established agency, Council for National Culture, were responsible for carrying out this policy. The Council was entrusted with the following duties;

1. To research, adapt, conserve and promote the existing national culture,
2. To research, adapt and define what is appropriate culturally or what is to be transformed,
3. To disseminate the national culture in accordance to the present context,
4. To control and find the means to propagate the national culture until it is instill inside the hearts of the people, and
5. To give consultation and carry out the policy of the government on national culture.

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<sup>9</sup> To give an example, Malai Chupinit, one of the reputable journalist and novelist openly announced that he could not continue to use the new language to write hie famous novel, Our Beloved Land. Hence, he stopped short before the novel actually come to an end (Ruen-ruetai, 1998).

Luang Wichit wrote 24 plays between 1936-1957 which were mostly patriotic plays. *Luead Supan* or *the Blood of Supan* (1936) was the first of its kind and performed by the students from the newly established School of Performing Arts (which was changed to the College of Dramatic Arts later). The play was a big success and the leaders of *Kana Rasadorn* was pleased with the nationalistic theme of the play. *Luead Supan* was followed by *Raja Manu* or *King Manu* (1936), *Phra Chao Krung Thon* or *The King of Krung Thon* (1937) and *Suek Thalang* or *The War of Thalang* (1937) which emphasized the theme of patriotic and nationalistic war. During the period when Luang Phibunsongkram was Prime Minister and at the height of the National Culture Project Luang Wichit produced 6 plays on similar theme. These 'patriotic drama' served the purpose of nation-building well especially in their story line on war and sacrifices and their characterisations of the heroes which broke with the convention of court theatre. The people or commoner took centre stage in these plays. In the case where the king was the hero he was portrayed as a righteous king rather than a deity. Women were also given a place in these plays.

The grandeur of the performance of these 'patriotic drama' was the highlight of the national theatre. When compared with court theatre their new aesthetic quality differed in the sense that they were based on the Western performing technique of realistic acting. And the pace of the diction and movement were quickened (shortened) as part of the technique to modernize the theatre. Some dancing was retained but it did not command the centre stage as it was in the past.

The 'patriotic theatre' of Luang Wichit was successful in constituting a significant element of the national culture project. His work was disrupted when Luang Phibun fell from power after WWII. But he made a return in B.E.2491 (A.D.1948) when Luang Phibun took office again. The concept during this period that the arts, especially plays and dramas, could be instrumental to

cultivating political ideology was instilled and handed down to each generations of political leaders.

### **The legacy of broadcast media licensing and state censorship**

Although radio was heavily utilized for Luang Phibunsongkram's National Culture Project from the start it was mostly on news and information, speech and feature from the high officials. The kinds of popular culture allowed on Radio Thailand was either political drama or music created expressly for a new culture. This was song and music by Suntharaporn Band from the Public Relations Department. But despite the strict state licensing and control of popular theatre during Luang Phibunsongkram's government, Likay and Lakon Chatri, for example, thrived as the mainstream popular genre among urban and rural audiences. On the contrary, the national theatre failed to capture the hearts and minds of the people after Luang Phibunsongkram lost his power in B.E.2488 (A.D.1945). When he returned as the prime-minister for his second tenure between B.E.2494-2500 (A.D.1951-1957) he chose to popularize Likay on radio and on television, to a lesser extent, for his political objective.<sup>10</sup> To allow popular culture on the broadcasting media licensing and control on the content and the performers continue to be significant for the state. In this way, the Public Relations Department took the place of the Department of Fine Arts in controlling the popular imagination on radio and television.

### Licensing popular culture on television

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<sup>10</sup> Luang Phibunsongkram accepted Likay because it was highly popular among the masses. This time it was Anti-Communism that he wanted to propagate through the popular media. A big competition was organised in B.E.2498 for Likay on Radio Thailand and over 60 troupes participated. The most popular group, Homhuan, missed the winning prize because he sang a live verse (not in the script screened by the station) which criticised the political situation at the time (Surapone Virulrak and Jenpob Jobkrabuanwan, 1995)

When television was first introduced in B.E.2498 (A.D.1955) by the government of Luang Phibunsongkram the state had complete control of the medium. The Broadcasting Law of B.E.2498 (A.D.1955), however, stipulated that state ownership of radio and television stations were exempted from any regulation provided in the law. With the power of the state on hand Luang Phibunsongkram, and later, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, Thanom and Prapas, and certain state agencies were able to appropriate ownership right of radio and television unabated. Paradoxically, by the regulation of this law the broadcast media became the sole monopoly of the state and yet exempted from any legal control and public accountability.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning, drama and popular theatre on television were under close supervision from the station. Television Channel 4 of the Public Relations Department (B.E.2498 or A.D.1955) set up its own drama production while Channel 7 of the Royal Thai Army (B.E.2501 or A.D.1958) must invite groups from the private theatre to produce television drama for the station. On both channels the story and the script of the drama as well as Likay must be screened and approved in advance. In addition, the station was in control of the entire production process since these were live broadcast (no recording available). On Channel 4 Lakon Ram or dance drama from the Department of Fine Arts was provided a monthly 2-hour schedule. This provision continued for two decades (Panada Thanasatit, 1988). Thereafter, Lakon Ram lost its popularity entirely to the 'modern drama' which drew most of their stories from literature, short stories, and later, pulp fictions in the weekly and monthly women magazines

In the early years of television Channel 4 produced its own love and vengeance, adventure and mystery drama as well as exotic drama from translated version of Chinese literature. These

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<sup>11</sup> See more detail on this in "*The media, cultural politics and the nation-state*", 2000.

drama took the convention of Lakon Pud introduced by King Rama VI and developed by Luang Wichit and the Department of Fine Arts during the national culture era. Although both television channels broadcasted Lakon Ram and Lakon Rong as part of its mandate to uphold national culture and good taste but since they must appeal to the popular audience at the same time comedy, vaudeville and revue and musical from the popular theatre also made their appearances on the small screen. Likay, especially, was extremely popular on television when Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat became prime-minister during B.E.2501-2506 (A.D.1958-1963). American series were also brought in with soap advertisements. Television as a medium, therefore, opened itself to 4 sources of popular entertainment; the station own productions (short stories, literature and pulp fiction), Lakon Ram and Lakon Rong of the national theatre of the Department of Fine Arts, the commercial popular theatre (mostly comics and music, drama and Likay), foreign series and films from advertising agencies.

The political transition period in the 1930s - 1940s had moved drama away from court dance. And with the advent of television drama theatre took another turn. We have seen that royal patronage of dramatic arts gave way to the new political elite of the nation. But it did not last very long. As a technology the new medium open itself to another type of patronage - the popular audience - who would be packaged by advertisements. Channel 4 set up as a state enterprise was funded from both public budget and advertisements. Channel 7 followed the same pattern although operated as a state agency. Hence, the market force became the challenging patron since day one.

Since structural licensing was put in place from the way television stations were organized and their sources of funding the programming divisions of Channel 4 and 7 (later changed to Channel 9 and 5) and the two private stations that followed in B.E.2510 and 2513 (A.D.1967 and 1970) were entrusted with the responsibility to license the drama troupes and to control the

content of the production.<sup>12</sup> The most regarded but un-written rule was political expression and criticism of the government (Darures Kas-osot, 1993).

Other censorship rules were on the use of proper language, respect for the religion and social moral in order to up-hold social discipline and prevent viewers from 'corrupted ideas'.<sup>13</sup> With television under the direct control of the military dictatorship the state monopoly and internal licensing system were deemed sufficient for censoring the popular imagination on television. In addition, the regime produced regular propaganda play to up-hold the standard of social morality.

During the first two decades, it was noticeable that the open genre of the popular theatre such as Likay, comic and revue became highly scripted and were strictly censored in its performance. In Likay, for instance, the sensuous expressions must be curtailed in the dialogue and the excessive tragic emotions were restricted since it would 'demoralize' viewers. The performance was also shortened to fit into the allotted air-time. However, these Likay troupes could perform what was missing in their live shows in the market place or on temple ground without being censored. The television performance only made them more well known to a wider audience wherever the station expanded its coverage area.

### The National Broadcasting Board : censorship in focus

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<sup>12</sup> Channel 3 received a 50-year concession from the Department of Public Relations (later transferred to the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand) and Channel 7 received a 52-year concession from the Royal Thai Army. Both private operators do not have legal rights to the stations and must oblige to direct and indirect censorship from these state agencies or the government.

<sup>13</sup> Other mass media such as newspapers, magazines and books, films and radio, were under strict censorship of the Revolutionary Order 17, 21 and other related laws, especially the Internal Security Law. Newspaper developed a tradition of reporting more crime news in the front-page than political news and printed gossip column as commentaries.

After the fall of the three military dictators, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, Field Marshal Prapas Charusathien and Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, in 1973 the elected government of MR Kukrit Pramoj began to regulate television and radio by setting up a broadcasting board independent of the broadcasting stations. The government did not reform the ownership rights of state agencies nor extend freedom of expression on radio and television. Instead, it proclaimed the Broadcasting Regulation of B.E.2517 and 2518 (A.D.1974 and 1975) whose objective on controlling the content of radio and television has seriously impinged upon television drama and its development. Firstly, it set up a National Broadcasting Board under the Department of Public Relations to regulate the operation of broadcasting stations and their content. The censorship of television content was carried out by a Sub-committee on Censoring Film and Television Drama. Secondly, the Regulation stipulated that announcers and broadcaster must hold a radio and television announcer license. Each candidate must pass a reading and announcing language test given by the Sub-committee on Testing Announcer. Thirdly, the Regulation stipulated the time allotted to television and radio advertisements. On television, 10 minutes per hour was allowed and 8 minutes per hour for radio.

The process of controlling television drama was much the same as how the Department of Fine Arts controlled popular theatre in the past. The drama producers must send the plot and script 15 days in advance to the Sub-committee for approval, comment or correction. The recorded video tape must also be sent for screening at least 3 days in advance before airing. The Sub-committee, made up of representatives from state agencies on education, culture and religion, the military and internal security and the police, holds the power to approve or disapprove the story, the script or the production. Drama producers must make correction according to the comments of the members of the Sub-committee or withdraw the application for that particular production (Panada Thanasatit, 2000).

The content area of censorship covered a range of 14 topics. These were (Darures Kas-osot, 1993) ;

1. Stories that stir up conflict between classes such as peasants and landlord.

2. Stories that are not suitable for current political/social situation or causing negative impact such as the story that conflicts with state policy or crime and illegal action.

3. Stories that create a negative impact on politics or international relations such as comments on politicians, government policy or international policy, stir up social/political unrest or disseminating the doctrine of Communism.

4. Stories that create a negative impact on the nation, the government or state officials such as comical, satire or critical comments on the government or the police.

5. Stories that create a negative impact on the monarchy such as creating bad feeling, disrespect or satiring or commenting on the monarchy or leaders of other nations.

6. Stories that create negative impact on the religion such as creating bad image, disrespect on the religion, the temple or the Buddha image or creating mis-understanding on the religious scripts.

7. Stories that demoralize or in conflict with Thai culture and tradition such as presentations that could create misunderstanding or destroy the Thai culture, disrespect on the parents, quarrels between students and teachers, homosexuality, sexual abuse, etc.

8. Pornography or stories that create sexual desire such as sexy language, love scene or extra-marital relations.

9. Stories that show violence, cruelty, hate, vengeance or un-civilized or any cultural debasement presentation.

10. Stories that promote crime or gambling or drug addiction.

11. Stories that are negative to the Thai language such as slang, improper pronunciation, vulgar language or wrong usage of royal vocabularies.

12. Stories that are unhealthy to viewers such as unclear plot, non-sense or mis leading to children and youth on sex and violence or magic.

13. Low quality production which might disturb the viewing of audience.

14. Stories with inappropriate name such as sexual desire which might stir up the desire to have sex.

From the list above the state was obviously setting stringent measures to censor the content of the broadcast media. This seems to be the continuing effort to create a new culture as opposed to court culture and popular culture or what Marcuse (1977) called the struggle for a bourgeoisie morality. In the 1970s and 1980s the Sub-committee was well known for its censorship role and the name '*Gor Bor Wor*', which is the acronym of the National Broadcasting Board, was used to signify censorship. '*Gor Bor Wor*' enjoyed fully its censorship power and left nothing to the imagination of the audience. Hence, as part of the effort to avoid the grip of censorship drama producers and the stations thrive on love stories, romance, mystery and some adventure stories.

Stories that reflected the social conditions such as *Khon Kai Khon* or *People Selling People* which talked about child labour was banned totally. The Sub-committee was of the opinion that there was no such thing as child labour in the Thai society. Similarly, a story on a woman who was raped and brought her case to court was also rejected by the Sub-committee because it resembled the true story although the context in the drama has been changed (Thiranan Anawatsiriwong, 2000).

True stories from the police file on *Si-ouy* or *Jack the Ripple*, *Ti Yai* or the *Big Bandit*, for instance, nearly did not pass the Sub-committee. The producers must go through a lot of revisions before it could go on air. The rationale was that *Si-ouy* would be too horrifying and *Ti Yai* was a bad example for youths. In addition, there was no evidence to prove that the portrayal of

their personalities and the crimes they committed were truthful (Panada Thanasatit, 2000). When censorship was moved away from '*Gor Bor Wor*' to each individual stations after 1992 it provided a liberal backdrop for television drama although it took several years before the censorship board of the station became more relaxed. Over the years the censorship measures have been instilled in the practitioners at all levels including the playwright and the director. The recent version of *Ti Yai* in 1999, was carefully produced with an emphasis given to the psychological background of the bandit. By comparison, it passed without much complaint from the station censorship board nor social critics (who usually tow the state line on censorship).

The measure on the time limit and censoring of television advertisement, on the surface, appeared to regulate on behalf of the viewers. Structurally, however, it opened the way for multi-national advertisements while turning away from local advertisers. The implications of advertisements on television became clear when multi-national advertising agencies use television as its main marketing tool for consumer products. For a time, between B.E.2520-2524 (A.D.1977-1981) Hong Kong and American series and films were the mainstream entertainment fare. But since 1983, television grew dramatically with an average of 50% of the advertising expenditure pump into the system. This is the largest share among other types of media (Ubonrat, 1999, see chapter 6). Their support go largely to the evening prime-time drama programmes that are locally produced and well accepted by the mass of television viewers.<sup>14</sup> The juxtaposition of drama with 3-6 mins break of 15-30 second-a-piece advertisement spot in between has been established as the successful formula to draw the largest number of audience on mainstream television. The flow of the evening programme slot, drama interspersed with advertisements, could be taken as a genre in itself. Its potential lies in its ability to connect and disperse, immediately in split seconds, television and popular culture with the globalized culture, nation-state with consumerism.

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### **Renewing popular imagination and global homogenization**

The impact of censorship and advertisement on television drama is both real and ideological. The highly restrictive censorship process has been internalized and turned into a measure of self-censorship throughout the drama production process. But in order to entertain the popular audience Thai television gradually combined the technique of Lakon Pud or Spoken Drama (introduced since the reign of King Rama V-VI of the middle Rattankosin period and refined by Luang Wichit and the commercial theatres thereafter) with the stylization and aesthetic beauty of Likay. The excessive costume of Likay Song Kruang or Costume Likay was adopted as well as its over-expressive acting and type-casting of the characters.<sup>15</sup> Most importantly, the mainstream television drama took from Likay and the popular tradition the comic character who command the direct link with the audience. In this way, the drama remain somewhat open (or create the sense that the genre is still 'open') for commentary within the story. The friend or the maid of the main characters would often play this role. They are the ones who comment their boss behind their backs or help add comment against the villain, etc. Therefore, they move between an obedient or loyal friend or maid and a commentator. This kind of art form represents reality in its estrangement yet entertaining. The content of the drama, struggle of individuals, life and death, is contained within the form of the drama.

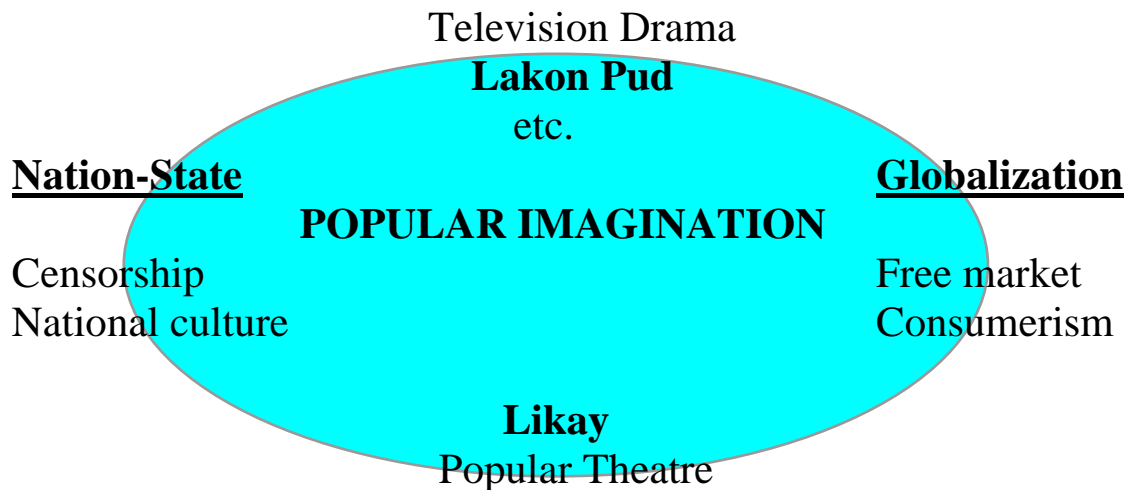
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<sup>14</sup> In B.E.2524 (A.D.1981) the government stipulated that the evening prime-time slot after the main news bulletin must be allotted to locally produced programme. A number of stations placed drama into that slot and found that it worked successful with the audience and the advertising agencies. The slot has been fixed and expanded from 30-mins to 60 and 90-mins for Thai television drama ever since.

<sup>15</sup> Likay was already driven out of television by the rise of television drama in the 1970s-1980s. Perhaps due to its shortage of stories (they based on a limited number of stories) which became irrelevant to the daily lives of viewers.

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And it might due to its outlook and limitation in staging. Earlier, movies was competing with Likay and took its place in the 1960s-1970s.



Nithi Aiewsiwong (1995) explained that Thai movies, or in our case - television drama, in its zenith was similar to other genre of popular theatre such as Likay and Nang Talung. They were new artistic forms (during their time) that contained old messages of the life-world of the peasantry. The novel media technology, once become an extensively popular medium, would be appropriated to suit the collective aesthetic worldview. Although cultural critics are often frustrated by the half-bred realistic drama, the stylized performance of Likay and the ad-lib and improvised role of the jester or comedian in Thai movies and television drama Nithi thought otherwise. He believed that the aesthetic value of popular culture lies in its ability to improvise and to communicate with the audience instantly. Unlike the well-scripted drama or film they would lose their immediate relevance to the viewers. Hence, losing their potential to subvert and to transcend the reality in the drama and film. It is the comedian who constantly reminds the viewers that reality in the drama and reality in life are two separate realm. The comedian talks to the characters in the story and could also talk to the audience as he/she is the only character permitted to do so. Consequently, the comedian would be jumping from one realm to the other to separate and to connect these two terrains.

As Nithi (1995) hypothesized how the popular aesthetic value in the Thai film and drama is significant to the audience and

their everyday life he did not see the aesthetic transformation that would break through the mystified horizon of change and liberation. Rather, Nithi cautioned that the '*still water*' film (and drama) would have to reformulate itself sooner or later if it is to survive in a fast changing cultural environment. But as we examine the struggle between the state and its cultural control over popular theatre we find the ebb and tide of their existence and the transformation in and between genres, slow and painful but inexorable.

Perhaps the change which is taking place in today's television drama would be another example on how popular theatre reformulate itself. Since television drama must accommodate the bourgeoisie together with the masses (just like Likay once was) it crafted the popular genre, Likay, on the genre of television drama which gives it a realistic and modern (read globalized) outlook. Another added dimension is the Greco-Roman appearance of the major characters of the drama. These actors are half Thai and Italian, Scottish, American, etc with English names or pet names. They are tall, fair (to white) with light colour eyes and hair. And some have blue eyes. The actors and actresses are excessively handsome and beautiful. They stand in the place of the hero and heroine of the Likay theatre without their headdresses and glittering costume. The representation is at once un-Thai, modern (Western, global) yet deeply Thai in its stylized performing tradition taken from Likay. In the aesthetic virtue of popular theatre the good characters must manifest their quality in their outlook, i.e., their persona, costume, physical appearance and their speech. They are the symbols of the ideal human being. Whilst the antagonists must demonstrate their evil/bad quality in contradiction to the protagonists in order to reveal the dark human instinct. These are well reflected in the mainstream television drama.

This kind of popular television drama has another global dimension when we look at the interspersed of advertisement spots. Well known pop singers and stars appeared as presenters

of products in these advertisements. The main characters of a drama might move from the drama they are acting and jump into the advertisement spot during the break and vice-versa. The comedian in the drama who is permitted to move between the realm of reality and imagery is no longer alone. He/she has a whole group of friends in the advertisement spots who break from the story they are performing to speak directly to the audience. Theirs are not the kind of current issues in socio-political topics or local affairs as the 'popular comedian' related to the audience but a sale-message for a particular product.

The advertisement spot and its presenter does not come with just the global message in consumerism. The genre itself has its own message too. The spot is short, colourful and contain tens and hundreds of quick-cut or cross-cut shots and other computer graphic that convey a sense of quick movement, diversity and joy which are the foundation of liberal consumption. The juxtaposition of 6-8 spots in a break make them into a (short) programme in itself while showing the diverse genre and sub-genre in these spots such as adventure, humour, fantasy, mystery and romance. It could be seen that in coupling drama and advertisement spots together they bear direct influence on one another. The quick pace and modern (or post-modern) outlook of the advertisement spots have contextualized the speed of the narrative and production technique of television drama so that it gradually conform to the new stylization. While advertisement spots borrow from the world of fiction and drama their genres and narrative styles to capture the popular imagination.

If we follow Nithi's argument, popular theatre in the past could deal with any new genre as long as the old content of everyday experience have a place to fit in. Television drama is being transformed into a new 'popular hybrid' not unlike what Likay has gone through decades ago. The original Likay from Hebrew and Arab religious chanting went through a long process of acculturation through court theatre and popular theatre. Likay Song Kruang as we know it is a genre reputable for its stylized

movement and poetic dialogue and singing (it has incorporated the pop music genre of Luktoong to its narrative style). From another direction, Lakon Pud has its origin from England and Shakespeare was exemplary of this. Lakon Pud or spoken drama whose narrative is based entirely on the dialogue broke with the 'sing and dance' tradition of court theatre and popular theatre. But over many decades, these have been gradually transformed into present day television drama. And we are now observing new changes when drama must be part of the globalized flow of entertainment and information, namely, advertisement.

Television drama was unable to escape the grip of state censorship as we discussed in the previous section. But in its somewhat 'open' cultural border it devised the 'comedian' to comment and argue in the fictitious world of drama. Hence, retained its popular tradition and popularity among viewers. The confrontation with advertisement and a range of televisual art forms is forcing television drama to transform again. Now that the direct control from the state is seemingly relaxed the global control is emerging to take its place. This means that the cultural border of television drama is under-going a new challenge. The test of time and its own aesthetic virtue of 'open and subversive potential' and finally, of 'content having become form' might be the only possible answer.

*"...The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change...."*

(Marcuse, 1978, pp.xii-xiii)

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