

Consuming Modernity and Nostalgia: A Case Study of Cross-border Representations and Fandom of Thailand-Myanmar Transnational Cinema¹

Veluree Metaveevinij

This paper explores representations of identities and fandom in two Southeast Asia border-crossing films, *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (2014) and *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (2016). Both films have already been exhibited in Thailand and Myanmar and have gained a huge following in both countries.

Myanmar in Love in Bangkok portrays a contemporary migrant situation: It is a love story between a male Burmese migrant worker and a Thai woman played by Kaew Korraevee, a Thai leading actress who has become famous in Myanmar because of her portrayal of this modern and unconventional character. Alternatively, *From Bangkok to Mandalay*, which notably presents Burmese and Siamese cultural heritage, has successfully created a feeling of nostalgia among the Thai audience, resulting in fan tourism to Myanmar.

Comparing these two cases, I argue that consuming modernity and nostalgia are the main driving forces of the cross-border representations and their subsequent fandom. This paper also engages with the existing fan studies framework put forward by Koichi Iwabuchi and extends the studies of transnational fans further by considering the Southeast Asian sociocultural context.

Keywords: fandom, fan studies, transnational cinema, modernity, nostalgia

Thailand and Myanmar are neighboring countries. Similar to many countries which have shared borders, Thailand and Myanmar have both cultural proximity and a long history of conflict and hostile relations. Since ancient times, there have been numerous wars fought between the Toungoo Dynasty of Burma² and the Ayutthaya Kingdom³ of Siam.⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that people of Burmese ethnicity have been constructed as the national enemy of the Thai people (Chutintaranond, 1992). And this mindset became the historical narrative that has been consistently reproduced in Thai school textbooks, television dramas, and films..

This situation, however, has recently begun to change due to various factors. One of the main factors is the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community area that facilitates cooperation and commerce among ASEAN member states. Moreover, Myanmar has opened up to foreign investment and tourism. Consequently, Thai investors, including

filmmakers, have recognized and attempted to capitalize on the abundant business opportunities in Myanmar (Metaveevinij, 2019).

In 2014, *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (Tanit Jitnukul & Nichaya Boonsiripan, 2014), a Thai film narrating a love story between a Thai woman and a Burmese migrant worker, was released in theaters. This was not the first time that Thai films have had Burmese characters in leading roles. King Bayinnuang, the king of the Toungoo Dynasty of Burma, had been depicted in the epic film saga *The Legend of King Naresuan* (2007, 2011, 2014, 2015). In 2011, Thai popular horror film *Laddaland* (Jira Maligool & Sophon Sakdaphisit, 2011) also focused on the story of a housing estate haunted by the ghost of a Burmese migrant worker. It is important to highlight, though, that in these films, Burmese characters were played by Thai actors or actresses. The lead character in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok*, on the other hand, is played by Burmese actor Aung Naing Soe.

The lead actress in the film is Korralee Pimsuk, who plays K, a Thai tattoo artist. Her short blonde-dyed hair lends a distinctive and modern flavor to her role. It is this unconventional character that has attracted many Burmese fans. And though the film was not commercially successful in Thailand, it contributed to Korralee's popularity. Her fans have continued to support her other media projects in Myanmar.

Two years later, *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (Natchapon Purikananond, U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016), a Thailand-Myanmar coproduction directed by Chartchai Ketsanut, was released. The film was commercially successful in Myanmar but received less attention in Thailand. However, it inspired seminars and discussions devoted to exploring Thailand-Myanmar history. Following this film, a documentary called *Yodia Thee Kid-mai-thung (Unexpected Yodia)*, also directed by Ketsanut (2017), was aired on Thai PBS television channel. This documentary investigates the history of Thailand and Myanmar, particularly the Siamese people who were exiled to Myanmar during the Burmese-Siamese War. This group of people called "Yodia" is still living in Myanmar, although they have inherited the cultural heritage of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. Both film and documentary have provoked newfound interest in the cultural proximity of Thailand and Myanmar. Some audience members have even traveled to Myanmar to visit many of the filming locations as well as try to find Siamese cultural roots in Myanmar.

To some extent, *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* and *From Bangkok to Mandalay* reflect, sociopolitical changes in Thailand-Myanmar relations. This paper aims to explore the two countries' new cross-border relations as seen in the main characters and the star status reached by the major personalities involved in the two films. Though these films did not succeed

commercially, they have gained devoted transnational fans that are fascinated by the films and that use these films to engage with said changes. This paper uses an aspect of fan studies proposed by Koichi Iwabuchi (2002; 2004) to help articulate the relationship between sociopolitical transitions in Southeast Asia and the media consumption of Thai and Burmese fans.

Fan Studies in Transnational Context and the Illumination on Cross-border Geopolitics

Generally, the term “fan” refers to anyone who has an intense affection towards a particular object (Jenkins, 2018). This affective feeling can be either a personal preference of only one fan or a common interest shared with other fans. However, “fandom” usually refers to a common identity which is a shared culture of a group of fans (Jenkins, 2018). In the context of media studies, fandom has been explored in parallel with the development of media technology. In the 1990s, key works on fan studies highlighted the practice of fans in relation to home-video technology and popular culture, whereas in the 2000s, fan studies grew in association with social media and digital technology (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Jenkins, 1992). As noted by Daniel Cavicchi (2014), among others, fandom has existed long before the term “fan” was invented, although past references tended to highlight the pathologization of fans by the media and society at large. For instance, in 1833, the word “musicomania” in the *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine* was used to explain an excessive musical passion (p. 63). While a century ago, fandom might have been considered as a disease or illness, many media scholars today have expanded studies of fans to highlight their active participation in creating alternative meanings in popular cultural texts (Jenkins, 1992), media texts and fan identity formations (Hills, 2002), among other expanded areas (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007, 2017).

With globalization, media fandom that occurs across national borders has also gained attention. In the context of Asia, there have been a number of works that have sought to extend the case studies and approaches. Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto (2013) pointed to a number of these approaches. One approach is to study fandom by analyzing the consumption habits and identities of fans. For example, Lee Dong-Hoo (2006) has studied the media consumption and cultural identity of young Korean women who are fans of Japanese television dramas. Nissim Otmazgin and Irina Lyan (2014) have also examined Korean popular music fandom in Israel and Palestine.

The second approach is to study transnational fandom in parallel with transnational stardom. The main objective of this kind of study is to examine stars that have gained popularity across national borders. For

example, Sun Jung (2006) examined the transcultural consumption of new Korean masculinity in Japan. In analyzing Japanese fans' reactions towards the Korean actor Bae Yong-Joon, Jung argued that middle-aged female fans desire the actor's soft masculinity because of their memories of and nostalgia for their past experiences. Eva Tsai (2005) analyzed the transnational stardom of Kaneshiro Takeshi, a Taiwanese-Japanese actor who has a devoted fan base spread across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan. Anthony Fung (2009) explored the nature of Chinese fans of Hong Kong pop music singer Faye Wong and argued that the singer's independent and unconventional image is aspirational for Chinese middle-class female fans who have to reconcile their traditional family roles with their modern careers.

Additionally, several studies have focused on fandom activities. For example, Reyna Denison (2015) examined the online fan distribution of Japanese television dramas by using the concept of shadow economies. Ian Condry (2010) also explained how "fansubbing" or the practice of overseas fans translating, adding subtitles to, and digitizing unauthorized copies of television series and films, challenges current copyright laws. Chin and Morimoto (2013) meanwhile highlighted the way in which previous works on transnational fandom focused more on transnational geopolitics instead of fans' affective engagements.

This paper sees the usefulness of engaging with geopolitical questions in relation to media representations of characters and fandom activities. Subsequently, it draws on Koichi Iwabuchi's work on transnational media consumption, particularly his notions of modernity and nostalgia that resonate in media representations and fan engagements. In his edited book *Feeling Asian Modernities: Transnational Consumption of Japanese TV Dramas*, Iwabuchi (2004) argued that the popularity of trendy Japanese dramas in Asia arose from the changes of Asian countries from traditional to modern societies. Watching trendy Japanese dramas that portray modern male and female characters, young Asian audiences attempt to reconcile their traditional values with the complexity of modernity. On the other hand, Iwabuchi (2002) similarly argued that Japanese audiences consume images of Asia because of the feeling of nostalgia they arouse. This feeling is what Rosaldo called "imperialist nostalgia," which is "a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (as cited in Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 550). The Japanese, for example, consume an image of an apparently innocent Thai waitress in a magazine because of the association of present-day Thailand with Japan's past (p. 562).

The concepts of modernity and nostalgia have been used to explain

transnational fandom, which usually refers to the fandom of Japanese and Korean pop culture. Few studies have been conducted to analyze fans that consume texts produced within the Southeast Asian pop culture scene. This paper, therefore, applies the concepts of modernity and nostalgia to explain the cross-border fandom phenomenon that is occurring in Thailand and Myanmar by using two transnational films as case studies. The first is *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (Natchapon Purikananond, U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016), a feature film coproduced by Thai and Burmese filmmakers. The other work is *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (2014), a feature film produced by Thai filmmakers, with both Thai and Burmese cast members.

Each of the films was exhibited in Thailand and Myanmar and attracted both Thai and Burmese fans. This paper, however, focuses on the Burmese fans of *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* and pays equal attention to Thai fans of *From Bangkok to Mandalay*. My main argument is that *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* engenders a sense of modernity among Burmese fans, whereas Thai fans consume a sense of nostalgia by fixating on the mediated images of Myanmar in *From Bangkok to Mandalay*.

The kind of media consumption exhibited by each group of fans depends in part on their psychological perception towards development processes in their own country. Myanmar is a country that has recently embraced economic liberalization (Rich & Franck, 2016). Myanmar youth fans, therefore, consume mediated images of Thai modernity that help them engage with their fast-changing society. On the other hand, Thailand has hurdled an economic downturn in the 1990s and severe political conflicts since the 2010s (Kongkirati, 2014). Thai fans that are yearning for “the good old days,” therefore, consume mediated images of a less developed country as a part of their nostalgia for Thailand’s glorious past. Clearly, the consumption of transnational media has been influenced by recent geopolitical changes in Southeast Asia, and such implication can be used to analyze transnational media consumption in other societies undergoing significant transitions.

This paper uses a combined research methodology, employing textual analysis as well as discourse analysis. Textual analysis is used to analyse film narratives and the star persona and imagery. Alternatively, discourse analysis is used to examine texts produced in online spaces, including Facebook and Instagram, that movie fans frequent to disclose their feelings towards these two transnational films. Only information that does not contain sensitive issues and is available for public viewing is included in the paper. The real names and Facebook names of key informants will not be disclosed.

***Myanmar in Love in Bangkok:* Modernity and Hybridized Identity**

Myanmar in Love in Bangkok (2014) in Thai is *Rak Phasa Arai*, which literally translates to “What is Love Language?” The film was produced by well-known Thai film director Tanit Jitnukul who, in an interview, said that he was motivated to produce this film because he saw an unfulfilled market segment of Burmese migrant workers who live in Thailand and consume Thai entertainment. Another motivating factor came from the fact that he directed *Bang Rajan* (2000), a period movie that depicts the battles between Bang Rajan villagers and their Burmese invaders. The film was commercially successful; nonetheless, it emphasized the stereotypical representation of Burmese as a horrifying enemy of Thai people, which Jitnukul felt responsible for. Consequently, he decided to make another film that positively depicted the Burmese people and culture and contributed to a positive relationship between Thailand and Myanmar. With these motivating factors in mind, he produced *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok*, a love story between Dan, a Burmese migrant who works in the Tawanna market in Bangkok, and K, a Thai female tattoo artist with whom he has nothing in common. While Dan is shy, naïve, and nice, K is strong, independent and sometimes irritable.

The film’s premier was held at a theater in Mahachai, which is the location of a large fish market and one of the biggest communities of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. After the film had been released in Thailand and Myanmar, Korravee Pimsuk or Kaew Korravee as she is better known, became popular among the Burmese. She continues to work in Myanmar largely due to the great support of her local fans. In an interview with Posh Magazine (“Special Interview - Korravee Pimsuk,” 2017), Korravee discussed the reason for her popularity :

Maybe, (it is) because Myanmar people love watching movies and (seeing) new things; for example, my character in the film which is very similar to my real character. They feel like . . . this one is a strange woman. So, they like me. Especially, in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok*, I am unconventional—dyeing hair with white (blond) colour, wearing something different from people there. They watch and truly feel that I am a cool woman. (para. 34-37)

The political and economic contexts in Myanmar is one of transition. The first general elections after 22 years of military rule was set in 2010. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD) boycotted the 2010 elections, it won in the April 2012 elections, and its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, gained a seat in parliament (Jones, 2014). Myanmar’s Gross Domestic

Product (GDP) of rose from \$12.6 billion to \$45.4 billion, while foreign investment increased from \$4 million to \$8.3 billion (Jones, 2014, p. 780-781).

These significant changes led to social reform. Elizabeth Jane Tregoning Maber (2016) argued that civic society in Myanmar has expanded remarkably in recent years. There has been an increasing number of organizations advocating for women's rights and gender equality (p. 420). The number of foreign tourists visiting the country has also dramatically increased. Anna Katherina Rich and Anja Franck (2016) examined tourism development in Bagan, Myanmar, and concluded that the tourism industry has considerably influenced the cultural identity of the youth in Myanmar. Young people who are living during a time of transition have to reconcile global values with their cultural traditions. Consequently, they develop glocalized or hybrid versions of their own cultural identities (p. 346).

This situation is similar to what Iwabuchi (2004) had observed about the Asian youth in the 1990s. According to him, as Asian societies were rapidly transforming towards more complex and modern social frameworks, Japanese TV dramas that portrayed love affairs, friendships, and working life in urban settings gained popularity in many East and Southeast Asian countries. And the main viewers were from the younger generations that consumed Japanese dramas as a way to fulfil their desire for modernity, particularly Asian modernity offered by Japanese dramas, which could not be found in Western media.

During rapid societal transformation, young audiences also consume media in order to reconcile their traditional values with new values. For instance, the Chinese middle-class female fans of Hong Kong pop music singer Faye Wong take inspiration from her independent and unconventional image to reconcile their family roles with their modern careers (Fung, 2009). In the same way that a desire for modernity and hybridized identity is connected to the popularity of transnational dramas and stardom, Korravee's character of a cool woman in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (Tanit Jitnukul & Nichaya Boonsiripan, 2014) strongly underpins her popularity among Burmese fans.

In the film, Korravee's character K, who has short blond hair and wears sexy T-shirts and shorts, has a dualistic representation. On the one hand, she is a strong, independent, and unconventional woman. On the other, she has some cuteness, tenderness, and vulnerability that she only reveals during intimate moments. In the first scene where Dan and K meet, for instance, an annoyed K takes the bus, sits next to Dan, and starts complaining to the bus driver. Shortly after that, she falls asleep on Dan's shoulder. Dan tries not to disturb her until K wakes up and gets off the bus without saying a word to him.

Some more scenes from the film exemplify K's duality. K, a tattoo artist, surprisingly never gets a tattoo. When one of her customers ask why, she philosophically replies that nothing is really important enough to her that she wants to mark it on her body. In various scenes, K is seen arguing with her rich Thai boyfriend who treats her like an object. Though K seems to be a modern woman, she does not want to have a casual relationship—she even ties Dan up to her bed's leg to ensure that he will not be able to touch her when they sleep together in the same room. She is depicted as a woman who cares about love more than money. Similar to the plot of other romantic films, K realizes later that Dan is important to her only after she pushes him away. She searches for Dan everywhere, even travelling to Dan's hometown in Myanmar. K eventually meets Dan when she returns to Bangkok. In the end, the two of them reconcile.

Though *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (Tanit Jitukul & Nichaya Boonsiripan, 2014) seems to be another romance cliché, it switches the gender roles traditionally assigned to male and female leads. In the film, K is confident and independent, while Dan is a shy boy who easily falls in love with K, and I argue that these representations are actually rooted in what Bangkok and other cities in neighboring countries have each come to symbolize.

In my other paper, "Negotiating representation: gender, city and nation in South East Asian transnational cinema" (Metaveevinij, 2019), I examined representations of cities in transnational cinema, particularly films coproduced by Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, and I found that Thailand, particularly Bangkok, is usually represented by male characters, while Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia are depicted by either female characters or male characters that are sentimental and led by emotions (e.g. Sabaidee Luang Prabang, 2008; Sakchai Deenan of *The Return*, 2014; Natchapon Purikananond, U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016). Moreover, masculinity in these films is portrayed in relation to capitalism, working life, and public spaces in Bangkok, whereas femininity is connected to cultural tradition, family life, and private spaces in other Southeast Asian countries. Masculinity, therefore, becomes a symbol of Bangkok's superior economic power as compared to neighboring cities.

In these transnational films, Bangkok is a symbol not only of capitalism and masculinity but also of violence and human alienation. In the horror films I studied, women, especially female migrant workers in Bangkok, are always depicted as victims. Meanwhile, the characters from Bangkok in romantic films always discover what true love means from characters who come from less modern cities and are therefore expected to be "more sentimental" and "more feminine" (Metaveevinij, 2019).

These stereotypical representations demonstrate that although the establishment of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has drawn the attention of Thai people in the neighboring country and has created a friendlier perspective of neighboring people, transnational cinema, produced by Thai directors, still fixates on the image of the “weaker” non-Thai character. Many times, non-Thai characters are created to become mere instruments of the Thai characters’ spiritual journey. In *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (Tanit Jitnukul & Nichaya Boonsiripan, 2014), for example, K, who is not very sentimental, has a one-night stand with Dan, but she does not view it as an act of love. In contrast, Dan falls in love with K at first sight and follows his heart without considering the consequences. Eventually though, after she returns from her journey to Myanmar and back, K comes to realize that she also loves Dan. This kind of narrative arc is also prominent under an Orientalist perspective, when Western characters in Hollywood films have to travel to Asia to revive their spirits.

Through this case study, I argue that the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* be explained in relation to hybridity of gender in transnational media. In examining Bae Yong-Joon’s popularity among middle-aged Japanese women, for instance, Jung (2006) argued that Yong-Joon’s star persona is due to his “hybridized masculinity.” Japanese fans see Yong-Joon as the ideal man, having both “manly charisma” and “feminine tenderness.” Jung further posited that Yong-Joon’s soft and tender images evokes memories of their first loves and the good old days during the Sho-wa era (1926-1988) when Japan was experiencing rapid economic growth. Later, the term “soft masculinity” would also be used, particularly in East Asian popular cultures, to define male images that are “more feminine” than the stereotypical macho man. These “softer men” would also be called “white-collar beautiful Chinese men” (Louie, 2012, p. 932), “pretty boy” in Japanese manga (p. 933), and “flower boy” in Korean drama (Miyose & Engstrom, 2015).

While male images in media texts have become more “girlish,” female images have also become “more masculine.” Louie (2012) argued that such reconstructed sexuality encompasses both values for the modern world and some traditional values (p. 940). This new kind of sexuality is arguably related to the increased buying power of women. The images of beautiful men have attracted and have been consumed by young women (Louie, 2012, p. 933). It also has an impact on male fans, especially the youth, whose identity is in transition. Mary Ainslie (2017) argued that in Malaysia, soft masculinity represented in Korean popular culture enables Malaysian male fans who are marginalized by hegemonic masculinity to build new forms of masculine identity.

In the case of Korravee's character in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (Tanit Jitnukul & Nichaya Boonsiripan, 2014), K symbolizes a hybridized form of femininity that embodies both strength and tenderness. As mentioned earlier, the film constantly shows K as an independent and modern woman who still needs someone who truly understands her and who still believes in true love. Her duality encompasses both modern and traditional values, as Louie (2012) had argued. This new femininity seems to fulfill a particular desire for a globalized cosmopolitan identity among the new Burmese middle class, who are part of a rapidly expanding economy. Of course such modern characters as K can be found in other transnational media, including Hollywood and Korean films. However, due to the cultural proximity of Myanmar and Thailand, Burmese audiences can better relate to images of modernity presented in Thai-produced films. This reaction is comparable to how Asian viewers react positively to Japanese TV dramas. As Iwabuchi (2004) argued:

[T]he cultural proximity is a matter of time as well as of place. The emerging sense of cultural similarity between Japan and other Asian nations experienced as such seems to be based upon a consciousness that both live in the same modern temporality. (2004, p. 12)

Besides being Southeast Asian co-cultures, both Thailand and Myanmar are also going through significant national development processes, which involve the force of globalization, the expansion of the middle class, transnational immigration, changes in gender relationship, and the clash between traditional and new global values. All of these changes fall under what Iwabuchi (2004) called “modern temporality,” which enables Burmese audiences to identify with K and Dan and feel modernity through their love story in Bangkok.

To exemplify this argument, I examined Korravee's Burmese fan page on Facebook, which has over 9,000 likes. This Facebook page was started in March 2015, a few months after *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* had been released in Myanmar. Updates and photos are posted on her page regularly. Interestingly, Burmese fans would refer to her as “K” and would call themselves “K's family in Myanmar.” Their posts complimented Korravee's feminine attributes: they used words such as “cute,” “beautiful,” and “lovely,” as well as words that emphasized her masculine personality such as “strong” and “brave.” These words reflect her hybridized femininity. When Korravee's other movie *Deception* (2018) was released in Myanmar, her fans began calling her “Emily” as well, after her film character. Apparently, her identity on-screen influences her fans' perception of her.

The Facebook posts that gained many likes from her fans were photos of her wearing traditional Burmese dresses and visiting temples in Myanmar. For instance, in May 2015, Korravee wore a traditional dress when she met her fans at Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. Photos of her were later posted on her fan page and were captioned “K with Myanmar Dress (heart emoticon)” and “The style she goes to shwedagon[sic]. With Myanmar dress. How beautiful she is huh!!! (smiley face with heart eyes emoticon)” (Korravee FanClub, 2015a). These posts gained hundreds of likes. In August 2015, Korravee returned to Shwedagon to shoot a television program, and she wore a traditional dress while helping to clean the pagoda floor. Her fans called her a kind-hearted person on Facebook (Korravee FanClub, 2015b). Arguably, wearing the traditional dress and visiting the pagoda enable Korravee’s identity to be culturally proximate to her Burmese fans and blend well her modernity with Burmese traditional values. These are examples of what can be termed “modernity with traditional values” and “capitalism with a heart” that embodies in Korravee’s star persona.

It could be argued that her star persona has been able to attract Burmese fans that have been living in this period of political, economic, and cultural transition. Their desire for modernity and their desire to preserve their own cultural tradition coexist, and Korravee’s hybridized images have become aspirational for them. When Korravee posted a question on her Facebook fan page asking which of the style her fans wanted to see her in a new magazine, one of her fans answered, “with modern and international traditional style” (Prince Momo, 2015). Apparently, these fans connected their own hybridized cultural identities with Korravee’s.

Besides having a fan page, Korravee also has an official Facebook account, which is followed by approximately 150,000 people (Korravee FanClub, 2015c). Another social media platform that she uses is Instagram, on which she has more than 70,000 followers (Korravee FanClub, 2016). She constantly uses social media to publicize her works and personal life. She has posted more than 3,500 photos and videos on her Instagram account. These photos include events and activities that she joined in both Thailand and Myanmar.

As with her character in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* that has both conventional and unconventional attributes, Korravee also posts pictures of her wearing traditional Thai and Burmese costumes, as well as bikinis. These contrasting images are all liked and praised by her fans.

It is not only Korravee’s posts on Facebook and Instagram that have impressed her fans but also her participation in charitable campaigns for Myanmar. In August 2015, when heavy rains caused severe flooding in various parts of Myanmar, she used her social media platforms to urge

her fans to participate in the campaign to help Myanmar flood victims (Korravee FanClub, 2015c). Her fans greatly appreciated her help, and her action increased her popularity among Burmese fans. In August 2016, when a 6.8 magnitude earthquake hit Bagan where thousands of Myanmar historic sites are located, Korravee also posted a photo of herself carrying a poster that said “SAVE BAGAN. PRAY FOR MYANMAR” on her Facebook fan page (Korravee FanClub, 2016). This post also elicited appreciation from her fans.

These aforementioned engagements highlight the way Korravee effectively uses social media to communicate with her fans. Today, her image, which has been constructed by both her film characters and her social media presence, is not only used to build up her acting career but also the Thai government. Because of her popularity, Korravee was invited to promote Thai products at a government sponsored event called “Top Thai Brands 2018” in Yangon, Myanmar in July 2018 (Kaewkorravee, 2018). This event was organized by the Department of International Trade Promotion, Ministry of Commerce, Thailand. Again, she wore a Burmese traditional dress and received attention from Myanmar media outlets. She has become not only a Thai actress but also a representative of the country in Myanmar. She has become a symbol of binational relations.

From Bangkok to Mandalay:

Myanmar as a Site of Memories and Nostalgia

From Bangkok to Mandalay (Natchapon Purikananond, U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016) is an example of contemporary transnational cinema that concerns Thai-Myanmar relations. It could also be viewed as a national project highlighting the emergence of the Myanmar film industry to the globe. The film, whose premier in Myanmar was attended by General Tin Oo, a chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD) political party, attracted the attention of Burmese media outlets and movie fans (ThaiPBS, 2017).

The film is a Thailand-Myanmar coproduction initiated by Chartchai Ketnust, a Thai filmmaker who had travelled all over Myanmar and was impressed with its beautiful landscapes and music. After his first visit, Chartchai returned to Myanmar initially to make a small road movie, but the project was scaled up after Myanmar investors decided to support it (ThaiPBS, 2017). Burmese actor Nay Toe and Burmese actress Wutt Hmone Shwe Yi then agreed to join the cast, and Sai Sai Kham Leng, one of the most famous Burmese singers, accepted a leading role in the film as well. During behind-the-scene interviews, Toe and Yi mentioned that the main reason that they decided to join the project was because they wanted to

experience working with a professional Thai production team (ThaiPBS, 2017). Toe added that working with a foreign team would be a way to develop the Burmese film industry: “Currently, we have to work hard to raise the standard of Myanmar cinema. We are doing various workshops and collaborating with foreign experts. In the future, we will have good films. We are trying” (ThaiPBS, 2017, 5.34-6.00 mins).

Ketnust, as the film’s director, had his own agenda. In one interview, he said:

I always question about love. In Thailand, we have many kinds of love. We use these kinds of love to identify our characters and identities. Many times, in history, Thailand had conflicts based on love. Love always comes with hate. We love this thing as much as we hate other things. I really disagree with this kind of love. (ThaiPBS, 2017, 23.41-24.32 mins)

This kind of love could arguably be referred to as a form of nationalism. Chartchai (ThaiPBS, 2017) was subtly making a statement against a kind of nationalism that causes conflicts within and between nations. He ultimately planned to use this transnational film as an instrument to eradicate the myths of nationhood and nationalism.

In the film, cities in Myanmar are constructed as sites of memory and nostalgia in various ways. The director cinematically links Myanmar with more traditional methods of communication, that is, the reading, writing, and mailing of letters, and he uses an iconic post office building in Yangon to symbolize the beauty in such a tradition. The main characters connect with each other through snail mail. In some present-day scenes, Pin (Pilaiporn Supinchoompoo) is shown reading her grandmother Thuzar’s letters. A flashback scene shows Thuzar (Wutt Hmone Shwe Yi) meeting Nanda (Nay Toe) for the first time when the former brings her students to visit the post office where the latter works as a postman. Images of letter envelopes also appear in the film’s trailers and posters.

Thuzar, as a university student working on her thesis about recording musical sounds, acts as both sound recorder and memory collector. Together with Nanda, she visit many places, particularly Burmese heritage sites, in order to record the sounds in those places. In every place she visits, there are not only sounds but also memories—the memories of local people there and the memories she has with Nanda. For example, in one scene Thuzar records the sounds on U Bien Bridge, the longest wooden bridge across Taungthaman Lake in Myanmar. She records the sound of villagers singing, while she and Nanda walk together across the bridge. During her

journey, Thuzar learns Burmese traditional puppetry. Two puppets are used to represent Nanda and Thuzar and symbolize their love for each other. And as the story develops further, individual memories of ordinary people begin to be connected to collective memory and national identity.

Memories as depicted in the film operate differently depending on audience type. To Burmese audiences, the film provides a visual representation of Burmese prosperity during the colonial and postcolonial era. In Thailand, where the film is less of a commercial success, there are, nonetheless, small groups of fans fascinated by the beautiful film locations that inspired them to travel to Myanmar. One Thai fan visited the film locations in Myanmar (Phongpan Kesa, 201). He took photos of an old building that was used as the location of Thuzar's house and posted them on Facebook. The official Facebook page of *From Bangkok to Mandalay* also shared these photos to compliment his effort in finding the film location. Noticeably, Thai travelers usually connect their visits to Myanmar with Thailand's past. For example, two Thai bloggers wrote online diaries of their trips in Myanmar as follows:

The time in Myanmar is 30 minutes slower than Thailand. But, it is like we turned back the clock almost one hundred years. (Tiaw Laeow Yang, 2016, para. 83-84)

Hsipaw is a small town in Shan state where the old-fashioned ways of living still remain. People say if you would like to know what Thailand was like 50 years ago, you should come here. (Ling Noi Thong Lok, 2017, para. 2)

This nostalgia is similar to the "imperialist nostalgia" proposed by Renato Rosaldo (as cited in Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 550), whereby a longing for the past is actually a part of cultural and economic domination. The dominant—Thai viewers in this case—mourn what Thailand has lost during its development, which can currently be found in the innocent beauty of Myanmar.

Apparently, the film commoditizes memories of Myanmar to the benefit of the country's tourism industry. The beautiful film locations have become favorite places of Thai tourists, especially Thai movie fans, when they visit Myanmar. Frederic Jameson (1991) argued that the nostalgia film is not simply a matter of representation of historical content but rather a way to construct the past through "stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of image" (p. 19). I argue that Myanmar's past that appears on screen evokes a sense of nostalgia among Thai fans—a sense of yearning for Thailand's past. Iwabuchi (2002) used the term "borrowed nostalgia" to

explain the politics of the transnational evocation of nostalgia, especially “when ‘our’ past and memory are found in their ‘present’” (p. 549).

Since 1997, *Nang Yon Yuk* [Returning to the Past] cinema has become one of the main film genres among Thai blockbusters (Anchalee, 2002; May Adadol, 2007). This genre includes films like *Nang Nak* (Visute Poolvorakals & Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), the ancient legend of a female ghost who waits for her husband; *Bang Rajan* (Nonzee Nimibutr et al. & Tanit Jitnukul, 2000), the story of Siamese villagers battling against the Burmese invaders; and *Suriyothai* (Kamala Yukol & Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2001), the story of an Ayutthaya queen who sacrifices her life during the Siamese-Burmese War. Anchalee Chaiwaraporn (2002) argued that this kind of cinema reflects a crisis in Thai identity that emerged as a consequence of the 1997 economic crisis. Once, Thailand enjoyed huge economic growth and was expected to become one of the Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs). However, this hope disappeared after Thailand’s economic bubble burst in 1997. After the devaluation of the local currency, many companies went bankrupt, causing unemployment to rise significantly. Watching *Nang Yon Yuk*, therefore, became an escape from life’s uncertainties and a way to reaffirm the greatness of the Thai nation. The rise of this style of cinema came with the rise of other forms of consuming nostalgia, including heritage tourism, and nostalgia-motivated tourism such as the popularity of traditional floating markets (Wantanee, 2017).

Even after Thailand’s economy had recovered, the country was mired in political conflicts lasting over 10 years, that led to its people becoming fiercely divided (Kongkirati, 2014). Today, consumption of nostalgia still remains high among Thais who yearn for the good old days, particularly after the death of King Bhumibol, the center of Thai nationhood, on 13 October 2016. After this day, production of historical period drama series to reaffirm Thai identity has been continuous.

When Thai filmmakers collaborate with ASEAN media companies to make transnational cinema, other ASEAN countries are usually depicted as pristine, undisturbed by capitalism. For example, Myanmar in *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (Natchapon Purikananond and U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016) signifies the purity that Thailand has lost during its development that many Thais now long to reclaim. Another example is *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (PAnousone Srisackda & Sakchai Deenan, 2008), a Thai-Lao romance film released in 2008, which portrays Laos as a beautiful country where the protagonist who is living a lonely life in the city of Bangkok, finds his inspiration and the true meaning of love.

From Bangkok to Mandalay and Yodia Thee Kid-mai-thung: When “They” Becomes “Us”

Besides highlighting traditional Burmese heritage sites, *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (Natchapon Purikananond, U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016) also depicts the culture of Yodia, the descendants of people exiled from Ayutthaya, a Siamese or Thai kingdom that existed from the 13th to the 17th centuries. The film goes beyond presenting the history of Myanmar—it argues that the histories of Myanmar and Thailand are closely related.

In one scene, Thuzar records the music of a Yodia. She asks an old musician about his heritage:

Thuzar:	Grandpa, do you have Thai blood?
Musician:	(nod in assent) Yes
Thuzar:	Do you miss Thailand?
Musician:	(sad facial expression)

This scene is inspired by the short story *I am Yodia*, written by acclaimed writer Seni Saowapong (1987),⁵ who used to be a Thai diplomat in Myanmar. The story of the Yodia was later further explained in a televised documentary *Yodia Thee Kid-mai-thung (Unexpected Yodia)*, which initially aired on Thai Public Broadcasting Service channel (Thai PBS) in 2017.

Ketnust, the director of *From Bangkok to Mandalay*, is a co-director of the documentary. The content of this documentary received input from various scholars, including Anant Narkkong, an ethnomusician; Saran Boonprasert, an expert in Southeast Asian culture; Lalita Hanwong, a Thai historian; and Mickey Hart, a Burmese historian interested in Yodia culture. Narkkong and Boonprasert were also consultants of *From Bangkok to Mandalay*. The documentary extends the concept of the historical and cultural connection between Myanmar-Thailand initiated in the film.

The documentary explores the culture of the Yodia through interviews with villagers in the Suka village, one of the Yodia villages in Myanmar (Suleeporn Pathomnupong et al. & Chartchai Ketnust and Surasak Pankin, 2017-2018). Though the culture in the village has assimilated to Burmese cultures, some clues of their Siamese ancestry still remain. For example, older generations of villagers use a secret language which have some similarities with Thai words. After airing, the documentary was overwhelmingly praised by Thai audiences who, for the first time in their lives, realized that the Ayutthaya cultural heritage is still alive in the faraway land of Myanmar (e.g. Kidsada Muangeiam, 2018; Nitiniti Chaiburi, 2017).

The documentary also tries to eliminate the negative attitudes that many Thais have towards the Burmese. In the first episode, Mickey Hart, a Burmese historian, mentioned that the ancient war between the Ayutthaya

Kingdom and the Hongsawadee Kingdom should not be considered as a Thailand-Myanmar war because it happened before the concept of nation-state existed. It is widely believed that after the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom, many of Ayutthaya people were forced into exile as war hostages in the Burmese kingdom. Nonetheless, the documentary emphasizes that these war hostages were privileged people who earned respect from their Burmese hosts.

The documentary explores the pagoda of Uthumphon, an exiled Ayutthaya monarch who lived as a monk in Burma until his death. His funeral rites were respectfully performed by the Burmese king. The documentary also investigates Ayutthaya music, cultural performances, and mural paintings that still exist in various parts in modern-day Myanmar. It concludes that these Ayutthaya exiles were mostly selected because of their royal privilege and artistic talents.

The argument proposed by the Yodia documentary has reshaped the attitudes of many Thais towards the Burmese people and their culture. Several viewers even commented on the Thai PBS YouTube channel that the documentary considerably reduces prejudice and the belief that the Burmese ruined the Ayutthaya Kingdom (Nitiniti Chaiburi, 2017). On the contrary, viewers saw that the Burmese kingdom had inherited parts of Ayutthaya culture, which are visible today (Kidsada Muangeiam, 2018).

Due to its success, the Yodia documentary continued with its second season in 2018. On 24 July 2018, Thai PBS, the main sponsor of the documentary, organized a seminar on the history of the Yodia at Bangkok Art and Culture Centre. On that day, hundreds of documentary and movie fans joined the event to discuss Yodia history with Chartchai Ketnust, Anant Nakkrong, Saran Boonprasert, and Mickey Hart. Media fans requested the production team to design tourist routes following the Ayutthaya heritage sites in Myanmar. Other fans also asked for movie and documentary DVDs with Burmese subtitles in order to share them with Burmese tour leaders. Hence, the tour leaders could take Thai fans to these heritage sites (ThaiPBS, 2018).

According to John Frow, the most important product sold by the tourism industry is “a commodified relation to the Other” (1991, p. 150). Although both *From Bangkok to Mandalay* and *Yodia Thee Kid-mai-thung* commodify memories and Burmese identities for the tourism industry, they have gone beyond the simple commodification of Myanmar as the Other in relation to Thailand. Media fans are fascinated by the “Thai-ness” that has been discovered from this Otherness. On-screen, Myanmar has been constructed as a site of memories, nostalgia, and, eventually, a site of authentic Thai-ness, which can be traced back to the Ayutthaya Kingdom.

During the making of the second season of the Yodia documentary, the production team discovered the temple called Maha Thein Taw Gyi in Sagaing, Myanmar (MahaTheinTawGyiTemple, 2018a). The temple, which was built by Siamese exiles, features iconic Ayutthaya-style mural paintings. Unfortunately, these paintings are decaying due to rain and flooding. In order to mitigate the damage, Ketnust and other specialists have initiated a heritage conservation project by building a retaining wall to keep water from flowing into the temple and renovating its ceilings and stairs (MahaTheinTawGyiTemple, 2018).

Fundraising for the project was done in April 2018. A merit-making event where participants donated to the conservation project was organized. This event drew the attention of Thai and Burmese fans, and Wutt Hmone Shwe Yi, the lead actress of *From Bangkok to Mandalay*, also attended and promoted the event (MahaTheinTawGyiTemple, 2018).

Many photos taken at this event were posted on a Facebook page created particularly to raise funds for the temple (MahaTheinTawGyiTemple, 2018). On this page it was mentioned that Sagaing villagers who were likely to be Yodia descendants were invited to watch a Yodia performance and *From Bangkok to Mandalay* in an open-air theater. In the film's penultimate scene, Pin, a leading Thai character, realizes that she has Myanmar blood because of her grandmother Thuzar. Likewise, the Sagaing audience may have realized they had some Yodia blood in their veins.

Although Ketnust mentioned in his interview that he disagreed with nationalism, his transnational film in some ways encourages nationalism among Thai fans who want to travel to Myanmar to see the cultural roots of the Thai nation (ThaiPBS, 2018). The heritage conservation project at the Maha Thein Taw Gyi temple is also driven by an attempt to preserve Siamese national heritage. However, unlike the traditional form of Thai nationalism that perceived the Burmese people as a national enemy, this new kind of nationalism, driven by the transnational film, accepts the Burmese as descendants of Siam and Siamese cultural heritage inheritors.

Conclusion

By comparing the narratives and star representations, along with fan engagements, of the two transnational films examined in this paper, audiences can clearly see their stark difference. *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok* (Tanit Jitukul & Nichaya Boonsiripan, 2014) attracted Burmese fans by depicting a hybridized character who displays both modern and traditional attributes. On the other hand, *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (Natchapon Purikananond and U Sue Won & Chartchai Ketnust, 2016) attracted Thai fans by evoking memories and nostalgia through beautiful scenery. But

both consumption of modernity and nostalgia are driven by transitions in the political, economic, and social contexts of Myanmar and Thailand.

The movie fandom of both films is not limited to the films per se. Kaew Korraeve, the leading actress in *Myanmar in Love in Bangkok*, has used her official Facebook account, fan page, and Instagram account to present her lifestyle. The production team of *From Bangkok to Mandalay* extended the historical connection between Thailand and Myanmar in a televised documentary, which was later posted on YouTube. And in the years following the films' releases, the cross-border movie fandom led to influential social campaigns embraced by the films' bigwigs. Korraeve supported the campaign to help natural disaster victims in Myanmar, while Director Ketnust initiated the heritage conservation project. Both campaigns received a groundswell of support from movie fans.

It is paradoxical, yet true, to say that transnational cinema in the specific Southeast Asian contexts explored in this paper operates as a national project in some ways. The Thai government has used Korraeve's popularity to promote Thai brands in Myanmar, while Burmese audiences connect Korraeve's star persona through their cultural identities. Burmese filmmakers saw an opportunity in *From Bangkok to Mandalay* to raise the domestic film industry's standards, whereas the film raises concerns about national history and heritage among Thai fans. Indeed, transnational cinema, which depicts transnational stories and transnational characters and is consumed by transnational audiences, is capable of reaffirming national identities and raising movie fans' national awareness in a myriad of emerging ways.

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Notes

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² Myanmar was formerly known as Burma until the ruling military junta changed the official name of the country in 1989.

³ The Ayutthaya Kingdom is a historical kingdom that existed from the 13th century to the 17th century and was formerly located in the present-day Phra Nakorn Sri Ayutthaya Province in the central region of Thailand. Many Thais consider the Ayutthaya Kingdom as an ancestry of the modern Thailand and Thai cultural heritages.

⁴ Thailand was formerly known as Siam. The name was changed in 1939, after the 1932 revolution transformed the country from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. In this paper, Siam refers to ancient Thailand, and Siamese refers to the people of ancient Thailand.

⁵ Seni Saowapong is a pen name used by Sakchai Bamrunghong when he writes novels and short stories.

VELUREE METAVEVINIJ is a lecturer and a director of Bachelor's degree program in Management of Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries at College of Innovation, Thammasat University, Thailand. She received Ph.D. in Film Studies from SOAS, University of London. She currently conducts a research project on transnational cinema in Southeast Asia. (corresponding author: veluree@citutu.ac.th, veluree.m@gmail.com)