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Introduction

From the Western sphere, the mass media were imported, one after another, into Thailand firstly for religious propaganda then for political purposes and commercial benefits. Newspapers were introduced by American missionaries in 1844, radio - broadcasting by the Thai Government in 1928 and television, again by the Government, in 1955¹.

Motion pictures were firstly shown for public entertainment by the Japanese military and businessmen at the beginning of the twentieth century. But the Thai began to make films as their own medium of communication only in 1921 after the cinemahall business had for about ten years.

As a matter of fact, the mass media are for Thailand an imported culture both theoretically and practically. Social technology, imprinted in cinematographic art, can be traced back to European and American origins. Hardware or applied - scientific technology is totally foreign artifact which can be bought and used by the Thai people but never be thoroughly understood by them.

Both maker and audience still find it difficult to appreciate the art and science of cinematography even at the onset of the approaching Information Age.

Major questions are therefore being asked by many thinkers, both local and international.

* ผู้ช่วยคณบดี คณะวารสารศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์ : *Docteur en Journalisme, Strasbourg.*

¹For details of communication development, see Dr. Somkuan Kaviya's textbook published by "Principles and Theories of Communication" Bangkok,

Are modern mass media contributive to the cultural development of the country or simply responsive to individual lust for amusement? Are they constructive or destructive to local cultures long developed and delicately preserved as national identity and pride? Even the UNESCO MacBride Commission is unable to give a decisive answer. They just became "a strong advocate of enmeshing the two forms (traditional and modern media), where the two work in harmony. For them, "it is indispensable for ensuring the survival, spread and effectiveness of all media, both old and new, which any society has at its disposal."

Award of this reality or not, policy-makers in Thailand have come to react in almost the same manner. They are not sure how and where to set a priority between old and new media, between national and western cultures, between Thai and Foreign films.

Since 1930, much legislation, from Acts down to Department Notifications, have been put forth to control the impacts of motion pictures. Some

laws are promotional to Thai Films, some are detrimental to them. National identity and real artistic and cultural values are often forgotten which is the major reason why Thai motion pictures are still struggling, right or wrong, to claim their right as a national art and industry. On the other hand, some critics note that the claim is not always justified. Some legislation and measures are already positive, even too positive, to Thai films. They consequently backfire and contribute to the deterioration in the quality of locally produced films,* while, at the same time, reduce the quality standard of the public entertainment and intellectual recreation.

STATUS AND PROBLEMS

Production

While documentary film production is still in the state of under-development, the production of feature film has nevertheless reached a peak. For a decade, Thailand has each year produced about one-hundred 35 m.m.

**Number of local films produced
during 1987 - 1989 compared
to the imported foreign films
Local Films**

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1987	9	10	7	9	11	8	4	9	9	13	9	17	113
1988	10	12	13	11	12	7	6	8	6	15	12	12	124
1989	6	10	6	12	4	7	4	3	11	14	13	8	98

* Harry Rolnick "Thai Film Industry : A Simple Solution" The Bangkok Post : Wednesday January 21, 1970.

Foreign Films

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
1988	14	12	10	11	13	19	18	15	21	13			146
1989	24	17	17	19	21	20	27	18	19	11	18	22	233

Seventy per cent of the producing companies are members of the Thai Motion Picture Producers Association which is the most important professional organization. The rest of the companies are non-members and mostly amateur.

In general the production costs of one typical film can be broken down according to three stages of the production process.

The first stage, involving the scriptwriter and his staff, costs anywhere from 20,000-150,000 bahts.

The second stage, involving location filming, costs on the average from 300,000-400,000 bahts.

The final stage, involving laboratory and

editing work, costs anywhere from 450,000-750,000 bahts to produce 8 prints.

In addition, publicity for the movie using various media, costs anywhere from 200,000-1,200,000 bahts.

Altogether the production costs are therefore between 970,000-2,500,000 bahts or U.S.dollars 38,000-100,000. These relatively high costs, as well as legal and ethical problems, have made the producers reluctant to increase their productivity and become more selective in their investment.

Following is the table showing trends in selecting shooting story-types during 1986-1988 :

Selected shooting story-types

Story-type	1986	1987	1988 (January- beginning October)
1. Violence, Excitement, Fighting	39	40	24
2. Love	20	23	18
3. Teenage	17	15	13
4. Life	11	17	10
5. Comedy	21	12	16
6. Sex Appeal	5	4	3
7. Musical	-	1	-
8. Traditional	-	1	-

(Source : Bangkok Swaytam "Thai Film 1986" and Chirabun Thasanabanchong "Thai Film Structure 1988").

According to study done in 1987 by Chamroenluck Thanawangnoi of Thammasat Mass Communication Faculty, "Thai movies do not have quality standards; lack of expertise and professional training is the source of this problem. Only 2.25 per cent of all producers and directors have been trained in local universities, though 4.49 per cent received training in foreign schools. The majority-nearly 43 per cent-say they learned form on-the-job training. Directors are those who have been in the business more than 10 years". The situation has not much changed nowadays.

Exhibition

Cinemas have been hit by growing competition from television and then videotapes, with revenue falling not less than 50% on the average in the last five years.

"Now people don't have to come into town to see movies like in the old days," said Piak Poster, an active and avant-garde producer, "Video piracy is an ongoing problem. Some people record the movie during its first night in the theatre and sell the tape the next morning".

Some cinema operators have already converted movie houses into other entertainment places such as fast-food outlets or snooker halls to earn additional revenue to cover declining income from ticket sales. The rate of conversion or closure is about 5 per cent a year. There exist now only 1,014 cinemas in the country with 577,000 seats (1 seat : 86 people). Bangkok alone has 109 cinemas and 122,000 seats. The rest is distributed in 73 provinces around the country.

In recent years, new form of movie houses has been however introduced to solve the problem. All newly-built cinemas have become smaller in size and have been designed to accommodate only 200-400 viewers at most. These "mini-theatres" are normally located in shopping complexes and have cut the prices of their tickets to 20-40 bahts or only 30 baht to attract more audiences. Within the last three years, we have seen 32 mini-theatres blooming up in 13 modern commercial centres :

26 in old Bangkok (left bank of Chaophya River) and 6 in Thonburi (right bank Bangkok Metropolitan). They usually show about 35% Chinese films, 35% Western films and 30% of Thai films. New hope has therefore come to refresh those sad hearts of Thai producers, although they have again to compete with the growing popularity and strong marketing strategies of the Chinese films from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Export

Very few local films has been exported to the United States, Japan and Europe each year for exhibition in special occasions. Almost none has been sent to other countries even among the ASEAN.

The ideology of free and balance flow of information in the world has never been materialized, probably due to weak joint effort among groups of developing countries. World market for Thai films is therefore out of reach until now.

Many professionals and academics agree that most foreign movies, Chinese or Western, are not better than Thai films in any aspect. But they are however imported because the Government, like in many developing countries, does not appreciate the countless socio-cultural value of the local cinematographic art and has not set up an appropriate policy to control the quantity and the quality of those imported films.

Production and Investment

Investment in film industry is treated like any other promoted industries, although it cannot produce in large quantity to offer in the decreasing market. Costs of production and promotion are thus rather high compared to perceived risks from failure due to a lack of popularity. Investment in film business therefore tend to remain in the hands of more commercial-oriented people and less professionals.

Equipment and technology

Cinematographic hardware and technology

are completely foreign-made and imported, thus resulting in high cost of production and low competitiveness vis-a-vis foreign films.

Marketing

Commercialization systems of Thai motion pictures are prejudicial to the professional film-makers, due to influential middleman network in the country and poor management abroad.

LEGISLATION

A long list of laws, regulations, orders and measures is there to control the film business from the production to the exhibition stages.

1. Copyright Act 1978.
2. Patent Act 1973.
3. Cinematographic Film Acts 1930 and 1936.
4. Act on Prevention against Communist Activities 1952.
5. Penal Code and the Civil and Commercial Code.
6. Department of Religious Affairs Regulation on the Utilization of Temple and Religious Sites as Film Locations 1963.
7. Act on National Promotion and Coordination for Youth 1978.
8. Notifications of the Ministry of Interior concerning Protection of Labour, Minimum Wages, Compensation Fund.
9. Labour Relations Act 1975.
10. Immigration Act 1979.
11. Alien Work Permit Act 1978.
12. List of the Prohibitive Kinds of Cinematographic Film set up by the Ministry of Interior.
13. Criteria for Film Censorship set by the Central Investigation Headquarters of the Police Department.
14. Revolutionary Announcements Empower-

ing Film Censorship Authorities.

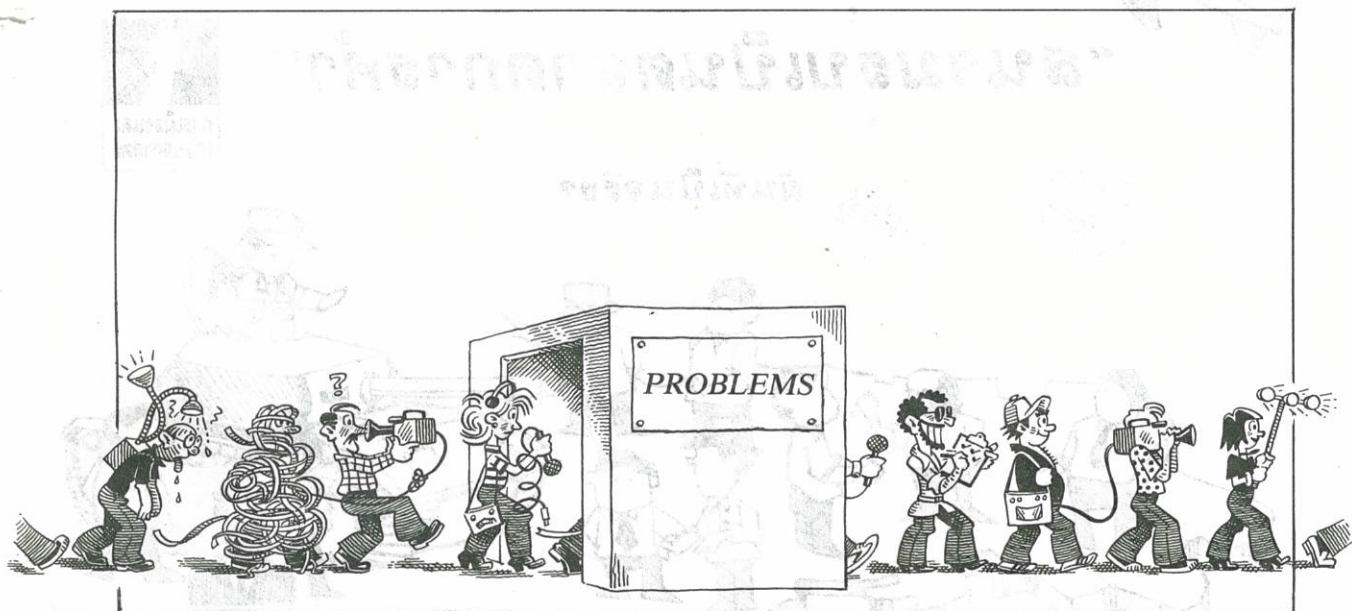
15. Act on Prevention of Danger in Connection with Entertainments 1921.
16. Act in Protection of the Consumers 1979.
17. Drug Act 1967.
18. Food Act 1979.
19. Act on the Control of Publicity by Utilization of Amplifier 1950.
20. Investment Promotion Act 1977.
21. Act of Thailand Industrial Capital Corporation 1959.
22. Revenue Code 1938.
23. Municipal Revenue Act 1954.
24. Customs Tariff Decree 1960*.

Some in this list may be justified, reasonable and positive, but most are rather arbitrary, negative, and authoritarian. Particularly, the strict rules of censorship reinforced by laws and functioning authorities tend to impose fearful sentiments which destroy initiatives, inspiration, and professional pride. The foreign films are apparently treated with more lenient practice because the authorities take culture of film-makers into consideration rather than the impacts on Thai culture and Thai people**.



* Details of current film legislation are being elaborated in Dr. Somkuan Kaviya's paper written for the Government Public Relations Department.

** See Seminar Paper on "To the Future -- the Thai Film", Chulalongkorn University, November 1988



ACTIONS TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS

Promotion By The State

Having more or less realized that the film industry in the country has many difficulties, the Government has done something to soften the problems. Decade ago they set up a joint body called the Film Board Commission which has been trying their best to develop the industry by adjusting some laws and putting out new positive regulations. In spite of many remaining negative laws, film people are happier with the sympathetic attitude and more patient to wait for new hope.

Now, the National Film Archives has been established in the Fine Arts Department through initiatives and continuing supports from private sector.

Meanwhile the Government Public Relations Department is pushing its effort to develop the documentary films production for use in Government projects and socio-cultural purposes. It is known that documentaries are scarcely produced in Thailand due to the lack of sufficiently-supported organization.

Regarding the ASEAN Film Fund hopefully expected by many, the PRD is optimistic and trying to coordinate to make it possible.

Promotion By the professional institution

For more than ten years, the most active professional organization is the Thai Motion Pictures Producers Association which has been hardly struggling for the survival of local film industry. They have much done for it and the only result is a slow-but-sure progress.

More of their works would be successful when they will lead other groups to join the newly-established Motion Pictures Confederation of Thailand which has been legally registered and will be soon ready to welcome members from various angles of the profession.

"Smile and Fight" is always a soft and strong motto for the Thai people in the Land of Smile. Of what you think we can dream, if all producers can bring back all violences they unnecessarily put in their films and make a unified strength for a beautiful and peaceful fight. ■