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When West Meets East: A Cultural Interpretation of the Film Anna and the King¹

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ABSTRACT

Anna and the King (1999) is a biographic film based on a 1944 novel *Anna and the King of Siam* (Thailand), which gives a fictionalized account of the diaries of Anna Leonowens. The story concerns Anna, an English schoolteacher in Siam, now Thailand, in the late 19th century, who taught the King's children in English and western sciences. The film vividly depicts the social and political life of Siam in the 1860s, and it is also filled with misunderstanding and confrontations of eastern and western cultures and thus igniting heated discussion on the cultural differences of East and West. The film has long been banned in Thailand, for the Thailand censors think its portrayal of their beloved King Mongkut was demeaning. This article does not intend to explore whether the film is based on facts or fictions, however, it takes the film as a discourse, and tends to interpret the cultural discourse based on four of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: Power Distance (PDI), Individualism (IDV), masculinity (MAS) and uncertainty avoidance (UAI).

Keywords: *Anna and The King*, Cultural Differences, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Siam.

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1. Introduction

Anna and the King (1999) is a biographic film based on a 1944 novel *Anna and the King of Siam*, which was based on Anna Leonowens' "fictional" autobiographies recounting her experience as governess in King Mongkut's court (Leonowens 1870, 1873). Anna is a young, British widow in the 1860s who moves to Siam to serve as tutor to the King's fifty-eight children. The King hopes to raise his heirs with a sense of globalism and a knowledge of the modern world outside of Siam. Anna struggles to balance teaching modern world views while respecting Siamese tradition. The king is regarded as the first king to have successfully engaged with the colonial powers while maintaining Siam's independence at a time when Siam's neighbors such as the kingdoms of Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam, were falling to European colonial powers. He is also presented as the first modern king, who could speak, read and write

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English as well as French and Latin (Pallegoix, 1969). While he is also portrayed as a capricious, sometimes cruel tyrant. Anna's encounter with the king is a story of West meets East. The film is a mixture of Oriental fantasy and fascinating details about palace life in Siam at a time of political, social and cultural transformation brought about in part by its increasing interaction with the West.

Leonowens' two books (1870, 1873) has had no shortage of critics. A review of *The Romance of the Harem* in the English literary magazine *The Athenaeum* ended with the following: "Mrs. Leonowens, as we believe, has either been crammed by gossiping inventors of marvelous tales, or has, from self-interested motives, put together a sensational work" (*The Athenaeum*, 1873:207). Danielle Glassmeyer (2012) believes the film enacts for its American viewers the maternal promise of sentimental orientalism. For the controversy and criticism, the film has long been banned in Thailand, and the Thailand censors think its portrayal of their beloved King Mongkut was demeaning and The Thais criticize the film for presenting a generally inaccurate and often disparaging depiction of the Thai society and culture of the time (Patrick, 2001). This article does not intend to explore whether the film is based on facts or fictions, however, it takes the film as a discourse, and tends to interpret the cultural discourse from a cultural perspective.

Anna is a representative of western culture, and the King is an embodiment of traditional eastern culture. The film reflects the comparison and contrast of different cultures and is a very typical case of Intercultural Communication. Hofstede (1986, 2005) proposed the cultural dimensions. An understanding for each of the dimensions provides an understanding of the cultural aspects and tendencies of a nation. Hofstede's cultural dimensions also allow us to compare and contrast different cultures.

By putting the discourse into Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the author well explains the distinct cultural differences between the United Kingdom and Thailand thereby inspiring the mass audience to adopt an open, tolerant and friendly attitude towards an alien culture.

2. *Anna and the King and Hofstede's cultural dimensions*

According to Hofstede (1986) and Hofstede, G and G.J. Hofstede. (2005), all social interactions are culturally mediated. Undertaking a factor analysis of 116,000 International Business Machines (IBM) corporate employees' values of workplace form more than 70 national subsidiaries from 1967 to 1973, Hofstede (1986, 1991) identified four cultural dimensions: power distance (PDI), individualism (IDV), masculinity (MAS) and uncertainty avoidance (UAI). (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005, 30). In this article, I interpret the film based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and hope to shed light on people's understanding of the two distinctive cultures.

2.1 Power distance (PDI)

Hofstede categorizes cultures as possessing either large or small power distance. Cultures with small power distance emphasize that inequalities among people should be minimized and that there should be interdependence between less and more powerful people. In cultures with large power distance, inequalities among people are both expected and desired. It features strict hierarchy in families, corporations and society.

Siam was one of the world's last absolute monarchies, in which one ruler has supreme authority and where that authority is not restricted by any written laws, legislature, or customs. It is a culture with large power distance. People are not equal and they follow strict hierarchy social structure.

In the film, the King is busy performing the tonsure to his oldest daughter and he is raising his oldest son to official rank. The boy is to be presented with a gold tablet engraved with his royal name, then he's to be invested with official position and title. The little boy is born with supreme power while there were many people who were born slaves and were ready to give their lives for the King's pleasure. Slavery was prevalent in the country Siam at that time. Most slaves at that time were war captives and debt-bondage slaves. Slaves' children will naturally be slaves. Thanks to Anna's unremitting efforts, the young prince was trying to teach kindness toward the slaves by his own example. He said to Anna:

"I don't think they ought to be called slaves. They have more right to be called noble than we have, because they have learned how to endure. We princes are the ones who haven't learned that there is nothing noble in oppressing our fellow men." (Margaret Landon 1944, 242)

In 1905, King Rama V ended the slavery at birth and the other slaves (not at birth) will need to pay to be free at the lower money every year until 1915 (in the reign of King Rama VI), there was no slavery existed in Thailand anymore.

Anna is from a small power distance culture, which believes everyone is equal. When she met the King, she curtsied deeply, and then balanced herself as best as she could with bent knees. She thought, she was “not a worm like those poor reptiles on the floor!”. By maintain her independence in front of the King, she claimed her autonomy. Unlike other countrymen in Siam, who was at the King’s disposal, Anna valued equality with the King.

2.2 Individualism (IDV)

Hofstede categorizes cultures as individualist and collectivist culture orientations. In individualistic cultures, emphasis is placed on individuals’ goals over group goals. The self is promoted because each person is viewed as uniquely endowed and possessing distinctive talent and potential. Hofstede (1986, 307) defines collectivist nations as ‘those where the group’s interest prevails over an individual’s interest’. In collectivist cultures, groups goals have precedence over individual goals. Most collectivist cultures value social reciprocity, obligation, dependence, and obedience.

Individualistic cultures, like the UK value privacy much more than collectivist cultures. When meeting with the Siam royals, Anna was asked:

“You are not married?”

She bowed slightly. “My husband is dead.”

...

How many years your husband has been dead?” (Margaret Landon 1944, 35)

This conversation irritates Anna, a woman with individualistic value orientation. She communicates the information to the King that his rights do not extend to the point of prying into her domestic concerns. However, Orientals, with collectivist culture orientation, usually opened a conversation with a series of personal questions such as age, marriage, family.

Individualism also manifest itself in the English’s obsession with their independent dwelling place. The English proverb “an Englishman’s home is his castle” used to say that English people believe that they should control what happens in their own homes, and that no one else should tell them what to do there. The King believes it is his pleasure to have Anna and her son reside within the Palace, but Anna thinks it is impossible for her to live together with the royal family. She would like to work in the Palace during the school day, but she need some little home of her own outside the Palace where she can retire when her duties are done. She simply desires to secure her and her son some privacy.

2.3 Masculinity (MAS)

Hofstede uses this dimension to describe the polarization between gender roles in a country. He states that universal characteristics of gender roles exist (Hofstede 1991, 81). The male role reinforces assertiveness and competition, and is centered around material success, while the female role stress nurturance, modesty, tenderness and a concern for relationships and for the living environment.

In the film, the King is the embodiment of masculinity with supreme power. The women here have filled Anna with terror of the King himself. They call him the Lord of life, which is certainly an awesome title for a human being and very suggestive of his power. Anna is granted a subjectivity culturally assumed to be a masculine prerogative while retaining those feminine-associated abilities. She fulfills a fantasy of masculine maternity offered in the service of conquest without bloodshed: by nurture, education, and emotional constancy. Anna’s nurture of and affection for the Siamese are thus coded as part of a rational strategy rather than a product of feminine embodiment. Her gender is likewise independent of her body. The Siamese sense, but cannot quite articulate, Anna’s failure to conform to expected gender roles. The King addresses the split between Anna’s body and expected gender behavior when he calls her “a difficult women, and much more difficult than generality.” The “difficulty” that Anna presents is captured by the Royal wives, who call her both “Mrs. Anna” and “Sir.” The film displaces all undesirable elements of femininity onto adult Asians. The Siamese harem women are associated with embodied, self-involved motherhood, and equated with “sex” in contrast to Anna’s discursive relation to romance. Anna was told that Siamese lady no like work. Love play. Love sleep. (Margaret Landon 1944,

89)

Tuptim in the film is the unhappy “gift” to the King from the Burmese Prince. Tuptim longs to be with the man she loves, choosing Western style romance over Eastern maternity. As the harem women mock her unhappiness, they show themselves devoid of sympathy and incapable of affection. (Danielle Glassmeyer, 2012)

2.4 Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)

This dimension measures how people from different countries are likely to ‘feel threatened towards situations they perceive as uncertain, unstructured or unknown’ (Hofstede 1986, 308; 1991,113). This dimension is expressed socially in the need for norms (formal and informal). In cultures with a weak uncertainty avoidance orientation, uncertainty is seen as a normal part of life, where each day is accepted as it comes. The people are comfortable with ambiguity.

Conversely, cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance orientation sense that uncertainty in life is a continuous threat that must be fought. Life can be stressful where a sense of urgency and high anxiety are typical. These cultures evade ambiguity in most situations and look for structure in their business organizations, home life, and relationships.

In the film, Anna was waiting impatiently for the King to give her assignments, however she was educated not to do anything. This is Siam. She mustn’t be rushing out and doing things. The important point here is to be able to wait until things come to her. (Margaret Landon 1944,32)

Generally, Eastern cultures have a preference for certainty, whereas Western cultures are uncertainty oriented. Uncertainty oriented people like to find out new information about the self. Certainty-oriented people are more group oriented, as the group provides a clear standard for norms and behavior.

3. Conclusion

Anna and the King (1999) has long been banned in Thailand, and the film remains controversial in Thailand, even in this era of increasing media freedom. Some critics think Leonowen’s book failed to give an unbiased portrait of Siamese and the King himself. Danielle Glassmeyer (2012) believes Asians (Siams) aren’t dominoes to be played, but children to be raised, and Americans (Westerns) are just the people to raise them.

Hollywood has been making films about the British governess and the king of Siam for six decades now, and they are blamed for not managing to produce a single historically responsible version.

However, I do not intend to make any judgement, what I am trying to do is to put the context of the film into Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, thereby interpreting the Western and Eastern cultural differences from a different perspective. By doing so, the audience is expected to adopt an open tolerant and appreciative attitude towards an alien culture.

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