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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL
REALITY THROUGH THE
SUPERNATURAL IN THAI
TELEVISION DRAMA PROGRAMMES
AND THE PERSPECTIVES OF THAI
AUDIENCES**

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PhD

2018

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Abstract

In the Western entertainment industry, supernatural television dramas are created to provide a form of entertainment that can be read as postmodern pastiche without explicit religious ideology or any emphasis on communicating social values to the audience. Thai supernatural television dramas, in contrast, are employed as an effective resource for promoting Thai Theravada Buddhism. This study examines the role of Buddhist teachings in the television dramas *Ngao* (2014) and *Nang Cha Da* (2015) which were the most-watched television programmes in Thailand in those respective years. This research examines the processes of production and consumption of certain television tropes to provide an understanding of the ways in which Buddhist teachings are constructed, represented, and perceived through television dramas. It analyses the textual features of the shows by comparing the content of the dramas with Buddhist scripture, examines the attitudes of the text producers, and analyses the viewer's perceptions of Buddhist material in the shows. This study adopts qualitative research methods, including textual analysis, in-depth interviews with the text producers, and focus groups with the audiences. The contribution of this study is to demonstrate that Thai supernatural television dramas, functioning as a Buddhist classroom, are utilised by Thai ruling class as a tool in promoting Theravada Buddhism within modern Thai society and culture. Buddhist teachings presented in the dramas are in line with the strongly held beliefs of the producers and with Thai government policies. The results of this study demonstrate that Buddhist teachings embodied in the dramas are intended to encourage audiences to think and behave as good Buddhists and to establish a unified moral community. I argue Thai supernatural television dramas are intimately connected with the promotion of Buddhist teachings.

Keyword: television dramas, ghost stories, karma, Buddhism, nationalism and religion in Thailand

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas, and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, Design, and Social Science at Northumbria University.

I declare that the Word Count of this thesis is 70,475 words.

Name: Nattawat Wongwilatnurak

Signature:

Date:

Introduction

Background of the study

“There is a paranormal turn in popular culture. Beliefs [in ghosts] are on the rise in contemporary Western societies,” according to Hill (2010, p. 15). In particular, paranormal media products have become an integral part of a renewed interest in the paranormal, feeding into viewers’ interest in ghosts and extraterrestrial life. Popular supernatural media products, especially paranormal television shows, turn extraordinary beliefs ordinary for the audience. As a result, Hill (2010, p. 94) claims that the popularity of paranormal television shows has allowed the “cultural and entertainment industries take paranormal beliefs and turn them into revenue streams”. The central feature of many of these programmes, the ghost-hunting theme, is akin to the Spiritualist craze of the Victorian era, with Hill (2010, p. 96) saying that “much paranormal media today draws on Victorian representations of ghosts, giving a gothic tone to contemporary spirit forms”. As such, it seems that paranormal reality and talk shows in Western societies are constructed and perceived as a support for beliefs in ghosts rooted in the Victorian period rather than with the intent to cultivate any religious principle. To demonstrate this, I will discuss the key messages in three popular television genres: paranormal reality shows, psychic talk shows, and supernatural television series.

Paranormal reality shows reflect aspects of social beliefs in ghostly apparitions originating in nineteenth-century Spiritualism. In particular, they echo the activities of the *Society for Physical Research* (SPR), established in 1882, which investigated the phenomena of ghosts and clairvoyant mediums (Finucane, 1984) by using scientific equipment such as infrared cameras, thermometers, and visual and audio recordings. According to the *Journal and Proceedings of the SPR* in the 1880s and 1890s, their investigations revealed that there was no empirical evidence to confirm supernatural apparitions; thus, claims of ghostly appearances and events were judged and perceived to be fraudulent (McCorristine, 2010). Irrespective of such scientifically-based rejection of ghosts, belief in and enthusiasm for the supernatural has persisted and is now a major theme in television entertainment. Examples in Western television include *Most Haunted*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Paranormal Witness*, and *Celebrity Ghost Mansion*. The common feature of this genre is a purported investigation into the existence of ghosts by employing scientific and televisual equipment to capture either visual or aural apparitions on camera. One of the most prominent programmes is the show *Most Haunted*, which has been on-air since 2002. *Most Haunted* is a British paranormal reality series claiming to investigate paranormal activities in locations across the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and elsewhere. The content of these programmes

seems to encourage Spiritualism rather than educating viewers to learn about any religious principles or ceremonies. According to the director of the programme Richard Woolfe, the programme has been successful in terms of popularity although no ghostly apparitions have ever been proven on the show. As he claims (cited in Hill, 2010, p. 140), “it is ten years since *Most Haunted* started and we haven’t captured any ghosts on camera and there is still the fantastic ability for the show to attract audiences. ... *Most Haunted* remains the brand leader in this type of genre”. This suggests that belief in ghosts is renewed and maintained through these ghost-hunting programmes. As to the reason why paranormal reality shows remain popular, it is possible that it is because the beliefs have not been disproven or explained through scientific knowledge and viewers believe that, as Sagan (1997) notes, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”.¹

Psychic talk shows have also become a popular genre, with Osborne and Bacon (2015, p. 286) arguing that the shows function not only as entertainment but also as “a service offered to comfort and support the bereaved” in a manner similar to the role of clairvoyant mediums in nineteenth-century Spiritualism. Nelson (1969) argues that the reason why Spiritualist cults became popular in opposition to formal religions in that period was because religions could not provide empirical answers or appropriate rituals to help people get a sense of comfort and relief from their daily problems. In this sense, mediums played a role in relieving their clients’ trauma or the pain of bereavement. Likewise, mediums (who are cast as presenters in programmes like *Crossing over with John Edward*, *America’s Psychic Challenge*, and *Hollywood Medium*) become a kind of mental therapist healing people’s suffering. One of the best known shows is the talk-show *Crossing over with John Edward*, which can be seen as highlighting the idea that “mediums may be equipped to deal with sitters experiencing complicated grief” (Osborne and Bacon, 2015, p. 286). To explain the reason why people who live in the twenty-first century still pay attention to the supernatural, Shermer (1997, p. 275) says, “they want to. It feels good. It is comforting. It is consoling”.²

Supernatural television series are another genre which has become popular among audiences, e.g., *Supernatural*, *Medium*, and *Ghost Adventures*. Several scholars claim that the series *Supernatural* provides only entertainment with no presentation of religious teachings or practices (Wilson, 2009; Engstrom and Valenzano, 2010). The series *Supernatural* does not engage with the core of Catholic principles although it shows scenes involving holy water and priests fighting evil beings. Engstrom and Valenzano

¹ The popularity of paranormal shows arguably indicates the persistence of the overlap of the supernatural and rational scientific worldviews articulated by Sagan, C. (1997) *The demon-haunted world: science as candle in the dark*. London: Headline Book Publishing.

² People may believe that this form of supernatural experience provides an immediate form of comfort, as discussed by Shermer, M. (1997) *Why people believe weird things: pseudoscience, superstition, and other confusions of our time*. New York: W. H. Freeman.

(2010, p. 81) claim that “the series consistently depicts non-Catholic religions and their associated characters as evil distractions for the protagonists, thus contributing even more to their marginal stature”. Similarly, Wilson (2009, p. 167) considers religious content represented in the series as a “way of mixing and matching recycled cultural references” rather than emphasising religious beliefs. Nonetheless, there are shows attempting to represent the core of Catholic and/or Protestant teachings such as the series *Mad Mad House* and *Revelation*. Ultimately, these shows are rejected by some viewers because the shows’ content is not in line with their understanding of the Bible, with some complaining to the broadcasters that they are misdirecting and devaluing religious beliefs (Bird, 2009 and Reality TV World, 2004). This indicates that the role of religious teachings in Western media contexts is as iconography rather than education.

It is the contribution of this thesis that this is not the case for Thai supernatural television dramas; they provide not only entertainment but also fundamental Buddhist teachings aimed at educating viewers. The key argument of this thesis is that the main function of the dramas is the promotion of Theravada Buddhism. That is, beliefs in ghosts and supernatural beings are employed as a vehicle for transferring Buddhist ideological messages to viewers. Ghost characters in this sense become protagonists helping viewers to understand the core of Buddhist teachings represented in the dramas.

Based on my review of the literature regarding the relationship between Thai ghost stories and Buddhist knowledge, there are few academic works that cover this area. Kaewthep (1999), who addresses the reason why the aspect of ghosts in relation to Buddhism is not popular in academic studies, argues that social beliefs about ghosts and black magic in Thai society are considered as old-fashioned values which do not have an important role in developing the country, unlike political and economic issues. In addition, they are viewed as fraudulent or useless for improving the standard of living of Thai people. As such, the majority of academic works on Thai supernatural media are limited to four areas of study as follows.

Firstly, the issue of gender is widely explored in representations of female ghosts. Boonbunjong (2011) argues that the duties of the female ghost represented in supernatural media (e.g., doing housework, breastfeeding children, and preparing meals for her husband) are perceived as appropriate in traditional Thai values. Similarly, Fuhrmann (2009, p. 224) notes that the ghost shown in the film *Nang Nak* (1999), directed by Nonzee Nimibutr, is employed as an example reflecting that gender roles are “an integral part of the refurbished Thai nationalism of the past decade”, i.e., the role of gender or sexual orientation, in particular, for women, gay men, and male-to-female transgender people, has been shaped and controlled by the government since the

beginning of the 2000s. For example, in that period, transgender people were viewed by the state as people who devalued beautiful Thai culture.

Secondly, the issue of Thai supernatural media products achieving popularity in both local and international levels as a result of their combining elements of Thai and foreign cultures. Goraghit (2007, p. 531) implies that the success of Thai ghost films internationally is because of their “intercultural social values”, especially their references to American, Korean and Japanese cinematic conventions. That is, the portrayal of particular characteristics of ghosts (e.g., wearing white clothes; having long black hair; moving like zombies; and crawling toward wardrobes, beds, or ceilings) is one of the factors in their popularity in domestic and international film markets with Ancuta (2011, p. 131) stating that Thai ghost films have “long been Thailand's calling card on international film markets”. In recent years, it has been difficult to identify what the genuine characteristics of Thai ghosts are and how they should be represented.

Thirdly, the issue of audiences’ attitudes and behaviour is stressed in contemporary academic studies. Content broadcast through mass media products (i.e., films and television shows) is regularly investigated by governmental agencies such as the Ministry of Culture, the Department of Religious Affairs, and the Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission. Rupkhamdi *et al.* (2013) note that the content of film and television shows appears to have an impact on audiences in terms of adverse attitudes and behaviour, i.e., some children or young viewers may imitate inappropriate acts from media products. Rupkhamdi *et al.* (2013, p. 182) suggest, as a solution to that problem, that “the government should provide policies to limit violent content represented in media products. More importantly, it should encourage CEOs of the television companies and their subordinates to present appropriate content upholding Thai culture, tradition, and religion”.

Fourthly, while authors such as Fuhrmann (2016) have discussed ghosts and Buddhism in a Thai context with regard to cinema, there are few studies on Buddhism in regard to Thai supernatural television dramas. The majority of Buddhist studies concentrate on film studies with the film *Nang Nak* (1999), directed by Nonzee Nimibutr, the most examined in academia. As Panyasophon (2003) notes, the key message of the film is an emphasis on the value of romantic love between a ghost (Nak’s ghost) and a human (Mak), while there are also some scenes denoting the Buddhist teaching of *anijjang* or impermanence. Similarly, Fuhrmann (2016, p. 36) notes that Nak’s ghost, who is represented in the film as attached to the emotion of love, reflects the fact that “attachment is futile” in Buddhist belief. Moreover, Panklang (1996), who examined variations on Nak’s ghost story released during the years 1978-1989, suggests that audiences interpret Nak’s ghost as a vengeful ghost of a type common in traditional Thai

folktales and that Buddhist teachings seem to be marginal or extrinsic to the films. In other words, audiences are either not interested in Buddhist knowledge or they find the teachings contained in the stories difficult to understand because the shows mostly focus on the romantic love story rather than on any Buddhist-based theme.

The evidence discussed above indicates that there is a gap in exploring the relationship between Thai supernatural television dramas and Buddhist teachings. Therefore, this research focuses on the role of Buddhist teachings contained in the dramas, as it is at the core of culture in Thailand.

The research project

This thesis, the *Construction of Social Reality through the Supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences*, aims to investigate Buddhist ideological messages contained in Thai television dramas by analysing the types of ghosts shown and how they are constructed and represented. Initially, I set the following three main research questions:

1. What types of ghosts appear in Thai television dramas?
2. How are social beliefs about ghosts and supernatural beings constructed and presented in Thai television dramas?
3. What are the perceptions and opinions of Thai viewers on the meaning of Thai beliefs about ghosts and supernatural beings contained in Thai television dramas?

Additionally, this research project is conducted towards the following three main objectives:

1. To examine the types of ghost portrayed in Thai television dramas.
2. To analyse the forms of the social construction of Thai beliefs about ghosts and supernatural beings in Thai television dramas.
3. To analyse viewers' perceptions and opinions on the meaning of Thai beliefs about ghosts and supernatural beings contained in Thai television dramas.

The method used in this study is the qualitative approach which involves: 1) the textual analysis of two key Thai television dramas, 2) in-depth interviews with text producers, and 3) focus-group interviews with audiences. These methods are employed as the primary tools in accomplishing the research objectives by examining the entire

process of media communication consisting of: the text producers (sender), television texts (message), and audience (receivers). As such:

1. The textual analysis is used as a tool in analysing Buddhist teachings and rituals represented in the Thai television dramas *Ngao* (2014) and *Nang Cha Da or NCD* (2015) which are produced and broadcast by the Thai broadcaster Channel 7. The types of ghosts shown are considered as the key element in examining which Buddhist messages are represented through ghost characters and how they are portrayed.
2. The in-depth interviews with text producers (i.e., producers and scriptwriters) are used to understand the reasons why Buddhist ideological messages are included in the dramas.
3. The focus-group interviews with audiences are employed as a tool in analysing audiences' perceptions and opinions on the meanings of ghosts presented in Thai television dramas. Additionally, this method places emphasis on the impact of watching the dramas on audiences' attitudes and behaviour.

Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. It includes two chapters of literature review, a chapter on research methodology, and three chapters of analysis. It ends with a conclusion providing a summary and a discussion of the findings within broader Thai socio-cultural contexts and suggestions for further research.

Chapter One, *The Notion of Ghost and Spirits*, presents the historical and cultural background to social beliefs in ghosts, spirits, and supernatural beings in Western and Thai cultures. It draws on the concept of Religious Functions introduced by Durkheim to investigate the beliefs, both in the Western context, where the belief in ghosts has been detached from Christianity since the Reformation, and in the Thai context, where the belief in ghosts is still strongly connected to Theravada Buddhist principles and practices. Chapter Two, *Supernatural Media Products*, explores the beliefs shown in both film and television shows. The concept of Social Construction of Reality articulated by Berger and Luckmann is employed as a tool in examining how text producers construct media products and how audiences understand and interpret media content. This is analysed through the framework of Myth developed by Barthes and involves the investigation of early representations of ghosts such as German Expressionism, which is the main source of contemporary supernatural screen conventions. Chapter Three focuses on research methodology and design. The main issue in this chapter is the background of qualitative research, research methods and data collections used in this thesis, including: 1) the textual analysis of Thai television dramas, 2) the in-depth interviews with television text

producers, and 3) the focus-group interviews with audiences. Chapter Four, *Ghosts and Mediums in Thai Television Dramas*, analyses the types of ghosts represented in the Thai television dramas *Ngao* (2014) and *Nang Cha Da* (2015). The theoretical framework of Postmodernism suggested by Jameson is employed as the principle theory to analyse ghost characters through the appearance, duties, and powers of ghosts. This chapter examines how Buddhist messages represented through ghost characters in the dramas are constructed and interpreted according to Theravada Buddhist principles. Chapter Five, *Concepts Represented in Thai Television Dramas*, explores the key messages shown in the dramas by using Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) to examine the reason why text producers include Buddhist teachings in their dramas. Chapter Six, *Audiences and Supernatural Representations in Thai Television Dramas*, provides a discussion on the audiences' perspectives regarding the interpretation of television tropes. This section examines the reasons why viewers can understand Buddhist teachings contained in the dramas through the concept of Ethnicity noted by Smith. Additionally, this chapter includes a discussion on the impact of the dramas' content on audiences' attitudes and behaviour through Jenkins' concept of Fandom. The Conclusion provides a summary of the research findings, the contribution of this study, the limitations of this study, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter One: The Notion of Ghosts and Spirits

This research thesis, *'The Construction of Social Reality through the Supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspectives of Thai Audiences'*, is an attempt to draw together cultural and television studies in contemporary Thailand. The main aim of this research is to study the representations of the supernatural in Thai television culture and how Buddhist principles are intentionally reinforced through those texts, together with an examination of the perceptions of Thai viewers reading these ideas and potentially negotiating them. This will be the basis of the textual analysis for the qualitative focus groups with Thai audience groups. To begin this analysis, this literature review chapter will look at some historical ideas about supernatural apparitions and will draw on a theoretical, conceptual, and historical exploration of Western and Thai understandings of the supernatural. This will enable the researcher to achieve an understanding of social values for the research questions about the notions of Thai beliefs about ghosts and spirits within the texts. This chapter will explore the key concepts and theories and examine the debates within the field of cultural and television studies. It will draw on a review of academic works on the background to and an overview of the beliefs and of the social functions of the beliefs in both Western and Thai contexts.

The historical background to apparitions is explored in several academic works; Bennett and Royle (2004, p. 133) claim that “ghosts have a history; it is possible to trace a history of ghosts”. In the western context, there is a widespread assumption that the earliest appearance of the paranormal occurred in the ancient Greek and Roman eras. However, several academic works note that the earliest appearance of ghosts in literature was the *Enkidu* recorded in the predated Babylonian/Mesopotamian epic *Gilgamesh*, which engages with the nature of mortality (Felton, 2014). In the Homeric literature of classical Greece, the souls of dead people continued their lives through otherworldly journeys – the world of the afterlife. In that period, there were two main aspects to the debate regarding life after death. The first idea was that, when souls leave their bodies, the souls find rest and peace in Heaven. It is the final point of the afterlife and, therefore, the dead have no need to communicate with the living. The second idea, influenced by Plato, emphasised the stage of life after death. Plato claimed that “the souls of the dead hover near the corpse”, especially in the case of violent or sudden death or suicide (Phaedo, 1953 cited in Finucane, 1984, p. 8). In this view, after the souls left their corpses, they descended to Hades, “the kingdom of the dead where was separated from the land of the living” (Cassell *et al.*, 2005, p. 133), where there is no punishment. The souls may have undergone purgation to clean the earthly sludge before going on to Heaven – “the place of repose, the home of God, and the place in which the souls have

gained salvation” (Cassell *et al.*, 2005, p. 136). Also, the belief about Hades spread to many European countries, especially England. As Davies (2007, p. 1) states:

“England had long had a reputation for being haunted...the English love affair with ghosts has little to do with a shared national temperament or the country’s ancient ethnic amalgamation. It is primary a consequence of our religious, social and cultural development over the last 500 years.”

Later, during the Medieval period, a significant change to paranormal beliefs in England was caused by the advent of Christianity which played a significant role in people’s attitudes to the issue of apparitions and life after death, especially through the influence of the Christian concept of purgatory on people’s beliefs which replaced the concept of Hades (Horrox, 1999). In the Reformation period, the belief in purgatory was removed from English society and was no longer an active part of English Protestant Christianity. In the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers considered the concept of ghosts as a pernicious product of a dangerous dogma and they viewed claimed manifestations of ghosts as fake apparitions without reliable evidence (Davies, 1990). Reformers argued that Catholic monks and priests encouraged belief in fake apparitions in an attempt to defraud and persuade devotees to donate money to the Church (Finucane, 1984; Marshall, 2002a). They also emphasised that “without purgatory there were no ghosts and without ghosts there was no purgatory” (Davies, 2007, p. 104). Belief in the concept of purgatory and ghosts was removed from the sense of laymen in that period while Catholic ecclesiasts, and some Catholic believers, continued to believe in the concepts of ghosts and purgatory. In effect, there were two main positions in the view of orthodox theologies: 1) that the popular belief in spirits “was in decline following the rejection of purgatory” in the 1670s (Marshall, 2002a, pp. 245-246) by Protestant reformers, and 2) Roman Catholic believers had continued to believe in the concept of purgatory and in apparitions, ghosts, and spirits into the nineteenth century (Finucane, 1984; Horrox, 1999).

This chapter will discuss the social movement of Spiritualism by narrowing down its focus to the Victorian era. In particular, this chapter will focus on the purgatorial aspects of ghosts and the functions of the beliefs on socio-cultural perspectives in the context of the theoretical frameworks of Émile Durkheim and Geoffrey K. Nelson which highlight a close relationship between religious beliefs and social groups. These frameworks will enable this study to move from the Spiritualist movements in the Victorian era to the purgatorial messages represented by ghosts within the Thai cultural context. It will also include an overview of the social functions and social beliefs around the supernatural in relation to Christian doctrines, the causes of the Spiritualism boom, and its decline in Victorian era Britain and the United States. Finally, it will draw on a discussion

of social beliefs about ghosts and spirits in the Thai context, the historical background, the definition of ghosts in Thais' perceptions, and the social functions of the beliefs in the theoretical framework of Durkheim and Nelson.

1.1 An overview of social beliefs about the paranormal

The issue of paranormal beliefs has been discussed in academia in several contexts, for example, the study of theology, historical background, the social function of apparitions, and supernatural themed media productions (to be examined in Chapter Two). As Bennett and Royle (2004) point out, the subject of ghosts has been a part of Western culture for centuries and so it can be considered as a part of historical culture. Davies (2007) claims that there have been studies relevant to paranormal beliefs over the last 500 years which were reported through many forms, including epic poetry, early church writing, medieval chronicles, journal articles, and books. Those forms will be employed as evidence while exploring this field in this chapter.

1.1.1 Definitions of ghosts

The definitions of ghosts vary according to the cultural context of each society. Historically, the English word 'ghost' originated from the German word '*Geist*' (meaning soul or spirit) and generally involved the concept of the spirit of dead people or animals (Felton, 2014). In addition, it is defined as "spirit, any inspiring or dominating principle" (Chamber Dictionary cited in Bennett and Royle, 2004, p. 133). In particular, the *OED* defines it as, "the spirit of a dead person that a living person believes they can see or hear" (Soanes and Stevenson, 2010, p. 151). Moreover, Bennett and Royle (2004, p. 133) suggest that the sense of ghosts "involves the idea of spectre, an apparition of the dead, a revenant, the dead returned to a kind of spectral existence". In England, the meaning was defined differently from the original meaning. The work of King James I, recorded in *Ludwing Lavater's of Ghosts and Spirits (1572)*, describes the concept of 'ghost' by using the words *lemurs*, *umbrae mortuorum*, and *spectra* to illustrate the souls of the deceased. James defined *lemurs* and *spectra* as the souls "that haunted some houses, by appearing in divers and horrible forms", and also explained that "some men call the ghosts of all dead things by the name of *Lemures*" (James I and VI cited in Marshall, 2003; Davies, 2007, p. 2). The word *Umbrae mortuorum* means the "shadows of the dead", for example, the appearance of the souls of the deceased (James I and VI cited in Marshall, 2003; Davies, 2007, p. 3). Around the sixteenth to seventeenth century, the word and meaning of ghost was recalled and redefined to the Latin word *larva* (larvae) that means the 'mask' or 'guise' of souls appearing in the form of the dead (Davies, 2007). Since the late

seventeenth century, the word 'ghost' has referred to 'supernatural beings' and also the 'holy ghost' in the Christian Bible (Soanes and Stevenson, 2010).

1.1.2 The appearance and objectives of ghosts

The issues regarding the appearance of ghosts are still being discussed in contemporary debates. Cowdell (2011) suggests that the belief in ghosts is about not only a phenomenon occurring through direct or indirect experiences, but also the existence of the physical manifestations (apparition, smell, and sense of presence) and the non-physical occurrences (dreams). Bennett and Royle (2004) claim that ghosts attempt to disturb the human sense of the separation between the living and the dead. Gunning (2013, p. 216), for example, claims that "a ghost puts the nature of the human senses, vision especially, in crisis. A ghost, a spirit, or a phantom is something that is sensed without being seen. But this does not necessarily mean that ghosts are more easily heard, smelled or felt". The work of the antiquarian Francis Grose suggests that:

"... ghosts commonly appeared in the same dress they usually wore whilst living: though they were sometimes clothed all in white; but that was chiefly the churchyard ghost. ... White-sheeted or shrouded ghost were also sometimes seen in homes and on the streets." (Grose, 1781, p. 9)

On the other hand, the first illustration of a ghost in a Spanish manuscript suggests that the "ghost is lacking all colour and material density; the description of his face and his clothing is reduced to a drawing that is uniformly diaphanous and scarcely visible" (Schmitt, 1998, p. 211). In addition, the apparition occurred during night-time rather than daytime. The aspects of the apparitions in this sense are explained in relation to contemporary viewpoints of religion and science. According to the ancient tales of Christian dogma, as Davies (2007, p. 16) points out, "the spirits of the dead visiting from purgatory would not be allowed to appreciate the divine light of earthly day". In a scientific sense, the philosopher Henry More argued that the condition of night-time air made it easier to see a ghost because the damp and clammy air of the night was "more easily reduced to visible consistency" (Aubrey, 1969, p.62 cited in Davies, 2007, p. 17). According to the article *Aristotle's New Book of Problems* authored by Farewel (cited in Davie 2007), an apparition could be detected at sunset because ghosts were formed by the grouping of vaporous gas.

It was claimed that not only were apparitions visible but that they could also be perceived by other human senses, commonly by smelling and hearing. In respect of smell, during the eighteenth century there were many pamphlets published reporting ghostly apparitions in the form of a sulphurous smell of brimstone. For instance, pamphlets

reported the case of a woman who experienced ghosts in her bedroom at night both by seeing an impression on the bed as if somebody had been lying on it and by perceiving “the smell of a Carcass some-while dead” (Baxter, 1691, p. 30). Green and McCreey cited in Viluoja (1996) suggest that eight per cent of the reports about odours were associated with apparitions. An interesting point is that this type of apparition often engaged with the memory of bereaved relatives or friends. For example, a female interviewee said that she could feel her dead husband’s presence and smell the cigarettes he used to smoke (Grose, 1781). Furthermore, ghosts were believed to be able to communicate or speak with humans. Davies (2007) reports claims that if a ghost called somebody’s name more than three times or groaned it meant that the ghost had urgent news or secrets which needed to be revealed, such as the horrific remembrance of a murder (Grose, 1781; Davies, 2002). The popular occultist *Ebenezer Sibly*, writing in the eighteenth century, claimed that ghosts could speak with humans in order to reveal the name of their murderers. During the Reformation period, people believed that ghosts were taciturn because they had lost their voices to a considerable degree (Davies, 2007). In this regard, some western people in the Reformation period believed that ghosts had no speech (Davies, 2007). Finally, the apparitions in the Victorian period differ from other historical periods in that humans could perceive the presence of spirits through hearing mysterious noises (Sausman, 2010). Finucane (1984) used the nineteenth century term ‘medium’ to describe a person who could hear mysterious ghostly noises. These noises were heard in the form of bangs and raps only. However, the *Society for Physical Research* (SPR), founded by a Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge University on 20 February 1882 (Pearsall, 1972; McCorristine, 2010), an organisation that researches the supernatural, could not confirm that these kinds of noises were the voice of the ghosts or spirits (Pearsall, 1972; Sausman, 2010). As mentioned above, several works engaged with the supernatural manifestations of ghosts seeming to connect with humans. In these cases, what was the purpose of ghosts in returning to the living?

Focusing on the objectives of returning ghosts, McCorristine (2010) claims that the ghost has always had a reason to return to the living throughout recorded history. In the ancient period, the literature of *Enkidu* in the Babylonian/Mesopotamian epic *Gilgamesh* reveals that early civilisations strongly believed that souls could not rest in the afterlife if they had not had a proper religious funeral. In the case of the haunted house of Pliny the Younger, the house was haunted by the soul of an old man rattling chains. When his corpse was found and provided a proper burial, the ghost never came back to the house again (Felton, 2014). In addition to that, Felton (2014) claims that ghosts return to the living because their corpses have not been provided with the religious and customary tradition. People in that period, therefore, believed that ghosts appeared to request a proper burial. In the medieval period, several works explored the objectives of ghosts.

Kubler-Ross (1998 cited in the Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying, 2001 p. 210) suggests that one of the objectives of ghosts is to complete unfinished business. It notes that “a dying person will try to hold on, even though it brings prolonged discomfort, in order to make sure those who are left behind will be all right”. Cassell *et al.* (2005, p. 245) assert that “the unfinished business is engaged with the individual needs of deceased people” such as warning their relatives about an imminent danger or dealing with the problems within their families such as a bequest. It may be noted that idea around the objectives of returning ghosts slowly changed from their requesting a proper burial or completing unfinished business to revealing an unpunished murderer. For example, in a famous case from the 1660s, the ghost of *Robert Parkin* appeared in the Westmorland parish church (Finucane, 1984) seeking justice. In this case, the ghost was crying ‘I am murdered, I am murdered, I am murdered.’ As a result, a judicial case was undertaken to restore justice to the victim. In the late medieval period, one of the common purposes behind many manifestations of ghosts was to warn the living about the issues of sin, confession, extreme unction, and absolution at the point of the death.

However, several academic works have argued that ghosts had no reason or purpose to return to the living because the social beliefs about purgatory had been largely removed from the society since the Reformation (Finucane, 1984). In Victorian England, the journal of *SPR Proceedings* revealed that there was no precise answer to the question of the purpose of ghosts (Finucane, 1984; Schmitt, 1998; Horrox, 1999; Marshall, 2002a; Davies, 2007; Handley, 2007; Gunning, 2013) as follows:

“The population of 17,000 chosen to provide responses to the census, 105 claimed to have seen, at first-hand, a person they knew to be dead. It is interesting that nearly three times this number (296 replies) claimed to have seen apparitions of living people they knew, while nearly this same proportion (272 replies) reported seeing total strangers who (as suggested by the detail of such cases) were usually assumed to be dead, haunting for some unknown reason.” (SPR Journal and Proceeding cited in Finucane, 1984, p. 192)

The SPR Journal and Proceeding cited in Finucane (1984) argued that the apparitions taking place in the Victorian period had no purpose in returning. This corresponds to the earlier work of Baxter (1691, p. 138), and supports the argument that, in the late nineteenth century, the period of the purposeful ghost was over and the ghost was a “purposeless creature” who “appears nobody knows why; this has no message to deliver, no secret crime to reveal, no appointment to keep, no treasure to disclose, no commissions to be executed, and as an almost invariable rule, ghost does not speak, even if you speak to him”. These reports are evidence showing that the nature of supernatural beliefs had been blurred.

1.2 The social functions of the supernatural in accordance with the framework of Émile Durkheim and Geoffrey K. Nelson

The issue of religion has been central to the understanding of belief in the supernatural. In particular, many studies of beliefs in ghosts relate to the Christian rites (Davies, 2002; Bennett and Royle, 2004) such as the ceremony of proper burial and the Christian doctrine of purgatory (Felton, 2014). In the classical work of Durkheim (1961), *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, a close relationship between religion and belief in the supernatural is underlined. He suggests that religion can be a kind of exploration to find answers about the supernatural:

“... the supernatural is the world of the mysterious, of the un-knowable, of the un-understandable. Thus, religion would be a sort of speculation upon all that which evades science or distinct thought in general.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 39)

The beliefs and rites are the main elements of religion:

“Religious phenomena are naturally arranged in two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion, and consist in representations; the second are determined modes of action.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 51)

In this view, the close relationship between funeral rites and belief in spirits is one of the cases. He notes that the funeral rites are related to a transformation from souls to spirits. That is to say, a spirit – the soul of the dead existing in a state of life after death – is a consequence of the separation of soul and body as a result of death and the completion of funeral rites. Focusing on the social functions of religion, religion can be understood as socially functioning on two main levels: 1) religion individually functions in shaping people’s minds and being as a mental anchor; and 2) religion socially functions not only in shaping the social behaviours among people in a community but also in having a central role in reinforcing social solidarity.

1.2.1 The purgatorial elements of ghosts

According to Durkheim (1961), religion plays a central role in shaping a society as it is a moral community in which members behave well following the teachings of their religious beliefs. Giddens (1972, p. 222) claims that religious beliefs can bring people into a moral group accepting new norms, absorbing new values, and adapting to new forms of behaviour in which their religion is perceived as “it often governs even juridical, moral, and economic relations. Its sphere of action extends, then, beyond the interaction of man with the divine”. Therefore, the doctrine of purgatory is defined below and is a Christian

concept demonstrating the social function of religious belief about life after death in shaping social behaviour. It attempts to persuade believers to be aware of punishment and salvation in the afterlife:

“... a half way stage between earth and Heaven, where the sinful but repentant soul, could through purgatorial or cleansing punishment, complete the process of making satisfaction for sin and so be rendered fit for Heaven.” (Horrox, 1999, p. 90)

The doctrine of purgatory emphasised that souls might suffer from punishments in the afterlife but the punishments could be reduced by indulgences, kindness, and forgiveness in this life. Christians believed that the souls of the deceased were tormented in the stage of purgatory because they had committed sins (Schmitt, 1998). In the early twelfth century, a well-known monk, St Gregory the Great, narrated the story of two monks who had sinned by stealing and hiding three pieces of gold. After they died, St Gregory the Great could feel that the sinners were tormented by fire for thirty days. At the end of the story, the punishment finished because the monks accepted their sins and followed the path of purification. Although the sinners confessed their misdeeds and followed the doctrine of purification, there was no alleviation of purgatorial pain until their punishment was completed. In a public sermon, St Gregory the Great stated that “the spiritual world is moving closer to us, manifesting itself through visions and revelation” (Finucane, 1984, p. 47). This suggests that the doctrine played a meaningful role in the social control of people in that period, i.e. it led people to be aware of the punishments if they committed sins and encouraged them to behave differently.

During the First Crusade, the social function of the doctrine was not only about the emphasis on the concept of salvation, but also on the concept of sharing, that is, sharing material goods with the churches such as money, food, or other alms for reconstructing the churches damaged during the Crusade. This led Christians to believe that the purgatorial punishments could be reduced through the collection of indulgence, especially donations. In traditional folklore, during the fourteenth century, there were also other ways to decrease purgatorial punishments, for example, avoiding savage slaughter, sharing alms with other people, or supporting the religion (Brundage, 1969). As Finucane (1984) argues, one of the infamous beliefs regarding indulgences among believers in the late fourteenth century was that if they helped to build a church or cathedral or gave a cash contribution, they would gain a reduction on the punishments in purgatory. In this sense, he asserts that the social function of purgatory reinforced the idea of punishment and reward to shape people’s attitudes in that period. Marshall (2002b) also confirms that the social meaning of purgatory was considered as a part of the social norm among people at

the time. This demonstrates how religious beliefs can have a social function in shaping human behaviour, not only at an individual level but also at a community level.

1.2.2 The social functions of beliefs in reinforcing social solidarity

Religious beliefs about ghosts and spirits can play a significant role in reinforcing social solidarity in communities in which they are discussed through the concept of solidarity developed by Durkheim. This concept will help to achieve an understanding of the Thai paranormal beliefs which are central to a circulation of traditional communal ideas and social solidarity in Thailand. Initially, the concept was introduced to explain a social function in terms of labour in society. In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1984, p. 17) suggests that the division of labour is an important factor in bringing people together and facilitating a feeling of solidarity in which “the economic services that it can render are insignificant compared with the moral effect that it produces, and its true function is to create between two or more people a feeling of solidarity”.

In his perspective, the social function of solidarity can be divided into two forms: *organic* and *mechanical* solidarity. *Organic* solidarity is about solidarity by the organisation of people or labour in a social group, that is, it consists of different individual characteristics. The division of labour hence corresponds with this form of solidarity. Conversely, the *mechanical* solidarity refers to solidarity by similarity of people in a social group, especially the similarity in terms of the collective beliefs and social practices. Durkheim (1984, p. 84) states that, “the solidarity that derives from similarities is at its *maximum* when the collective consciousness completely envelops our total consciousness.” This indicates the function of *mechanical* solidarity in creating a social community consisting of the collective identity among people. Focusing on the issue of religion, according to Durkheim (1961), the concept of *mechanical* solidarity is central to an explanation of religion in which the collective sentiments and practices within a social group are contained. In other words, religion is an important source of *mechanical* solidarity as it can unify individuals into a homogeneous group. He underlines the function of religion in relation to the Church as a moral community that binds individuals together and as a tool for sustaining and strengthening the solidarity within a community:

“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them...for by showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from that of the Church, it makes it clear that religion should be an eminently collective things.” (Durkheim, 1984, p. 62)

Religious beliefs (as collective beliefs) together with religious rituals (as collective practices) can underpin solidarity within a society. In his analysis of the totemic religious rites in Australian Aboriginal tribal societies, a totem - a sacred object in the form of an animal or plant - is considered as an emblem of a tribe, and the totemic rituals play a central role in gathering people together in a social group and reinforcing a *mechanical* solidarity. This corresponds to Barron (2013, p. 43) who states, following the Durkheim's approach, that "religion upholds and reaffirms collective sentiments and collective ideas, reinforcing unity and cementing mechanical solidarity". This concept can be used to explain the rise of social beliefs in ghosts and, in relation to Spiritualism, how social values can be reinforced through the supernatural.

1.2.3 The social functions of Spiritualist beliefs as a mental anchor

In the United States, in 1848, modern Spiritualism was born in upper New York State when an influx of new ideas brought by new migrants disrupted social life and led to a desire for new ways of dealing with psychological problems (Nelson, 1969). The origin of modern Spiritualism is credited to the Fox Family in 1848, when they claimed the occurrence of mysterious noise was a sign of ghostly activity (Sausman, 2010). *Margaretta* and *Kate* were called 'mediums' as they claimed they could hear uncanny noises, bangs and raps and could communicate with spirits in their house. Afterwards, many publications reported on the occurrences of mysterious noises in many places across the United States (Naronis, 2010). This illustrates how the popularity of the story influenced the increase in publications about ghosts and the supernatural. This period became known as the 'Spiritualism boom':

"Spiritualism as a movement arose in America and spread with amazing rapidity across that continent within some five or six years of its inception. Never before, or since, has any religion spread so rapidly or become so popular within such a short period." (Nelson, 1969, p. 68)

The interesting question is why the Spiritualism boom happened in the United States in that period. Previous studies have revealed that the rise of the Spiritualist movement was caused not only by the trend for medium-ship but also by the social changes in that period. This can be clarified by the explanation of Nelson (1969, p. 257) who argues that the sudden influx of migrants with their varieties of belief led to "the dilution of beliefs", that is, many people queried their previously held beliefs. In this social condition, "the traditional answers to fundamental problems of life and death are no longer felt to be adequate by many people, and consciously or unconsciously such people seek new beliefs that will satisfy their needs for knowledge and emotional security". In other

words, the growth of Spiritualist cults was caused by the sudden social change introduced by a great influx of immigrants with differing and conflicting cultural patterns, combined with the effects of rapid industrialisation. He also suggests that a society that mixes indigenous people and immigrants may lead to a transition from a 'Communal Society', that is a society with shared social norms and a sense of community, to an 'Associational Society', that is a society based on independent individuals and lacking agreed social norms. In the book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Durkheim (1952) claims that people had a lot of confusion in their lives when they responded to their personal needs with disregard for social regulation of social activities. He felt this resulted in the breakdown of social control and the absence of social norms, which he calls '*anomie*'. Durkheim defines '*anomie*' as "a lack of regulation of the individual by society" and "the breakdown of social control and the absence of social norms" (Nelson, 1969, p. 69). Moreover, the associational society leads not only to *anomie* but to the social condition *egoism*, that Durkheim (1952, p. 14) defines as "a lack of integration of the individual into society". Similarly, Nelson (1969, p. 69) calls it as a stage of "excessive individualism".

Durkheim (1952) and Nelson (1969) suggest that *anomie* is the consequence of rapid and sudden economic change. As there was a lack of spiritual and mental anchors among people who were under pressure from economic conditions and psychological insecurity in this type of society, people needed emotional reassurance and confidence. Thus, Spiritualist cults were utilised as a tool to provide people with such an anchor (Nelson, 1969). Besides, the confusion in people's lives in an associational society can lead to an increase of anomic suicide, which "results from man's activity's lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings" (Durkheim, 1952, p. 219). This suggests that an increase in both Spiritualist beliefs and suicide were ways of escaping from the suffering brought about by social conditions.

Focusing on the social function of Spiritualist cults as a mental anchor, a sense of belonging to a group could provide an emotional reassurance and confidence to its members:

"Spiritualism was one of the unconventional religious methods of solving the problems of individuals confused by the social chaos of the period, and, at least for a time, a particularly successful one." (Nelson, 1969, p. 71)

This suggests that Spiritualist cults can function as a mental anchor in response to humans needs, whereas other religions at the time did not provide their followers with this function. That is, many non-Spiritualist religions rely on ritualistic rites rather than a spiritual or mental anchor for the followers. Nelson evidences the case of the Spiritualist cult '*Asculapius*' in the period of Republican Rome, circa 293 B.C., in support of his

argument. The cult offered a spiritual and mental anchor for its followers during a period of widespread famine, plague, and war. Nelson (1969, p. 77) claims that “spiritualism cults emphasise individual inspiration rather than the acceptance of authority, and many cases phenomena similar to those found in modern Spiritualism are familiar”. This role as a tool of mental anchor might be a reason why the paranormal has played a meaningful role in people’s minds since ancient times.

Spiritualist cults, functioning as a mental anchor, flourished not only in the United States but also in the United Kingdom. In Victorian era Britain, the belief in Spiritualist cults was transferred from the United States in 1852. The causes of the Spiritualism boom in Britain were similar to those in the United States. In Britain, the Spiritualist idea was accepted in urban rather than rural areas. As a result of industrialisation, urban people could not adapt themselves to the rapid social change of industrialisation leading to a lack of consistent social norms. This situation led people to look for a new norm and social group which could provide them with a sense of security. Spiritualist cults were one choice in response to that:

“The urban way of life has also been characterized as anomic, as lacking in consistent norms, and this has been seen as producing a situation in which men seek for a new norm, and for a group ... This process has been used as an explanation for the rise of many social and religious movements, and is partly an explanation of the attraction of Spiritualist Churches.” (Nelson, 1969, p. 264)

The growth of mass communication and urbanisation led to a similarity in rural and urban patterns of life which contributed to the spread of Spiritualism in the countryside. Likewise, it also arose in the rapidly growing industrial cities in which industrialisation was “responsible for the breakdown of the traditional pattern of life and gives rise to an attitude of doubt in the sphere of religion” (Nelson, 1969, p. 264).

The decline in Spiritualism in both Britain and the United States was a result of the work of various organisations investigating and criticising claims of apparitions. In the Victorian era in Britain, the SPR stated that the claimed manifestations and objectives of ghosts were a fraud. Developments in science and philosophy had affected the people’s way of life since the age of Enlightenment in the seventeenth century. In this sense, people believed that many issues around the supernatural could be explained by the use of science. The SPR spent more than twenty years investigating claims of apparitions by using the scientific disciplines to explore haunted houses, mediums, apparitions, and spirit photographs. Discussions of ghosts and mediums were published in the *Journal and Proceedings of the SPR* between the 1880s and 1890s (Barrett et al cited in McCorristine, 2010). Most mysterious cases that were reported and discussed in the journal were described as having “a total absence of any apparent object or intelligent action on the

part of the ghost. If its visits have an object, it entirely fails to explain it” (SPR Journal and Proceedings cited in Finucane, 1984, p. 194). Thus, there was no confirmation or obvious evidence of the purposes of ghost, mediums, or other supernatural issues reported in this journal.

In the United States, despite the fact that there was a large Spiritualist movement from the middle of the nineteenth century, the belief in mediums was criticised by two organisations, Harvard College and the American Society for Physical Research (ASPR), as a fraudulent cult. There were three significant mediumistic cases credited as a major cause of the decline in the belief in mediums. In the first, Professor Eustis, a lecturer at Harvard College, investigated the case of Frederick Willis who claimed to be a person with mediumistic power. As a result of this investigation, Willis was accused of being an impostor. The second case was an investigation funded by the Boston Courier newspaper. The result of this study was claimed as a complete failure because no satisfactory manifestations appeared (Nelson, 1969). In the third case, the ASPR noted that many cases of mediumship were a result of fraud and deception. These investigations seem to have been an important factor in the decline of social beliefs in mediums and Spiritualist cults in the United States. At the same time in Britain, there were hundreds of cases of claimed mediumistic powers investigated by the SPR. The report of Dr George Zorab presented at the SPR International Conference at Edinburgh claimed that the majority of the spectacular physical phenomena and mediums reported in 1870s and 1880s were not “anything other than fraudulent” (Gauld cited in Finucane, 1984, p. 188). Belief in mediums and Spiritualism has decreased considerably since the 1950s (Cannadine, 1981). All this indicates that the reality of mediums and Spiritualism, both in the United States and Britain, was considered as fraudulent and beliefs in them were in decline from the late nineteenth century.

1.3 The social beliefs about supernatural beings in Thai context

The social beliefs around ghosts and spirits can be considered as a part of Thai culture as they are closely related to Buddhist principles which “have been deep-rooted in minds of Thais” (Panyasophon, 2003, p. 11). “Despite the fact that Thai society has moved to the period of globalisation, Thais still believe in ghosts and spirits.” (Panklang, 1996, p. 2) This continuity of belief may have been facilitated by the close relationship between the beliefs in traditional culture and Buddhism. Rittichainuwat (2011) notes that one reason why the social beliefs about ghosts and spirits continue to strongly exist among Thais is that these beliefs have been connected with Buddhism from the past to the present. Compared with Christianity, Buddhist principles about Hell and ghosts are still actively connected with Buddhism in twenty-first century Thailand while the Christian

doctrine of purgatory and ghosts has been detached from many Christian Churches (Marshall, 2002a). Moreover, the beliefs can be counted as '*sacred*'. In Durkheim's view, religious beliefs presuppose a classification of all things in the world, both real and ideal, into two opposite groups: the *sacred* and the *profane*.

"The beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things." (Durkheim, 1961, p. 52)

As he points out, anything, even trees, rocks, or a piece of wood, can be a sacred object which, when approached through any of several forms of religious rite, such as incantations or blessings, can become a concrete symbol of religious beliefs. *Profane* things are all things that are not specifically sacred to the religion. He also emphasises that sacred things are an essential part of all religions and are mental tools which enable people to feel more confident and feel stronger as a result of "forces which were languishing are now reawakened in the consciousness" (Durkheim, 1961, p. 387). In the Thai context, the long existence of beliefs in sacred objects seems to be a key part of the Thai way of life in which people view those objects as providing them with emotional security. Wearing or having individual sacred objects (e.g. holy thread or water or a necklace with a small image of the Buddha) is considered as a mental safeguard symbolising the role of Buddhist powers in protecting Thai people from disastrous supernatural powers and in bringing them good luck (Thienthaworn, 2009). Furthermore, the placing of statues of the Buddha in houses and worshipping the statues of the Buddha are a way that makes Thais feel safe and calm and which they believe encourages the household gods to protect them from any dangers, including dangers of human activities, dangers of accidents, and dangers of evils or ghosts. This demonstrates that the idea of sacred objects continues to be an important focus in Thai society.

1.3.1 Definition of ghosts in Thai culture

Traditionally, '*Na-ta or Nat*' was the word for ghosts. The word was influenced by Buddhism and is derived from the Pāli canon. It generally involves the spirits of the dead which hover over a place that they were inextricably engaged with before death (Jithidecharuk, 1990). In addition, he suggests that there are three kinds of Thai ghost: 1) the ghosts who died by accident or sudden death, 2) the ghosts who protect a place or building (as guardian spirits), and 3) the ghosts who were a hero/heroine in a war when they were alive. After the era of Sukhothai, from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries, the word '*Na-ta or Nat*' was renamed as particular Thai word '*phii*'. In the eighteenth century, as

recorded in the book of Buddhist cosmography titled *Traibhumi of Phra Ruang*, ghosts were divided into: 1) *thewada* – gods who had a preponderance of good karma; and 2) *preta* or *asura* – the departed people that were sinners in their past lives (Reynolds, 1976). Since the late nineteenth century, the meaning of ghosts has been recognised by Thais in two ways: 1) *phii dee* – good spirits who have a duty to protect and solve people's daily problems (Esterik, 1982); and 2) *phii rai* – bad ghosts that attempt to haunt people or appear as a disgusting or disfigured body (Mills, 1995). Besides, as Kaewthep (1999, p. 16) argues, “ghosts and spirits are not only about someone who has passed away, but also the supernatural powers of mountains, rivers, and trees”. This indicates that ghosts in Thai perception are not only about the soul of the deceased but also includes a sense of supernatural powers existing in the natural environment.

1.3.2 The relationship between Buddhist principles and supernatural beliefs

Among religious syncretism in contemporary Thailand, religions have had an impact on Thai peoples since before 1292 and on, in particular, the coexistence of Buddhism, paranormal beliefs, and other religions (Kirsch, 1977). Kitiarsa (2005, p. 463) notes that the Thai religious system can be characterised as an “inclusive syncretism” consisting of Theravada Buddhism, folk Brahmanism, and animism, in which Buddhism stands at the apex of the system and forms an integral part of the social values. As such, Thai people view Buddhist principles as being at the core of their practices in everyday life.

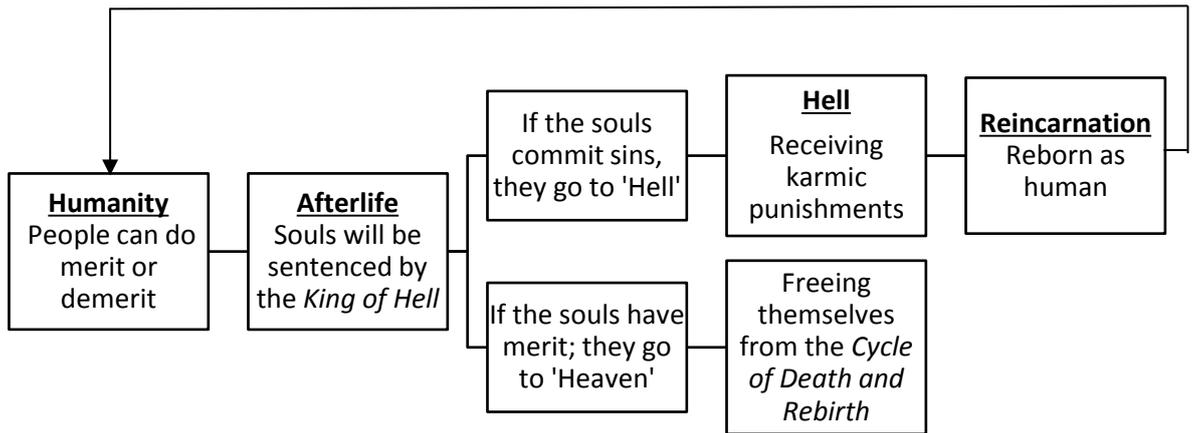
Historically, in the late fourteenth century, Brahmanistic elements (e.g. Khmer sacerdotal officials, bureaucrats, and other rituals) were used to enhance the prestige of the Thai kingship; transported to Ayutthaya, they were incorporated into the state structure (Kirsch, 1977). That is, most of the rituals were confined to the ruling elite and were supported by the institution of the monarchy. Together with an influx of Khmer culture, social beliefs about paranormal beings also spread through the country in what Thai scholars call '*ghost religion*' (Kaewthep, 1999; Hinviman, 2001; Thienthaworn, 2009). In that period, people believed that natural phenomena, such as rain, thunder, or storms, were caused by the supernatural power of gods and bad weather was a sign of evil created by deities (Boonbunjong, 2011). With the advent of animism during the early eighteenth century, as Hinviman (2001) pointed out, Thai people were led to believe that humans were the central subject of the universe and could control the environment by using black magic; a prohibited practice that engaged with the supernatural power of evil spirits, bad ghosts, talismans, and rites, with the aim of harming enemies (Bhavakhunworakit, 2012). This influenced people to be afraid of supernatural powers, in particular, the powers of ghosts and incantations. By the middle of the eighteenth century,

evidence recorded in the inscription of Rama I says that Theravada Buddhism was brought by the kings and elites, although they cannot be clearly identified, through the region of northern Thailand, and was employed as a tool in creating unity among Thai peoples (Reynolds, 1976). In the view of Kirsch, another benefit of the advent of Buddhism is that knowledge of Buddhist teachings led to a gradual decline in supernatural beliefs. He suggests that the aim of Buddhism is to free oneself from any kind of attachment (e.g. to valuable things, ranks, people, ghosts, etc.) so as to achieve *Nirvana* – a state of extinction – by following the Buddha’s teachings, especially the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path*. In recent years, Buddhism has shaped the institutional fabric of not only a small group of the educated elite but also the mass of ordinary Thais in whom Buddhist values, conceptions, and rituals are at the core of religious practice in their daily life, especially an emphasis on the teachings of ‘*Karmic Law*’ and the ‘*Cycle of Death and Rebirth*’.

Considering the conception of karma, the word ‘karma’ derives from the Pāli word ‘*kamma*’ from which Humphreys (1969, p. 82) suggests that karma includes three meanings: “1) action; 2) action-reaction as an inseparable unit, and 3) the results of reaction, in the sense of resultant of a long series of acts by an individual group.” In the Thai sense, karma is divided into two types which are merit, called ‘*Boon*’, referring to goodness, and demerit, called ‘*Barb*’, referring to sinfulness (Ghose, 2007; Wichaidid, 2007). Thai people view karma as a collection of good and evil karma from the past to the future (Engle, 2005). Results of karma will be returned to their lives in an inescapable cycle called the ‘*Karmic Law*’ (Humphreys, 1969). In addition to that, the *Karmic Law* emphasises that the condition of life after death is a result of the moral behaviour of people when they were alive (Kirsch, 1977). That is to say, if people conduct themselves well, they will go to paradise after death and will not return to the human world. On the other hand, sinners will be punished in Hell and will also have to return to the human world to redeem their sins.

This emphasis on the ‘*Cycle of Death and Rebirth*’ as a condition related to the *Karmic Law* is one of the main differences between Buddhism and Christianity. The concept underlines the link between the spirit and the human world which leads Thai Buddhists to believe that the death of body is not the end (Conze, 1959) and that the souls of the departed will return to be human again if they still have sins to cleanse. The relationship of these teachings is emphasised in the work of Kunawuthi (1978) which argues that sinners cannot escape from their punishments. The result of karma must be decided either in this life or in the next life in which they are reborn to redeem their sins (Kirsch, 1977) and that involves three stages: 1) humanity; 2) afterlife; and 3) reincarnation.

Figure 1.1: The three stages of the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth*



Thai Buddhists believe that there is only one stage where the soul can do the immoral or moral actions that are considered as the propositional model of the karmic universe, the effects of which are to return itself to its natural state (Kunawuthi, 1978). In other words, the results of karma are based on an evaluation of the actions that the soul performed while human (Carlisle, 2012). For this reason, before a person dies, the way to break this cycle is to perform actions of religious merit, for example, entering a monastery and observing Buddhist dharma and evangelism (Reat, 1977), which activities can lead to the achievement of *Nirvana*. As a result, the main focus of merit-making actions for many is to try to enter the monkhood through Buddhist ordination, as monks dedicate themselves to the rigorous principles of the religious life and give up their attachment to family members, friends, and wider society. Another way to accrue merit is by participation in religious activities, including listening to sermons, attending religious events, and following Buddhist teachings (Kirsch, 1977). Consequently, the Buddhist temple is an important place for Thais as it is central to Buddhist activities. This demonstrates that the Buddhist temple functions in the same way as the concept of the Church in Christian societies does for Durkheim (1961), as a moral community binding people together.

In traditional Thai culture, when humans die, Thais believe that *Yamatoots* – messengers of the Dead – come to take the dying person to meet the *King of Hell* or *Yama* – a person who has the duty of assigning the souls of deceased people to their karmic punishments and appropriate rebirths and who presides over Hell (Murphy, 2001). That is, “[souls of the dead] who have offended the Buddhist laws will have to reside in one of the Buddhist hells for a definite length of time until their karma has exhausted its cumulative effect before they can be reborn on earth” (Igunma, 2017, p. 71) at which stage they will be reborn as humans through the process of reincarnation. In contrast, the souls of the deceased who followed Buddhist practices will free themselves from this cycle and will not be reborn again (Chaloeichai, 2007). Murphy (2001) argues that the belief in the

afterlife among Thais is most often derived from Buddhism and culture-bound traditions. This indicates that belief in the *Karmic Law* and the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth* functions as a religious tool in warning the people to be aware of sin and in facilitating the continuity of the teachings of those ideas.

1.3.3 The social functions of supernatural beliefs in Thai society

The question of why these beliefs still exist in contemporary Thai society may be answered by the argument of Williams (1998) who identifies one of the key causes for the continuity of social beliefs. He argues that the beliefs have continued from the past to the present because they have been adapted and shaped by the culture and society:

“The cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors... The existing state of the selective tradition is of vital importance, for it is often true that some change in this tradition – establishing new lines with the past, breaking or re-drawing existing lines – is a radical kind of contemporary change.” (Williams, 1998, p. 56)

In conformity with Williams' viewpoint, Kaewthep (1999) argues that the beliefs in the supernatural continue to exist in contemporary Thai society as a result of attempts to adapt them for transmission to the next generation. Moreover, Hinviman (2001, p. 49) claims that, “the supernatural beliefs are not only a tool for sending a religious message to another generation, but also the construction of functions and social behaviour in Thai society”. Moreover, the religious rituals and beliefs are key sources in building the mechanical solidarity which play a significant role in reinforcing the collective identity and unity among Thai social groups. This corresponds to the view of Durkheim in that:

“The really religious beliefs are always common to a determined group, which makes profession of adhering to them and of practising the rites connected with them. They are not merely received individually by all members of this group; they are something belonging to the group, and they make its unity. The individuals which compose it feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith.” Durkheim (1961, p. 59)

He suggests that religions and ceremonies can function in bringing people together to have a sense of belonging to a society:

“... the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they too should be social affairs and the product of collective thought.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 22)

In this way, Thai supernatural beliefs shape communities to become unified through their shared traditions and cultural rituals. The rituals regarding beliefs in the *Guardian Spirit* are an obvious example. Jindawong (2011), exploring the persistence and the role of the city-guardian-spirit beliefs and rituals in *Chiang Mai* province, suggests that the rituals provide strength to the community in terms of bringing native people and neighbours together to participate in the rites, and in providing a resolution to mental health problems by discussion. In addition, Yakhampor (2011, p. 95) examining the roles of the *Guardian Spirits* and rituals in *Chiang Rai* province, argues that “communities can be shaped to become a unity through the rites by two levels”; including: 1) at the level of the community, i.e. the rites are at the centre of the spiritual needs of local people and that they make people live and work together smoothly; and 2) at the level of individual people, i.e. the condition of these rites leads participants to reject inappropriate behaviour and intoxicants which have an influence on their physical and mental health, and can help to reduce a problem within families and society. The results of these studies support the idea that the Buddhist rituals regarding supernatural beliefs are an effective tool in strengthening social solidarity.

Moreover, the function of beliefs around ghosts and spirits in harmony with the traditional rites as a spiritual anchor has been demonstrated. Thamkankang (2003), studying the worship of *phii puya* ghosts conducted in *Chiang Mai* province, suggests that the worship of ghosts offers a mental anchor through attending the ceremonies. In his study, *phii puya* is defined by local people as the souls of senior relatives, who function in protecting their family members from evils and dangerous fields. The local people therefore believe that the worship of these spirits can protect them from evils and dangerous fields. Likewise, Thongthirakul (2007), examining the functions of the worship of *phii puya* ghosts in *Lam Pang* province, noted that this kind of worship has a function of mental encouragement for the participants. That is, this worship was observed for local people who planned to leave their hometown to study or work in remote areas. In this situation, people would ask the ghosts for a benediction to give them safety and good luck. It is remarkable that the results of the studies of Thamkankang (2003) and Thongthirakul (2007) are so similar even though the data collections were conducted in different locations. This shows how widespread these beliefs are and their significance as a spiritual anchor for Thai people.

In general, one may consider Buddhism as the key factor in facilitating the continuity of social beliefs about ghosts and spirits in Thai society, along with the traditional and religious practices that play a central role in strengthening the social solidarity and act as a mental anchor among Thai society. It is difficult to deny that Buddhism has been interwoven with the fabric of Thai society, and is the ‘pop-culture’ of twenty-first century Thailand.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the studies regarding supernatural beliefs in Thailand are mostly done in rural areas where the locals are closer to traditional Thai beliefs and culture than people in urban areas where lifestyle, values and cultural beliefs tend to be more modernised. The National Statistical Office (2012) claims that inhabitants of the countryside are more likely to participate in Buddhist activities (e.g. praying for the Buddha, performing meditation, offering food or alms to monks) and tend to follow a strict observance of Buddhist teachings more so than people in urban areas. This view corresponds to the argument of Kaewthep (1999) explaining that metropolitans are farther from Buddhism. Buddhist temples, in remote areas, are considered by locals as their second home in which they can arrange their social activities, especially religious rites and wedding ceremonies. Moreover, temples are the places for educating people in moral principles through sermons delivered by monks. In contrast, temples in urban areas are merely utilised as places for religious rites, especially ordination and funeral ceremonies (Chaloeichai, 2007). This suggests that proximity to religious practice for Thai people should be taken into account in this study.

A survey conducted by Chaloeichai (2007) revealed that 70 per cent of Thai people believed in ghosts and sacred objects and that these beliefs had been transmitted by the elder generation of Thais or others who claimed to have had direct experiences in perceiving haunted apparitions. In 2012, Reader's Digest magazine cited in Saewikul (2012) explored the belief in ghosts in many countries and suggested that 81 per cent of Thai people believed in ghosts. The percentage of people in other countries was much lower, for example, 47 per cent of Malaysians, 43 per cent of Americans and Filipinos, and 42 per cent of Britons. This indicates a higher level of supernatural beliefs among Thais compared with other peoples. Saewikul (2012) argues that there are two significant reasons why Thai people are more likely to believe in ghosts. The first reason is that there is a long history of belief in the supernatural in Thailand before the advent of Buddhism. The second reason is that there are many kinds of ghosts mentioned in the Buddhist tales (which are one of the many elements transmitted by the Thai monarchy) and these have been transmitted to Thais from the past to the present through monks' sermons and traditional culture. As a result, these beliefs still exist in contemporary Thailand. In a survey conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA, 2012), a majority (52.73%) of Thais said that they followed Buddhist principles because they were afraid of the effects of karma and also of being haunted by ghosts. Taking all the above into account, it seems that the trend of supernatural beliefs among Thais will continue.

An additional interesting point is that there has been much growth in the popularity of media representations of the supernatural, especially in Thai films and television programmes. Regarding the film industry, the huge box-office success of these films is evidence of their popularity. For instance, the '*Pee Mak*' film shown in 2013 was the highest grossing Thai film (£11.97 million or 1,000 million baht), while other ghost films earned over a hundred million Thai baths each, including the films '*Nang Nak*' (£2.99 million or 149.6 million baht) in 1999, '*Ladda Land: Home of ghosts*' (£2.34 million or 117 million bath) in 2011, and '*Hah Prang*' (£2.25 million or 115 million baht) in 2009 (Augkulanon, 2013; Thairathnews, 2013). Regarding television programmes, there are many shows engaging with Thai paranormal artifacts, especially ghost stories. As Petrachaiand (2007) suggests, new Thai supernatural television dramas were produced every year. Also, there have been many productions of the dramas relating to ghost stories such as *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* released in the years 1980, 1989, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, and 2016; *Kra Sue* broadcast in 1994 and 2012; and *Buang* broadcast in 1992 and 2012. The many productions indicate the popularity of ghost stories in Thailand. This reflects the continuity and popular trend of traditional beliefs in media products which pay particular attention to the representation of Buddhist principles in the Thai context. Therefore, it is important for this research to conduct a review of studies regarding supernatural stories on screen. The next chapter will draw together academic works on supernatural media and cultural studies by examining theoretical frameworks from the classical to contemporary British and Thai representations, along with the theories of social construction of reality, postmodernism, and semiotics which are key concepts of the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Supernatural Media Products

The previous chapter discussed the background to and provided an overview of beliefs in ghosts and the social functions of those beliefs at both individual and community levels. This chapter will examine how Western and Thai media represent the supernatural differently, in particular, in relation to historical and religious culture. This will be analysed through the key frameworks of postmodernism; the social construction of reality; and the idea of myth as articulated by Fredric Jameson, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and Roland Barthes. This chapter will also provide the foundation for analysing television texts and audiences' perceptions and interpretations of supernatural television dramas.

Social beliefs around the supernatural discussed in historical and media studies are considered part of 'popular culture'. They have become more popular in recent years through paranormal studies, ghost tourism, and supernatural themed media productions. As Davies (2007, p. 1) claims, the study of ghosts, religions, societies and culture has been examined "over the last 500 years". Hill (2010) asserts that "there is a paranormal turn in popular culture" with almost half of Britons and two-thirds of Americans believing in some form of the paranormal. To define the term 'popular culture', Williams (1988, p. 237) suggests that it is subjects or practices which are "work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people". It is "intimately connected with education, mass communication, production and a society's ability to access knowledge" (Block, 2012, p. 3). Consequently, Popular Culture is perceived as "tools and content for public discussion" and can be seen in many forms of literature, art, the media, popular entertainment, religions, beliefs, and so on (Hermes, 2005, p. viii). Historically, as discussed in Chapter One, supernatural studies explored many aspects of ghosts, including their appearance, objectives, and functions. In particular, Davies (2007, p. 1) claims that, "England has long had a reputation for being haunted" which has resulted in many investigations into the existence of supernatural creatures by various institutions. Davies (2007); Hill (2010) and Warner (2006) argue that interest in the supernatural has not ended and that the entertainment, leisure, and tourism industries have turned paranormal beliefs into big business. A 2009 survey in the magazine *Paranormal* revealed that ghost tourism was perceived as "the new extreme sport" and had increased by 20% in the UK and America (Hill, 2010, p. 93). Most noticeably, and relevant to this study, this increase in interest is highlighted and represented in many new reality TV shows, including *Most Haunted*, *Paranormal State*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Celebrity Ghost Mansion*, among others. Beeler (2008) suggests that there are several ghost-hunting shows which are collaborations between local and international companies. The shows *Psychic Investigator* and *Rescue Mediums*, for example, are produced through the cooperation of British and Canadian television companies. Additionally, Osborne and Bacon (2015) assert that the psychic television

shows featuring mediums/spiritualists function not only as entertainment but also as therapy. These shows try to help viewers relieve their mental trauma or bereavement through the use of therapeutic techniques like the 'empty chair'; that is, a conversation between medium, client and deceased spirits imaginatively assumed as sitting on an empty chair. An example of this format is *Crossing Over with John Edward*. Paranormal television series are still very popular with high ratings for shows such as *Dark Shadows*, *Mystery and Imagination*, *Haunted*, *Ghost Story for Christmas*, *Afterlife*, *Midwinter of the Spirit*, and *Hollywood Medium*. This demonstrates that supernatural productions continue to be a source of pop culture. As Hill states:

“The paranormal is part of mainstream popular culture. ... Resurgence in popular beliefs gives momentum to a range of representations of ghosts, supernaturalism... In popular culture, paranormal attitude and beliefs are being transformed into lifestyle choices. Spirits are becoming a way of life.” (Hill, 2010, p. 37)

Interestingly, Hill also claims that one reason why these beliefs are still popular is that paranormal beliefs have changed from extraordinary to ordinary as people become familiar with representations of the paranormal through media consumption, and, in particular, through watching paranormal television shows. In other words, popular media has played a meaningful role in blurring the boundaries between what is ordinary and extraordinary. Thus, as supernatural representations on media screens are common, they enter lifestyle practices. This chapter will examine how paranormal beliefs are constructed and represented through supernatural media productions. It will focus on three main areas: 1) media construction of the supernatural; 2) the history of supernatural media programmes; and 3) media semiotics.

2.1 Media construction of the supernatural

Mass media products play a significant role in constructing, circulating, and maintaining paranormal beliefs nowadays. In particular, the beliefs are constructed through the vehicle we know as language. In *The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 13) argue that reality “is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyse the process in which this occurs” and is defined as:

“... a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 13)

Reality in this sense, including knowledge, culture, and social values, is “a human product” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 79) that does not establish itself but is built and circulated by humans, what they call ‘externalisation’. The concept of ‘internalisation’, on the other hand, explains that constructed reality affects people’s attitude and behaviour in line with their social norms, including law, policies, and regulations. Although many kinds of knowledge, social values, and regulations are established by the people, they can also be used to shape the people’s thoughts and behaviours.

As they emphasise, the construction of reality in everyday life needs a medium for constructing, reconstructing, and transferring from one person to another. That medium is language – “a system of vocal signs that it is the most important sign system of human society” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 51), as they state:

“In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and of the common-sense apprehension of this reality.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 55)

The key feature of language is communication and it is the element of conversation that is the main tool for understanding reality in everyday life:

“The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation. One may view the individual’s everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies and reconstructs his subjective reality.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 172)

Although this concept does not highlight the social construction of reality through media products, it can still be employed in the analysis of media texts and the way media use their own symbolic language to communicate with audiences. Television language, combining images, sounds, and special effects, is the essential tool used by the text producers to construct social knowledge for audiences. Bignell (2005, p. 124) states that “television has a language of realism that programme makers and audiences share”. He suggests that media products share this language to allow producers and audiences to understand each other and create a conversation through the understanding of signs appearing on the screen.

2.1.1 Non-fiction and fiction

Television language is an important factor in determining contents representing fiction and non-fiction in television genres. As Berger and Luckmann suggest, the world of

everyday life as a social reality is collectively created (and perceived as real) by people's thoughts and actions:

"The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these." (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 33)

Similarly, media text producers represent reality in a way which people from every social context can, generally, make sense of and interpret by drawing on their own thoughts and experiences. Ghosts on screens, therefore, can be constructed and perceived as either real or not real depending on choices of meaning, construction, and interpretation. This demonstrates that the ways people make sense of the world can be many, and Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 35) argue that, for this reason, the world "consists of multiple realities". Thus, supernatural media shows can be constructed as different aspects of reality. That is, they can be represented as 'real' or 'fantasy' through fictional and non-fictional presentations.

Focusing on the representation of ghosts as 'real', television functions as a tool for reflecting and/or reproducing the features of reality, what Fiske calls 'realism':

"We can thus call television an essentially realistic medium because of its ability to carry a socially convincing sense of the real. ... television is seen either as a transparent window on the world or as a mirror reflecting our own reality back to us." (Fiske, 2011, p. 21)

The television genres of Documentary and Reality Show have been used to construct beliefs in the paranormal as real. They have attempted to prove the reality of ghostly manifestations. Jones (2017, p. 6) claims that "supernaturally-themed found-footage is a *verite* style that is ostensibly frightening because it feigns access to reality, and so suggest that ghosts and demons are real". *Most Haunted* as one of the obvious examples:

"In England the recent success of Living TV's *Most Haunted* series, which presents sensational, telegenic live investigation, and its spin-off publications, have also no doubt boosted renewed interested in the occupation of ghost hunter." (Davies, 2007, p. 97)

According to interviews with audiences of *Most Haunted* conducted by Hill, some audience members have developed a fear of supernatural apparitions as a result of the show. As one of the audiences claims:

“I don’t disbelieve they are happening”. (Hill, 2010, p. 82)

Additionally, the audiences’ direct experience in dealing with extraordinary apparitions in everyday life seems to influence their interpretation and perception of television shows. As one of the viewers said:

“If it does happen to you personally you can say for a fact, yes, absolutely with me, it happened to me”. (Hill, 2010, p. 86)

Despite the fact that the show does not provide any proof of the capturing of ghosts on camera and does not confirm the manifestation of ghosts, it is presented and narrated as a real documentary. According to Hill (2010, p. 86), although Richard Woolfe, a former controller of Living and Sky Channels, states that “we haven’t captured any ghost on camera”, the show “can create an atmosphere of a never-ending search where audiences play a game of ghosts”. He also claims that the show “doesn’t stop people looking for glimpses of authenticity in an entertainment frame, but it positions audiences as similar to reality TV audiences in general”. This indicates that reality shows are constructed as ‘realist’ rather than ‘fantasy’ shows.

On the other hand, fictional television genres are constructed through another kind of television language in which a key feature of the fiction is the creation of fear as entertainment for audiences. Classic German Expressionist films from the early 1920s were the first film product to represent supernatural creatures, including vampires, demons, ghosts and spirits (Eisner, 1969). Expressionism is defined as:

“Expressionism ... is a reaction against the atom-splitting of Impressionism, which reflects the iridescent ambiguities, disquieting diversity, and ephemeral hues of nature.” (Edschmid cited in Eisner, 1969, p. 10)

The key features of Expressionism are the use of signs stressing: 1) chiaroscuro, which employs extreme contrasts of light and dark; 2) a preoccupation with reflective glass; 3) the use of anthropomorphism, the attribution of human qualities to non-human beings; and 4) abstractionism, a style of unrealistic art (Scheunemann, 2003). These signs are used to present terror and appear in many films. The film *Nosferatu* is a good example of this case and is analysed by Eisner. The film presents a vampire, Count Orlok, who pursues humans to drink their blood. This character is always appears accompanied by expressionist signs. To begin with, chiaroscuro lighting, appearing as the shadow of the vampire climbing a staircase to haunt the characters, is used to suggest that evil is coming. Additionally, gothic makeup and clothing, along with the exaggerated movements

of the vampire, reflect a distorted reality which suggests a non-human being with supernatural power. Moreover, buildings, roofs, pathways, and other distorted objects represented in the film combine to evoke a strange world full of a sense of horror. Furthermore, the physical characteristics of the vampire, which are described below, can frighten viewers.

“... a stranger as bald as a skull, without eyebrows, and with pink but flabby cheeks. This character folds his repugnant skin into convulsive grimaces in such a way that at every instant a different personality seems to take shape beneath this changing mark.” (Eisner, 1969, p. 110)

Laner (2012) notes that signs, however, can also be employed as a tool in decreasing the feeling of fear, for example, the imagery used to represent the dissolving vampire. At the end of the film, this sign allows viewers to assume that the vampire has been defeated by sunlight. As mentioned above, German expressionist signs have become a common source for representing supernatural creatures and are widely employed in contemporary gothic films and supernatural television shows.

As Bignell (2005) explains, media products, whether fiction or non-fiction, are constructed according to different codes of narrative and television genres each have their own code. Although documentary, reality shows, or television dramas may claim to be ‘based-on-true-stories’, they are still fictionalised. Similarly, Berger and Luckmann suggest that individuals interpret social realities through what they learn from society and their place in society; in other words, realities are interpreted according to shared culture and knowledge. They call this the ‘symbolic universe’ and state that:

“These are bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality, using the term symbolic in the way we have previously defined. To reiterate, symbolic processes are processes of signification that refer to realities other than those of everyday experience.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 113)

As a result, people in different regions may have their own knowledge, culture, and background and will read texts and perceive reality differently depending on their socio-cultural contexts. For this reason, supernatural beliefs in Western and Thai cultures are perceived differently because they do not share a historical and cultural background; as a result, supernatural media presentations are constructed and interpreted differently in both cultures.

2.1.2 Postmodernism and Western supernatural programmes

I would argue that supernatural television shows in Western contexts are a postmodern product not concerned with reinforcing the core of religious principles. Although the representations of ghosts and paranormal beings include some Christian elements, they are not underpinned by Christian teachings and are linked to Christianity only at a surface level. Much of the Christian iconography in Western television is used only for its symbolism and as a common language that acts at the level of 'surface postmodern pastiche'; it is a formal collage that is not actually underpinned by any Christian ideology. The combination of Christian symbolism and supernatural representations is used to create a new kind of text as a postmodern haunted screen. While some critics argue that postmodernism is not compatible with sociological analysis because it is an out-of-date tool (Lash, 1990 and Featherstone, 2007), others contend that supernatural television dramas in the Western context are a product of postmodernism that reflect the idea of depthlessness suggested by Jameson. The concept of depthlessness is illustrated in the classic book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* through Van Gogh's and Warhol's images. Jameson (1984, pp. 58-59) argues that Van Gogh's paintings of shoes reflect meaning beyond what is represented, that is, the paintings not only depict the physical reality of the shoes but also refer to the hermeneutic meaning of "the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty". Conversely, the Warhol illustration "no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear". It only reflects its denotative meaning and has no meaning beyond its own image which draws on the culture of commercialisation in late capitalism. As Jameson argues:

"What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (Jameson, 1984, p. 56)

As set out above, postmodern products are a combination of aesthetic and commodity production. Jameson (1984) claims that what he calls pastiche, artistic forms including advertising, television series, and Hollywood films, has become the production of commodities. Pastiche is defined as:

"Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists." (Jameson, 1984, p. 65)

In addition, Jameson considers pastiche as a 'blank parody' which does not reflect the purpose of creating a personal style and has no individual meaning. The media representations of ghosts have also been engaged with this process of commercialisation in a kind of postmodern pastiche. The television series *Supernatural* (2005-) is an obvious example of the concept of postmodernist pastiche; "*Supernatural's* success can be partially attributed to its popular culture references" (Peirse, 2009, p. 264). As Wilson (2009, p. 167) points out, several parts of the series seem to be "a way of mixing and matching recycled cultural references". For example, the American folklore around the Woman in White, the legend of Bloody Mary, and the historical disappearance of the Roanoke colony are combined in the episode 'Wendigo' in the show's first season. Wilson (2009, p. 167) states that "*Supernatural* isn't interested in historical authenticity; anyone who wants to know what Croatoan means to historians had better look elsewhere". This demonstrates that the representation of supernatural beings does not correspond to an authentic text; rather it is conceived as a blank parody. In other words, some elements represented in the series are cut from a context of historical authenticity and pasted into media texts with no regard to the accuracy of the core information.

The commercial pastiches of late capitalism are collage narratives which focus on "the heterogeneity and profound discontinuities of the work of art, no longer unified or organic, but now virtual grab-bag or lumber room of disjoined subsystems and random raw materials and impulses of all kinds" (Jameson, 1984, p. 75). He also notes that the concept of collage highlights the reading or narration of a text in terms of "differentiation rather than unification". The postmodern narrative can therefore be arbitrarily created through adding, removing, and rearranging elements. Connor (1997) suggests that the contemporary media products reflect the concept of postmodern narrative not only in their aesthetic appreciation of collage, but also in the use of repetition, jump-cuts, and discontinuity.

The representation of horror texts employs the collage narrative in this way in several television shows, especially in television dramas. Although there have been dramas which represent ghostly apparitions through the iconography of Christianity, they do not reflect a coherent Christian ideology or an emphasis on teachings, practices, or even ceremonies. The dramas might use elements of Christianity such as the language, symbolism, and objects as a postmodern tool but they do not engage with Christian ideology. An example of this is the television series *Supernatural* which uses Christian iconography linked to the concept of supernatural beings. There are episodes, for example, the episode 'Swan Song' in the fourth season and 'Everybody Hates Hitler' in the eighth season, presenting the concept of The Apocalypse, a vision of the end of the world involving supernatural evils (Engstrom and Valenzano, 2014). Clark (2003) argues that these episodes show the dark side of Christian Evangelicalism, especially in the

representation of angels, demons, and monsters. Moreover, the representation of religious objects like holy water, rosary beads, and Latin prayer in the series is made in accordance with the concept of postmodern pastiche. It borrows from Christian concepts with no regard to Christian principles. Wilson (2009) asserts that although the representation of sacred objects in the series is derived from Christian concepts, it does not reflect the core of Christianity, especially with regard to: 1) the use of sacred objects, and 2) the processes of producing the sacred objects. To begin with, Wilson's study reveals that the function of sacred objects as represented goes beyond their function in Christian teaching when they are shown as powerful weapons for subduing evil. For example, the hunters Sam and Dan in the episode 'Jus in Bello', attempt to generate a new type of weapon for dealing with vengeful spirits by merging Catholic rosary beads with holy water. Similarly, with regard to the processes for producing sacred objects, the hunters appear to create their own kind of holy water without being ordained. The holy water in this episode is given magical powers solely by incantation. These examples demonstrate that the production of sacred objects in the series is invented and contrary to real Christian teachings. As Engstrom and Valenzano (2014) state:

“Even though they [Sam and Dan] use religious-based weapons, they do not practice a particular religion nor attend any church.” (Engstrom and Valenzano, 2014, p. 69)

Furthermore, Engstrom and Valenzano (2014, p. 33) state that the series “reflect a non-religious aspect, not relating specifically to a particular religion” in which some characters (i.e. evils, demons, and witches) are adapted from the Bible:

“The showrunners and scriptwriters assert they use biblical stories such as the Apocalypse more for the horror and terror the texts invoke, rather than any explicit theological purpose.” (Engstrom and Valenzano, 2014, p. 9)

Interestingly, the television shows that attempt to combine belief in ghosts with religion are less popular with audiences. One example is the reality show *Mad Mad House* (2004) broadcast on Syfy channel which tried to prove the existence of ghosts in other religions, including Voodoo, Akan, the Orisa, and Santeria (Massanari, 2005 cited in Engstrom and Valenzano, 2014). After being aired, African followers of these religions sued the broadcasters and producers for demeaning and misrepresenting the principles of Voodoo. As a result, audience share decreased and the programme was cancelled (Reality TV World, 2004). Furthermore, the television series *Revelations* (2005) broadcast on NBC attempted to combine paranormal beliefs with Christianity but the audience “turned away” from the series. Bird (2009, p. 24) explains that the series was ignored because the narrative of the series was “quite slow, and tame”, and the role of Christian

dogmas in the series was accused of being a “religious misdirection”. This suggests that the representations of the supernatural disconnected from religion are more popular on Western television as a result of the weakening of Christianity in Western society. It supports the argument of Davies (2007, p. 246), as discussed in the previous chapter, that “belief in ghosts is not dependent on religion of course”.

2.1.3 Buddhist teachings and Thai supernatural programmes

It is arguable that Thai supernatural products, including films, radio and television programmes; engage with Buddhist principles in much the same way as Thais believe in ghosts in everyday life. According to Engle (2005), Thai media products are a vital medium for conveying Buddhist concepts to the Thai people:

“Buddhism has assumed a more universal form, located as much in the mass media and in translocal and transnational networks as in the village temple or in local connections between Buddhism and animism.” (Engle, 2005, p. 509)

Buddhist teachings and Thai supernatural programmes are connected and the programmes are considered a tool for circulating Buddhist knowledge. Srivibhata (2002, p. 196), who examines nine stories of Nak’s ghost published in novels and broadcast on television during the years 1912-2000, implies that the key message of the products is to highlight the Buddhist teaching of “the *Karmic Law*”. Specifically, how Nak’s ghost was defeated by the *Karmic Law*. In particular, the different media products attempted to present the ghost, who was an evil ghost that haunted and kill people, as an evil sinner. Ultimately, the ghost was sentenced in line with her previous karma and was represented as an example of the idea that ‘*if you do good things, good things will happen to you; however, if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you*’. Similarly, Worrasetrthasak (2005, p. 67), who explores ghost stories broadcast on the radio programme *The Shock FM*, notes that the programme attempts to reflect the Buddhist idea of “*what goes around comes around*”. Listeners who have direct or indirect experiences of dealing with apparitions are invited to share their experiences live on air and to extensively discuss their beliefs based on Buddhist principles. The famous reality show *Kon Uad Phii* deals with several issues involving ghosts and inexplicable events via ‘mediums’ who claim to communicate with spirits and to explain uncanny events by drawing on Buddhist beliefs and scientific knowledge (Kongtong, 2012). Chankom and Sripraphan (2017) argue that this show is a channel for circulating ghost beliefs in relation to traditional Thai culture and Buddhism. Both presenters and hosts present ghost stories with Buddhist messages and also provide short quotes of teachings at the end of each episode. Moreover, Nonlucha and Tularak (2014, p. 38), who analysed Thai television dramas during the year 2007-

2012, argue that the key message of those dramas is an emphasis on traditional Thai and Buddhist values including, “goodness and evilness, forgiveness, afterlife, the *Karmic Law*”.

Recently, supernatural television dramas have attempted to link the Thai practice of *Wai* and belief in ghost with Buddhist teachings. A clear example of this is found in the drama *Nang Cha Da* (2015). Johnson (2012) proposes that the *Wai*, a gesture of putting together the palms of one’s hands and modestly bowing one’s head, has two meanings: 1) a social practice of greeting, showing respect, and expressing a sense of gratitude in general; and 2) a way of showing respect to images of the Buddha, monks, or of worship to supernatural beings. The drama presented the character Choengchai expressing the *Wai* (as shown in Figure 2.1) to Rinlanee’s ghost for forgiveness, a gesture which refers to the Buddhist teaching called ‘*Ar Ho Si Karm*’ (Manager, 2015).

Figure 2.1: The gesture of *Wai* in the drama *Nang Cha Da* (2015)



Furthermore, the *Wai* to the Buddha also functions as a mental anchor. Although the *Wai* cannot directly protect people from evil spirits in practice, it provides people with a mental safeguard, that is, it provides a feeling of safety, fortune, and happiness. In the novel *Bangkok Tattoo* (2005), the central characters Nat and Lek do the *Wai* to ask the Buddha to protect them from vengeful ghosts. The scene is described as:

“This time I am the one to turn the corpse over. Yep, afraid so. ... Lek covers his mouth, shares another very female glance of terminal terror with Nat, then finds a carpet to kneel on while he *wais* the Buddha. ... (Believe me, there’s nothing more depressing than a clinging ghost on your back for life). I wait while the two of them, palms joined in high *wais*, silently inoculate themselves with a potent mixture of magic, superstition and customized Buddhism.” (Burdett, 2005, p. 260)

The reason why Thai supernatural genre products represent and explain beliefs in ghosts through religious rather than scientific references is that Thai thought and culture has been shaped by religious rites related to ghosts and spirits. Mungthanee (2017) claims that Thai custom is involved with Buddhist dogmas and rituals from cradle to grave:

“When a child is a little bit older, there will also be a ceremony for cutting off the hair. ... When a man reached 20 years of age, a ritual of ordination will be held. Additionally, the ceremony will also be done when certain status in life change such as weddings or ordinations as well as the funerals after someone passes away.” (Mungthanee, 2017, p. 50)

This demonstrates that Buddhism is not detached from the Thai way of life. Buddhist-based media products are much more a part of Thai life compared with supernatural media products in the West where the core of Christian principles has been largely detached from daily life. Thai supernatural genre products are viewed as a form of communication referring to traditional Thai culture and Buddhism in a unified culture. This corresponds to the view of Berger and Luckmann (1966) noting that people (or human artefacts) within a community play a role in constructing, changing, and destroying their identities:

“By the very nature of socialization, subjective identity is a precarious entity. It is dependent upon the individual’s relations with significant others, who many change or disappear ... symbolic universes ... are sheltering canopies over the institutional order as well as over individual biography.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 120)

Views on Buddhist knowledge represented in Thai media products are similar to individual or national identities which can continue or disappear depending on the people or creators active in that society. In other words, the reality of prolonged cultural expression (in this case, Buddhist teachings) will continue due to cultural transmission, whereas debunked concepts (concepts that go against Buddhist teachings e.g. black magic) will be blurred, disappear from society, and replaced with the right knowledge. As a result, Buddhism, belief in ghosts, and supernatural genre media products are ideas which Thai people consider a part of Thai culture that has been transmitted over generations.

2.2 History and supernatural media programmes

The history of spirit photography, photography claiming to depict the spirits of deceased people which developed in the Victorian age, has played a prominent role in the depiction of ghosts on Western television screens. According to Ruffles (2004), the

representation has been influenced by the features of spirit photography from the heyday of Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century:

“[Spirit] photography provided another source of inspiration for early filmmakers who wished to portray the supernatural. Spirit photography has to be seen in the context of the Victorian photography as memorial.” (Ruffles, 2004, p. 25)

Sir David Brewster’s spirit photography of the 1870s, showed that the appearance of apparitions could be captured on camera by having a figure enter and leave a photograph before it was completed (Gernsheim, 1988). He found that the picture appeared to have a transparent quality, what he described as a white sheet, from lengthy exposures. In later decades, there were several articles published proving that spirit photography was deceptive (Chanan, 1980). Maxwell-Heron (1898) in a study of spirit photographs called *A Railway in Holborn London* and *A Ghost Which Was Not a Ghost* published in *Harmsworth Magazine (1898-99)* stated that:

“A photograph is absolutely inadmissible as evidence of anything, unless it is proved conclusively that it was in nowise faked after being taken...The two ghost photographs are specially calculated to puzzle not a few who are unacquainted with the tricks of the art.” (Maxwell-Heron, 1898)

Although there were official denouncements of misleading spirit photographs in the nineteenth century, this style of representation of ghosts was adopted by text producers in visual media products (Ruffles, 2004; Ancuta, 2008). Many kinds of spirit photograph influenced the characteristics of ghosts in early haunted films:

“American spirits tended to be recognisably human, if a bit faded and transparent, English spirits were usually shrouded in folds of ectoplasmic vapours and less substantial, while the French ones seemed an odd mixture of the two.” (Meinwals, 1996, cited in Ancuta, 2008, p. 31)

Although the supernatural genre was first introduced by the film industry (Eisner, 1969 and Beard, 2013), it is on television screens that it has flourished (Cherry, 2013). Wheatley (2006, p. 3) describes the representation of supernatural creatures, including “repetitions, returns, déjà vu, premonitions, ghosts doppelgangers, animated objects and severed body parts, etc.”, as the “Gothic mode”. It is defined as “an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters, and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense” (Punter, 1996, p. 1) and “a literature where fear is the motivating and sustaining emotion” (Gross, 1989, p. 1). In short, the primary feature of gothic television is that it provides viewers with an artistic narrative of dread and

terror by borrowing key elements from Gothic literature, including character, plot, and narrative. During the years 1762-1800, Gothic literature flourished and developed a substantial repertoire of ghosts, witches, evils, and vampires. Clery (1999) proposes that paranormal stories should be considered as paradoxical productions, featuring: 1) reporting the supernatural as 'real', and 2) recounting the supernatural as 'surreal'. Many news reports and works of fiction regarding the manifestation of ghosts have been published since then. Clery claims that these stories of ghosts (whether fact or fiction) have turned into entertaining commodities for both believers and sceptics. Additionally, Wheatley (2006) claims that Gothic television creates a space of terror or disgust:

“Gothic television is understood as a domestic form of a genre which is deeply concerned with the domestic, writing stories of unspeakable family secrets and homely trauma large across the television screen.” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 1)

In Wheatley's view, Gothic television functions as a domestic space where a connection between the characters and the audience is made. The Gothic television drama *Twin Peaks*, broadcast on ABC in 1990-91, is a good example. Ledwon (1993) points out that the form of postmodern representation in the drama plays a significant role in inducing an emotion of melancholy, dread and the uncanny within the audiences' living room. By adapting the imagery of Gothic literatures and combining them with modern special effects, the show creates an atmosphere of terror in the domestic space. Thus Ledwon (1993, p. 260) argues that “television would seem to be the ideal medium for Gothic inquiry.”

Focusing on the features of the supernatural television drama genre, drama can function as a cultural mirror reflecting social reality in everyday life. Thornham and Purvis (2005, p. 19) suggest that drama can “reach huge numbers of people” and can “get in close and to mix subjective and objective views, all combine to raise this concern with contemporary issues from mere commentary to something far more”. Moreover, Brandt (1993) notes that dramas are a cultural tool for representing individual experiences, social relationships, languages, and cultures:

“Drama as a mirror of life ...; as a reflection of real human concerns ...; able to relate individual experiences to an implicit moral structure and scale of values; able to broaden the viewer's sympathies beyond their normal confines... .”
(Brandt, 1993, p. 5)

The reasons why television dramas have been and continue to be popular is that they: 1) provide “lucrative advertising revenue” for sponsors or television companies”; and 2) feature “as escapist or fantasy” entertainment which fulfils a need in audiences for

whom entertaining gratification is “missing from their own everyday lives” (Hobson, 1982, pp. 26-27).

In an analysis of a series of Russian folktales, Propps (1968, cited in Lacey, 2000) suggests that the type of character - villain, donor, helper, princess, dispatcher, hero and false hero - and their development play a prominent role in narrating a story. He suggests that conflict between characters and between humans and non-humans (demons, monsters, zombies, vampires, and so on) are a main theme of the horror genre. Conflict is a major element in paranormal stories and, he notes, conflict is underlined in the texts:

“The narrative disruption is often caused by a non-human villain... The binary opposition mobilised in the narrative is human; non-human.” (Lacey, 2000, p. 234)

For this reason, the types of character and the conflict between them in the supernatural television genre will be employed as a framework in this thesis. In particular, I will examine the types of ghosts, shamans, and monks that are key characters in supernatural television dramas.

2.2.1 Western supernatural television dramas

The concept of ‘showing less and suggesting more’ described by Haining (1993) is considered a key tool for representing the paranormal in Western dramas. It refers to the method of representing ghosts and spirits by hinting at their existence with vocal signs, sound effects of sobbing and groaning, and ambient sounds. He explains that this concept was effectively applied in the early period of ghost television dramas because supernatural representations were difficult to depict. Therefore, the use of sound helped as it allowed audiences to imaginatively make sense of and interpret the meaning of the texts:

“Television being a strictly literal medium ... can do nothing to a cosy tale of death and diabolism without overdoing it. One way to cope with this difficulty is to show less and suggest more.” (Haining, 1993, p. 189)

In the early days of producing this kind of drama, the concept was introduced from radio programmes that narrated ghost stories. As Wheatley (2006) explains, the programme *Appointment with Fear* was broadcast for nine years on BBC Radio’s Light Programme by the famous broadcaster Valentine Dyall, known as The Man in Black. The dramatised ghost stories emphasised the importance of sound both by using sound effects and exaggerating the narrators’ emotional vocals. Similarly, the well-known ghost stories of M.R. James, broadcast on BBC Radio’s Home Service, Light Programme, and

Children's Hour during the 1940s and 1950s also employed these techniques (Wheatley, 2006). In Haining's view, this concept was practised and applied in television drama based on Gothic literature broadcast in the 1960s and 1970s. The well-known drama, *Armchair Theatre* (1956-74), first broadcast on ITV, was categorised as part of the televisual serial genre; which is defined as "a serial has established characters and settings and an unfolding narrative whose plots or storylines continue over from one episode to another" (Hobson, 1982, p. 32). The broadcast stories, derived from gothic fictions, literatures, and historical documents, acted as what Creeber (2004, p. 8) calls an "anthology series", that is "a number of single stories that are connected by a related theme, setting or set of characters". Some scholars call this genre 'hybrid dramas' because the genre combines supernatural and family themes, an example being *Ghost Whisperer* (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 123). Wheatley (2002, p. 173) stated that dramas such as *Mystery and Imagination*, *The Open Door*, and *Whistle and I'll Come to You*, "began to look and sound like a radio play with pictures". There are several scenes in *Mystery and Imagination* that emphasise dread and terror by using "haunting sound effects of sobbing, groaning and the amplified sound of a heart beating" (Wheatley, 2002, p. 173). Likewise, in an interview with Amanda Walker who cast the ghost's voice for the series *The Open Door*, she emphasised that sounds play a central role in representing ghosts in the series such as a "loud whimpering cry ... shuddering moan ... sobbing sigh ... [and] sound effects" (Davies, 1966 cited in Wheatley, 2002, p. 173).

Moreover, in the classic drama *Whistle and I'll Come to You*, based on the short story by M.R. James, broadcast on BBC1 in 1968, the scenes representing ghostly manifestations were depicted for a short length of time, only seventeen seconds. The ghost's appearance was illustrated as an animated white sheet with horror genre sound effects (Wheatley, 2006). The results of research exploring the viewers' perspectives revealed that the combination of eerie atmospheres, actions, dialogues, and supernatural representations was successful and effective:

"For about half [of the viewers], it was a most successful evocation of atmosphere, a fascinating interpretation of a basically simple story ... The atmosphere of foreboding, of unspeakable unpleasantness to come, was built up with telling effect ... It provided a spine chilling essay in the macabre, one in which atmosphere was all and lack of conventional dialogue served only to heighten the effect." (BBC, 1968 cited in Wheatley, 2006, p. 47)

In recent years, supernatural television dramas in the Western context have changed. Dramas now feature not only ghosts but also mediums. The role of mediums, as protagonists, has been represented in many recent drama programmes. Interestingly, female mediums have been more common. As Beeler (2008, p. 165), exploring the paranormal films and television programmes from 1990 to 2007, points out, there has

been an increase in “television drama series which presents a female medium as its central character”, including *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and *Afterlife*. The result of her study reveals that female mediums function as heroines negotiating and dealing with the conflicts between humans and spirits. Beeler (2008, pp. 16-17) clarifies that the reasons why female mediums are presented in these dramas are: 1) “the result of Western culture’s search for different models of heroism for women as an alternative to the more limited image of the male hero”; and 2) the symbolic expression of the feminine, that mediums “act as a mediator-facilitator who must negotiate between spaces, since she occupies an unusual third space”, which she defines as an area of hybrid worlds between the world of the living and the dead. She argues that the mediums play a vital role in dealing with supernatural problems with the use of logical reason which is similar to the role of the masculine hero in crime dramas.

Moreover, Sausman (2010) and Beeler (2008) argue that paranormal dramas attempt to present the Victorian belief in mediums era combined with the relationships within everyday family life, including the roles of motherhood, marriage, and friendship). According to McGuire and Buchbinder (2010, p. 298), the series *Medium* and *Supernatural* refer to popular beliefs about spirit mediums in terms of the “nostalgic ideal” which “identifies the family as central to the Gothic”. Those series refer to the Victorian age when mediums communicated and negotiated with the dead for the living. As Beeler (2008) points out, the contents focus on family relationships. In the series *Medium*, for instance, the story of Allison Dubois as a female seer reflects the role of motherhood in protecting her daughter and husband by negotiating with demons in the third space. Similarly, in the series *Ghost Whisperer*, in the episode ‘Voice’, Melinda Gordon as a medium communicates with her dead mother and son using technological devices - her telephone and computer. In the series *Afterlife*, in the episode ‘The 7:59 Club’, Alison as a medium helps her friend Robert to contact his son, who had died in a car accident, in order to relieve Robert’s trauma. Furthermore, Spooner (2010), in a study of the BBC series *Sea of Souls*, notes that the content focuses on popular beliefs regarding haunted places and mediumship from the Victorian age in which the beliefs are explained by scientific rather than non-scientific methods. The evidence above indicates that supernatural television dramas in the Western context have focussed the role of mediums as protagonists or heroes rather than on the role of ghosts.

2.2.2 Thai supernatural television dramas

In contrast, Anuruksa (2012) claims that Buddhist tales and ghost stories are considered as a source for Thai supernatural genre entertainment:

“In particular, the characters and objectives of ghosts on television screen are created following and imitating the Thai traditional cultures and religious beliefs as much as text producers can.” (Anuruksa, 2012, p. 225)

Pob Phii Fah was the first supernatural television drama broadcast in 1975 by Channel 7. The content of the drama was adapted from radio dramas during 1970s (Sangthong, 2009). Initially, ghostly apparitions were mostly portrayed as a ghost with apparent physical characteristics performed by actors. The representation of Kra Sue’s ghost, as shown in Figure 2.2, is an example. Anuruksa (2012) claims that the typical ghost is depicted as having a green-coloured face, long curved teeth and inhabiting a dark space (especially night-time), as shown in the dramas *Pob Phii Fah* (1975), *Mae Nak* (1979), *Kru Sue* (1994), and *Pret Wat Su Tud* (2003).

Figure 2.2: Kra Sue’s ghost in Thai ghost dramas (Retroian, 2013)



Additionally, he notes that Buddhist teachings, holy objects, and black magic have been a main focus in supernatural dramas since 1975. The drama *Pob Phii Fah* (1975), for instance, presented ghost stories based on the North-eastern Thai belief that a ghost “originates in a living person, then conceals itself in the body of that person, who is called the originating host” (Suwanlert, 1976, p. 119). In the drama, the ghost was subdued by magical shamans who used sacred objects, in this case holy water and knives. Furthermore, the drama *Pu Som Fao Sup* (2007), presented the concept of gaining merit, called *Boon*, by entering the monkhood (Anuruksa, 2012). Likewise, the drama *Sapai Zaa*

Mae Ya Hian (2012) also highlighted the Buddhist ritual *Pindapata* – a Buddhist practice of putting food offerings in a monk's bowl, which Thais believe passes *Boon* to the spirits of deceased people (Petrachaiand, 2007). Furthermore, the drama *Jao Nang* (2015) emphasised the Northern Thai tradition regarding guardian spirits in which locals believe that the spirits provide a “defence against supernatural attack” and “ensure the home is a safe” (Pearce, 2011, p. 352). The key idea of this drama is to present the power of the guardian spirit in protecting residents from evil spirits.

For the messages behind television texts, Buddhist knowledge has been the basis of both soap operas and supernatural dramas, especially the presentation of Buddhist proverbs and dogmas. In the several versions of the melodrama ‘*Thong Nuea Kao*’ shown in 1987, 1997, and 2013, the story underlines the disadvantages of drinking alcohol, which is prohibited by Buddhist principles, in terms of both physical sickness and social reaction. At the end of the dramas, monks provide Buddhist proverbs warning viewers to avoid sin. According to Komchadluek (2013, p. 17), “this melodrama provides many useful proverbs and suggestions to reflect the results of karma and religious sin”. Similarly, in the drama ‘*Yuey Fah Tah Din*’ (2008), Punyataro (2010) states that the Buddhist dogma of ‘*Karmic Law*’ is highlighted as the main theme, allowing viewers to recognise the effects of karma and to learn the traditional proverb ‘*what goes around comes around*’:

“Due to the fact that Thai society has been shaped by traditional and Buddhist values for a long period, the Buddhist principle of karma is a significant tool in shaping and maintaining Thai society as peacefulness. ... This drama reflects that the villains cannot be escaped from the *Karmic Law*.” (Punyataro, 2010, p. 77)

In the drama *Chao Kam Nai Ven* (2000), presenting a connection between belief in ghosts and the *Karmic Law*, Archavabul (2002) shows that the drama can change viewer’s attitudes. Research showed that 74% of interviewees intended to improve their religious attitudes and moral conduct by way of good thinking, good speaking, and good behaviour:

“The drama is a function of a mirror reflecting the significant torment of afterlife and the next life which resulted in their previous lives. ... In the drama, it refers to the relationships between *Karmic Law* and the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth* which are a good example letting the audiences to realise their karma.” (Archavabul, 2002, p. 119)

He demonstrates that the religious dogmas appearing in this drama followed Buddhist teachings such as the teachings of ‘*forgiveness*’ and ‘*what goes around comes around*’. These principles are Dharma quotes that warn people of their tendency to commit sin (Archavabul, 2002). Likewise, the drama *Pret Wat Su Tud*, broadcast in 2003

and 2012, is claimed by KhaoSod (2010) to be a good example of Buddhist principles of the *Karmic Law* and the effects of karma in the past life. Komchadluek (2011, p. 17) notes that the representation of *Pret* ghosts in the drama “allows audiences to learn and recognise the Buddhist teaching of the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth*”. Moreover, the newspaper Thairath (2014a) claims that “the main purpose of the ghost returns is to revenge or ask for justice” and ghosts are eliminated by “a practice of Buddhist principles”. The above clearly indicates that Buddhism is a significant source for Thai supernatural television dramas. The reasons for this are explained by scholars as follows:

“Buddhism forms an integral part of Thai culture, acting not only as the dominant religious faith, but also comprising the base of many of the country’s rituals, its monarchy and the national identity.” (Oxford Business Group, 2015)

Pornsiripongse *et al.* (2014) also claims that Buddhist teachings have a great influence on Thai people:

“Buddhist teachings ... influence their perspective, thoughts, and beliefs. The teachings also play a crucial part in cultivating their values, personalities, and livelihood. ... Buddhism also influences people’s perspective on the world, life, health, sickness, and death.” (Pornsiripongse *et al.*, 2014, p. 68)

Furthermore, Buddhist ceremonies in temples have become a part of everyday Thai life. Naming babies, offering foods or alms to monks, learning Buddhist teachings, merit-making, ordinations, funerals, and wedding ceremonies all take place in temples. For this reason, Buddhist temples are ubiquitous in Thailand and are essential for Thais. Although not all religious temples and activities are funded by the government, there has been an increase in State funding of religion every year (Pornsiripongse *et al.*, 2014). According to a survey conducted by the National Office of Buddhism in 2011 cited in Pornsiripongse *et al.*, 2014, p.75, “almost every village in the country has a temple”. It revealed that in 2011 there were 37,075 temples in the country and 291,116 monks were practising.

Figure 2.3: Number of temples nationwide by regions

Regions	Number of temples	Percentage
Bangkok	425	1
North	8,809	24
Central	2,984	8
Northeast	17,906	48
East	1,865	5
West	1,878	5
South	3,244	9
Total	37,075	100

As shown above, Thai television dramas function as a cultural mirror of the influence of Buddhism on Thai thought and daily practice as well as the belief in ghosts that still exists in Thai society. Despite the differences in Western and Thai dramas, they both share methods for representing ghosts through audiovisual signs.

2.3 Media semiotics

Semiotics is used as a tool to generate meaning through symbolic signs. Van Leeuwen (2005) suggests that it is the study of signs. According to Eco (1976, p. 7 cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 2), “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign”, and engages with “the study not only of what we refer to as *signs* in everyday speech, but of anything which *stands for* something else”. Additionally, it refers to an “assemblage of signs e.g. words, images, sounds, and/or gestures” (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). In other words, media constructions can generate meaning and realities in everyday life, depending on the signs used. For example, the speeches of actors, photographs, typeface, and sounds can all act as vehicles in conveying meaning to an audience (Bignell, 2002; Branston and Stafford, 2003).

Semiotics was developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who introduced a two-part model of the sign called ‘Semiology’. A sign consists of: 1) the *signifier* – the material (or physical) form of the sign; and 2) the *signified* – the mental concept. The relation between *signifier* and *signified* is called ‘*signification*’:

“The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and sound-image. ... The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it ‘material’, it is only in the sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of association, the concept, which is generally more abstract.” (Saussure, 1959, p. 66)

In this regard, semiotics had been employed in German expressionist films from the 1920s. Eisner (1969) demonstrates that semiotics was a tool to identify supernatural beings and ghosts in each scene. For instance, the distorted sets used in the film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1920)* act as a signifier denoting the unnatural habitat of supernatural beings. Moreover, in every single scene featuring demons, there was a high contrast of light and shade functioning as a reference to the demon (Prawer, 1980). Similarly, the demon character Lindhorst in the film *The Student of Prague (1926)* moved from one place to another by gliding smoothly and quietly rather than by normal walking; this signified that the character was not a human. His face was portrayed as fearfully wrinkled as the face of a disgusting ghost. At the same time, horror sounds played as Lindhorst suddenly appeared; these sounds were a signifier that he was a demon (Eisner, 1969).

Another form of semiotics is the study of signs invented by American philosopher Charles Peirce which focuses on three modes of significations: 1) the *iconic* – a mode of visual sign resembling the signified; 2) the *indexical* – a mode of sign involved with its object; and 3) the *symbolic* – a mode of sign engaging with arbitrary conventions from a shared culture (cited in Chandler, 2007). Arguably, the *indexical* is primarily employed as a tool in emphasising ghostly apparitions. In the reality show *Most Haunted*, the programme, presenting a tour of haunted houses with hosts who use video equipment in an attempt to capture pictures of unnatural things, attempts to create a text functioning as an index of apparitions (Koven, 2007). Additionally, the use of television techniques, including quick jump-cutting, slow-motion shots, monochrome shots, night shots from infrared cameras, and increased volume of unusual voices, functions as clues to the presence of supernatural creatures. Likewise, in the television series *Lost Hearts* inspired by M.R. James's stories, Wheatley (2006) suggests that audiences can distinguish between human and supernatural characters by the use of *indexical* signs. That is, a presenter with sallow skin, lacking colour and vibrancy, may be perceived as a spectral being. Thus, the *indexical* sign is an essential factor in directing audiences to specific understanding of media texts.

The concept of Myth introduced by the French critic Roland Barthes focuses on a process of reading, interpreting, and understanding realities or texts in everyday life. As Barthes (1993) notes, this framework explains how meaning is generated and understood through both literal denotation (i.e. language) and cultural connotation (i.e. history, tradition, society, and religions):

“Myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. ... since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth, provides it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message.” (Barthes, 1993, p. 109)

In other words, myth is a particular form of communication which signifies a meaning greater than a literal reading of the original message. According to Barthes (1993, p. 114), in his classic book *Mythologies*, myth is a “second-order semiological system” (as shown in Figure 2.4) that is created from a preceding semiotic term. That is, a sign in the first system “becomes a mere signifier in the second system”.

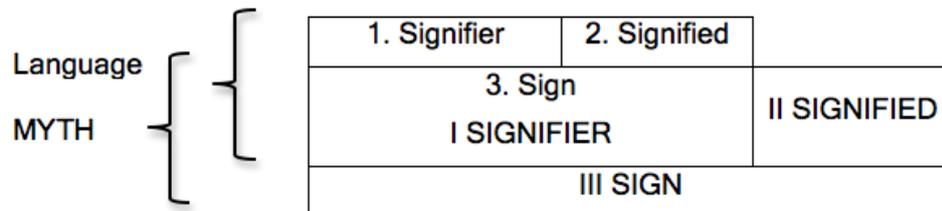


Figure 2.4: The pattern of myth conception (Barthes, 1993, p. 115)

He explains that the level of language generates the system of denotative meaning, while the level of myth creates its own system of connotative meaning called *metalanguage*. In other words, myth is constructed and read through cultural frameworks in each society; thus, myth may have many meanings depending on different cultural readings.

In Western contexts, for example, people mostly interpret supernatural texts through history rather than religion (as discussed in Chapter One). For example, during the sixteenth century Reformation, people did not have faith in ghosts because that belief was resisted by reformers and no longer engaged with Christian belief. In the nineteenth century, the Victorian age, there was a popular belief in mediumship. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that audiences read and understand supernatural texts in the context of their historical and cultural background. Television shows like *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Paranormal State* are examples of this. Williams (2010) suggests that supernatural dramas reflect the role of mediums from the Victorian age, with viewers interpreting ghostly apparitions through the actions of the mediums, such as talking to themselves, and showing illness in the form of headache or stomach-ache. This allows audiences to create a link between those representations and their knowledge of Victorian culture to assume that there is an apparition represented in the shows.

In Thai contexts, supernatural texts are constructed and interpreted according to not only traditional Thai culture but also Buddhism. An example of this is in the ghost stories *Mae Nak*. According to Srivibhata (2002), *Mae Nak* is a classic tale from the eighteenth century which has been transformed into modern entertainment products,

including literature, films, radio and television dramas, and is still popular today. Panklang (1996) suggests three media tropes are created by drawing on traditional and Buddhist backgrounds. First, a woman, who dies during childbirth, is believed to become a powerful ghost in traditional beliefs. Nak's ghost, represented in many media products, is the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth; thus, on the basis of traditional beliefs, it is implied that she is a particularly powerful ghost. Second, a common traditional belief is that the sound of dogs howling at night is a sign that a vengeful ghost is coming. This belief was used as a tool to represent Nak's ghost entering scenes. Finally, Buddhist holy items together with the practice of praying to the Buddha are perceived as tools for protecting humans from evil or ghosts. This idea is presented in the film *Pee Mak Phra Khanong* (2013) where a character Ae holds a Buddhist necklace and prays to the Buddha when he sees Nak's ghost. All these signs are created and read according to the traditional culture which both the text producers and the audience share and understand. This demonstrates that cultural beliefs of the viewers are essential in helping them to interpret and make sense of texts in the supernatural genre.

Conclusion

The supernatural media genre remains one of the most popular media genres. Jowett and Abbott (2013, p. 37) claim that supernatural products, including films, paranormal reality shows, and supernatural mini-series or serials, "become more pronounced and is increasingly used as a source of horror". According to Wheatley (2006), the supernatural genre has been mainly presented in two contexts: 1) the textual domestic space, that is, haunted places); and 2) the extra-textual domestic space, that is, mediumship). These two aspects reflect beliefs rooted in the period of the Spiritualism boom and the Victorian age (Wheatley, 2006; Hill, 2010).

The development of the contemporary supernatural screen genre has resulted in the combining of traditional and religious elements into a 'religious-flavoured product'. For example, the series *Supernatural* that uses the characteristics of demons drawn from the Bible. However, as it is religious-flavoured rather than religious-based, Engstrom and Valenzano (2014) argue that the stories presented are not underpinned by any principle of Christianity despite partial imitation of demons from the Bible. Additionally, the television programmes which combine the concept of ghosts and religion are less successful with viewers, as shown above in relation to the television shows *Mad Mad House* and *Revelation* (Bird, 2009). These shows can be read as a kind of surface postmodern pastiche, combining Christian symbols with ghost stories without an emphasis on the core of Christian ideology. In other words, they are a postmodern products 'cutting' some elements of Christian beliefs and 'pasting' into media texts. For this reason, the

paranormal contents represented in supernatural shows, in particular, ghostly apparitions and mediums, tend to follow a similar pattern to current Christian teaching. That is, the social beliefs around ghosts and spirits in everyday life have weakened in line with religious teaching.

Thai supernatural television shows, conversely, function as a cultural mirror for a contemporary society where belief in ghosts and Buddhism are still connected. That is, Buddhist teachings, as represented in supernatural media products are the same as the religious teachings in everyday life and the shows function as a tool for circulating Buddhism. Based on reviews of the literature, Thai supernatural media mostly underlines two main Buddhist principles: 1) the *Karmic Law*; and 2) the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth*. The dramas *Mae Nak* and *Chao Kam Nai Ven* are clear examples. The key message of *Mae Nak* is an emphasis on the *Karmic Law* (Srivibhata, 2002) while in *Chao Kam Nai* it is the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth* (Auerakohran, 2011). Many scholars and newspaper critics assert that Thai supernatural television dramas present Buddhist teachings and practices, as they are Buddhist-based media artefacts (KhaoSod, 2010; Lee, 2010; Dailynews, 2014; Thairath, 2014b). These kinds of dramas remain popular with Thai audiences. This also suggests that supernatural television dramas are an important tool in reinforcing Buddhist teachings among Thai viewers.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Design

Chapter Three will set out the research methodology for collecting, categorising, and analysing data used in this research thesis. The first part of this chapter will address the broader issue of a qualitative inquiry introduced by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. This study is suitable for a qualitative approach which is considered to be an inquiry establishing knowledge 'from the inside' of individuals to explain the world 'out there' in line with the interpretive paradigm. The second part of this chapter will highlight research methods used in this thesis, consisting of: 1) textual analysis, 2) in-depth interviews, and 3) focus groups. The procedures for selecting research samples from the television dramas *Ngao* (2014) and *Nang Cha Da* (2015) along with a process for reading and interpreting the key messages represented in the dramas are explored in the section on textual analysis. Access to TV text producers and scriptwriters and the role of their interviews is discussed in the section on in-depth interviews. The section on focus groups will describe: 1) the benefits of using focus groups; 2) the criteria for choosing research samples and recruiting participants; 3) the role and qualifications of the moderator; 4) the research materials used, for example, a guide to interviews and video clips; and 5) the procedures adopted for storing and analysing data using the software package *NVivo*.

3.1 Research methodology

Qualitative research is considered and applied as the central method of this thesis to achieve the aims of this research. The aim of the qualitative approach is to gain an understanding of the world "out there" and to explain social phenomena "from the inside" (Flick, 2007, p. ix). Qualitative research is a tool for grasping the social construction of realities and a process for creating knowledge through the perspectives of people in everyday life:

"... a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self." (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 3)

In this sense, Flick (2007) explains that qualitative researchers observe and study people's perspectives to understand their lives and insights. It is also claimed that "qualitative research is an inquiry project but it is also a moral, allegorical, and therapeutic project" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. xvi). Moreover, Becker (cited in Flick, 2007) considers it a tool for studying issues of the underprivileged, of minorities, or of victims of

colonisation or migration through one-to-one and group interviews. In short, qualitative research engages in changing our interpretation of knowledge by allowing us to understand the world from the perspective of others.

The key function of qualitative research that makes it suitable for this thesis is that it deals with the what, how, and why-questions. This research focuses on an analysis of televisual communication focussing on senders (text producers), messages (contents shown in the dramas), and receivers (audiences). Jensen (1993) suggests that qualitative research can examine the meaning of a media process within wider social and cultural contexts. Additionally, Flick (2015) claims that questions of what, how, and why can be best addressed through the qualitative research approach. He defines that approach as consisting of: 1) an understanding of the subjective meaning of issues from the opinions of participants, in this case, the perceptions of Thai viewers on the meaning of supernatural beliefs represented in the dramas; 2) a grasp of the latent meaning of a situation, how are the beliefs constructed and presented in the dramas; and 3) an explanation of social practices and the life experience of participants, including whether there any organisations forcing text producers to present content in line with Thai Buddhism and their reasons for doing so. The purpose of qualitative research is not just to find responses to questions but to find deeper information (Silverman, 2006; Richards and Morse, 2013). As Bryman (2012) points out, the research information can reflect on reality in everyday life and on what is called social knowledge. Research findings in this thesis, for example, explain why Buddhist teachings in the dramas are highlighted and supported by the government. Cresswell (2007, p. 18) suggests that social knowledge, which is studied and read through socio-cultural contexts, takes for granted that it is subjectively interpreted and perceived as the field where “participants live and work”. In this sense, the field is viewed as a way in which researchers can understand the stories and interpretations of the participants. Qualitative research is a useful tool for approaching those questions and is judged on the interpretations of the researcher in collecting, categorising and analysing data. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm is employed as the principal framework to analyse the research methodology of this thesis, including textual analysis, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The interpretive paradigm plays a meaningful role in interpreting key messages inside the dramas, how viewers understand television texts, and why producers produce dramas associated with Buddhist ideas. These questions will be explored through the interpretive paradigm within Thai socio-cultural contexts. Although Bryman (2012) argues that the paradigm is subjective, Snape and Spencer (2003); Denzin and Lincoln (2011) note that it can help people to understand the social construction of reality. As Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 14) state, rather than focusing on facts, the paradigm is used as “the approach seeks to understand people’s lived experience from the perspective of people

themselves, which is often referred to as the emic perspective or the inside perspective”. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 31) acknowledge that “all research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied”. In other words, this paradigm highlights “the importance of interpretation and observation in understanding the social world” as reality is socially constructed and interpreted within wider social contexts of tradition, culture, and history (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 7). This is known as the *Verstehen* concept or method and was first applied in Sociology by Weber. The meaning of the *Verstehen* is “an inherently subjective process. *Verstehen*, in this interpretation, involves getting inside the actor’s mind, a process far removed from objective apprehension of facts in the natural sciences” (Hekman, 1983, p. 90). It refers to the study of lived experience which occur in a social world (Hennink *et al.*, 2011). The key feature of the *Verstehen* method refers not only to an understanding of the issue of the insider’s interpretation but also a description of problems and how to solve and prevent problems (Hennink *et al.*, 2011). Weber (2007, p. 216) suggests that individuals’ background can lead to the “ability to produce new knowledge by interpreting already *known* facts according to known viewpoints”. Thus, Weber’s concept functions as an important tool in analysing research data in this thesis. That is, this study sheds light on an understanding of the viewer’s interpretation within their social knowledge and cultural contexts and of why the media producers try to cultivate Buddhist ideology through the genre of television drama. It will also explain the meaning of cultural beliefs and phenomena represented in the dramas by exploring social knowledge and political, social, and cultural contexts of everyday life for the viewers and producers.

3.2 Research design

Research findings discussed in this thesis were used to explain Buddhist knowledge embodied in Thai television dramas in the analysis chapters. The findings were generated by a process of triangulation between multiple methods of textual analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. To achieve the research goals with proper methods, they were used as an empirical tool in proving the research findings by examining the entire process of media communication consisting of: the producers (sender); television texts (message); and viewers (receiver) as set out below.

3.2.1 Textual analysis

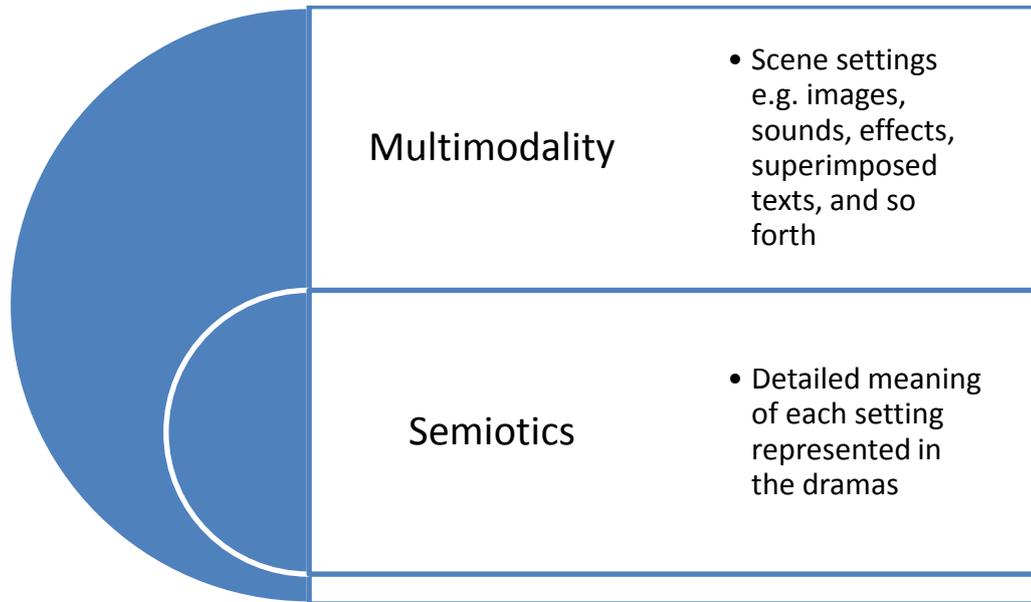
Textual analysis was initially used as a tool in studying the television texts. The elements of Buddhist ideology presented in the dramas were analysed and compared to Buddhist scriptures. This method consisted of two procedures: 1) using content analysis in

categorising data falling into each classified group, and 2) employing textual analysis to interpret television texts in terms not only of verbal language but also the fixed and moving representations shown in the dramas.

Content analysis was the initial stage in analysing qualitative data for this thesis. The key feature of this was to “aim at classifying the content of texts by allocating statements, sentences or words to a system of categories” (Flick, 2015, p. 164). Berg (2009, p. 343) claims that content analysis “can be effective in qualitative analysis”. The use of *objective*, *systematic*, and *reliable* research techniques (Berelson, 1952) played a significant role. The meaning of *objectivity* is identified as “there is transparency in the procedures for assigning the raw material to categories, so that the analyst’s personal biases intrude as little as possible in the process.” *Systematic* means that “the application of the rules is done in a consistent manner so that bias is again suppressed” (Bryman, 2012, p. 284). *Reliability* means that the research outcome is replicable and accurate through repetition of experiments in the same and variable conditions (Silverman, 2011). These components play a crucial role in demonstrating that the content analysis is non-subjective and is based on reliable conventions. According to Silverman (2011, p. 64), who employs content analysis in the field of mass communications, “content analysis is an accepted method of textual investigation”. The key benefit of conducting content analysis is to enable the researcher to classify data and to assume that repetition of content in the dramas signifies a level of importance of that data (Grbich, 2013). For this study, this method was used to explore and categorise the texts by counting the number of references to ghosts, Thai myths, and messages highlighted in episodes, and by calculating the percentage presentation of Buddhist teachings.

In the stage of textual analysis, a theoretical framework of multimodality, an interdisciplinary approach which can understand a process/meaning of media communication and representation, was applied. The key feature of this approach is an explanation of the meaning-making process which people use in everyday life, for example, visual signs, verbal and non-verbal communication, written texts and so forth. These are called ‘semiotic resources’, that is, people can understand the meaning of each process by drawing on their own knowledge (Hodge and Kress, 2014). As such, this concept can provide a framework to show how resources are developed and organised to make meaning. In this study, I employed the concept to analyse how the social beliefs about ghosts associated with Buddhist ideas in the dramas were constructed. The meaning of the media content, which was systematically categorised and classified during the content analysis, is analysed through the concept of Semiotics (as illustrated in Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: The concepts of Multimodal and Semiotics are used at the stage of textual analysis



This thesis used the combination of multimodality and semiotics to analyse and interpret the television texts in detail. According to Larsen (1993), an analysis of media texts refers to not only verbal language but all elements including fixed and moving images, sound, and music. This method of analysis is called ‘multimodal’ and is an approach introduced by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). It is defined as “an analysis of the rules and principles that allows viewers to understand the meaning potential of the relative placement, framing, salience, proximity, colour, saturation, styles of typeface, etc.” (Machin, 2007, p. 7). To analyse the socio-cultural meaning represented in the dramas, this study also draws on Thai culture as an analytical-semiotic frame to interpret and obtain a deeper meaning. This analysis is called ‘social semiotics’ which is defined as “system[s] of meanings that constitute the reality of the culture”, and is suggested by Halliday (1978, p. 123). The principal feature of this is a process of reading or constructing meaning by drawing on social contexts which are “by and large about the how of communication” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 93). Long and Wall (2009) note that social semiotics can answer the why-questions with explanations influenced and constructed through people’s culture and lives. In this study, there are several scenes in the dramas *Ngao* and *NCD* indicating that the meaning of each televisual sequence needs both denotation (i.e. an act of naming something within the profane world, e.g. trees, houses, other objects) and connotation (i.e. an act of understanding something within the sacred world e.g. religions, beliefs, traditions, and cultures) to understand TV texts. This will be discussed further in Chapters Four and Five. Therefore, the use of the combination of multimodality and semiotics is necessary to analyse the television texts in this study.

This study used *purposive sampling* as the sampling strategy for data collection as an appropriate technique that reflected the creation and interpretation of supernatural beliefs associated with Buddhist teachings represented in Thai television dramas; the key theme of this thesis. *Ngao* (2014) and *Nang Cha Da* (2015) were selected for the research samples as they represent a typical of media presentations of Buddhist ideas that function as a tool for shaping attitudes and behaviour in viewers and in promoting traditional Thai culture. The selected samples were chosen as they are particularly popular examples of the genre and have won many awards for reflecting social responsibility in harmony with Thai Buddhism from both state and private organisations. To access the data, the dramas could be watched through the official website <http://drama.bugaboo.tv/>, which is authorised by Bangkok Broadcasting & TV Co. Ltd broadcasting as Channel 7, the official holder of the copyright on the research samples. Furthermore, pictures, dialogues, and visual materials of this thesis were available from Channel 7.

3.2.2 In-depth interviews

The research method of in-depth interviews was suitable for obtaining viewpoints on the use of supernatural beliefs in Buddhist ideas in Thai television. The following text producers and scriptwriters were interviewed:

- The producer of *Ngao*, working at JSL Global Media Co., Ltd.
- The scriptwriter and co-producer of *Ngao*, working at JSL Global Media Co., Ltd.
- The producer of *Nang Cha Da*, working at the Polyplus Entertainment Co., Ltd.
- The scriptwriter of *Nang Cha Da*, working at the Polyplus Entertainment Co., Ltd.

Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 109) suggest that in-depth interviews “are used when seeking information on individual, personal experience from people about a specific issue or topic”. Kvale (2008) notes that interviewees can explain what happens in their lives, examine what they do in real life, and discuss why they do (or do not do) that. Interviewing “allows the interviewee[s] the freedom to talk” about their social worlds in more detail, while the interviewers are “active listening” in order to gain rich individual data (Noaks and Wincup, 2004, p. 80). This method is considered as “a special kind of knowledge-producing conversation” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006, p. 128). Additionally, Buetow (2013) notes that the main source of knowledge is in use of language. Berger and Luckmann (1966, pp. 51-52) claim that language is “essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” and “is the most important sign system of human society”. One of

the many quotations obtained from the in-depth interviews demonstrates that language is an effective medium in understanding TV texts. In Extract 3.1, below, the *Ngao* producer described the reasons why a visual presentation of the *King of Hell* in the drama was presented differently from traditional Thai culture.

Extract 3.1

“There are two reasons for creating the King of Hell character in a way which differs from the original Thai version: 1) to be based on the original novel, and 2) to build a sense of the King of Hell’s modernity. The modern form of the King of Hell can help viewers to understand the story more easily. So his modern black suit has a sense of everyday living of the sort which viewers experience every day. I mean that I try to persuade viewers to believe that the King of Hell exists and lives among humans. So he has a sense of human behaviours, e.g. wearing a modern suit, driving a car, eating food, and so on. However, the core concept of the King of Hell remains in the highlighting of traditional Thai values.”

Regarding the research tools for collecting data from the in-depth interviews with the text producers, semi-structured live interviews with a series of open-ended questions were undertaken. As Kvale (2008, p. 51) points out, this “seeks to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee[s] with the respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon”. This allows the interviewer to understand what are the interviewees’ thoughts on experience, consciousness, meaning, stories, and interpretation through their use of vernacular conversation (Hennink *et al.*, 2011). As Kvale (2008) and Bryman (2012) argue, a series of open-ended questions are a good choice to combine with a semi-structured live interview. The key benefit of using open-ended questions is that it allows the interviewer to ask new questions in response to the interviewee’s replies and enables the interviewee to describe how they feel or think about a selected topic (Hennink *et al.*, 2011). During the interview with the *NCD* scriptwriter, she told me that in the beginning, the drama was almost banned by the Ministry of Culture. This then led to a series of open questions regarding the topic of the ban leading to her response as transcribed in Extract 3.2 below.

Extract 3.2

“At that time, eight episodes of the drama were done. My crew and I were stressed after hearing the bad news. ... In this case, I learnt that the topic of Thai art and culture was a sensitive issue not only for Thai viewers but also for the government. The main reason given for the ban was an issue of devaluing traditional Thai dance costumes. One of the explicit examples was a scene where Rinlanee’s ghost [who was wearing traditional Thai dress] performed a traditional Thai dance on top of a coffin. In Thai culture, this is considered as a serious devaluation of Thai art and culture which my crew and I were unaware of.”

In respect of accessing the producers, they were accessed by way of personal relationships. I contacted ex-colleagues and friends who were working for the TV companies and who had a close relationship with the producers, to invite them to be interviewees for this project. I followed up with an official letter asking for permission for the interviews from their original companies. This letter was provided by my sponsor, Bangkok University. The companies rejected my request because the potential interviewees were no longer employed by them. However, the companies provided me with their phone numbers so that I could contact the interviewees directly.

To collect the data, the interviews took place in Thailand with meetings held in public places. Each of the in-depth interviews ran for between 60 and 90 minutes. Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 12) suggest that an appropriate length of time for interviewing people is “typically last no longer 90 minutes; it is difficult for an interviewer and an interviewee to remain focused longer than this in an intense interview”.

3.2.3 Focus groups

Focus groups were employed as a research tool in addressing how viewers understand the texts and how they interpret and decipher meaning in the texts. This method was a useful tool for collecting data to explore the particular perspective of Thai viewers regarding both denotation and connotation of the supernatural beliefs associated with Buddhist knowledge represented in Thai supernatural television dramas. Bryman (2012, p. 502) argues that the method is an appropriate tool in investigating “what is known as audience reception, how audiences respond to television, radio programmes, films, newspaper article, and so on”. In other words, it is an accepted method for the study of “media audience reception” (Jensen, 1993) and “audience interpretation of cultural and media texts” (Bryman, 2012, p. 502). It can be used to understand what audiences are thinking and how they are interpreting the meaning of texts; as such, it was one of the key features of this method.

There are three major advantages to using focus groups. The first advantage is that this method allows for the establishing of a consensus of the participants’ opinions on a selected topic. Participants, who have had a certain experience, describe their understanding of that experience while others negotiate and reject or accept the opinion (Bryman, 2012). This consensus of discussions and outcomes facilitates a detailed and deeper understanding of the audience’s “decision-making” process (Hennink *et al.*, 2011, p. 159). Valid generalisations can then be made from the outcome of the interviews, what we call “groupthink” (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Barbour (2007) suggests that the consensus arrived at will obviously reflect a sense of group-norms or group-processes. Focus group participants realise that “they share a common experience, and feel that their

views are validated and supported by others” (Gray, 2014, p. 470). As such, the participants’ groupthink on a selected topic may lead to the construction of new ideas or knowledge in everyday life. An example of this idea of ‘groupthink’ is described in Extract 3.3 below. It demonstrates how the process of groupthink affects the participants’ understanding of the Buddhist teaching of ‘letting go’ embodied in *NCD*.

Extract 3.3

- Viewer 1: Rinlanee’s ghost is the main character who contains the key message of this drama. [Other participants nodded their heads up and down to show agreement].*
- Viewer 2: To me, the key theme of this character is a sense of revenge. Rinlanee’s ghost swore revenge on the people who had killed her. The murderers who killed Rinlanee were a group of her close friends. If she had not killed anyone, she would be happy and lived with her boyfriend.*
- Viewer 3: It is impossible in everyday life. I mean you will definitely get angry if someone hurts or kills you. This is the reason why the ghost returned to haunt and kill the murderers. That makes sense to me but she did not learn the Buddhist concept of ‘letting go’. If she learnt and followed the dharma, she might not get karmic punishments.*
- Viewer 4: Umm. I think she did know the teaching because there were many scenes where the monk character taught her about it. However, she chose to ignore it because she had a strongly held violent passion.*
- Viewer 5: At the end of this drama, it is clear to me that the ghost cannot live with her boyfriend because she needs to redeem her sin.*
- Viewer 6: I think we have a conclusion for you [i.e. the interviewer].*
- Interviewer: Can anyone tell me the key message of this drama?*
- Viewer 6: Yes, I can. The point of this drama is the Buddhist concept of ‘letting go’. The drama tries to teach us about ignoring any sense of revenge, anger, or other misbehaviour by emphasising the concept. The misbehaviour leads to social problems, which we have to face in everyday life. In the drama, I learnt that Rinlanee’s ghost can no longer return to her human form even though the ghost has killed all of the murderers. Thus, the best way is an understanding of the Buddhist concept to stop the feeling of anger. Does it make sense?*

The second advantage of using focus groups is to “reach parts that other methods cannot reach – revealing dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by the more conventional one-to-one interview or questionnaire”, especially an understanding of non-verbal language, such as gestures, smiles, and frowns (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 107 cited in Hennink *et al.*, 2011, p. 159). Likewise, Barbour (2007); Bryman (2012); Gray (2014) suggest that non-verbal responses, such as nodding, smiling or being silent, can provide opportunities for clarification of participant’s views. This was demonstrated during the

focus group interviews in this study when the participants were discussing beliefs in the Spirit House, a small shrine to guardian spirits. One of the participants tried to explain the detailed differences between two kinds of Spirit Houses, the *San Phra Phum* and the *San Puya*, by using her finger to point towards the support poles of the Spirit House in front of the meeting room (shown in Figure 3.2). She stated that:

“[She raised her fingers toward the shrine of San Phra Phum, located outside the meeting room]. If you guys have not recalled them, you can see, on your left-hand side, the shrine with one support pole that it is called the San Phra Phum. The shrine beside that one is San Chao Thi that has four support poles. This is a point for the categorisation”.

Figure 3.2: *San Phra Phum* (on the left-hand side) and *San Puya* (on the right-hand side)



Finally, the third advantage is “the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meaning around it” (Bryman, 2012, p. 502). That is, there is knowledge which develops during the interviews through interaction between respondents, especially new knowledge, prediction or an explanation of something which is defined within a group discussion (Bryman, 2012). In this study, one of the conversations between the participants demonstrates how a new idea or interpretation is established. The Extract 3.4 below shows how the respondents develop a new understanding of the Monk character in the drama *Nang Cha Da*.

Extract 3.4

Viewer 1: The monk is not a ghost-hunter. However, Kong [the name of the monk in the drama] is a religious teacher who explains Buddhist concepts.

Viewer 2: At the end, you can see that Rinlanee's ghost redeems her sin, while Kong explains why the ghost deserves the karmic punishments and suggests a solution based on the Buddhist teaching of 'letting go'.

Viewer 3: I think so. The new generation of the dramas give the viewers not only entertainment but also the radical facts.

For the research samples, the focus group respondents were divided into four groups, each consisting of six people. As Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 152) states, "a group of six participants may be sufficient when participants are likely to have significant knowledge or experience on the research topic, or when discussing complex or controversial topics". Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggest that the data obtained from the interviews may lead to a lack of detailed information if there are too many participants so they recommend no more than eight participants. Morgan (1998) recommends smaller numbers of participants in a focus group interview because the participants are likely to have a lot to say on the research topic. Morgan (1998, p. 75) adds that "[a] smaller group when topics are controversial or complex and when gleaning participants' personal accounts is a major goal". Likewise, a smaller group of between three to five interviewees "ran more smoothly than larger group interviews" (Peek and Fothergill, 2009, p. 37).

Regarding the focus group participants, Litosseliti (2003) notes that an effective way of selecting the participants is not only to look for diversity but also for common characteristics and familiarity with the research topic. This study determined that the appropriate criteria for recruiting participants included:

- People who hold Thai nationality and live in Thailand.
- People who have practised Theravada Buddhism and who used to attend Buddhist rites in Thailand.
- People who are over the age of 18.
- People who have watched one or both of the selected dramas - *Ngao* and *Nang Cha Da*.

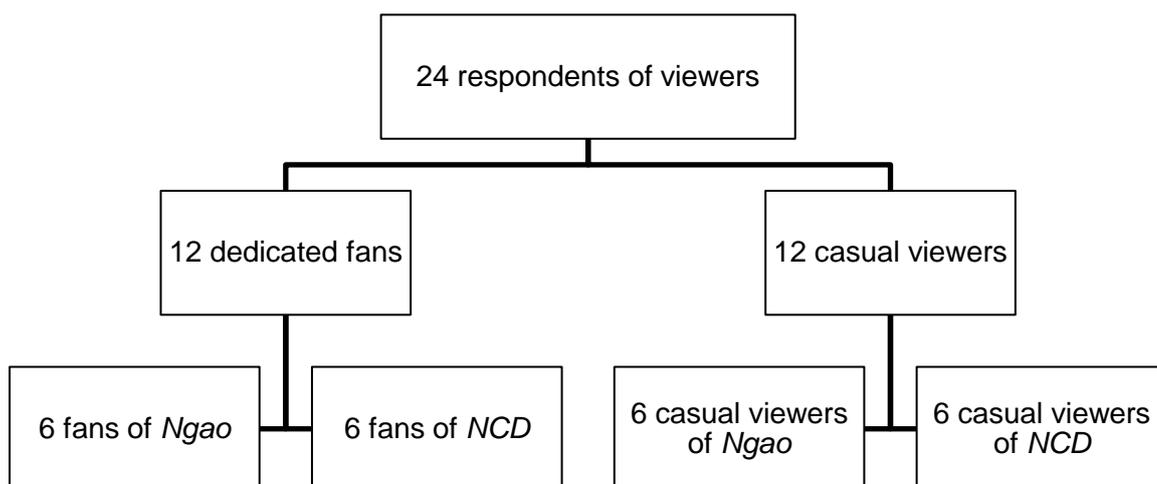
These criteria were established to understand cultural meanings represented in Thai supernatural television dramas. Thai nationality was important as this indicated the participants had learnt Thai culture and Buddhism at school, at home, or in their local community. As the belief in ghosts shown in the dramas requires socio-cultural knowledge

to read the texts, the research objectives required that participants be able to draw on their own cultural context to discuss the selected topics. Participants had to have practiced Theravada Buddhism and attended Thai Buddhist ceremonies so that they could understand the Buddhist aspects of the texts. Participants had to be over the age of 18 to allow for a sense of social maturity and to have had experience of Buddhist teachings and Thai myths represented in the dramas. Lastly, participants in this study had to have watched at least one of the dramas under discussion.

The chosen participants for this study were twenty-four Thais divided into two main groups:

- Twelve people who were dedicated fans – respondents who had intentionally watched all episodes of the dramas *Ngao* (6 people) and/or *NCD* (6 people).
- Twelve people who were casual viewers – respondents who had only watched some episodes of *Ngao* (6 people) and/or *NCD* (6 people).

Figure 3.3: The participants in the focus group interviews of Thai television viewers in this project



Focus group participants were recruited through online advertising on social media networks, targeted web-boards, and web-forums. One of the benefits of using online advertising was the ability to target suitable participants by using social networks dedicated to Thai television dramas, specifically *Ngao* and *NCD*. The list of social networks and web-forums used was as follows:

- A Facebook group titled 'แฟนละครช่อง 7', a group that largely talks about television dramas produced by Channel 7.

- A web-board/comment section of *Bugaboo.tv*, a website for watching the two dramas - <http://www.bugaboo.tv/>.
- A web-board on pantip.com called ‘ละครเรื่องเงา ช่อง 7 สี’, an online community talking about *Ngao* - [https://pantip.com/tag/%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%B2_\(%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A3\)](https://pantip.com/tag/%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%B2_(%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A3)).
- A web-board on pantip.com called ‘ละครเรื่องนางชฎา ช่อง 7 สี’, an online community talking about *Nang Cha Da* - [https://pantip.com/tag/%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%8E%E0%B8%B2_\(%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A3\)](https://pantip.com/tag/%E0%B8%99%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%87%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%8E%E0%B8%B2_(%E0%B8%A5%E0%B8%B0%E0%B8%84%E0%B8%A3)).

In addition to this recruitment, I targeted audiences via my personal Facebook page. I also used the technique of *snowball sampling* to find more participants by asking sampled participants to suggest and recommend other people they knew who fitted the criteria outlined in the previous section. Some respondents were contacted through my personal network of friends and mutual acquaintances. Once the recruitment was completed, details of the focus groups meetings were circulated through personal emails and Facebook messages.

To conduct the focus group interviews efficiently, the role and characteristics of the focus group moderator are very important. Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 155) state that “the moderator is the key person who conducts the group discussion”. The moderator plays the role of leader to facilitate the natural flow of debate. At the same time, they must not dominate the discussion (Barbour, 2007). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990); Hennink (2007); Bryman (2012) note that the three characteristics of a good moderator are: 1) to ensure that the discussion remains focussed around the central research issues and that interesting points are followed up; 2) to facilitate the flow of discussion and group interaction or debate; and 3) to avoid or create conflict when appropriate. Silverman (2004, p. 179) states that “obtaining high-quality focus group data depends, at least, upon an effective moderator”. More importantly, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990); Barbour (2007) emphasise that the moderator should clearly understand the questions and socio-cultural contexts or traditional backgrounds which are relevant to the topic of the focus group. As such, the requirements and characteristics of a good moderator for this study included three distinct kinds of knowledge: 1) that they were practising Theravada Buddhism and clearly understood Buddhist teachings, rituals, and myths, to ensure that suitable questions, follow-up questions, and consensus of participants’ opinions were

asked, understood and interpreted; 2) that they had knowledge of social beliefs and myths around ghosts and spirits in Thai contexts and the Thai traditional-historical background, such as the myths about the *King of Hell*, black magic, sacred objects, guardian spirits, and so on; and 3) that they had a detailed knowledge of the contents of the dramas because the moderator had to be able to recognise any scenes, characters, or quotations mentioned by the participants. I took responsibility to act as the moderator as I met all these requirements.

A benefit of using a focus group moderator is that it avoids sessions degenerating into 'slanging matches' and to reconcile differing perspectives when participants are disagreeing and arguing with each other (Barbour, 2007). Additionally, Frey and Fontana (1993) assert that a moderator plays an important role in setting participants off against each other and in exploring their differing views. Rather than viewing disagreement as a problem, Barbour (2007, p. 81) suggests that a heated debate is advantageous as an analytic resource for probing and inviting participants "to theorize as to why they hold such different views". In my experience as the moderator facilitating the focus group of *Ngao* fans, a conflict situation arose between participants over the topic of Buddhism in Thailand. The question, what do you think about the situation of Buddhism in Thai daily life and Thai TV dramas, was asked during the interview. The majority of the participants responded that Buddhist monks are good representatives of Buddhism and are respected by ordinary Thai people. However, one participant held an opposing view and criticised monks as "traitors to Buddhism in Thailand". A heated debate resulted as set out in Extract 3.5 below.

Extract 3.5

Viewer 1: I do not think so. I would say that Buddhism in Thailand has been devalued because of monks' misbehaviour. As you can see, there have been many news reports regarding inappropriate behaviour by monks, e.g. involvement with sexual abuse, financial impropriety, gambling, and other immoral activities. ... To me, I think monks are traitors to Buddhism in Thailand and I have no reason to trust in them.

Viewer 2: I totally disagree with your idea. You cannot speak like that. Although the news is a source of the truth, it does not mean that every monk in Thailand is immoral and dishonest.

Viewer 3: I also would argue that his accusation is not realistic. The majority of Buddhist monks living in Thailand are not like that.

Viewer 1: I have just spoken the truth but you cannot accept that.

Interviewer: Okay, calm down guys. Guys please. Be patient with me. Should we find out what an appropriate element of being a Buddhist monk is?

Silverman (2004) suggests that an efficient tool for moderating focus groups is the ability to raise the right questions through research tools. The materials used for this fieldwork were of two types: 1) a document containing a list of questions, and 2) video clips extracted from the dramas. The guide to *open-ended interviews* is a list of questions which can obtain “rich data” from discussions with the participants (Silverman, 2006, p. 10). Characteristics of the open questions are: “open, short and simple, and include one question at a time” (Hennink *et al.*, 2011, p. 118). The main advantage of these questions are that they allow participants to describe their stories, experience, and provide information about a specific topic in detail (Hennink *et al.*, 2011; Bryman, 2012). Moreover, Litosseliti (2003) suggests that open questions are a more appropriate tool for focus group interviews than closed questions as they provide participants with a chance to freely express their opinions, feelings, emotions, and knowledge. Additionally, participants are not dominated or directed by the questions. In my experience of moderating focus group interviews, I tried to avoid suggesting answers and allowed the participants to spell out their thoughts and feelings. The transcription in Extract 3.6 below demonstrates the use of open questions to allow the participant to freely express their own feelings.

Extract 3.6

Interviewer: Can you tell me or to define your expectations of Thai supernatural television dramas in the future?

Viewer 1: I expect to see a development of the genre, especially the dramas which are based on Buddhist tales or on stories depicted in wallpaper-paintings in Thai Buddhist temples, for example. These days, the dramas have turned the contents into modern fictional representations. ... As we are Thais, in my view, we should not overlook the original stories.

Video clips extracted from the dramas were employed to help the participants recognise characters from the dramas, including ghosts, monks, heroes, villains, and so on. In addition, they were used to remind the participants of scenes featuring Buddhist teachings and supernatural beliefs.

The focus groups for this thesis were conducted in Thailand; rooms in public areas like libraries, local community centres, and universities, were used as meeting places. Each focus group session took between 90 and 120 minutes, as Hennink *et al.* (2011) suggest that 90 minutes are needed to make participants feel comfortable enough to express their views. The focus group sessions were designed to have three parts. For the first 10 minutes, I introduced myself, explained the objectives of this project, and asked participants to fill in and complete an informed consent form which explained conditions of the interviews and of data collected. Importantly, I informed them that any sensitive personal information would remain anonymous and confirmed that the project had been

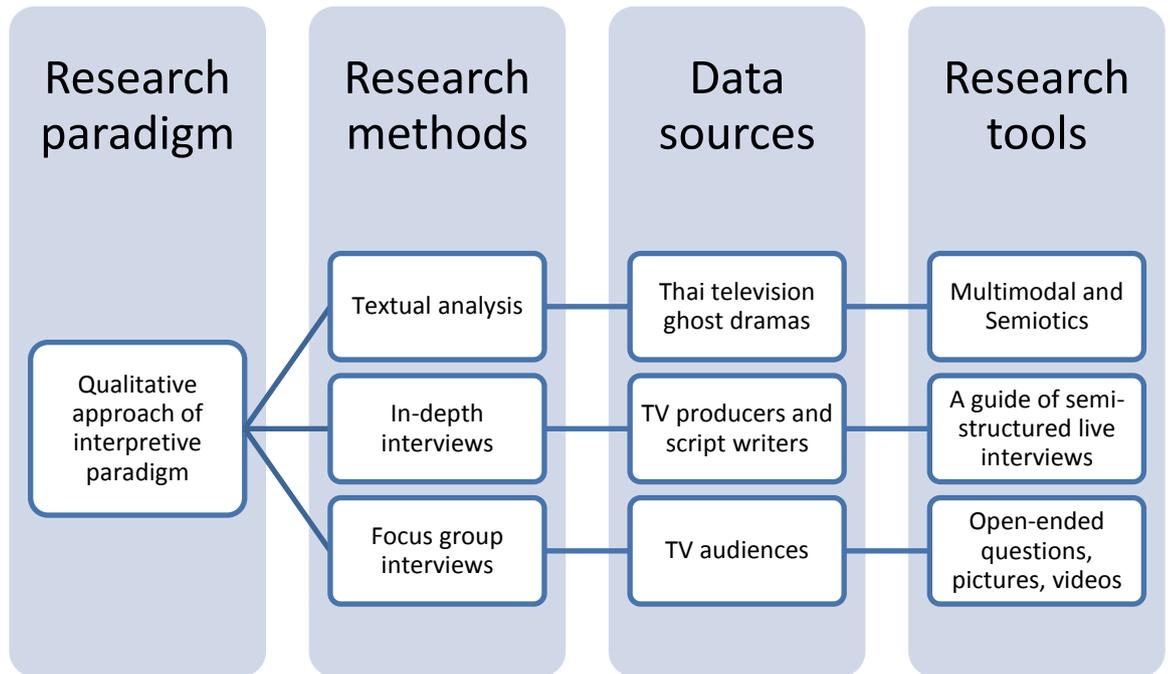
approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, Design, and Social Science at Northumbria University. At this stage, the video extracts from the dramas were shown in order to give the participants an overview of these dramas. When the participants had watched the video clips, video and voice recording of the focus group began. For the second section (40 minutes), I asked participants to introduce themselves and detail their cultural background regarding Buddhism, Thai culture, and knowledge of myths about ghosts and spirits. The main aim of this section was to encourage participants to share their thoughts about social beliefs such as ghosts, guardian spirits, the *King of Hell*, the idea of *Hell*, signs of ghost coming, and so forth, represented in the dramas, together with their perspective on how to read and interpret the texts through their cultural background. In the final section (40 minutes), Buddhist knowledge obtained from the dramas was highlighted and the impact on the attitudes and behaviour of viewers after they had watched the dramas was investigated. At the end of the session, each participant received a voucher for transport for attending the interview worth £20.

For storing and analysing data, I used the software package *NVivo* which helped to organise, structure, and memorise the qualitative data including transcriptions, notes, pictures, and voice and video records, within a systematic structure. The function of 'Node Classifications' is a key feature for categorising and analysing the data. When the data was organised and stored with the software, a process of analysing the data and making notes began. Afterwards, the structured data was reported in the form of the analysis in chapters Four, Five, and Six that follow. For added security, information extracted from the TV producers, TV viewers, and video sources from Channel 7 were encrypted and saved in secured accounts and folders. This project has always followed the guidance for ethical conduct of research and governance policies provided by Northumbria University.

Conclusion

This project aims to answer the research questions on the what, how and why of media construction and meaning of supernatural beliefs and Buddhist ideas represented in the genre of Thai supernatural television. The qualitative research approach is considered as the most important method in this research. A qualitative-interpretive paradigm is the key approach in analysing data resulting from textual analysis and in-depth and focus group interviews.

Figure 3.4: the visual presentation of research designs is employed in this project



The research method of textual analysis took account of Buddhist ideological messages represented in the dramas through television tropes. The theoretical framework of multimodality was used in examining meaning in several areas, including, verbal language, kinetic gestures, camera movements, and superimposed texts. The processes of media production and consumption of the texts were investigated. Semiotics played a significant role in interpreting meaning in the dramas and in how the contents of Thai television ghost dramas are in line with Buddhist teachings. The cooperation of multimodality and semiotics was a tool for discovering and interpreting constructed media meanings represented in Thai supernatural ghost dramas.

The in-depth interviews were used to examine the processes of producing the dramas by interviewing both the producers and the scriptwriters. The interviews helped towards an understanding of ‘why the key contents in the dramas tried to highlight Buddhist ideology’, and ‘what impulses caused TV producers to embed Buddhist ideas into the dramas. The processes of the media construction were investigated through semi-structured live interviews. The advantage of using this tool was the chance to talk directly with the interviewees and to follow-up directly on their replies. This tool provided the interviewees an opportunity to explain their views in the context of both their Buddhist background and childhood experiences in Thai society.

The focus groups were an appropriate method to examine audience opinions on the interpretation of media content in Thai TV dramas. Using this method allowed me to locate an idea of ‘groupthink’ to understand the issues around audiences’ decision-making

regarding reading and interpreting the television texts. Moreover, the research tools of open-ended questions and video clips were a useful tool for extracting participants' thoughts, stories, feelings, and experience. Thus, the data gained from audiences' perspectives was employed as a tool in analysing their interpretations of Buddhist teachings presented in the dramas and the impact of the dramas on their attitudes and behaviour.

Chapter Four: Ghosts and Mediums in Thai Television Dramas

This chapter will set out the research findings from the textual analysis of the representation of supernatural beliefs in two television dramas: *Nang Cha Da (NCD)* (2015) and *Ngao* (2014). It will examine the types of ghosts and mediums that are represented in the dramas, and how and why they connect with Buddhist ideas. The theories of Social Construction of Reality and Symbolic Universe invented by Berger and Luckmann (1966) will be used to examine how Thai beliefs in ghosts and mediums are represented through the televisual constructions. The Postmodernism of Jameson (1984) will be used to analyse how the television dramas serve a distinctive religious function by promoting Buddhist ideas through the roles of various characters, in particular, ghosts, Buddhist monks, and shamans, and symbolical features. Semiotics, introduced by Peirce (1977), and Myth, developed by Barthes (1993), will be employed as a framework to understand the semiotic resources represented in the dramas.

Television drama programmes, known as '*lakawn*', were selected as the research samples for this study because they are the most popular form of entertainment in Thailand.

"The most popular programming on Thai television is the screenplay genre known as *lakawn*." (Hoare, 2004, p. 180).

To explore the reason why the programmes are the most popular, Hoare demonstrates that the *lakawn* has a long tradition in Thailand dating back to the eighteenth century. They have developed from traditional art forms, including: *Khon*, a classical masked dance based on the Indian *Ramayana*; *Likay*, a live performance with comic and farcical elements; and *lakawn nai/nawk*, a classical dance-drama performance from the inner (court) and outer (popular) theatres. The *lakawn* is similar to a western soap opera in that one storyline can run for months. The key feature of the programme is a representation of narrative themes, typically involving forbidden love, infidelity, betrayal, ghosts, and more. According to national surveys, Thai television dramas remain the most popular shows among Thai audiences (Rupkhamdi *et al.*, 2013). For this reason, this genre of television drama was selected as a suitable source for examining beliefs in ghosts and mediums in Thailand.

Ngao and *NCD* were chosen as the research samples of this study because they are typical examples of the representation of Thai supernatural beliefs and Buddhist teachings, and were highly rated in the years 2014 and 2015. *Ngao* originated in a novel by *Wimon Chiamcharoen* in 1967, and was broadcast in the years 1982, 1987, 2000, and

2014. According to ThaiDramaRating (2015b), the drama gained a high rating of 11.5. As Dailynews (2014) and Thairath (2014b) both noted, *Ngao* provided not only entertainment for Thai audiences but also moral teachings following Buddhist principles that play a role in cultivating the viewers. In the case of *NCD*, the story was based on a ghost novel authored by Pakinia Kasirak in 2008 and was the prime-time drama broadcast on Channel 7 from 25 March to 20 May 2015. The key feature of this drama was the combination of a vengeful ghost (Rinlanee's ghost) and the Buddhist teaching of '*letting go*'. *NCD* had the highest rating, a score of 14.4, of all dramas broadcast that year (ThaiDramaRating, 2015a).

For the textual analysis, these dramas were viewed repeatedly and in detail. Scenes were transcribed and a thematic categorisation was applied to the notes to allow the researcher to achieve an understanding of the material through the semiotic resources which consisted not only of visual but also of audio texts. This chapter is divided into two sections: 1) the types of ghosts represented in Thai television dramas; and 2) the types of mediums represented in Thai television dramas.

4.1 Types of ghosts represented in Thai television dramas

Thai supernatural television dramas play a central role in circulating Buddhist teachings in Thailand in line with the perspectives of the Social Construction of Reality introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1966). That is, the dramas use the belief in ghosts to serve a religious function as a medium for reinforcing Buddhist teaching through popular entertainment. As Berger and Luckmann state, reality is jointly constructed through shared understanding and needs a 'vehicle' to move from person to person which is the system of linguistic signs or language.

"Language provides the fundamental superimposition of logic on the objectivated social world. The edifice of legitimations is built upon language and use language as its principle instrumentality." (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 82)

In the same way, the dramas are employed as a tool for transferring Buddhist ideas to the audience through television tropes, that is, the use of dramatic, visual, or aural conventions to represent supernatural beings. This section will demonstrate that the ghost characters featured in the dramas are not just for entertainment but also embody Buddhist teachings.

The results of the analysis illustrates that there are four types of ghost represented in the dramas *NCD* and *Ngao*: 1) ghosts mentioned in Buddhist scripture; 2) vengeful ghosts; 3) slave ghosts; and 4) guardian spirits.

Figure 4.1: Types of ghosts represented in *NCD* and *Ngao*

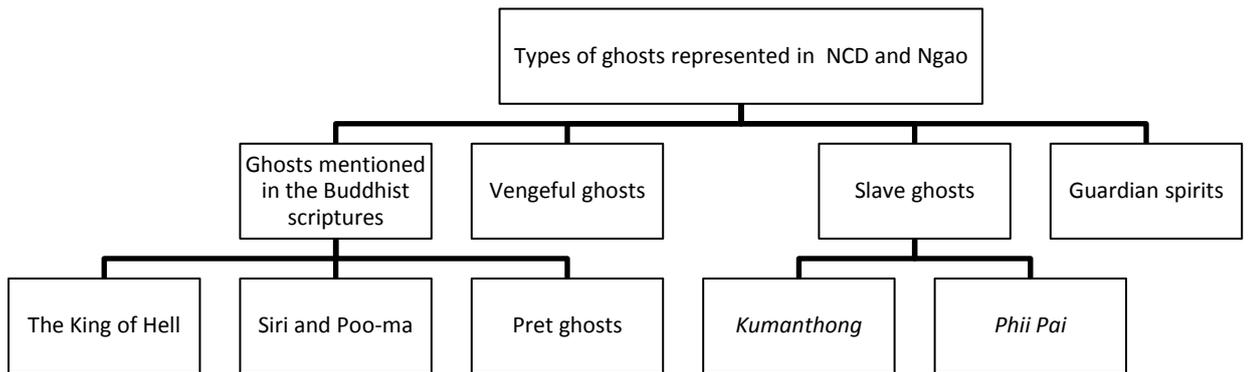
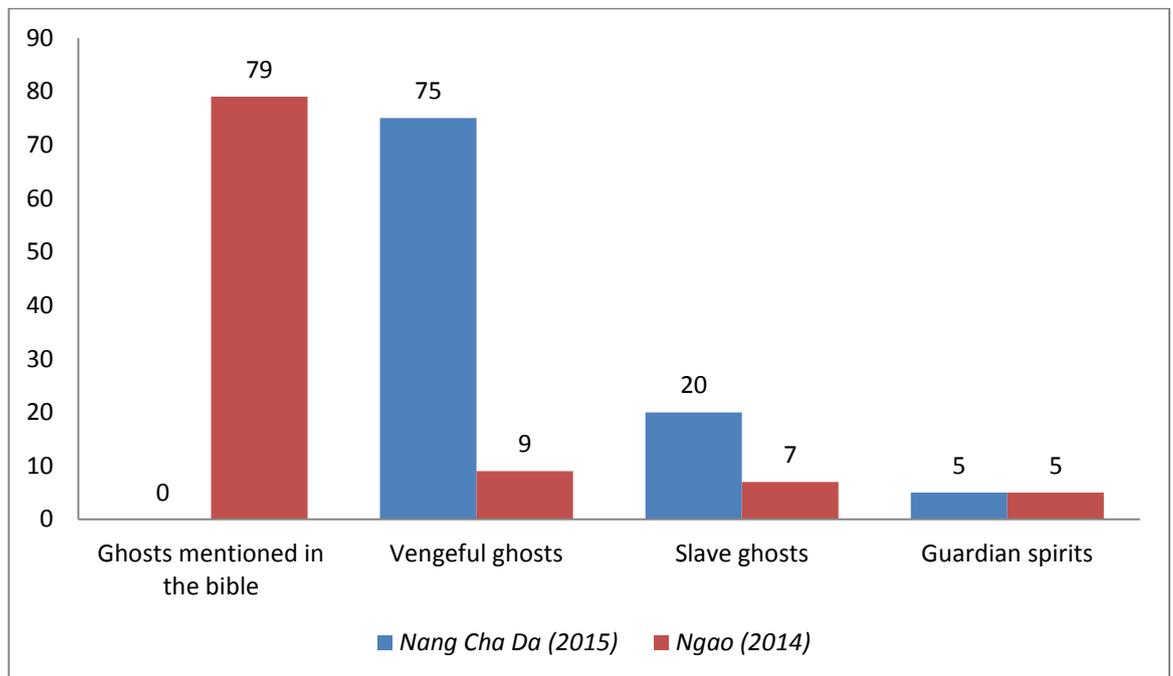


Figure 4.2: The percentage of ghosts of each type appearing in the *NCD* and *Ngao*



As shown in Figure 4.2, the vengeful ghosts appearing in *NCD* and the ghosts mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures appearing in *Ngao* are the most commonly represented. According to Grbich (2013), as discussed in Chapter Three, the repetition of content signifies its level of importance; therefore, the King of Hell and Rinlanee’s ghost are the main focus of this analysis. The other types of ghosts and spirits appearing in more minor roles are also discussed.

4.1.1 The ghosts mentioned in Buddhist Scripture

The results of the analysis show that ghosts mentioned in Buddhist scripture only appear in *Ngao*. They are: 1) the King of Hell, a spirit who has the authority to make karmic judgments in Hell; 2) Siri and Poo-Ma, the jailers of Hell who are responsible for bringing the spirits of the deceased before the karmic court; and 3) Pret ghosts, tall ghosts with tiny mouths, suffering from starvation as punishment for their evil karma.

4.1.1.1 The King of Hell

The King of Hell in the drama plays a significant role in communicating Buddhist teaching, in particular, the *Karmic Law*, to the audience. This teaching is not new but is an integral and important part of Buddhist Thai society. In Thai culture, the King of Hell is known as '*Phra Ya Matchurat*' (Tidbits, 2013). The term '*Phra Ya*', according to Office of the Royal Society (2016b), means a king of a land or a leader. The term '*Matchurat*' means God of Death and indicates his power in the afterlife, the most important aspect of which is making judgements about the karmic punishments for evil doers. Additionally, he is known by scholars as the Lord of Justice, Lord of the Underworld, Keeper of the Dead, Yom-Phra-Baan, and Yama (Murphy, 2001). In a description of Phra Malai's visit to the hell of thieves, the key duty of Yama is described as:

"The soul of a deceased person will first of all meet Yama, the Lord of Justice, who presides over the Buddhist hells. Yama will decide about the reincarnation of that person according to their karma, which is the result of their actions of body, speech, and mind during their previous existence. Those who have offended the Buddhist laws will have to reside in one of the Buddhist hells for a definite length of them until their karma has exhausted its cumulate effect before they can be reborn on earth or, eventually, in heaven." (Igunma, 2017, p. 71).

The King of Hell's character in *Ngao* is represented as having a similar role. He is cast not only as a judge in the karmic court in Hell but also as a protagonist who plays a prominent role in teaching the *Karmic Law* through his many scenes in the drama. The first episode, for example, presents a scene of the karmic judgement in Hell. Hell's jailer, Siri, reports on the good and evil karma of a soul (the soul's karma being based on their conduct when they were alive) to the King of Hell so that he can sit in judgement on the soul.

Figure 4.3: A scene of karmic judgement in Hell as represented in *Ngao*



The King of Hell: *Siri, can you report his karma?*

Hell's Jailer: *He behaved very badly. He broke many laws, including robbing a bank, killing people, and selling illegal drugs. Finally, he killed himself to escape a human court.*

The King of Hell: *Evil soul, you thought that you could escape punishment in the human court by committing suicide. Although you could run away from a punishment in the human world, you cannot get away from the karmic law in Hell. Definitely, everything you did in the previous life will be repaid to you.*

The drama also attempts to persuade its audience to do good things through the example of rectitude in the leading character Mr Watsawat, the human form of the King of Hell. He personifies the Thai belief that good things will happen to those who do good things. *Ngao* reflects this idea that the King of Hell rewards those who behave well. An example of this is in his rewarding Ying, the female character who is a symbol of goodness in the show and a contrast to the many characters who symbolise badness. When she dies from illness, he sends her soul to Heaven after this conversation:

Ying: *Hi, Mr Watsawat. I haven't seen you for many years. You don't look older at all. Am... Am [sound of a cough due to illness] However, I've not been well, and sorry for my cough.*

Watsawat: *Yes, I know you are sick. You will get better and have a rest soon.*

Ying: *Mr. Watsawat, who are you? [she looks at him with startled eyes]*

Watsawat: *I am a witness to the good karma that you did. I am waiting to send you to live in a good place. It is nearly that time for you. I*

would like to ask you to think about the good deeds that you have done.

This demonstrates how the representation of the King of Hell is connected to and expressive of Buddhist teaching. In contrast, as discussed in Chapter Two, many Western supernatural television programmes are no more than postmodern pastiches. They combine some Christian symbols with storylines of supernatural beings without any explicit emphasis on the core Christian dogma (Bird, 2009; Engstrom and Valenzano, 2014). This corresponds to the view of Jameson (1984, p. 56) that “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally”. In other words, postmodern media products are a combination of aesthetic and financial productions without ideology or meaning beyond their contents, what Jameson calls ‘*depthlessness*’. In this example, this is not the case. Although the King of Hell is part of a commercial product and influenced by both Thai and Western ideas, he still engages directly with a distinctive Buddhist ideology. As such, while in terms of his physical characteristics and particular duties, which will be discussed below, the King of Hell has been constructed at a surface level as a postmodern pastiche, there is a traditional Thai Buddhist form underlying the character. In short, this character’s most important feature is that he underlines the idea of the *Karmic Law*.

1) Physical characteristics

The following pictures depict differences in the physical appearance of the King of Hell in Buddhist tales, Buddhist temples, and *Ngao*.

Figure 4.4: A visual representation of the King of Hell from Buddhist scripture (Tidbits, 2013)



Figure 4.5: A statue of the King of Hell located in the Buddhist temple *Wat Tha Soong*, *Uthai Thani* province (Watveerachote, 2015)



Figure 4.6: The physical appearance of the King of Hell in *Ngao*



As seen in Figure 4.6, the physical appearance of the King of Hell or Yama in *Ngao* is very different from the traditional features of Yama illustrated in the Buddhist scriptures (Figure 4.4) and Buddhist temples (Figure 4.5). However, the key characteristics of the King of Hell in the drama are in line with the representation in the Buddhist scriptures; he is the judge in the karmic court in Hell and an observer investigating human behaviour in relation to both good and bad karma. According to Raponsan (2010), the Yama has an imposing manner and red skin colour. He always dresses in traditional Thai clothing, rides a buffalo, and holds a holy noose in his right hand and a holy sceptre in his left hand. These items are weapons for arresting the evil ghosts to be judged in his karmic court in Hell. He functions as a karmic judge who decides on the punishment of evil spirits. In *Ngao*, the visual characteristics of the King of Hell are very different from those in the Buddhist tales. Notable differences include: 1) the use of black and white costumes to signify good and evil, 2) that he does not use holy objects, 3) the representation of him as having horns, and 4) the use of flames spreading across his face.

Although the King of Hell dresses in a Western manner similar to Dracula, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, rather than in a traditional Thai manner, the alternation of his suit between black and white reflects some aspects of Buddhist ideology in that it denotes the opposing forces of good and evil. The detailed meaning behind the text is explored and interpreted through the concept of Myth suggested by Barthes (1993, p. 113) who states that myth is “a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second”. In other words, myth is a sign or message that generates meaning beyond its literal meaning based on the cultural constructs within a society. In this sense, the meaning of the King of Hell’s clothes can be considered as a signifier that refers to the

Karmic Law. The meaning of the virtue and evil shown through the opposing colours of his suit is illustrated in the two different situations he appears in. He always dresses in black when he meets bad people or spirits and dresses in white when he meets good people or spirits. The black colour of the suit is a symbol of evil karma; so evil doers always meet the King of Hell when he is wearing black, for example, when in the karmic court. Conversely, as the white suit refers to good karma, the virtuous always see him dressed in a white suit. This way of meaning-making through the black and white colour refers to the teaching of the *Karmic Law* and the belief that '*what goes around comes around*'. This reading was confirmed in an interview with Ruthtapong Tanapat (the actor who played the King of Hell in *Ngao*) for the television programme *Sen-Tang-Ban-Terng* on Channel 7, when he said that:

"To represent the concept of the Karmic Law, Mr Watsawat dresses in a black suit to meet the bad people and evil souls. ... There are a few scenes where he meets good people. When he meets good people such as the leading character, he always dresses in a white suit." (Channel 7, 2014a)

Figure 4.7: A scene where the King of Hell dressed in black meets bad people



Figure 4.8: A scene where the King of Hell dressed in white meets a good person



Additionally, *Ngao* adopts a new approach to the King of Hell's weapons, using the teaching of Buddhist principles as a weapon rather than relying on traditional holy objects. The television show does not make use of old-fashioned symbols such as the noose, the sceptre, and the buffalo that appear in traditional Buddhist tales. Instead, it presents scenes in which the King of Hell uses Buddhist teachings as a weapon to teach and cultivate the evil ghosts rather than using actual holy objects to harm them. In the eleventh episode, for example, the King of Hell explains the Buddhist teaching of *forgiveness* as a way of controlling Eak's ghost. When the ghost attempts to kill a female character, Chalinee, the King of Hell explains the karmic results of killing people to the ghost. His lesson on morality rather than any physical force causes the ghost to stop trying to kill

Chalinee. This demonstrates the drama's attempt to reconstruct the King of Hell as a benevolent character and create a more peaceful representation of him.

The show introduces new features in its representation of the King of Hell, including horns, signifying his great power, and his use of the Buddhist punishment by fire. It is possible that this shows the influence of older media products on popular imagery. The King of Hell had been represented with horns and a crown in earlier Thai dramas as shown below in figures 4.9 – 4.11.

Figure 4.9: The King of Hell in the drama *Piphop Matchurat* in the 1960s (Sailom, 2007)



Figure 4.10: The King of Hell in the drama *Piphop Phrayayom* from the 1990s (Thai Classic Movie, 2015)



Figure 4.11: The King of Hell in the drama *Yommaban Chao Kha* from 2013-2014 (Sanook, 2013)



In this sense, *Ngao* creates a new feature for the King of Hell which is different from previous representations – the crown has gone and the horns are now a part of the King of Hell's head. The reason for this may be to signify the power of the King of Hell as he has the greatest power of judgement in the karmic court. The horns together with the flame spreading around the King of Hell's face, as shown in the following figure, is a typical feature of the King of Hell in this drama.

Figure 4.12: The King of Hell showing his horns and with flames spreading around his face



The representation of fire spreading around the face is a reference to *Fai NaRok*, the Buddhist punishment by fire, represented in accordance with the Buddhist Scripture *Phra Suttantapidok*. The punishment by fire in the Buddhist Hell is described as:

“[517] When the front door of Hell is opened, animals [i.e. the spirits of deceased people] quickly run towards the door. They are punished by fire. Their skins, bodies, organs are burnt.” (Punyanuphap, 2003)

Nevertheless, there are scenes in *Ngao* showing punishment by fire that are different from traditional tales. For instance, in the first episode, as soon as the karmic judgement is made, the body of the evil spirit is punished and burnt by fire blown from the King of Hell’s mouth (Figure 4.13). The repetition of this scene in the drama signifies that the sinful spirits will always end up suffering punishments because of their sins. The fire is, therefore, a symbol of the retribution that sinners deserve.

Figure 4.13: Stills from a scene showing the karmic punishment by fire



There are other scenes representing different methods of karmic punishment in line with Buddhist scriptures. For example, sinners are shown tormented by being stabbed with a long spear, being put into a boiling pan of water (called *Nam Kra Tha Thong Dang*), or being chained and burnt with fire at very high temperatures. This demonstrates that although the karmic punishments have been represented in imaginative modernised forms, traditional Buddhist ideas remain at the core of the drama.

2) Professional duties

Ngao presents a new role for the King of Hell through his additional duty of having to seek a person to replace him as King of Hell after his retirement. The requirement for him to find a person to carry on the role of King of Hell in the drama denotes the idea that *“the law of karma will never the end”* but will continue under the eye of a new King of Hell. Mr Watsawat (the current King of Hell) needs to retire. Therefore, he must find an appropriate person, someone who balances good karma and bad karma, to be the next King of Hell. Based on my exploration of the Buddhist texts, this condition is not mentioned in scripture. The representation of the King of Hell’s retirement and replacement in the drama is therefore fictional. This seems to be a device by which the drama generates the meaning and sense of the *Karmic Law*; that Hell as a place for karmic punishments will exist eternally, and that the karmic surveillance will never end. Although the duty in seeking for the next King of Hell appears as a postmodern pastiche, it still contains a Buddhist message.

Nonetheless, there are scenes in which the mental characteristics of the King of Hell involve a postmodern technique of collage. As Jameson (1984, p. 75) points out, the key concept of the collage provides for a form of texts showing “differentiation rather than unification” along with a presentation of the idea of meaninglessness. Connor (1997) suggests that the technique can be represented as a pastiche of montages, consisting of many separate items pasted into a work of art. The King of Hell in this sense is represented as a combination of the key characteristics of Yama from scripture and human emotions, in particular, romantic love. This is a very different character from the traditional Buddhist representation. *Ngao* presents the King of Hell’s romantic feelings of love and care for Kwan, a female character who is symbolic of goodness. His desire to love and be loved in return by Kwan after his retirement from the position of King of Hell is a recurring theme in the drama. A love song is used as a leitmotiv during scenes where the character meets Kwan. The lyrics of the song include:

“Where am I able to find you? I’ll do everything for your return. I’d like to say I do love you although I can’t live with you.”

In addition to that, in the scene in which she dies, The King of Hell expresses a sense of bereavement signifying his love for her. Another scene has the King of Hell appearing in Kwan’s dreams to talk with her because they cannot talk in person and telling her that:

“If you and I live in the same world, I won’t let you die. However, of course, we cannot escape from the Karmic Law. I promise you that I am going to find and meet you again in the next life.”

However, the representation of romantic feeling is the scriptwriter's fictionalisation rather than a Buddhist ideological construction. Interestingly, despite the representation of the King of Hell having this aspect of human emotion, the drama still maintains the sacredness of the King of Hell as a symbol of rectitude. The drama represents the expression of romantic emotion of the King of Hell in a way that does not conflict with Buddhist ideas. At the end of this drama, the King of Hell understands that he can never be in a romantic relationship with a mortal woman and continues to strictly perform his duties. This is an example of how *Ngao* attempts to present a modern version of the King of Hell while balancing the postmodern collage with Buddhist principles. Thus, the supernatural television drama as postmodern collage remains compatible with traditional Buddhist teachings.

The reason why some of the visual elements of the King of Hell in *Ngao* set out above differ from traditional depictions in Buddhist scriptures lies in the growing popularity of 'hybrid' presentations in Thai popular media. Thais prefer to watch supernatural media products that combine traditional Thai ghost stories with Western visual culture. This can be seen in the success of both Western and other Asian supernatural films at the box-office in Thailand. Examples of the popularity of international films among Thai viewers include: the American film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2* (earning US\$ 6.23 million or 218 million baht); the Japanese film *Ju-On: The Grudge* (US\$ 1.02 million or 35.7 million baht); and the Korean film *The Eye* (US\$ 0.43 million or 15.5 million baht) (Manager, 2008; Box Office Mojo, 2016). Many Thai ghost films have been influenced by the popularity of international cinema, especially, American, Japanese, and Korean films (Goraghit, 2007; Kamjohn and Hinviman, 2008; Srijinda, 2015). According to Srijinda (2015), the characteristics of ghosts shown in Thai films are a hybridisation of Thai and other cultures. As Goraghit (2007, p. 22) points out: "characteristics of Thai ghosts in films have differed from traditional Thai beliefs in ghosts ... However, the difference has also gained them popularity among Thai viewers". For example, in the Thai film *Ha Phraeng* (2009), ghosts appeared and walked like zombies which is not a Thai form of ghost (Srijinda, 2015). This suggests that the hybrid characteristics of Thai ghosts are one element contributing to the success of the contemporary Thai supernatural television dramas. This might also be a reason why the King of Hell in *Ngao* combines modern characteristics along with an emphasis on traditional Buddhist ideology. In commercial terms, this form of postmodern representation is likely to guarantee popularity among Thai television viewers. Similarly, Peirse (2011) and Peirse (2013), who examine the reason why ghost stories in Korean haunted screens have remained popular, have argued that the stories remain the core of Korean myths and folktales although trends, conventions,

and customs have been developed and influenced by German Expressionist, American and Japanese horror films.

4.1.1.2 Siri and Poo-Ma

The analysis indicates that although some characteristics of the *Hell* jailer characters (Siri and Poo-Ma), that is, their names and physical appearance, have been modified, the core Buddhist messages are retained. In traditional Buddhist tales, there are two main jailers in Hell: 1) Suwan, who has the duty of recording and reporting the souls' karma to the King of Hell to be used as evidence in the karmic court; and 2) Suwarn, who has the duty of bringing the souls of the deceased before the karmic court for judgment (Raponsan, 2010). In *Ngao*, the jailers are renamed Siri and Poo-Ma but their duties are represented as the same as in the traditional tales.

Initially, the jailers are presented as a tool for teaching the *Karmic Law* even though the representation of the jailers' is similar to that of the Western vampire. Siri and Poo-Ma haunt sinners in the drama by appearing to bite people like the vampires in the film series *Twilight*. They also share a demonic facial expression similar to the character Nell Sweetzer in the film *The Last Exorcism Part II*. However, the representation of this new version of Siri and Poo-Ma still contains a Buddhist message. While they appear as vampires haunting sinners, their purpose is to get them to confess their sins. For example, in one episode a group of teenager are throwing stones at a car driving by, causing a fatal accident. While the sinners are running from the scene of the accident to escape the police, Siri appears to haunt them by showing his frightening vampire-like expression, as shown in Figure 4.14 below. At the end of this scene, the criminals are sentenced in the karmic court by the King of Hell in accordance with their karma.

Figure 4.14: A representation of Siri haunting sinners



Figure 4.15: Buddhist quotes presented at the end of each episode of *Ngao*



At the end of each episode of *Ngao*, Buddhist quotes from the characters are repeated and emphasised as superimposed texts. This device is used to summarise the key Buddhist message of each episode and to remind the audience of the consequences of sin. For instance, as shown in Figure 4.15, a Buddhist quote superimposed on the screen at the end of an episode reads ‘บุญต้องทำ กรรมต้องรับ’, the teaching that good karma will be repaid and bad karma will be punished.

4.1.1.3 Pret ghosts or Phii Pret

The representation of the Pret ghosts in *Ngao* plays an important role in underlining the Buddhist beliefs about karmic punishments. It indicates the intention of the drama to persuade its audience to be aware of evil karma and its affects, whether in this world or the next, as mentioned in Chapter One. Thais believe that people who sin against

Buddhism will be reborn as Pret ghosts. As noted in the Buddhist dogma '*Puo-Ti-Mook-Pret-Ta-Wat-Tu*' (Bamphenboonbarame, 2013), direct sins against Buddhism can result in being turned into the *Phii Pret*. Such sins include: 1) encouraging Buddhist monks to have a quarrel; 2) destroying Buddhist objects, for example, temples, statues of the Buddha, and the Buddhist scriptures; and 3) attacking Buddhist monks. This idea about ghosts is similar to the Christian concept of purgatory, as Finucane (1984) notes that the social function of purgatory is to reinforce religious teachings about punishments in the afterlife. In the Christian idea, the souls will be tormented for their sins. In contrast, souls that have behaved well or confessed their sins will rest in peace. The Buddhist idea of *Pret* ghosts is similar. Thais believe that the *Phii Pret* is a ghost suffering from karmic punishment. The *Phii Pret* is used in *Ngao* as a symbol of karmic punishment. For example, in the tenth episode of *Ngao*, the King of Hell sends a ghost to haunt a group of thieves who are cutting the head off a sculpture of the Buddha in a temple. The ghost has a very skinny, tall body and a high-pitched voice like the *Pret* ghosts in the old Buddhist tales. The gangsters are scared of the ghostly apparition, stop cutting the sculpture, and run away from the temple. This scene captures the Buddhist idea that an attack on Buddhism can result in the sinner being turned into a *Pret* ghost.

4.1.2 Vengeful ghosts

The results of the analysis illustrate that vengeful ghost characters are the main villains in both *NCD* (including Rinlanee's ghost, Prawit's ghost, and Nard's ghost) and *Ngao* (including Yok's ghost, Eak's ghost, and a group of evil ghosts driven by the emotion of malice during the War of Ayutthaya). This section of the analysis focuses on Rinlanee's ghost in *NCD* while the other ghosts play a minor role.

Vengeful ghost characters in the dramas *NCD* and *Ngao* reflect Thai beliefs about ghosts and reinforce Buddhist teachings of the *Karmic Law* and *letting go*. This will be explored through three main features of the ghosts: 1) the signs of approaching ghosts, 2) their physical appearance, and 3) the supernatural powers of ghosts.

4.1.2.1 Signs of approaching ghosts

The results indicate that the signs of approaching ghosts in the dramas construct a sense of fear as referred to in the concept of the Sublime articulated by Burke (2008). Burke claims the sublime as an aesthetic product that involves the creation of a sense of pain, danger, and terror generated through visual and aural representations:

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates

in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” (Burke, 2008, p. 39)

Burke suggests that the representation of darkness leads to a creation of terror:

“As to the association of ghosts and goblins; surely it is more natural to think, that darkness being originally an idea of terror, was chosen as a fit scene for terrible representation, than that such representations have made darkness terrible.” (Burke, 2008, p. 142)

Burke implies that the use of visual and aural signs, for example, thunder, heavy rain, and darkness, has great power in introducing or increasing an emotion of terror. In *NCD* and *Ngao*, the visual and aural signs act as *indexical* signs; a mode of sign involved with its object and in which the signifier is connected in some way with the signified (Chandler, 2007). These signs are used to create a sense of fear and to indicate the approach of vengeful ghosts. This presentation of the ghost’s wickedness, indicated through the signs, refers to the *Phii Rai* or evil ghosts in traditional Thai beliefs. *Phii Rai*, as noted in Chapter One, are a type of ghost who haunt people and have the appearance of a disgusting or disfigured body. This character is signified by three signs: 1) the sound of dogs howling at night; 2) heavy rain, and thunder and lightning; and 3) mysterious sounds or unusual phenomena which cannot be explained.

To understand the beliefs in ghosts in the Thai context, we need to draw on the concept of Myth. According to Barthes (1993), the interpretation of a thing can be read through either language, i.e. linguistic denotation, or myth, i.e. cultural connotation.

“The meaning of the myth has its own value ... it belongs to a history ... The meaning is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions.” (Barthes, 1993, p. 116)

In the dramas, the representations of approaching ghosts are made in line with traditional beliefs, especially the sound of dogs howling at night. In Thai culture, the sound of dogs at night is a sign a ghost is approaching. Thai elders believe that dogs have a sixth-sense which allows them to perceive vengeful ghosts (Panklang, 1996). If many dogs are simultaneously howling in the night, it is believed in Thai myth to be a sign of ghostly manifestations (Panklang, 1996; Bamroong, 2015). Moreover, the sound is now considered as a sign of approaching ghosts because of media constructions, it is a convention often used in Thai supernatural media productions. Srivibhata (2002) notes that the sound of a dog howling is used as a sign of Nak’s ghost in various films and TV dramas. Additionally, the sound effect has been used to signify vengeful ghosts in

supernatural radio programmes since 1928. According to the television news report *Khat Khao Dee* on Channel 3, the sound of dogs howling is still used in Thai supernatural media to create a frightening atmosphere although there is no scientific basis for the belief (Bamroong, 2015). This suggests that the sound is used in Thai supernatural dramas partly because it is known as a cultural sign of ghosts in Thai tradition and partly as a result of media representations. The sign is used in both *NCD* and *Ngao* before the appearance of vengeful ghosts.

Heavy rain and thunder and lightning have long been seen as signifying something awful; as Burke (2008, p. 82) claims “the noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind”. Traditional Thai beliefs have also regarded them as warning of returning vengeful ghosts or that an unfortunate accident must soon occur. The meaning is similar to the Thai proverb ‘*Fon Dtohk Mai Mee Khaao*’ (raining without a sign) which signifies that there may be unforeseen events or problems (Office of the Royal Society, 2016a). Many scenes in the dramas show the ghost coming through the heavy rain and thunder and lightning. In the first episode of *NCD*, for example, the signs of Rinlanee’s ghost approaching the scene of funeral are signified by the failure of an electric light bulb and the flickering of candle flames, along with the sound of heavy rain and thunder. After the rain, Rinlanee’s ghost, dressed as a traditional dancer, mysteriously emerges from the dark and enigmatically hovers over a coffin (Figure 4.16).

Figure 4.16: The appearance of Rinlanee’s ghost with the *indexical* signs



Other unnatural phenomena are used in the dramas as signs of approaching ghosts. For example, scenes featuring a mysterious smell of incense, electric appliances turning themselves on and off, and a sound of knocking from inside a wardrobe. The appearance of Rinlanee’s ghost is an example of how the ghost uses supernatural powers to create uncommon events as it approaches. In the fourth episode of *NCD*, one of the

murderers hears the sound of traditional Thai music in a modern department store where it is unusual to hear this kind of music. The music in this scene is an unusual thing that is a sign of an approaching ghost and Rinlane's ghost mysteriously appears after the music has started. The conversation between the murderers and a salesperson are shown as follows.

Murderer 1: *[Thai traditional music is turned on in a store] Oh! This is the luxurious store but it opens a sound of traditional Thai music. Have you heard the music?*

Salesperson: *[she shows a strange facial expression] No, I've not heard the sound.*

Murderer 2: *'Help ... help me please', she screams. [Then, the murderer 1 attempts to cover her mouth to stop her from screaming.]*

This shows how the drama attempts to draw on traditional Thai beliefs to create a sense of terror for viewers.

4.1.2.2 Physical appearance

The representation of ghostly apparitions in the dramas is a tool for highlighting Buddhist teachings of the *Karmic Law* and *letting go*. The physical appearance of Rinlane's ghost in the drama *NCD* is an example of this practice.

Rinlane's ghost appears in three different styles of dress, each with a particular meaning: 1) a pink-coloured dress; 2) a dark coloured dress; and 3) a traditional Thai dance costume. The representation of Rinlane's ghost wearing the first dress reflects the Thai myth that ghosts wear the clothes they wore before their death, whereas the two other styles of dress reflect Buddhist ideas. According to Worrasetrthasak (2005), Thais believe that the souls of the deceased appear in the form of shadows or ghosts wearing the same clothes as they wore when they were alive. In the drama, there are many scenes reflecting this myth (Figure 4.17). In the scenes in which she wears this dress, she normally shows herself as a human without any expression of haunting, anger, or revenge, especially in the scenes in which she meets her boyfriend Tachin.

Figure 4.17: The appearance of Rinlanee's ghost as human



Figure 4.18: The appearance of Rinlanee's ghost as a ghost wearing the stained dress



In Figure 4.18, the second form of Rinlanee's ghost clothing is an *indexical* sign referring to not only the cause of her death but also to her vengefulness. In many scenes, she appears wearing the stained pink dress and visibly disfigured. This refers to the cause of her death: her friends killed her by hitting her with a stone and then burying her alive. The stained pink dress in this sense is a symbol of the ghost returning from the grave to revenge her murder. Additionally, the drama shows the wounds on the ghost's face and body spreading as a symbol of the karmic results of engaging in vengefulness and thereby sinning. The number of the wounds increases every time the ghost kills someone.

Figure 4.19: The wounds appearing on Rinlanee's ghost



In Figure 4.19, the wounds function as an *indexical* sign referring to both the creation of evil karma and also to Buddhist punishments. The increasing number of wounds on the ghost's body denotes her increasing evil karma. As shown in many scenes, after the ghost uses her supernatural powers to kill someone, burns immediately appear on her body symbolising the karmic punishment by fire. In later episodes, the appearance of the ghost changes to that of a corpse, as shown in Figure 4.20. The wounds and corpse correspond to evil karma and punishment by fire as discussed in the King of Hell section, above. These visible symbols emphasise the Buddhist idea of '*what goes around comes around*' in accordance with the *Karmic Law*.

Figure 4.20: The representation of Rinlanee's ghost as a corpse



Figure 4.21: Rinlanee's ghost dressed in the clothes of a traditional Thai dancer



The third appearance of Rinlanee's ghost is in a traditional Thai dance costume, as shown in Figure 4.21. This form of the ghost's appearance is the *indexical* sign denoting the ideas of '*Khwan Phuk Phan*' or 'bond' and the Buddhist teaching of '*letting go*', which means '*not holding or attaching to a thing*'. In Thai beliefs, the soul of the deceased returns to the realm of the living to do what they loved to do when they were alive. In *NCD*, when *Rinlanee* was alive, she was a traditional Thai dancer. Therefore, after she died, she appears every night wearing the traditional Thai dance costume and dancing alone. This denotes the *Khwan Phuk Phan* (bond) holding her to her past: her infatuation with dance, her desire for vengeance, and her desire to live with her lover forever. The key Buddhist message behind this representation is that if the ghost can let go of her attachments, she will be free from suffering.

4.1.2.3 The supernatural powers of ghosts

The supernatural powers of vengeful ghosts in *Ngao* and *NCD* are used as a symbol of evil in line with Thai traditions. The ghosts' powers are represented through three television tropes: 1) aggressively staring at something or someone; 2) killing people by strangulation for revenge; and 3) social beliefs about ghostly possession.

Firstly, aggressive staring at something or somebody is a common media construction signifying a ghost's use of supernatural power to kill or control something or somebody. In Thai tradition, according to Suwanwattana (2010), the colour red symbolises blood, danger, revenge, and wrath. This colour is frequently used to express evil in the dramas. Vengeful ghosts are shown with red eyes referring to their desire for revenge. At the same time, this staring expression in the dramas still carries the same meaning even when the red colour of the ghost's eye is not displayed. There are many scenes showing ghosts using the staring expression to kill people. In the sixth episode of *NCD*, for example, a male character, Tulathew, is attacked by small pieces of smashed light bulb when Rinlanee's ghost stares at a light bulb. In this scene, there is no change in the colour of the ghost's eyes, but the meaning is clearly presented. This indicates that the meaning can still be interpreted even though the expression has been modified; this expression reflects the level of connotative meaning in Thai contexts.

Secondly, the method of killing humans by strangulation is a symbol of wickedness and a sign referring to a strong desire for vengeance. In Thai supernatural media, there are many film and television dramas presenting ghosts returning to the realm of the living to find and kill their murderers by strangulation. As Panklang (1996) points out, one of the reasons why ghosts return to the living is to complete unfinished business or to seek revenge. Thais believe that the souls of the dead must complete any unfinished business, in particular, revealing details of murderers, injustices, or the ghost's last testament. She notes that the killing of the living by squeezing their throat is perceived by Thais as a way for ghosts to express their vengeance. This idea comes from the classical Thai story of *Mae Nak Phra Khanong*. Thus, this act is easily interpreted as a symbol of evil and for this reason both *NCD* and *Ngao* use it in the same way. For example, in *NCD*, Rinlanee's ghost returns to the living seeking revenge on her murderers.

Finally, vengeful ghosts who use supernatural powers to control people underline traditional myths about ghostly possession. In Thai culture, it is believed that people who are possessed by ghosts usually exhibit unusual behaviours such as living in a dark place, avoiding meeting with and speaking to people, trying to kill people or themselves (Potila, 2012). This myth is called *Phii Khao Sing* and is represented in both *NCD* and *Ngao*. There are many scenes in which human characters are possessed by vengeful ghosts for

a special purpose such as killing someone or stealing something. For instance, there is a scene showing Tachin, the leading male character and formerly Rinlanee's boyfriend, planning to renovate a house as a wedding gift for his fiancée Chompoo. After Rinlanee's ghost learns of the plan, out of jealousy, she possesses a worker and uses him to try and kill Chompoo by strangulation.

At the end of both dramas, vengeful ghosts and villains are dead, unhappy, and punished according to their karma. Rinlanee's ghost, for example, succeeds in killing all of her murderers but she cannot be reborn in human form to live with her boyfriend. This is revealed to her by a monk who tells her:

"It is because of your karma. You committed very bad karma although you and Tachin also live in the stage of life after death. Your karma [as a result of killing people] has to be redeemed."

As demonstrated above, the representation of vengeful ghost characters as a symbol of evil combines ghost stories, Thai culture, and Buddhist teachings to warn audiences to avoid sin and to seek virtue and good karma.

4.1.3 Slave ghosts

The characteristics of slave ghosts are presented in line with traditional Thai beliefs about black magic. Bhavakhunworakit (2012), as discussed in Chapter One, notes that black magic is related to the older Thai religious systems of Brahmanism and animism and involves unorthodox practices which are prohibited in Buddhism such as the creation of ghosts, talismans, and evil things. He also suggests that the practice of enslaving ghosts and detaining the souls of the dead is prohibited in Buddhism. Slave ghosts have many names in Thai, including Kumanthong, Phii Pia, and Hong Pia. Based on the textual analysis, the characteristics of the slave ghosts appearing in *NCD* and *Ngao* are similar to the traditional beliefs; slave ghosts are souls detained and controlled by an evil shaman to use to do evil karma. Phii Pia is the only type of slave ghost represented in *NCD* while the slave ghosts in *Ngao* include both Kumanthong and Phii Pia.

4.1.3.1 Kumanthong ghosts

Kumanthong ghosts are depicted according to traditional Thai beliefs, especially with regard to their physical appearance and functions. According to Kunhalung (2014), a Kumanthong ghost is the soul of a deceased child who died at childbirth and who is

controlled by an evil shaman. They are usually represented in the form of traditional golden dolls (Figure 4.22). Additionally, Thais believe that the physical appearance of the ghost is in the form of a child spirit with a traditional Thai hairstyle called *Phom Jok*. In *Ngao*, the key characteristics of the ghosts are retained, but the media construction emphasises the power of the evil shaman's black magic by using a sign of black-coloured smoke and a picture of a child locked and chained with iron shackles, chains that the ghost wears around its neck and feet. This symbolises how the ghosts cannot redeem their sins nor can they be reborn in the human world because they are imprisoned and controlled by the shaman. Thais believe that every soul is reborn until their sins are redeemed and they have no evil karma, which the slave ghosts are prevented from doing. The Kumanthong named Jok in *Ngao* is a good example. At the end of the tenth episode, a male shaman Kong is killed by a Kumanthong ghost when he loses his black magic powers and needs to redeem his sin of incarcerating the ghosts. After Kong loses his power, the ghost speaks to him as follows:

“You used the power of black magic to treat me as a spectral slave for a long time. Now, you have to pay for your evil karma because my soul is not reborn.”

Figure 4.22: Thai traditional doll *Kumanthong* (Anantchai, 2015)



Figure 4.23: The representation of a *Kumanthong* ghost in *Ngao*



4.1.3.2 Phii Pai or Hong Pai

Similarly, the function of Phii Pai in *NCD* and *Ngao* is used as an example of evil karma in Buddhism. Thai social beliefs about Phii Pai are that they are a type of ghost controlled by an evil shaman through the power of black magic. In the Thai epic *Khun Change Khun Phaen*, Phii Pai is a ghost who is created through black magic and is used as the spectral slave of an evil shaman (Tarinnon and Penguang, 2011). In the dramas, the concept of Phii Pia is constructed in the same way as in the tradition, by underlining

that the creation of the ghost is a sin. There are many episodes showing that the ghost has been used as a tool of the shaman to do bad things, for example, stealing things, finding out personal secrets, and responding to the evil purposes of the shaman. For instance, Hong Pia is forced by the shaman Jeng to kill Rinlanee's ghost. The ghost Hong Pia is viewed as a sinner who commits the sin although she is strongly disinclined to kill Rinlanee's ghost. At the end of this episode, Hong Pia and Jeng are both sentenced according to the *Karmic Law*.

Figure 4.24: A Dementor represented in the film *Harry Potter*



Figure 4.25: *Phii Pai* represented in *NCD*



Although there are scenes in *NCD* representing *Phii Pai* in a similar manner to the Dementor shown in the American film *Harry Potter*, the key idea of this character is in line with the Buddhist message. As the scriptwriter of the drama stated:

“I was inspired to show Phii Pai like the Dementors in the film Harry Potter to attract audiences to enjoy the show, but the key message is an emphasis on the concept of Barb [evil karma] in Buddhism”.

This shows how the slave ghost characters are employed as one of the factors in highlighting Buddhist teachings by attracting audiences to watch the show with a borrowed image from a Western media product.

4.1.4 Guardian Spirits

The belief in guardian spirits comes from a syncretism of Brahmanism and Buddhism, and is the source for this type of character. As discussed in Chapter One, guardian spirits are perceived as a mental safeguard to protect family members from evil ghosts. Thais believe that the spirits live in a place called the *Shrine of the Household Spirits* (Pearce, 2011). This function is in line with the views of Nelson and Durkheim that religions or spiritualism cults can provide followers with mental help to solve the problems of individuals confused by social chaos. Moreover, Durkheim asserts that religious practices and items can uphold mental strength among believers:

“Men are more confident because they feel themselves stronger; and they really are stronger, because forces which were languishing are now reawakened in the consciousness.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 346)

In this sense, Pearce (2011) notes that Thailand has seen a prevalence of spirit houses in urban and rural areas as Thais believe that guardian spirits can help them to achieve good things and protect them from evil. He claims that this has been a popular religious belief since the nineteenth century. Guardian spirits who live in spirit houses are seen as a sacred object for protecting inhabitants from ghosts.

In *NCD* and *Ngao*, this belief is represented in a similar way. That is, the representation of guardian spirits in the dramas reflects their significant role in reinforcing mental strength in human characters. For example, there are many scenes showing characters worshipping spirit houses for protecting them from vengeful ghosts. When vengeful ghosts try to enter or attack people in a house, there is an image of a spirit house emitting a flash of gold lightning (Figure 4.26). The spirit house emitting a shining gold light represents the power of guardian spirits to protect against evil ghosts entering a house. The evil ghost is injured when he attempts to enter a house without permission from the inhabitants or the guardian spirits (Figure 4.27).

Figure 4.26: The power of guardian spirits shown with a shining light in *NCD*



Figure 4.27: The power of guardian spirits to prevent an evil ghost from entering a house in *Ngao*



On the contrary, there are many scenes showing that vengeful ghosts can go into a house if dwellers allow them access by speaking with a guardian spirit. The conversation between Tachin and Rinlanee's ghost (transforming herself into the form of human) is an obvious example. In the eighth episode of *NCD*, Rinlanee asks Tachin to stop the car before driving a car to access his house because she is aware of the power of a guardian spirit. As the conversation between them states:

- Rinlanee:* [She perceives a power of guardian spirits] Stop the car! Do not go into your house.
- Tachin:* [He stops the car] Are you alright? My parents are waiting for you.
- Rinlanee:* [She is looking at a spirit house with an emotion of fear] Do you allow me to visit your house?
- Tachin:* Why not? Of course!
- Rinlanee:* Can you speak it out loudly?
- Tachin:* [He shows a facial expression of confused] I definitely allow Rinlanee to access my house.

With all of the aforementioned ghosts, although the imagery is modern rather than traditional, the heart of each character still reflects the core of Buddhist teachings and traditions, especially the *Karmic Law* and *letting go*. As the *NCD*'s scriptwriter stated:

"I would say that this drama is a product of mixing ghostly love stories and Buddhism. The contents in the drama pay attention to love stories rather than religious principles. Definitely, audiences may turn the drama off if there are exorbitant religious contents. Thus, I am persuading audiences to learn Buddhist teachings through watching a ghostly love theme that they will enjoy."

In other words, ghost characters in *NCD* and *Ngao* are utilised as a tool in circulating the teachings through a form of entertainment that allows audiences to enjoy the stories while at the same time warning them of the importance of karma.

4.2 The types of mediums represented in Thai supernatural television dramas

The results of the analysis illustrate that the role of mediums in *NCD* and *Ngao* is taken by Buddhist monks and shamans who are presented as people who can negotiate and communicate with the ghost characters. This role is in line with the concept of mediumship in Thailand as mentioned in Chapter One. That is, in Thai tradition there are two kinds of mediums: 1) the white or good mediums, monks called *Phra*; and 2) the black or evil mediums, shamans called *Mo Phii*. Thais believe that mediums can communicate with the deceased. In addition, they have the power to subdue ghosts and to help people who are attacked by ghosts. However, shamans are perceived as bad people because they use black magic to control ghosts for their own purposes. As such, Thais believe that mediumship still exists and is still a social value in Thailand. This is explained through the concept of the Symbolic Universe developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) who state that realities, including, social norms, language, religion, culture, and so forth, are established and interpreted by individuals who learn from the society they belong to. In other words, realities are read according to an individual's history, tradition, and culture. They claim that the way to understand realities in a society is to pursue its history and origin:

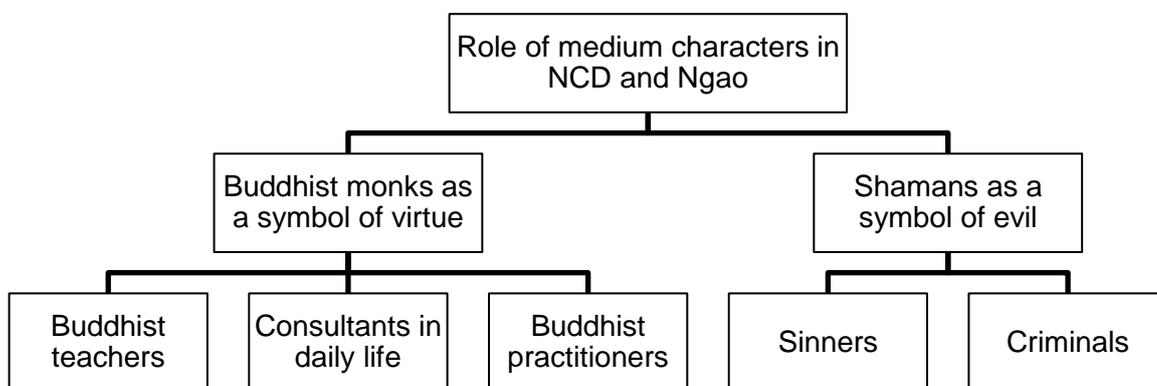
“Symbolic universes are social products with a history. If one is to understand their meaning, one has to understand the history of their production. This is all the more important because these products of human consciousness, by their very nature, present themselves as full-blown and inevitable totalities.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 115)

Additionally, they contend that realities tend to be a cycle of knowledge maintenance facilitated by individuals within a community and those realities that are not included in the cycle disappear from the society. In other words, the fact of shared knowledge or realities will continue depending on repetition by individuals within a society, whereas misleading or false information, or an idea which goes against a social norm in the society, will be removed from the general stock of knowledge of people in that society. In short, perceived false values will be rejected by the people who will focus on learning the right knowledge instead as:

“What is more, whenever one strays from the consciousness of this order (that is, when one finds oneself in the marginal situation of experience), the symbolic universe allows one 'to return to reality' – namely, to the reality of everyday life.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 116)

In this way, the belief that monks and shamans as mediums can communicate with the souls of the dead is a product of Thai beliefs. Likewise, in *NCD* and *Ngao*, the characters function as a sign representing the same idea. They are shown as examples with the role of monks as a symbol of virtue and the shamans as a symbol of evil. The following figure illustrates the role of medium characters represented in the dramas.

Figure 4.28: Roles of mediums represented in *NCD* and *Ngao*

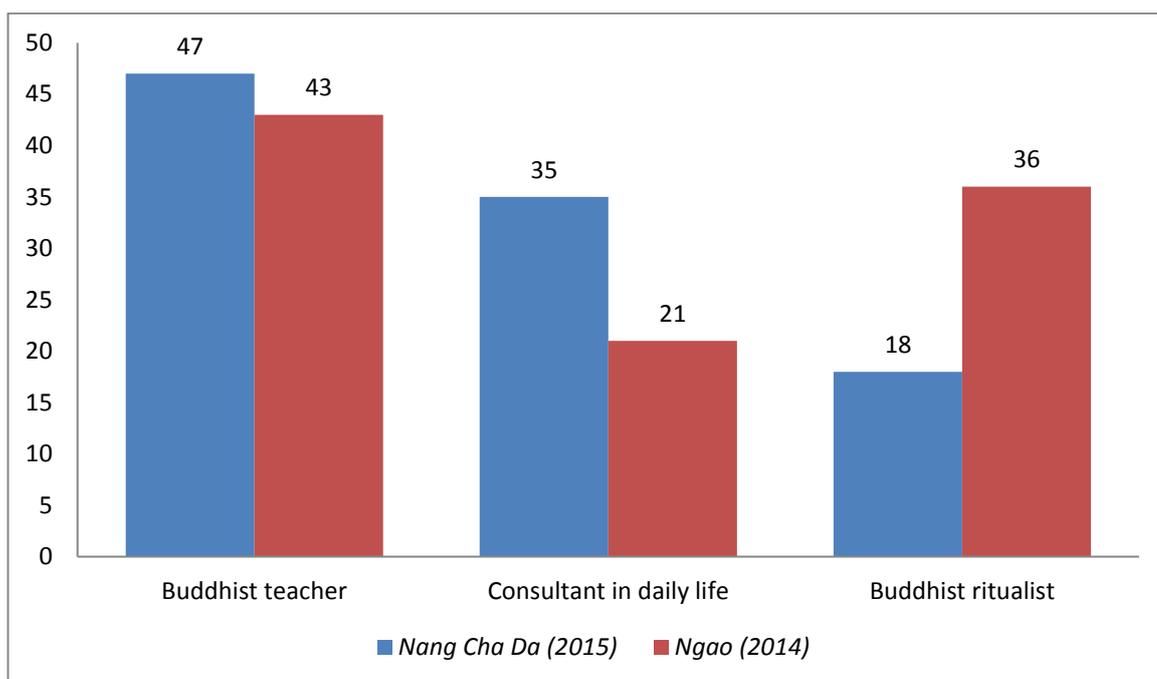


4.2.1 Buddhist monks

In Thai culture, the *Three Gems* (known in Thai words *Phra Rath Ta Na Tri*) at the core of Buddhism are: 1) the Buddha, the person who found the path to salvation; 2) the Dharma, the practices and teachings realised and promulgated by the Buddha; and 3) the Sangha, the communities of monks and nuns who pursue and disseminate the Dharma to the people. The first two parts of Buddhism are viewed as a compass for Thai life by which Buddhists should obey the Buddha and observe his doctrines, while the monks are seen as “a disseminator or heir who plays a central role in facilitating Buddhism ... by using Buddhist principles as an important tool” (Morachart, 2009, p. 12). According to Chantapunyo (2011) and Sunanto (2011), monks disseminate the Buddha’s thoughts through: 1) meditation, 2) prayer, 3) teachings, and 4) rituals. This kind of the practice counts as the conduct of good karma, called *Boon*. In other words, monks encourage their followers to practice good karma in accordance with the Buddha’s thoughts. As such, Thais assume that Buddhist monks are a good representative of Buddhism and a symbol of righteousness.

In these dramas, Buddhist monk characters are represented as symbols of goodness, and teach the Buddha’s words to ghosts and living characters for good karma. The data gained from textual analysis illustrate that the representation of monks reflects three main roles: 1) as Buddhist teachers; 2) as consultants in daily life; and 3) as Buddhist practitioners, monks who practice or advocate observance of Buddhist rituals.

Figure 4.29: The percentage representation of Buddhist monks' roles in *NCD* and *Ngao*



As shown in Figure 4.29, the role of Buddhist teacher is the most common representation in both dramas, and a key point in the image of monk characters. Additionally, the second commonest focus in *NCD* is on monks acting as consultants in daily life, while the role of Buddhist practitioner is more important in *Ngao*. The following paragraph focuses on the first two roles, while the third role will be examined in the section on Buddhist rites in Chapter Five.

4.2.1.1 Buddhist monks as Buddhist teachers

The results of the analysis illustrate that the monk characters play a significant role in teaching Buddhist doctrines to both ghost and human characters in *Ngao* and *NCD*. There are nine and six Buddhist teachings respectively represented through monk characters in the dramas and these will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Focusing on the representation of ghosts taught by monks, there are many examples in the dramas reflecting the Buddhist teaching of *Wen Yom Ra Ngap Duay Kan Mai Jong Wen* (which means that no revenge is more honourable than the one not taken). The clear example is in the case of Rinlanee's ghost in *NCD*. In the sixteenth episode, Rinlanee's ghost tries to kill people with her supernatural power while Kong, a monk, attempts to persuade her to forgive the murderers for what they did to her and to inform her of the karmic result of revenge killings. The conversation in this scene is as follows.

Monk: Can you stop expressing anger?
 Ghost: They cruelly killed me. It is time for them to redeem their sins.
 Monk: However, the best way to avoid an act of revenge is to follow the principle of *Wen Yom Ra Ngap Duay Kan Ma Jong Wen*. Don't waste your time on revenge. Those who hurt you will eventually face their evil karma. Please do not kill them in revenge. If you do this, you will need to redeem your sin as well.

Interestingly, scenes in which monks repeat the teaching on revenge to stop Rinlanee's ghost from killing and to warn her about the result of evil karma are depicted in many episodes until the ghost finally understands and obeys the teaching. At the end of the drama, the ghost cannot live with her boyfriend, is unhappy, and is punished in accordance with the *Karmic Law*. This suggests that the ghost is happy when she understands the teaching and accepts the need to redeem her sins.

The representation of monks teaching Buddhist principles to human characters is best demonstrated in *Ngao*, especially the teaching of gratitude (called *Akka TanYoo*). In the tenth episode, the drama presents a villain who abandons her elderly mother alone in a remote forest. This action is considered an ungrateful act in Thai culture and Buddhism. In the scene a monk, seeing the woman abandoned by her daughter, says:

"Father and mother can be considered as a kind of monk living in your house. When you were a child who could not help yourself, you needed much help from your parents such as drinking water, eating food, and teaching you to speak. When parents get old, it might not be a responsibility of their children to take good care of the parents in return. However, doing the right thing here is a good chance to create virtue (Boon). ... This action is a sin."

As set out above, the monk characters function as Buddhist teachers and by teaching Buddhist principles to the characters in the drama, they also teach the audience. Chapter Six will discuss the impact on audiences' perspectives and behaviours after they have watched the shows.

4.2.1.2 Buddhist monks as consultants in daily life

The monk characters in the dramas are shown as being able to advise on adapting Buddhist principles into a practical way for dealing with problems in everyday life. In other words, the dramas attempt to persuade audiences to solve their problems by consulting with Buddhist monks or applying Buddhist teachings to their daily life. A good example is found in *NCD*. There are many characters who have problems in their lives such as worries about inheritance from an ancestor, sickness, and revenge. When characters have to face difficult problems and cannot find a moral way to deal with them, the monk

characters are shown as providing advice on dealing with those problems. Many villain characters, for example, are haunted by Rinlanee's ghost and visit a monk for help in subduing the ghost. The monk tells them:

"There are no items or religious rites to stop the ghostly apparition. You do not need to fear it if you do not offend the ghost. Do not waste your time trying to find a way to subdue or take your revenge on the ghost. It will be a sin. You should let go of revenge and accept your karma."

The key message of this scene is the teaching of '*letting go*'. The monk teaches them to deal with the ghost by not trying to harm or subdue the ghost but by letting go of their revenge and accepting their karma. It is possible that the drama is attempting to create a link between emotions of revenge in daily life and the teaching by advising the audiences the way to deal with a desire for revenge is to practice '*letting go*'.

That the monk characters in the dramas are employed as a tool for educating audiences in Buddhist principles is, arguably, because monks in Thai culture are perceived as respectable and virtuous people. As Chantapunyo (2011) suggests, Buddhist monks in Thailand fulfil many roles, including being religious teachers in schools, spiritual advisers in rural areas, and conciliators in dealing with problems in local areas. In other words, Thais view Buddhist monks as trustworthy people who know the teachings of the Buddhist scriptures and how to show others to be good Buddhists. As *Ngao's* scriptwriter said:

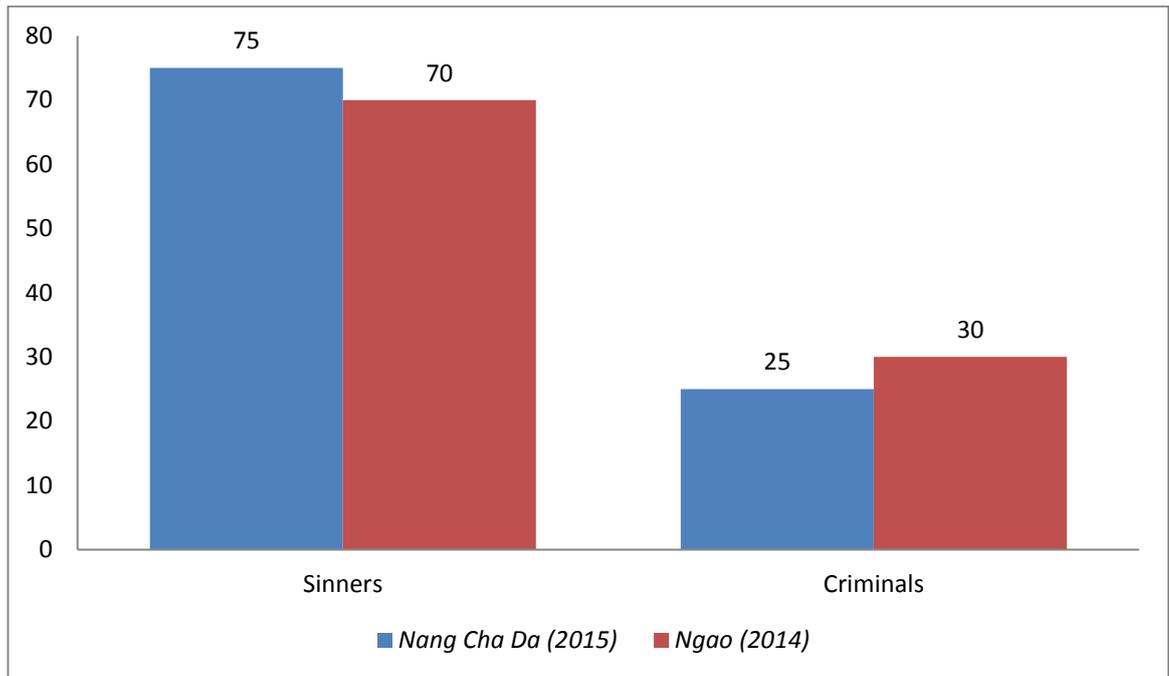
"I think Buddhist teachings in the drama should not be misrepresented. Although I cannot understand all of the teachings, I would ask Buddhist experts or read books before filming."

Moreover, Kirsch (1977, p. 248) claims that "the Sangha stands as the proximate exemplar and symbolic center of Buddhism; the monks stands at the apex of Thai religious and social order". In this regard, the representation of monks in the dramas does not differ from the perceived role of Buddhist monks in Thai society; thus, these characters are constructed and presented as a symbol of goodness.

4.2.2 Shamans

Shaman characters in *NCD* and *Ngao* are presented as villains or as symbols of wickedness, even though, in traditional Thai culture, there are some good shamans who do not sin. The results of the analysis illustrate that the shaman characters fulfil two roles: sinners and criminals.

Figure 4.30: The ratio of shamans as sinners to criminals in *NCD* and *Ngao*



As seen in Figure 4.30, shamans as sinners are more common in both dramas, while shamans as criminals feature more in *Ngao* than *NCD*.

4.2.2.1 Shamans as sinners

The role of shamans as sinner in *NCD* and *Ngao* reflects their involvement in practices that go against Buddhism, what is called *Sai-Ya-Sard*, a form of black magic. As mentioned in Chapter One, activities involving black magic are prohibited in Buddhist prohibition although they are not illegal. Sahatumno (2011, p. 1) suggests that black magic is “a subject which leads to a failure in understanding Buddhist principles and leads to a creation of sin”. As mentioned in scripture: “the subject leads to many social drawbacks, e.g. the destruction of Buddhism, a social problem of crime, and a belief engaged with imposture, deception, credulity” (Chutindharo, 1999, p. 100). As such, in Buddhism, involvement with black magic causes evil karma and should be avoided. This idea corresponds to the concept of Symbolic Universe, discussed above, in the sense that any reality that resists the norm in a society will be opposed and replaced with the right knowledge. Similarly, the dramas attempt to show how people involved with black magic will be punished for their bad karma. Both dramas present many kinds of black magic through the shaman characters, including treating ghosts like spectral slaves, subduing ghosts with sacred objects, and participating in black-magic ceremonies. For these reasons, the characters are identified as sinners from the perspective of Buddhism. At the end of the dramas, the shaman characters always die unhappy and are punished in the

karmic court. This representation is in line with the Thai proverb that goodness will always triumph over wickedness. The dramas use the shaman characters to guide audiences away from black magic through fictional stories reflecting on their evil karma and punishment.

4.2.2.2 Shamans as criminals

The second role of the shaman characters are as criminals who commit two types of crime: 1) defrauding people of their money, and 2) sexually assaulting young women. *NCD* and *Ngao* both show these crimes ending with the character prosecuted by law enforcement and sentenced in accordance to the Buddhist principles of the *Five Precepts*. These are actions to be refrained from: harming living things, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicating substances.

In both dramas, the shamans use their powers of black magic to threaten leading characters and to obtain money by deception. In the fifteenth episode of *Ngao*, the shaman Dum demands money (ten million Baht) from a group of leading characters with the threat that “I’ll let the ghost go to visit all of you guys if you do not give me the money”. The characters must pay the money because they are aware of his power to cause a ghost to haunt them. The action of Dum is both illegal and immoral as it goes against the *Five Precepts* in that it is ‘taking what is not given’.

Moreover, the representation of the shaman characters in the dramas reflects activities which involve breaking both the human law and the *Five Precepts*, especially the crime of sexual assault. The character of the shaman Kong in *Ngao* is shown in the eighth and tenth episodes deceitfully tricking young women into sexual assaults. When the women come to meet him to ask for sacred objects or assistance in relation to black magic, Kong tricks them into sexual acts by using his black magic. As a result, he is considered a criminal in the eyes of the law and as a sinner who breaks the *Five Precepts* by ‘sexual misconduct’.

It appears the dramas are attempting to present sacred objects or activities related to black magic, represented by the shaman characters, as ideas to be ignored. They present a warning to the audiences to avoid belief in the power of black magic and to focus on Buddhist observation and practice instead.

Conclusion

The reason why Thai supernatural dramas have engaged with the representation of ghosts in the context of Buddhist traditions is that the majority of their audience are Thai

Buddhists. According to a survey conducted by the National Statistical Office (2014), Buddhism is the primary religion practised in Thailand. 96.4% of Thai people are Buddhists, while Islam is the second largest practice at 4.2%, and Christianity is third at 1.1%. In addition to that, as mentioned in Chapter One, beliefs in ghosts and Buddhism have been inseparably linked, in Thai culture for generations. As Srichampa (2014) points out, beliefs about mediumship, the power of black magic, and Thai amulets have been strongly influenced by the Thai religious systems of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism. Moreover, the broadcasters are acting within a wider attempt to “submerge popular religious beliefs and rituals under that shadow of state-sponsored Buddhism” (Kitiarsa, 2005, p. 462). Mungthane (2017) notes that Thailand is a place where Thai custom has involved Buddhist dogmas and rituals from cradle to grave, especially in the cooperation between supernatural beliefs and the concept of karma. In short, this kind of drama and Buddhism are interconnected and part of the wider Thai way of life.

This chapter has argued that Thai supernatural television dramas have played a meaningful role in facilitating and spreading Buddhist principles. The dramas function as a religious classroom for teaching Buddhist lessons by drawing on contemporary Thai social problems as case studies and then suggesting a solution from Buddhist teachings through supernatural storylines. Vengeful ghosts and shamans are used to represent evil and teach that it should be avoided. Similarly, the representation of revenge and black magic are shown to be sinful. At the end of the dramas, the evil characters are shown being punished for their sins, either in Hell or in jail. On the other hand, Buddhist monks are represented as the embodiment of righteousness and as good religious teachers who instruct the living and the dead in the proper observance of Buddhist teachings. The character of the King of Hell is also shown as a religious teacher and a symbol of karmic justice. The key message behind the dramas is the emphasis on the fact that everyone – whether characters in the dramas or viewers in Thai society – is subject to the *Karmic Law*. The suggestion is that if people apply the principles promoted by the dramas in their daily lives, sin and crime will be reduced or will vanish altogether. In other words, the characters discussed above are guiding the audience to avoid evil karma and to do good karma instead.

Chapter Five: Concepts Represented in Thai Television Dramas

This chapter will examine which ideological messages are contained in the Thai supernatural television dramas *Ngao* (2014) and *NCD* (2015) and how those messages are communicated. It will also explore the reason why those messages are emphasised in the dramas by drawing on the data gained from the textual analysis, the interviews with the programme producers, the Thai socio-cultural heritage, and the Buddhist scriptures. The key theory used in this chapter will be the idea of Ideology State Apparatuses (ISA) articulated by Louis Althusser (1971). This will be used as a tool for analysing messages presented through the dramas, discussing the reasons why the programme producers included them, and why the viewers accept those messages. Additionally, the Theravada Buddhist concepts of *Boon*, *Barb*, *merit-making*, and *transferring merit* will be examined. The meaning of *making-merit* through Buddhist rituals and why black magic is considered evil karma will also be discussed. In addition, this chapter will explore how Buddhist teachings and rituals represented in the dramas are linked to beliefs in ghosts and the supernatural in Thai society through the concept of Profane and Sacred Worlds invented by Émile Durkheim (1961). The theory of Myth invented by Roland Barthes (1993) will be used to examine how Thai beliefs about ghostly apparitions, the powers of ghosts, and omens are represented in the dramas and what the messages underlying those texts are. At the end of this chapter, I will draw on the data gained from government policies and interviews with the producers to address the reasons why Buddhist knowledge embodied in the dramas is underpinned by both the macro (the government) and the micro (the people) in Thai society.

5.1 Types of concept presented in Thai supernatural television dramas

Thai supernatural television dramas act as a religious school for cultivating Buddhist ideology in their audiences as discussed in Chapter Four. The Buddhist knowledge presented in the dramas is in line with Buddhism as practised in Thailand and which is the dominant ideology among Thai people. This argument will be analysed through the concept of Ideology State Apparatuses (ISA) developed by Althusser (1971).

Marx and Engels (1970, p. 47) state that ideology is “the product of idea, of conception, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour”. Their view is that ideology is nothing other than a human product of the imagination that defines the relationship between the ruling class and labour. In other words, any ideology

is an imaginary construct of a pure dream, empty, and vain. However, Althusser (1971) argues that ideology affects people's thinking and behaviour:

"Ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of man or social group. ... ideology is therefore ... the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live." (Althusser, 1971, pp. 158, 165)

In other words, ideology is imposed through socio-cultural products that are controlled by the ruling class and its agents. He asserts that the ideology of the ruling class in a society is produced and perpetuated through the educational system:

"Children at school also learn the rules of good behaviour ... he is destined for: rules of morality civic and professional conscience ... In other words, the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches know-how, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice." (Althusser, 1971, pp. 132-133)

He claims that schools are an educational institution for teaching know-how; children learn how to read and write and understand in schools where the ideologies of morality, ethics, social norms, and so forth, are automatically implanted in the children's minds. In the same vein, Thai supernatural television dramas function as a religious school teaching Buddhist practices to viewers who fulfil the role of child/student. In short, viewers are students who unconsciously learn Buddhist knowledge at home through television drama programmes. The following paragraph will examine this process.

The results of the analysis illustrate that there are three main concepts represented in the two dramas *Ngao* and *NCD*: 1) Buddhism, 2) black magic, and 3) Thai myths. Buddhist content is the key focus of both dramas and can be considered as the key ideology based on the theoretical framework of Althusser, that is, the contents are produced and supported by the Thai government, as will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

Figure 5.1: Principle types of concept represented in *NCD* and *Ngao*

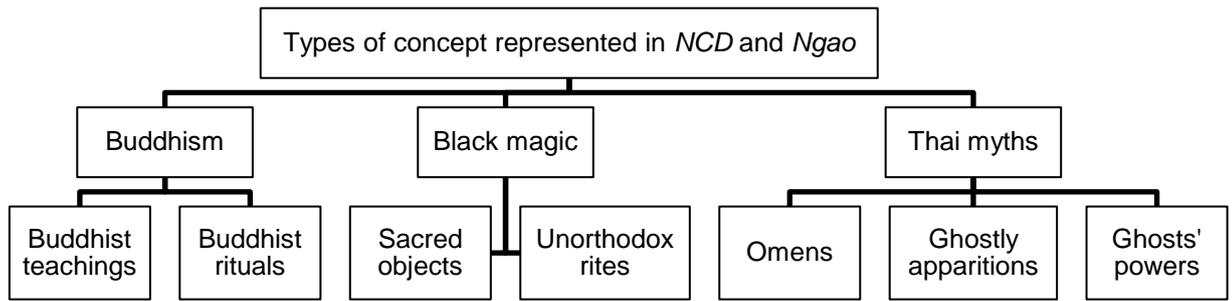
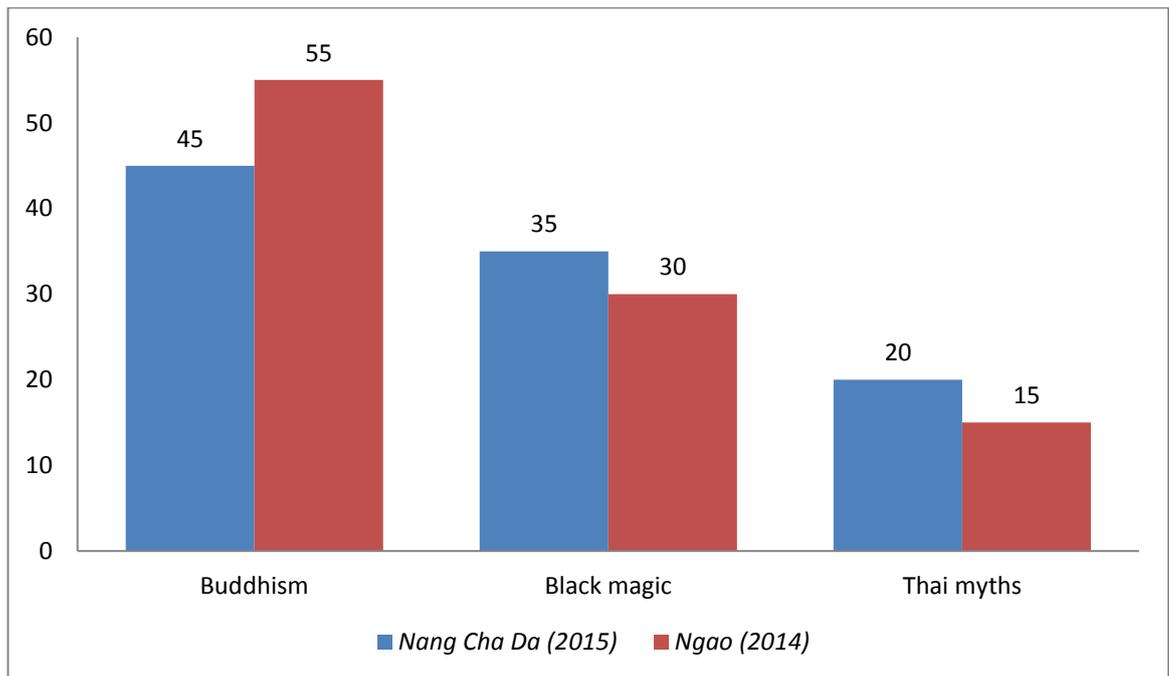


Figure 5.2: Proportional representation of the three concepts as a percentage in each drama



As can be seen in the figure above, the largest proportion of each drama is devoted to Buddhism, with black magic and Thai myths representing a smaller proportion. Accordingly, this chapter will concentrate more on Buddhist concepts. The reason why Buddhist concepts occur more frequently in the drama *Ngao* may be because it stresses the importance of traditional Thai culture, in particular, regarding the King of Hell and related teachings, whereas *NCD* does not include characters from Buddhist scripture.

5.1.1 Buddhist Concepts

Buddhist content in the dramas is organised into two types: 1) teachings, and 2) rituals. According to Hoare (2004) and Crosby (2014), the observance of Buddhist teachings and rituals are seen as a way to create good karma or *Boon* as discussed in Chapter Two. Crosby (2014) suggest that *Boon* in Theravada Buddhism is a way of merit-

making through the practice of good works³, such as, giving alms, following teachings, attending rituals, and listening to sermons. Buddhists believe that *Boon* allows people to gain good karma for themselves or, by the process known as *transferring-merit*, for others, including the dead. This form of *Boon* is represented in both *NCD* and *Ngao* as addressed below.

5.1.1.1 Buddhist teachings

The representation of Buddhist teachings is at the heart of *NCD* and *Ngao*. It acts as an educational tool for cultivating Buddhist teachings in the audience. As mentioned in Chapter Four, there are three parts to Buddhism, called *Three Gems*, which are: 1) the Buddha; 2) the Dharma; and 3) the Sangha. According to Crosby (2014), at the core of Buddhism is a way of seeking refuge from social problems in daily life by using the Dharma. This can lead to overcoming *samsāra*, the sense of suffering in all living beings contained in the cycle of death and rebirth, and can lead to achieving both bliss and extinction, called *nibbāna* or Enlightenment. Thus, Buddhist teachings are guiding people in dealing with the problems of everyday life through applying the Dharma. Similarly, Buddhist teachings embodied in the dramas are a tool for reducing or removing the feeling of sadness in daily life if the audience applies them to their lives.

Analysis of the Buddhist teachings represented in the dramas shows that they are in line with the Buddhist scriptures (called *Tipiṭaka*) as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 5.3: The percentage representation of Buddhist teachings in *NCD* and *Ngao*

Buddhist teachings shown in the dramas	<i>NCD</i>	<i>Ngao</i>
The <i>Karmic Law</i>	25%	35%
<i>Forgiveness</i>	7%	10%
<i>Letting go</i>	40%	2%
<i>Consciousness</i>	3%	3%
No revenge is more honourable than the one not taken	10%	10%
The <i>Cycle of Death and Rebirth</i>	0%	15%
Karmic Punishments in Hell	15%	15%
The <i>Five Precepts</i>	0%	5%
<i>Gratitude</i>	0%	5%

³ There are ten ways of merit-making in the perspective of Theravada Buddhism including 1) giving the four requisites (food, clothing, shelter, and medicine) to monks, 2) keeping the precepts to avoid evil karma, 3) providing a practice of meditation, 4) feeding monks or sponsoring the recitation or copying of religious texts, 5) rejoicing in the merit of others is an important act in itself, 6) looking after others e.g. parents, friends, acquaintances, etc., 7) showing appropriate deference, particularly to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, 8) giving the Dhamma to others, 9) listening to Dhamma in temples, and 10) understanding and practicing three marks of existence including impermanence, suffering and no-self (the Four Noble Truths), and mental states. The merit-making above is addressed by Crosby, K. (2014) *Theravada Buddhism: continuity, diversity, and identity*. Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.

As can be seen in Figure 5.3, *Ngao* presents nine teachings but stresses the *Karmic Law*, the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth*, and karmic punishments in Hell, while *NCD* presents only six of those teachings and highlights the concepts of *letting go* and the *Karmic Law*.

The concept of Double Functions identified by Althusser is employed to analyse and classify the Buddhist teachings presented in the dramas. Althusser argues that every state contains two ruling systems: 1) the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), a system which is explicitly conceived for subjugation and functions *by violence* through institutions including the police, the army, and the government; and 2) the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), a system which functions *by ideology* through institutions such as churches, political parties, and trade-unions. He notes that the RSA and ISA cooperate with each other; one can function as the primary apparatus while the other has a secondary role:

“I shall say rather that every State Apparatus, whether Repressive or Ideological, functions both by violence and by ideology.” (Althusser, 1971, p. 145)

He provides an example of the double functions: the army, the police, and the state compel their agents to achieve their mission *by repressive* means. At the same time, they also believe in and promote the *ideology*. In other words, the way to maintain an ideology is by using both subjection and non-subjection.

In this sense, Buddhist teachings contained in the dramas are in line with the concept of double functions and can be categorised into two types. They are: 1) teachings emphasising the role of karmic punishments which are *by subjection*, Repressive Buddhist Teachings (RBTs); 2) teachings suggesting a way to end feelings of sorrow or revenge in everyday life which are *by non-subjection*, Ideological Buddhist Teachings (IBTs).

1) The IBTs

The presentation of IBTs occurs more in *NCD* than in *Ngao* and includes five teachings: 1) *consciousness*, 2) *letting go*, 3) *forgiveness*, 4) no revenge is more honourable than the one not taken, and 5) *The Five Precepts*. The following section examines the concepts of *letting go* and *forgiveness* while the other three were discussed in previous chapters. The cases of Rinlanee’s and Eak’s ghosts are examples showing that those teachings can reduce and eliminate the effects of bad karma.

NCD attempts to suggest the way in which Buddhist teachings can reduce Rinlanee’s desire for revenge. That is, her ghost returns from the grave to the realm of the

living seeking revenge by killing her murderers because she herself is to hold the suffering from her death, desire, and vengeance. In short, the ghost always thinks about her emotions in which this call *atta* in Buddhism. The Buddha teaches that “there is no enduring, permanent soul or self” (Crosby, 2014, p. 114) in which *Atta* is defined as:

“*Atta* can mean self, being, ego, and personality. ... *atta* can signify [that which] the Buddha denied.” (Silananda, 1999, p. 7)

In addition to that, *atta* leads to the failure of Buddhism:

“[428] *Atta* (i.e. a stage of holding something or never stopping to do/think about activities/ideas) cannot be found in Buddhist saints. ... Therefore, sons, partners, animals, estate, valuable things cannot be found. ... The *atta* is a tool leading to the failure of Buddhist practices.” (Phra Trai Pi Dok 29: 4612-5616)

In other words, *atta* in this sense is a stage of strongly holding on to a thing or self. The drama presents a monk advising the ghosts that they can eliminate their *atta* through the practice of *letting go* (or *anatta* in the Pāli canon). *Anatta* refers to no-self or the absence a single entity (a soul or a thing) in which it is defined as:

“The *anatta* doctrine denies any and all psychological entities or agents inside the person.” (Silananda, 1999, p. 8)

In this way, *anatta* is a way to decrease a sense of egoism, by letting go of something, someone, or an emotion. Silananda (1999, p. 33) claims that “the Buddha was only directing us not to see the real self in the personal ego”. This concept is taken from the scriptures and is presented through many scenes in the drama. *NCD*'s scriptwriter points out that “the teaching is the core of the drama and is repeated until the last scene of the drama”. For instance, Rinlanee's ghost returns to the realms of the living because she has a strong desire for vengeance (her *atta*). A monk suggests to her to let go of her desire for revenge (her *anatta*); the suffering of the ghost will be eliminated if she can understand and practise this teaching.

Moreover, *NCD* offers a cure to the desire for vengeance by using the teaching of *forgiveness* (called *Ar Hoe Si Kam*). There are many scenes showing a monk attempting to guide Rinlanee's ghost to overcome her desire for vengeance through *forgiveness*. The key idea of the teaching is the act of forgiving somebody. In the scripture, it reveals that *forgiveness* overcomes the desire for vengeance:

“*Ar Hoe Si Kam* is another karma which does not have an effect on people as it is no longer active. It is similar to a dead plant which cannot grow and return to life. In other words, it is lapsed or defunct karma.” (Brahmagunabhorn, 2016, p. 249)

In the same vein, Eak’s ghost in *Ngao* is used to emphasise *forgiveness* both for others and for himself for the creation of good karma. After the ghost had confessed his sin and had forgiven others and himself, the physical character of Eak’s ghost visually changes from the disfigured body (Figure 5.4) to a glowing white body (Figure 5.5) as a visual sign of his merit-making or *Boon*.

Figure 5.4: The disfigured appearance of Eak’s ghost while desiring revenge



Figure 5.5: Eak's ghost after understanding and practising the Buddhist teaching of *forgiveness*



The IBTs contained in both dramas are constructed and presented as a tool for guiding audiences to deal with their problems or to overcome a desire for revenge in daily

life. In the interviews with the producers, they claimed that Buddhist contents represented in the dramas were intentional. The *NCD* scriptwriter said:

"I would say NCD needs to have Buddhist teachings. As I am a scriptwriter, I present contents that are not only entertainment but also Buddhist knowledge for audiences. I believe that ... if this drama can change audiences' attitudes or behaviours to do good karma, it means that the drama has been successful."

This quote reflects the expectation of the producers that they can persuade audiences to apply Buddhist teachings to solving or reducing problems in their everyday lives by promoting the concept of *Boon* in encouraging them to do good karma.

2) The RBTs

The representation of RBTs emphasises the idea of karmic punishments and that those who commit sin cannot escape punishment. The RBTs include four teachings: 1) the *Karmic Law*, 2) the *Cycle of Death and Rebirth*, 3) karmic punishments in Hell, and 4) *gratitude*. They feature in *Ngao* more so than in *NCD* because *Ngao* concentrates on the *King of Hell* and his role based on the Buddhist tales. Although there have been many versions of the *Ngao* story broadcast, the producer of the 2014 version claimed that it differed from previous products in the sense that:

"This version attempts to ask viewers to examine what good or bad karma are, how sinners are punished when they commit sins. ... Thus, this version stresses that sinners need to redeem their sins with violent punishments. If viewers get my message, they may understand that they should avoid sinning."

Ngao's scriptwriter added that many storylines represented in the dramas were inspired by Thai news reports:

"In particular, misbehaviour of sinners is inspired by news reports from Thai society. I try to make a connection between immoral actions and karmic punishments to let audiences know that those actions are counted as Barb [evil karma]."

Ngao attempts to draw on many types of crime happening in contemporary Thailand to illustrate the role of karmic punishments recorded in the scriptures, as shown in the following figure, in order to indicate that sinners are violently punished if they go against Buddhist teachings.

Figure 5.6: Crimes and karmic punishments from Buddhist scripture shown in *Ngao*

Featured in Episode(s)	Types of crime/evil karma	Karmic punishments shown in <i>Ngao</i>	Karmic penalties recorded in scripture
1	Illegal drugs	✓	-
2	Prostitution	✓	✓
3, 17	Hurting/killing people	✓	✓
4	Breaking the <i>Five Precepts</i>	✓	✓
7	Damaging Buddhism	✓	✓
13	Sexual abuse	✓	✓
15	Corruption	✓	✓

The figures above indicate that *Ngao* mostly presents crimes and karmic punishments that are explained through Buddhist knowledge recorded in the Buddhist scripture, especially karmic punishments. It is possible that idea behind presenting the karmic punishments is to encourage viewers to be aware of evil karma. *Ngao* implies that sinners are always punished in Hell whether they are in the stage of humanity, afterlife, or reincarnation (as discussed in Chapter One). One of the outstanding examples is the case of Ya and Kaew in *Ngao*, a married couple who run a brothel. Although they are not sentenced by law enforcement, they are sentenced to karmic punishments in Hell. The penalty for involvement in prostitution is described in scripture as:

“Women or men who are unfaithful to their partners need to redeem their sin. They will be attacked by animals, stabbed with shapened spears, and prevented from sleeping. Every morning, Hell’s jailers will force them into a large area where sinners are punished with hot water and fire.” (Phra Trai Pi Dok 28: 575-732)

In *Ngao*, Siri, one of Hell’s jailers, reads the verdicts and penal judgements in the karmic court:

“Two evil souls need to redeem their karma in the stage of *Ta-Ba-Na Hell*. They are to be stabbed with sharpened spears, burnt with fire, and mauled by hellhounds until they die. Sinners will be reborn and will be repeatedly punished in the same way.”

Figure 5.7: Hell's jailer using a sharpened spear to punish sinners



Moreover, the show's producers tried to popularise a new expression, '*go and redeem your sin*', to emphasise the RBTs and the idea that sinners must always redeem their sins. The phrase is used by the King of Hell in a loud and aggressive voice every time he makes a judgement in the karmic court. Kelly Thanapat, the actor playing the King of Hell, stated that the phrase was a way of reminding viewers to avoid evil karma:

"I am glad to hear that ... viewers like my phrase... I have heard that when some viewers hear this phrase they agree with the King of Hell. If people commit sin, they will get karmic punishments in return". (Kongtrakarn, 2014)

Furthermore, there are many scenes showing the King of Hell speaking to himself about how he does not wish to see humans committing evil karma:

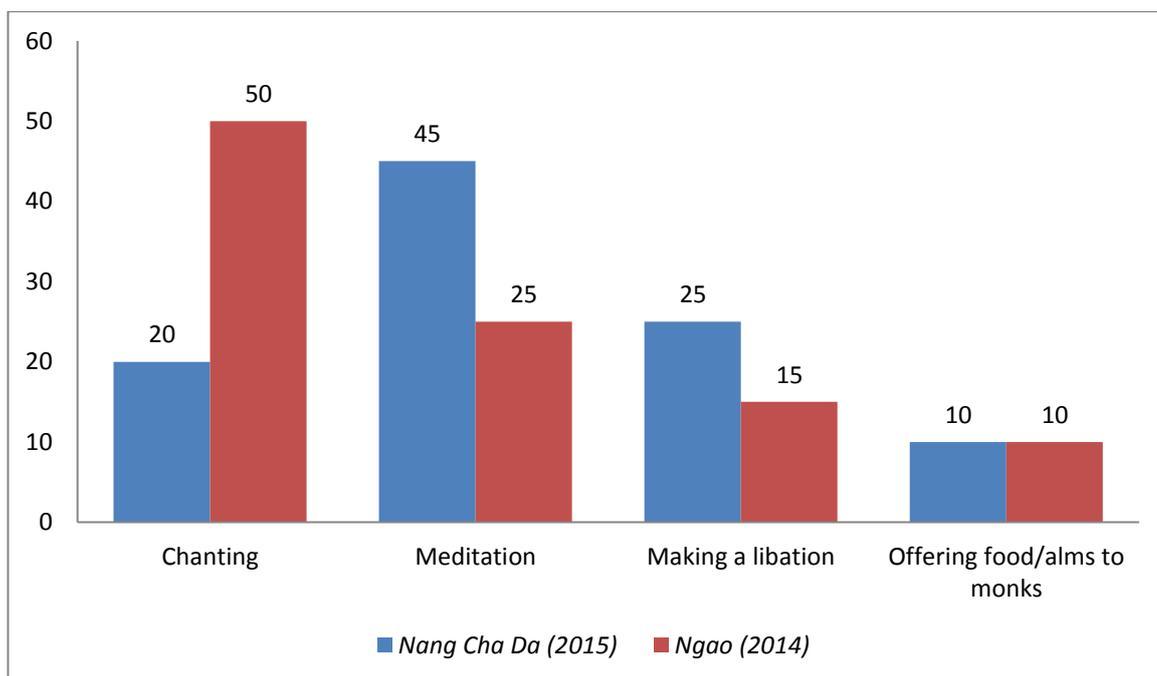
"So long as there is evil behaviour, sinning, attacking Buddhism, killing parents, monks, and people, I am not happy."

Through the IBTs and RBTs mentioned above, the dramas attempt to direct their audiences to solve their problems in daily life by following Buddhist teachings as the way to make good karma. At the same time, they warn their audiences against committing sin by the depiction of violent punishments in hell based on penalties recorded in scripture. As such, both the IBTs and RBTs contained in the dramas function in the same way as religious classes given by Buddhist monks in Thai temples. In short, they are just a new way of transmitting Buddhist teachings while the core principles remain unchanged.

5.1.1.2 Buddhist rituals

The results of this study demonstrate that Buddhist rituals shown in the dramas are constructed as a tool for highlighting the beauty of Thai culture to the younger cosmopolitan generation who may not normally attend religious ceremonies. More importantly, the rituals embodied in the dramas place emphasis on the concepts of *merit-making* and *transferring-merit* in line with the concept of good karma in Theravada Buddhism as discussed in the previous section. In both *NCD* and *Ngao*, characters who attend or participate in Buddhist rituals can communicate with the deceased and can transfer their *merit (Boon)* to ghosts through four rituals: 1) chanting, 2) meditation, 3) libation, and 4) offering food or alms to monks.

Figure 5.8: The percentage representation of Buddhist rituals in *NCD* and *Ngao*



According to the figures above, Buddhist chanting is the most common ritual in *Ngao*, while Buddhist meditation is the most common in *NCD*. The practices are used to show that Buddhist rites are a link between the profane and sacred worlds. Buddhist rites are considered as a way of creating *Boon* for *merit-making* in this world and transferring that *Boon* to ghosts in the next world. The following section explains the rites through the concept of Profane and Sacred worlds introduced by Durkheim (1961).

In Durkheim's view, rituals have a function in reinforcing social solidarity through a connection between laities in the realms of everyday life, what he calls the profane world, and the realms of religion, what he calls the sacred world:

"A society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world, and by the

fact that they translate these common ideas into common practices, is what is called a Church.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 44)

In addition to that, he also emphasises that rituals are an important part of religious myths and often involve holy objects or practices:

“Very frequently, the rite is nothing more than myth put in action; the Christian communion is inseparable from the myth of the Last Supper, from which it derives all its meanings.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 82)

In this way, Buddhist rituals are connected with the profane world in that Thai Buddhists believe that rituals allow *merit-making* and *transferring-merit* to other living beings and the deceased. This concept is represented in both dramas. A good example is Kwan in *Ngao* who is shown praying to the Buddha every night, offering food and alms to monks (Figure 5.9), and making a libation.

Figure 5.9: Kwan and Kaew offer alms to a monk to gain *Boon*.



Kwan dedicates her good karma (*Boon*) to the King of Hell because she knows that even the King of Hell needs to redeem his sins. She attends Buddhist rituals and performs the chanting, recorded in Buddhist texts and still practised in contemporary Thailand, to transfer her *Boon* to her loved ones, the King of Hell, her father, and her grandmother.

*“May all beings subject to birth, aging, illness, and death, be happy,
May all beings be free from exploiting each other,
May all beings be free from physical and mental sufferings,
May all beings live in peace and happily, free from all sufferings and dangers.”*

After the ritual has finished, the King of Hell, who has to redeem his own sin by drinking boiling water every hour, notices that the water does not hurt him and the colour of the water changes from a yellow to a green flame (Figure 5.10). The colour changing in this sense is a semiotic signification that *Boon* can effectively reduce suffering from karmic punishments.

Figure 5.10: Yellow and green flames are a media construction signifying a reduction in karmic punishments



The reason why the concept of *Boon* connected to those rituals is highlighted in the dramas may be an attempt to popularise the rituals because of the way Thai lifestyle has changed and modernised. Many younger and urban people may temporarily forget about Buddhist rituals; thus, the dramas can become a reminder that *Boon* is the way in which Buddhists should conduct their lives. The data gained from the interviews with the producers implied that the objective of including those rituals and an emphasis on the concept of *Boon* was to encourage children and young people to learn Buddhism through CGI animation and special effects. As *Ngao*'s producer stated:

"After young viewers have finished watching the drama, I hope that they would ask or persuade their parents to do religious rites. I realise that globalisation and modern Thai lifestyle have a tendency to cause young people to forget or ignore our beautiful Thai religious culture. ... Children, in their leisure interests, focus on technology rather than Buddhism. ... I would encourage them to maintain Buddhism."

This view of the producers' shows that because they are concerned about young people forgetting or ignoring Buddhist rituals, so they focus their product on the younger viewers. The concept of *Boon*, whether *merit-making* or *transferring-merit*, through Buddhist rituals is used in encouraging children to pay attention to Buddhism. The impact of this on audiences' behaviour will be discussed in Chapter Six.

5.1.2 Black magic

In contrast to the concept of *Boon*, the representation of involvement in black magic is as *Barb* (evil karma). The results of this study demonstrate that black magic contained in *Ngao* and *NCD* reflects the idea that shamans, who create sacred objects or provide unorthodox rites, and sinners, who use the objects to attack/defend ghosts or attend unorthodox rites, are considered to have sinned against Buddhism. As mentioned in the discussion on Althusser in Chapter Four, black magic in this sense is not an ideology because it is against Buddhism and is not supported by the government. Thus, I would call it '*a set of prohibited beliefs*'.

Black magic, in the dramas, is represented as a shaman's tool in warding off, defending against, or imprisoning vengeful ghosts and causing them to commit sins, and as a villain's tool for defending against ghosts. It is a sin and a cause of sin. Buddhist scripture, as noted in Chapter Four, explains that any involvement in black magic is evil karma. Black magic, according to Phra Trai Pi Dok 3: 4426-4445, is "a type of unorthodox practice which does not provide any benefit" (called *Ti Rath Charn WiCha*). In scripture, the Buddha notes that there is only one way to escape from their karma for those involved with black magic:

"[841] a person, who has knowledge of black magic, cannot escape from his/her karma if she/he does not practise morality. ... Therefore, any forms of the magical issue are useless. Good behaviour in relation to good karma is the truth." (Phra Trai Pi Dok 27: 3859-3869)

The black magic in the dramas is shown as a type of weapon that can be used for four functions: 1) subduing ghosts, 2) imprisoning ghosts, 3) defending against ghosts, and 4) supporting shaman or evil characters in making bad karma.

Figure 5.11: The four functions of black magic in *Ngao* and *NCD*

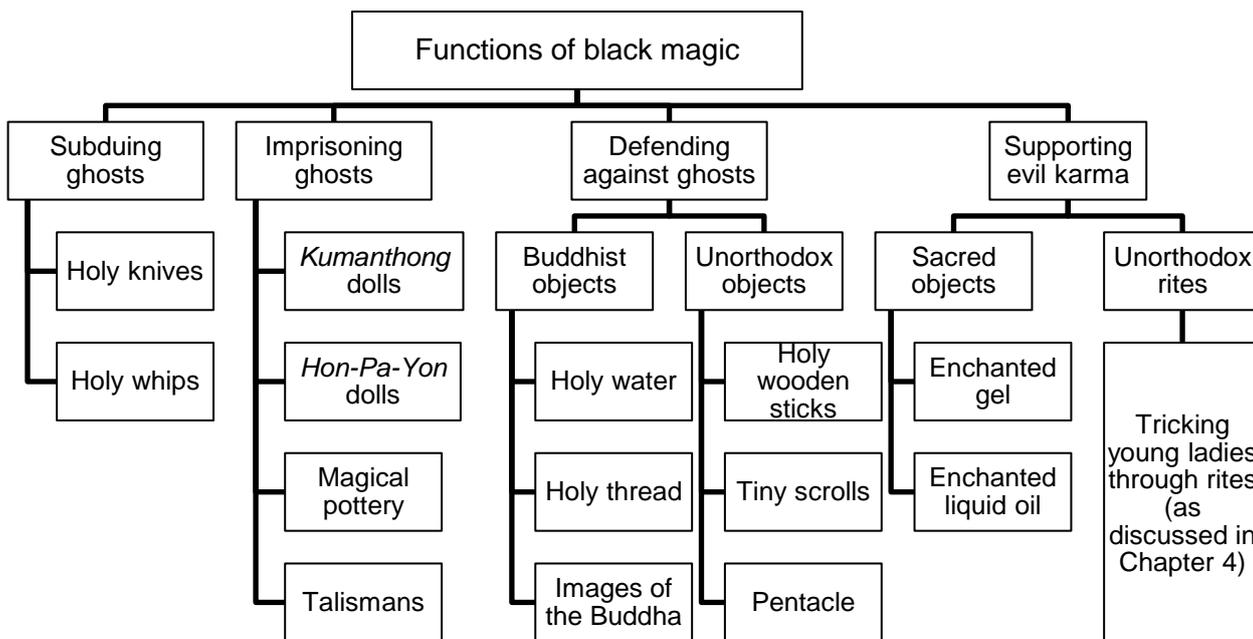
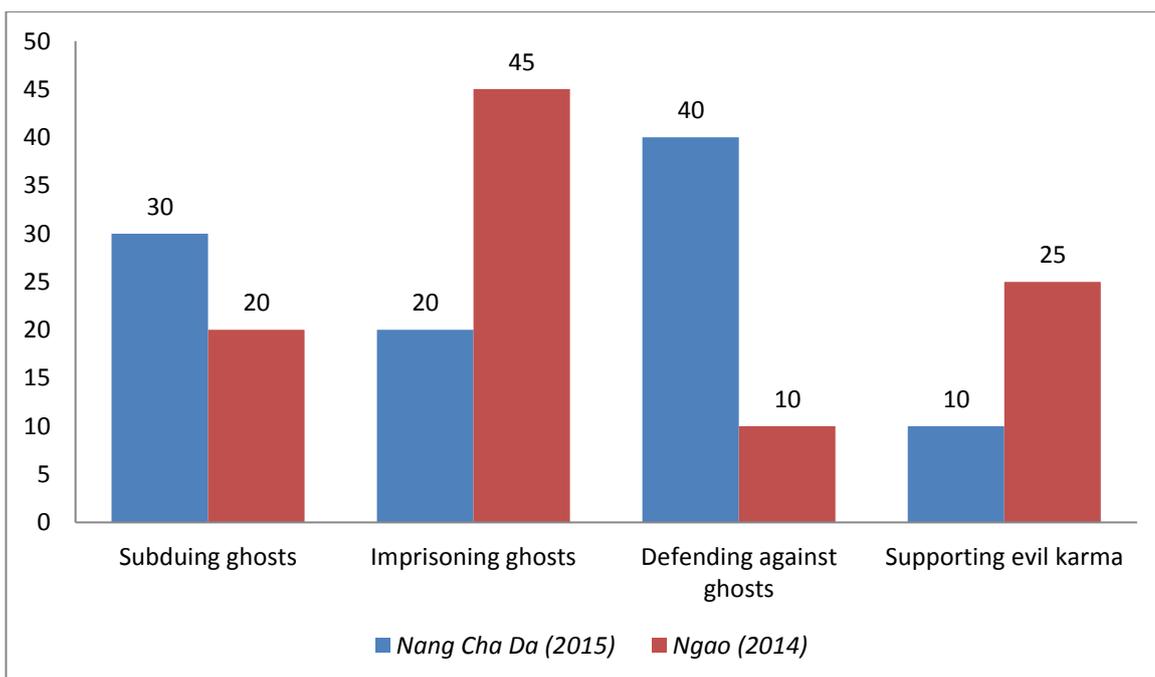


Figure 5.12: The percentage representation of functions of black magic in *NCD* and *Ngao*



According to Figure 5.12, the most common use of black magic in *NCD* is for defending against ghosts, while in *Ngao* it is as a tool for imprisoning ghosts. In line with the key point of representing black magic objects and rituals as against Buddhism, all four categories are acts of evil karma or *Barb*.

Figure 5.13: Holy knives



Figure 5.14: Holy whips



Figure 5.15: A *Kumanthong* doll



Figure 5.16: A *Hon-Pa-Yon* doll



Figure 5.17: Magical pottery



Figure 5.18: A talisman



Figure 5.19: A tiny scroll called *Takrut*



Figure 5.20: Pentacle



Figure 5.21: Holy wooden stick



Figure 5.22: Holy water called *Nammon*



Figure 5.23: Holy thread

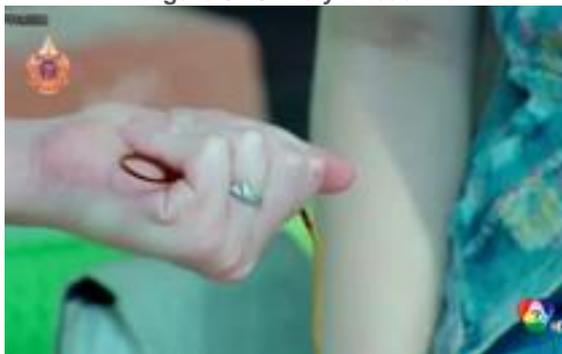


Figure 5.24: A necklace with the Buddha's image



Figure 5.25: Enchanted gel called *Si Phung Phray*



Figure 5.26: Enchanted oil called *Namman-Phray*



The data from the textual analysis and the interviews with the shows' producers indicate that there are two purposes to objects represented in the dramas: 1) black-magic objects and rituals are shown as evil karma and fraudulent, and 2) Buddhist sacred objects are shown as a reminder to realise good karma and not to engage with any supernatural powers.

Black magic objects and activities are presented as fraudulent and against Buddhism. For example, enchanted gel and oil (Figure 5.25-5.26) represented in the dramas are used as a tool for enchanting someone to fall in love against their will. If a sinner touches a victims' skin with the gel or oil, the power of black magic forces the victim to fall in love with the sinner against their will. Although the objects work temporarily, at the end of the dramas, the sinners who use them are not happy and are punished according to their evil karma. This idea is a response to the market in sacred objects and black magic in contemporary Thai society that is advertised across popular media and, in

particular, on television. This has led to a problem of public misunderstanding of the core values of Buddhism and fraudsters tricking people to buy sacred objects with large amounts of money. The size of the market in sacred objects caused an increase in Thai GDP in the year 2008. Many people fell victim to media hype and advertisements in the hope that the objects would bring them good luck. According to business reports in 2008 conducted by Srichampa (2014, p. 54), there was a high profit margin in selling old and new images of the Buddha and other sacred objects in Thailand with “the most famous amulet affecting GDP being the *Jatukahm Ramathep* which yields sales of about 20,000 million baht per annum”. During the years 2015-2016, there was a popular trend in owning sacred dolls known as *Tukata Look Thep*. Some believers brought their doll everywhere with them, treated it as if it was their child, and even booked airplane seats for their doll. They believed that the dolls would bring them fortune. Malikhao (2017, p. 31) asserts that the increase in a popularity of the dolls was because of how they were “portrayed by the mass media”. Sacred objects in these circumstances are viewed as negative products that lead to a misunderstanding of Buddhist teachings. As such, it is possible that the representation of sacred objects and orthodox rituals represented in *Ngao* and *NCD* is a construct to warn viewers that they are prohibited in Buddhism and that people should not get involved in their trade. In other words, the shows’ producers were concerned about this issue and as the scriptwriter of *Ngao* explained:

“A few years ago, there were big issues regarding sacred objects and black-magic rites in which women were deceived into having sex with shamans in the belief it would bring them good luck. This idea was presented in the drama as a cautionary tale. I combined the news with religious teachings to warn audiences that there is nothing to help them get good luck. ... so, at the end of the drama, they [sacred objects] are defeated by the law of karma.”

This idea is also emphasised and upheld by the government, the Ministry of Culture, and the Department of Religious Affairs in a policy that bans stores located in Buddhist monasteries from buying and selling sacred objects). The policy is described as:

“There has been propaganda broadcast in television programmes that tricks people into having faith in the power of sacred objects regardless of the teaching of Buddhism. This causes people to learn a misleading Buddhist concept. ... As Buddhist monasteries are only places for Buddhist activities, it is forbidden to buy, sell or advertise any kind of sacred objects. (Matichon, 2017)

Both dramas attempt to represent Buddhist sacred objects as a reminder of what good and bad karma is and to counter the idea that the objects have supernatural powers or bring their owners good luck. In other words, the objects should be used as a mental anchor to realise the law of karma and not as a weapon against ghosts or to increase

supernatural power. In *NCD* and *Ngao*, the representation of Buddhist sacred objects differs from other supernatural media products in Thailand. Srivibhata (2002) argues that holy water or *nammon*, as shown in Figure 5.22, in many versions of the story of Nak's ghost, is used as a weapon in subduing ghosts. In recent years, Buddhist sacred objects, such as holy water and holy thread, have been used in the Thai supernatural dramas *Ngern Pak Phii* (2018), *Mae Nak* (2016), and *Chet Wan Chong Wen* (2015) as weapons. In contrast, in *NCD* and *Ngao*, there are scenes where holy water, holy thread, and the Buddha's image (Figure 5.22-524) are presented as a Buddhist reminder rather than as a weapon. One example is the case of Rod, a character in *Ngao*. Rod gives necklaces with the images of the Buddha to other characters and tells them that:

"I received them from the abbot. These necklaces are to remind you of the Buddha's teachings. They are useless if you do not follow Buddhist teachings and practices."

This idea draws on Buddhist scripture in that Buddhism does not provide any objects or activities involving supernatural powers:

*"[25] The Buddha always rejects any objects, rituals, and activities which are a reference to *Ti Rath Charn WiCha* [black magic]. Sacred rites, objects, and talismans are not a practice of Buddhism." (Phra Trai Pi Dok 9: 220-238)*

The textual analysis indicates that the representation of sacred objects in the dramas is based on Buddhist scripture and that the producers realise that these objects go against the core of Buddhist teachings. These dramas differ from other supernatural media products in that the producers do not devalue or distort Buddhist values. In other words, the producers deliberately present orthodox Buddhist teaching. As the producer of *Ngao* producer stated:

"In Thai culture, we have many beliefs in sacred objects and rituals [as a result of our religious history]. However, based on my limited experience in Buddhist studies, I realised that Buddhism does not provide any sacred objects or even beliefs in supernatural power. The core of Buddhism is an emphasis on the law of karma."

As mentioned above, this demonstrates that the representation of sacred objects and unorthodox rites in *NCD* and *Ngao* is intended to inform audiences about: 1) the Buddha's thoughts, 2) how people can follow his thoughts, and 3) why audiences should know the original Buddhist teachings. The reason for this is that the producers want their audiences to learn the appropriate Buddhist knowledge from their dramas. The producers clearly try to avoid distorting original Buddhist ideas and always underline the core

teachings of Buddhism; in this case, that Buddhism always rejects all kinds of black magic. They attempt to warn their audiences about false beliefs in the power of black magic whether through sacred objects or unorthodox rites. So, the representation of black magic is employed by the producers as a tool to encourage the audience to rethink the concept of sacred objects and to reconsider what genuine Buddhist teachings are.

5.1.3. Thai myths

The key function of representing Thai myths in *NCD* and *Ngao* is to use the rich cultural beliefs about ghosts that exist in Thai society to promote the *Karmic Law*. The data gained from the analysis demonstrate that there are three categories of myths: 1) bad omens, 2) the supernatural power of ghosts, and 3) the appearance of ghosts. The detail and meaning of each category is explained in the following figure.

Figure 5.27: Characteristics of Thai myths represented in *NCD* and *Ngao*

Characteristics of Thai myths		Meaning
Bad Omens	Hearing a lizard cry five times before leaving the house.	A sign that bad fortune will occur in the near future, e.g. an accident, heart attack, sickness, death, or many other kinds of misfortune.
	Breaking a comb while combing hair in front of a mirror.	
	A photo frame of family members or loved ones falling to the floor and breaking for no reason.	
	If, in good light, somebody cannot see your head or the shadow of your head, Thais believe that you may die soon.	
Ghosts' supernatural power	<i>Phii-Kao-Sang</i>	People are unable to control the way that they think, speak, or behave. It is perceived as a form of ghostly possession (as discussed in Chapter Four).
	<i>Phii-Bang-Tar</i>	People cannot find or see things or places that others can see. Thais believe that the thing or place is hidden by a ghost.
	<i>Wan-Kon</i>	<i>Wan-Kon</i> is the day that monks have their heads shaved. Thais believe that ghosts can return to the world of the living on that day.
Ghosts' appearance	People can see ghosts at night by bending down and looking between their legs.	Thais believe that you can see ghosts or deceased people when looking between your legs at night.
	People born on a Wednesday night have the ability to see ghosts.	In Thai culture, some people believe that a person who was born on a Wednesday night can see or communicate with ghosts.

The characteristics of Thai myths shown in Figure 5.27 are discussed through the concept of Myth proposed by Barthes (1993). That is, the myths are implanted in Thai minds through history, tradition, and culture, so that Thais believe that they are genuine social values even though they cannot be proved scientifically. According to Barthes, as noted in Chapter Two, myths are the second level of reading texts and are a particular form of communication that signify a meaning beyond literal meaning. In other words, they are constructed and interpreted through socio-cultural contexts. As he states:

“Myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning: the arrow which is brought in order to signify a challenge is also a kind of speech ... We shall therefore take *language, discourse, speech*, etc., to mean any significant unit of synthesis, whether verbal or visual.” (Barthes, 1993, p. 108).

Additionally, he argues that myths can make particular signs appear as natural, eternal, or absolute because they are close to people in their cultural environment. As such, myths transform history into nature so that readers believe that pictures, articles, beliefs, traditions, and so on, are natural because they have always existed in their society. He argues that:

“Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion. ... The elaboration of a second-order semiological system will enable myth to escape this dilemma: driven to having either or unveil or to liquidate the concept, it will *naturalize* it.” (Barthes, 1993, p. 128)

In this way, the Thai myths shown in Figure 5.27 are interpreted as a part of cultural beliefs that have existed and engaged with the Thai way of life for a long time. They are widely used not only in Thai society but also in Thai media entertainment, especially the supernatural media genre. Thus, those myths are used as media signs to denote particular meanings, such as bad omens, approaching ghosts, and the presence of ghosts.

The data analysed from textual analysis and the interviews with the producers indicate that there are two interesting trends: 1) using existing Thai myths in line with their cultural meanings; and 2) creating new Thai myths to highlight the *Karmic Law*.

Firstly, Thai myths and their cultural meanings are used to show fear of ghost characters in *Ngao* and *NCD*. The producers attempt to influence the audience by creating television tropes drawing on Thai culture. An example is in the Thai myths regarding bad omens. According to Barai (2010), belief in omens is used by Thais as a way of predicting future events. For example, some people believe that, when leaving their house, if they hear the sound of a lizard crying five times, it means that they may

suffer misfortune. According to the reference book *Thai Culture* published by the Department of the Fine Arts, the belief is culturally interpreted as:

“Thais believe that if a lizard cries five times, there may be misfortune. The act of offering food or alms to monks (called *Thum Bun*) can counter it”. (Barai, 2010, cited in Saonayon, 2009)

This belief is constructed and represented in *NCD*. In the third episode, Tachin, the lead character, hears a lizard cry five times before he leaves his house. The producers draw on Thai culture and visual and vocal clues to create a television trope signifying danger. The conversation between the characters in this scene is one clue that evil things are coming:

Chat: One, two, three, four, and five.

Tachin: What are you counting for?

Chat: It is lizards crying. This is a sign of misfortune in traditional Thai beliefs. As far as I know, if you hear lizards crying five times before you leave your house in daytime, it means that something bad may happen to you.

Another example is the traditional belief called *Phii BangTar*. *Phii BangTar* is a compound word of *Phii*, meaning ghosts, and *BangTar*, meaning the action of hiding something. In Thai culture, this belief means that objects are hidden by the power of a ghost so that they cannot be found or seen in the normal way. This idea is represented through the appearance of Tachin’s house when he is under the power of Rinlane’s ghost. In the sixth episode, the ghost, who has transformed herself into a pretty woman, lives with her boyfriend Tachin; their house appears spotlessly clean, neat, and tidy (Figure 5.28). The clean house is an illusion created by the power of Rinlane’s ghost. In reality, the house is actually in a dirty and dilapidated condition but this is hidden from Tachin by the ghost’s power so that he sees the house in a clean condition.

Figure 5.28: A scene showing that Tachin is under the ghost's power



The house and furniture appear in a dirty and dilapidated condition (Figure 5.29) when Tachin is not under the power of Rinlanee's ghost. The producers attempt to link the traditional beliefs and television tropes by providing visual representations that allow the audience to easily recognise that myth.

Figure 5.29: A scene showing that Tachin is not under the ghost's power



Additionally, there are scenes in which conversations between characters reflect the concept of *Phii BangTar*. In the thirteenth episode, friends of Tachin come to his house where the dead body of Rinlanee is buried in a small garden. They try to find her body; however, the dead body cannot be found as the ghost's power has blinded them.

- Chat: I know that Rinlanee’s body is buried in this area.*
- Fuengfah: Her body cannot be found. Did we miss anything?*
- Atm: Is it possible that someone has made us blind?*
- Fuengfah: Sort of, the ghost does not want us to know that she is dead. So she is trying to hide her body.*

The reason why the representation of the ghosts in the dramas is constructed and based on Thai culture is that these beliefs have existed in Thai society for a long time and are easily understood. *NCD’s* scriptwriter confirmed that she had interviewed people to research these beliefs:

“One source of the ghostly signs used in the drama was by asking my friends and people who lived in both rural and urban areas. I also used the internet a lot to find the meanings and details of each belief, and searched with the keywords ‘Thai beliefs in ghosts’ on Google. It showed more than ten pages.”

In other words, the producers used the cultural resource of Thai myths and common beliefs to create a feeling of fear and to circulate a set of supernatural values. Besides, they found that the audience enjoyed the use of Thai myths in the show.

Secondly, the use of new representations and myths, such as the King of Hell’s physical appearance, is employed to underline the *Karmic Law*. This representation is a new media construction. It is only found in the drama *Ngao*. *Ngao* tries to create new myths to encourage viewers to be afraid of committing evil karma and to observe the *Karmic Law*. The analysis demonstrates that there are two types of the media-constructed myths (as shown in the figure below).

Figure 5.30: Types of media-constructed myths in *Ngao*

Types of media-constructed myths	Meaning
The black and white clothes of the King of Hell	The colours black and white stand for evil and good karma (as explained in Chapter Four).
The King of Hell’s standing position when he sees the soul of dead or dying people.	This belief has two elements: 1) the soul will be punished in Hell if the King of Hell is standing by the body’s head; or 2) the soul, will be invited to Heaven if he is standing by their feet.

Ngao presents media-constructed myths, for example, referring to the *Karmic Law* through the King of Hell’s physical appearance, by borrowing from the fact that the King of Hell is culturally perceived as a person who has the fairness of the karmic judge. This is

combined with television tropes, especially with regard to his clothing and his standing positions. As analysed in Chapter Four, the black and white clothes of the King of Hell stand for evil and good karma. That is, he meets evil souls or people when wearing a black suit but good souls or people when wearing a white suit. His clothes, therefore, remind the audience of karmic judgement and the dangers of committing evil karma. In other words, the drama is trying to persuade the audiences to imagine that they may meet the King of Hell in his black suit if they have sinned. Furthermore, his standing position in relation to other characters has a particular meaning new to Thai culture. For example, in one scene he appears besides a character who is in a coma. When he stands besides the person's head wearing his black suit (Figure 5.31), it means that he has come to take the soul for punishment in the karmic court. Conversely, when he stands beside a character's feet wearing his white suit (Figure 5.32), it signifies that he has come to take the soul to Heaven.

Figure 5.31: The King of Hell stands by the head of a person who is in coma.



Bad character

The King of Hell

Figure 5.32: The King of Hell stands by the feet of a person who in a coma.



This imagery is repeated in many episodes to warn audiences against committing evil karma and to encourage them to practise good karma instead. The idea is also emphasised through his dialogue:

“When the time of your death arrives, I want to be standing by your feet. Do not let me be standing by your head. Absolutely not!”

The reason why the producers created this brand-new myth rather than using an existing one is that they wanted to emphasise the *Karmic Law* in a modern way that would capture the audience’s attention. The scriptwriter for *Ngao* said that:

“Actually, this idea is not a reference to any cultural Thai beliefs. ... Firstly, this idea originated in the novel ‘Ngao’. Secondly, this is a challenge for the viewers to find the meaning and its origin.”

This indicates that the producers wanted to persuade their audience to learn Buddhist teachings through a form of entertainment. Although the ideas of the King of Hell’s suit and his standing positions are a media construction, the imagery still highlights traditional Buddhist teachings. This is similar to my analysis in Chapter Four that the modern version of the King of Hell is merely a tool to attract an audience to watch the show while promoting the core of Buddhism.

5.2 The importance of Buddhism in Thai supernatural television dramas

To understand the reason why Thai supernatural television dramas significantly underline Buddhist teachings, they must be examined through the concept of Infrastructure and Superstructure introduced by Marx and developed by Althusser (1971). As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Althusser agrees with Marx that an ideology is a kind of constructed or imagined idea that directs individuals or social groups to follow regulations and social norms. Marx suggests that the superstructure, that is, the government, has the power to determine social values through a process of productions in a society. This idea is also accepted by Althusser. Moreover, Althusser adds that the key players who set social and cultural norms within a society act at one of two levels: 1) the politico-legal level, that is, government and law; and 2) the ideological level, that is, the bourgeois and ruling classes. At the heart of this edifice is the cooperation between the two levels so that they can establish, change or maintain ideology in society through reproduction:

“I believe that it is possible and necessary to think what characterizes the essential of the existence and nature of the superstructure *on the basis of reproduction*. Once one takes the point of view of reproduction, many of the questions whose existence was indicated by the spatial metaphor of the edifice, but to which it could not give a conceptual answer, are immediately illuminated.” (Althusser, 1971, p. 136)

I will utilise Althusser’s framework to address the reasons why Thai dramas need to include Buddhist teachings and encourage audiences to follow those teachings. There are two reasons: 1) state power, whereby the government compels media companies to follow state policies; and 2) the text producers’ belief that they have a responsibility to promote Buddhist teachings.

5.2.1 State power

The reason why Buddhist ideologies are represented and emphasised in Thai supernatural television dramas is, arguably, a result of state power. The Thai government retains strict control over television broadcasting with government regulations playing a crucial role in deciding what the main ideological message and contents of television dramas should be. In particular, the *Act on Organisation to Assign Radio Frequency and to Regulate the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Services 2000* is an important element in controlling the content of broadcasts. Religion is one of the elements identified and regulated in this law. Section 26 sets out five conditions regulating broadcasts:

The permission to use radio frequency for the purpose of sound broadcasting or television broadcasting services shall be carried out with due regard to the maximum public interest, including:

- (1) To promote education, religion, art and culture,
- (2) To promote science, ICT, and the environment,
- (3) To promote agriculture and local business,
- (4) To promote national security and public safety, and
- (5) To promote a good understanding between the state and the people, and to provide useful information to the handicapped, the underprivileged, and any other information that serves the public interest. (The National Legislative Assembly, 2000).

Additionally, the state Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) is responsible for controlling and penalising TV stations that violate broadcasting laws. This organisation demands that all television stations and media providers operate in accordance with the regulations. The *Ethical Guidelines and Self-Regulation for Thai Broadcasting* covers all television genres, especially the genre of Television Drama Programme. In the section on television dramas, the key purpose of such programmes is stipulated as follows.

Firstly, this genre, which benefits the public interest, is defined to promote educational knowledge among audiences. e.g., general knowledge, science, ethics, morality, culture, social developmental issues, and love relating to a good relationship within a family. (The National Legislative Assembly, 2015)

Furthermore, the state organisations, the NBTC, the Ministry of Culture, and the Department of Religious Affairs, monitor content on both radio and television broadcasts. These organisations function as watchdogs penalising media producers who break government regulations, especially producers who create contents considered offensive to Thai Buddhism, culture, art, or tradition.

Focusing on the representation of religious contents, the Department of Religious Affairs has the main role in investigating inappropriate contents appearing on media screens, social networks, and at social events. The main policies are published on the official website at www.dra.go.th, and include:

Firstly, the Department cultivates religious knowledge for residents, especially students and children ... Secondly, the Department encourages residents to have a sense of religious behaviour ... Lastly, the Department uses aspects of religion (i.e., teachings and practices) to reduce social problems or religious conflict in Thailand. (Department of Religion, 2016).

As can be seen above, state agencies play a significant role in legislating against unapproved broadcasting content and effectively grant the state power to act as a

monopoly in controlling and limiting content. Thus, it seems that the representation of Buddhist teachings and the position of Buddhism in society shown in the dramas are under the control of the state.

5.2.2 The responsibility of text producers

The second reason why Buddhist teachings are highlighted in Thai supernatural television dramas is that text producers believe they have a responsibility to promote Buddhist knowledge among both Thai children and adults. The data gained from the interviews with the producers demonstrate that all of them are very proud to be a part of Thai Buddhism; thus, they attempt to promote and protect Buddhism as much as they can. As the scriptwriter for *Ngao* said:

“I feel very proud to be a part of the team disseminating Buddhism in Thailand. ... Not only did rewards come to the organisation, but also we were Buddhist evangelists. That was an excellent opportunity for me.”

Additionally, they perceived that their participation in producing the dramas *NCD* and *Ngao* was good luck because there were so few people promoting Buddhist teachings through supernatural television dramas. The scriptwriter of *NCD* responded that:

“I was chosen (as a scriptwriter for the drama) by the CEO of the company. I was glad to know that I was a part of a production team that was among the top three television companies in Thailand. Personally, I am so glad that I can use my Buddhist knowledge to promote Buddhism.”

Moreover, they believed that the dramas were a good way of teaching Buddhist ideas through concrete examples. The producer of *Ngao* revealed:

“The main problem is that some Thais, in particular, children, avoid the observance of Buddhist teachings and rituals. They do not understand what the Buddha’s thoughts are, or find the teachings difficult to understand. ... Thus, I would like to present Buddhist knowledge that is easy to read. ”

Furthermore, they noted that Thailand has a modern and complex society where people pay more attention to Western than Thai culture. They understood that the supernatural media genre is designed to gain high ratings regardless of the religious content. Thus, they created the dramas as a media product to reinforce Buddhism. As the producers of *NCD* claimed:

"I chose to produce this drama because there were Western supernatural media available during that period [during the years 2012-14]. In that period, there was no Thai supernatural television drama to make a link between beliefs in ghosts and Buddhism. NCD, finally, was released in that year and was a success not only in television ratings but also in religious teachings."

It is possible that one of the reasons they included Buddhist teachings in their dramas was to win awards, although all of them rejected that and said they did not expect any awards. They claimed that the dramas were produced solely due to their sense of social responsibility and Buddhist interests. Nonetheless, *Ngao* has been awarded the *Rakong Thong Prize* for the best television drama programme reflecting social responsibility which is presided over by a state representative, His Excellency Air Chief Marshal Kamthon Sindhvanada (Channel 7, 2015). This award is made by the Assembly of the Radio, Television, and Newspapers Authority of Thailand, a not-for-profit organisation, in cooperation with state institutions (Channel 7, 2014b; KrungthepTurakij, 2016). Similarly, *NCD* has been awarded the *Pikanasuan Prize* for the best television drama programme promoting good Thai culture and morality. This award is presided over by His Excellency General Pichitr Kullavanijaya (KrungthepTurakij, 2016). The awards seem to play an important role in encouraging the producers to create more dramas that are in harmony with Buddhist ideology.

Interestingly, the reason why the dramas *Ngao* and *NCD* are popular and are not rejected by viewers may be answered by examining the case of the supernatural film *Arbat* (2015) which was banned by the government and opposed by Thai Buddhists. The film presents the story of a young man who is forced by his parents to become a novice but commits many monastic misdeeds. When the film trailer was broadcast, many devotees, and religious and cultural organisations asked the Ministry of Culture to ban the film because they saw it as offensive to Buddhism. The film was investigated by the Film and Media Screening Committee, the state agency responsible for approving and licensing films (Wonganan, 2015). The film was not approved and was judged to contravene Section 29 of the *Film and Video Act 2008*, that is, it could lead to social conflict and offend Buddhists (DailyNews, 2015). The government provided four reasons for the ban: 1) the portrayal of novices relating to violent conduct, 2) the portrayal of novices drinking alcohol, 3) the portrayal of novices in sexual relationships, and 4) depicting scenes which were disrespectful to the Buddha (Poo Jatkarn Daily 360 Degree, 2015). Many protesters claimed that the film intentionally devalued Buddhism in Thailand. There are some interesting points regarding the idea that Buddhism is the dominant ideology in Thailand and should not be devalued by media institutions. Satien Vipormaha, the leader of a group called the Academy for Buddhism, said in an interview with a reporter from the online newspaper *Khaosod*:

“[The film] is blasphemy against Buddhism. ... Although our group has not seen the entire film, judging from the trailer, there are some scenes that risk offending Buddhism, such as the scenes of the novice touching a woman’s cheeks, or the monk pulling a woman into his residence.” (KhaoSod, 2015)

In contrast, the dramas *Ngao* and *NCD* are not banned by the government nor are they rejected by Thai Buddhists because they uphold Buddhism and encourage people to follow Buddhist teachings and rituals. Buddhist content in the dramas is not devalued or distorted; rather, it is used as an educational tool in teaching Buddhist ideas through a form of entertainment.

To explore the wider context of Thai culture, Buddhism is one of the three pillars of Thai identity as explained through the symbolism of the national flag. According to The National Identity Office (2011), each colour of the flag has a particular meaning which refers to each of the three primary institutions of Thailand: 1) the nation, 2) religion, and 3) the monarch. Red refers to the nation, the people and state of Thailand; white stands for religion, in effect, Buddhism as the dominant religion; and blue represents the Thai monarchy. (The National Identity Office, 2011).

Figure 5.33: The national flag of Thailand



This symbolism represents the importance of the religious institution among Thais. Although the name of the religion is not officially identified, white can stand for the country’s main religion, Buddhism. This shows how Buddhism has importance for the Thai people and explains its importance in Thai media. In other words, Buddhism is perceived as part of the living ideology in Thailand.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Thai supernatural television dramas act as an excellent tool for highlighting, promoting, and maintaining Buddhist practices. They represent three main concepts: 1) Buddhism, 2) black magic, and 3) Thai myths. The representation of Buddhism underlines both teachings and practice. It encourages

audiences to practise good karma, by drawing on the concept of *Boon* in Theravada Buddhism, and to visualise how sinners are punished if they commit sins, which is in line with the concept of *Barb*. In other words, Buddhist knowledge represented in the dramas is part of the dominant ideology in accordance with Althusser's framework and claims that ideology requires a mode of reproduction and transmission through a vehicle, in this case, the media. As argued in Chapter Four, Thai supernatural television dramas are an educational tool for teaching Buddhism through a form of entertainment. Buddhist teachings can be recognised as the dominant ideology. Black magic, on the contrary, is presented in opposition to Buddhism. That is, dramas reflect the prohibition in Buddhism on sacred objects and unorthodox rites that lead to evil karma and unhappiness. The dramas examine: 1) what the Buddha's thoughts are, 2) how people can follow his thoughts, and 3) why audiences should know the genuine Buddhist teachings. In short, black magic is represented as evil karma, which should be avoided. Thai myths regarding ghosts represented in the dramas are constructed to create fear by drawing on Thai culture and beliefs about ghosts and to emphasise the *Karmic Law*. Although the producers create new myths about the King of Hell, they do not change the core idea of the King of Hell and the fairness of karmic judgment. As such, I argue that the three concepts represented in the dramas are similar to the Buddhist classrooms thought by monks in Thai temples. They are developed and produced as new material for teaching Buddhism through a form of popular entertainment that persuades both children and adults not to forget Buddhist teachings.

It is difficult to ignore how the Thai government, through its policies, and the show producers, through their sense of social responsibility, play a significant role in promoting Buddhism through Thai supernatural television dramas. This is in accordance with Althusser's argument that both the politico-legal and ideology levels of society establish, circulate, and maintain norms in society through a mode of reproduction. As such, I argue that the government and producers continue to promote Buddhist teachings through their products because Buddhism is the dominant ideology in Thailand.

Chapter Six: Audiences and Supernatural Representations in Thai Supernatural Television Dramas

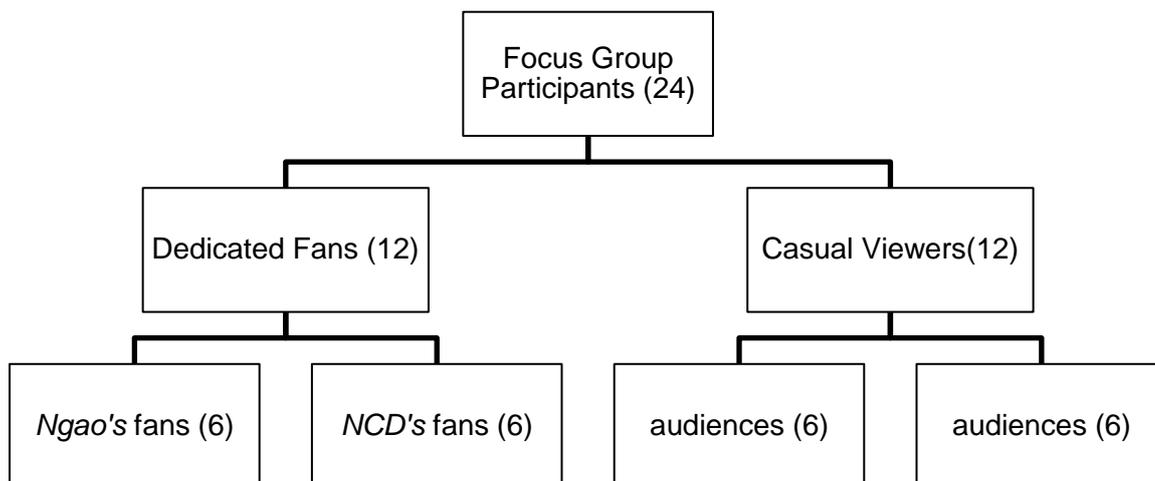
The thesis, *The Construction of Social Reality through the supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences*, explores how Thai supernatural television dramas are constructed and why they are used as a tool in promoting Buddhism in Thailand. This thesis attempts to find those answers through a method of triangulation: 1) examining TV texts; 2) in-depth interviews with TV scriptwriters and producers; and 3) focus-group interviews with TV audiences. Chapters Four and Five above were a textual analysis examining content presented in the dramas *Ngao* and *Nang Cha Da (NCD)* and comparing them to Buddhist teachings recorded in the Buddhist scripture. These chapters examined how the dramas were linked with Buddhism. This chapter will examine the reasons why television producers present Buddhist ideology in their dramas and why TV audiences are open to this Buddhist ideology, preferring to watch those dramas which contain Buddhist references rather than those without Buddhist content.

Data analysed in this chapter was obtained from two kinds of research collection: 1) in-depth interviews with TV scriptwriters and producers; and 2) focus groups with TV audiences. To understand the reasons why television producers produce dramas with a Buddhist ideology, in-depth interviews with the producers were an appropriate way to explore the question. According to Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 109), the key feature of conducting in-depth interviews is to seek for “information on individual, personal experience from people about a specific issue or topic”. In addition to that, open-ended questions are a useful technique in searching for detailed individual information (Kvale, 2008). Therefore, the method of in-depth interviewing of the producers was used in this thesis and focused on four key informants including the main producers and scriptwriters.

Berg (2009) suggests that the focus group interview is a good way to collect data from a large number of people rapidly and conveniently. In addition, Hennink *et al.* (2011, p. 159) suggest that understanding audience perspectives can facilitate detailed and deeper information about their ‘decision-making’ processes. To understand audiences reading of content represented in Thai supernatural television dramas, focus groups were conducted for this study. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between dedicated fans and casual viewers, or ‘fandoms’ and ‘non-fandoms’, with Henry Jenkins (2013) arguing that fandoms are made up of people who prefer to consume texts many times and are ‘active media audiences’ – people who are not only text readers but also text producers. To examine the concept of the active media audiences as suggested by Jenkins, the focus group interviews in this study were divided into two groups: 1) two

groups of dedicated fans; and 2) two groups of casual viewers. The focus groups therefore included four groups of television audiences as shown in the figure below.

Figure 6.1: The participants of the focus groups



The questions for the focus group interviews focused on three main areas: 1) the participants' Buddhist background; 2) the audiences' perspectives on and interpretations of Buddhist teachings embodied in the dramas; and 3) the impact of the dramas on the audiences' cultural views and behaviours. After the completion of all the focus groups, a detailed transcription of the video-recorded interviews took place. For the process of data analysis, a framework was adopted to facilitate thematic categorisation in accordance with an article, *Focus-group Interview and Data Analysis*, by Rabiee (2004). She suggests a method of analysing focus group data through four stages. The first stage is a familiarisation with the data that can be achieved by listening to tapes and reading transcriptions many times. The second stage is to develop a thematic framework by writing notes and ideas arising from the texts and beginning to develop categories. The third stage involves the completion of indexing, sifting the data, highlighting and sorting out quotes, and making comparisons. The final stage is the provision of charts, diagrams, and explanations in line with the developed thematic framework. After these four stages were completed, the data analysis was developed into this thesis chapter.

This chapter will discuss the responses of television drama producers and audiences to Buddhist teachings presented in the two supernatural dramas being examined. It will also examine the use of television drama as a tool for spreading Buddhist knowledge among audiences (as discussed in Chapter Four) and for promoting the continuity of Buddhist ideology in Thailand (as discussed in Chapter Five). It will include discussion of the interviewees' views on: 1) Thai supernatural television dramas as a tool in promoting Buddhist teachings; 2) the interpretation of Buddhist teachings by both the

producers and the viewers; and 3) the cultural impact of these dramas on audiences' attitudes and behaviour.

6.1 Thai supernatural television dramas as a tool in promoting Buddhist teachings

“So, in postmodern culture, “culture” has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.” (Jameson, 1984, p. x)

In Jameson's argument in his classic book *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, culture has turned into a product or commodity; especially illustrations, radio and television advertising, television series, and Hollywood films. He suggests that the main motivation for turning culture into commodity was to support the growth of industrial capitalism (Jameson, 1984). He refers to postmodern culture as pastiches that should be considered as products and are developed in response to customer satisfaction. Thus, Jameson claims that many parodies, i.e. pieces of artistic works which are created for business objectives rather than pure artistic messages, are made solely to support capitalists and entrepreneurs. In recent years, Lash (1990, pp. ix, 2) has claimed that 'postmodernism is, patently, no longer trendy' and 'lose[s] entirely its cult values' in the late 1970s and early 1980s because of a theoretical movement in that 'there is dismissal by much of the Marxist left'. For this study, however, the idea of postmodern pastiche is still valid.

As mentioned in the literature review chapters above, many supernatural television series, such as *Most Haunted*, *Supernatural*, *Mad Mad House*, and *Revelation*, are produced for commercial purposes and to satisfy viewer demand. These supernatural television series are a good example of postmodern pastiche. In the book *Paranormal Media* by Hill (2010), the author conducted an in-depth interview with Richard Woolfe, the Channel Controller of Five and former controller of Living and Sky TV channels. The transcription of the interview indicates that *Most Haunted* has been produced for more than a decade and works as a tool of postmodern pastiche in attracting audiences to watch the show. As Woolfe states:

“It is ten years since *Most Haunted* started and we haven't captured any ghosts on camera and there is still the fantastic ability for the show to attract audiences ... *Most Haunted* remains the brand leader in this type of genre”. (Hill, 2010, p. 140)

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter Two, both Wilson (2009); Engstrom and Valenzano (2014) claim that the series *Supernatural* is a clear example of a media product as postmodern commodity. That is, the show combines 'pop culture' and 'fictional elements' to attract audiences to watch the show.

In Jameson's view, one of the key features in defining postmodern pastiche is a product that rejects traditional models of depth. Jameson calls it a '*depthlessness*' which means that a product or parody is an empty message, without any deep, or the absence of meaning:

"In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. ... Pastiche is thus blank parody." (Jameson, 1984, p. 17)

An example of this concept was given in the case study of the television series *Supernatural* in Chapter Two above. Engstrom and Valenzano (2014) claim that this television series is a product which contains only a superficial level of religious core. That is, although there are several scenes where characters in the series employ Christian religious objects, such as holy water and crucifixes, the programmes do not reflect the core ideas of Christianity. Moreover, Wilson (2009) adds that *Supernatural* is an entertainment product which is produced in response to its fans demand regardless of any religious principles.

In this thesis, it will be argued that Thai supernatural television dramas are different in that they employ a form of postmodern pastiche or collage to attract audiences to watch the shows but they are rooted in Buddhist teachings. There were nine Buddhist teachings represented in the drama *Ngao* and six teachings in the drama *NCD* as mentioned in Chapter Five above. The following paragraph will focus on the key Buddhist teachings discussed in the interviews. They are, in *Ngao*, an emphasis on the teaching of '*Karmic Law*' as represented through the character of the King of Hell, influenced by Dracula in, for example the version by Frank Langella from the 1977 Broadway production and the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992); and, in *NCD*, a stress on the teaching of '*letting go*' which is presented through the death scenes of the dramas' villains in a style that refers to the American movie series *Final Destination*.

Focusing first on the teaching of the '*Karmic Law*' through the character of the King of Hell in *Ngao*, the majority of the focus group participants perceived that the physical appearance of the King of Hell in *Ngao* was similar to the traditional appearance of Dracula but that the core of his character is a reflection of Buddhist teaching. In the

drama, the King of Hell was interpreted and perceived (by the focus groups) as Dracula because he had white skin; was tall, thin, and handsome; and had sex appeal. In addition to his facial expression, he had a long nose, high eyebrows, sharp teeth, and a cruel-looking mouth. This character is similar to Dracula as described by Hughes (2009):

“His face was a strong – a very strong – aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead, and hair growing scantily round the temples but profusely elsewhere. His eyebrows were very massive, almost meeting over the nose, and with bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion.” (Harker, cited in Wilson, 2009, p. 32)

Hart (1992) adds that Dracula always dresses in a black suit which is a distinct symbol expressing the entity of Count Dracula. There is a clear similarity in the style of Frank Langella as Dracula in the 1977 Broadway production and the King of Hell in the drama *Ngao* with both characters appearing in a black western suit and black cape.

Figure 6.2: Dracula, in the 1977 Broadway production, dressed in a black suit (Hart, 1992)



Figure 6.3: The King of Hell, in the drama *Ngao*, dressed in a black suit



Additionally, a minority of the focus groups perceived the King of Hell as similar to Dracula in the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Hart (1992) suggests that the key characteristic of Dracula's physical appearances include wearing a suit and sunglasses in this version. In the focus group interviews, the participants noticed that the King of Hell in the drama always dressed in a formal suit and sometimes wore sunglasses. Typical visual representations of Dracula (Figure 6.4) and the King of Hell (Figure 6.5) are depicted below. With regard to the meaning of the colour of the King of Hell's suit, as described in the chapters on textual analysis, all participants suggested that the King of Hell wore black clothes as a reference to the idea of evil

karma. He always dressed in black to meet or punish sinners in the drama. For this reason, the viewers perceived that the black colour of his suit represented the idea that no one can escape the results of karma and was in line with the concept of *Karmic Law*. Thus, the viewers considered that the King of Hell's clothes were a form of postmodern collage that contained traditional Buddhist teaching. As one of the participants said:

“Although the King of Hell in the drama did not wear traditional Thai clothes, the colour of his suit included a Buddhist meaning. That is, the black suit can refer to the idea of evil karma. ... I think the main focus of the suit invokes the concept of Karmic Law.”

Figure 6.4: The visual representation of Dracula in the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Hart, 1992)



Figure 6.5: The visual representation of the King of Hell in the drama *Ngao*



In addition to the visual aspect, the focus group results demonstrated that there were two other plot elements in the drama reflecting an emphasis on the *Karmic Law*: 1) the King of Hell's duty to seek out the next King of Hell; and 2) the romantic feelings of the King of Hell.

Ngao presents a new role for the King of Hell which differs from Thai tradition. The main duty of the King of Hell in traditional Thai culture involves the making of karmic judgements on sinners in a karmic court in Hell. However, in the drama, the additional duty of the King of Hell is to search for a person who can become the next King of Hell. The drama shows Mr Watsawat, the current King of Hell, as preparing for retirement. He therefore needs to look for an appropriately qualified person, someone he considers as a person who balances both good karma and bad karma, to be the next King of Hell. Based on my own exploration of Buddhist texts, the duties and conditions of the King of Hell mentioned above are not set out in the Buddhist scriptures; they are purely a construction of the drama's scriptwriters and producers. Focusing on the Buddhist teaching behind those representations, as mentioned in Chapter Four, the need to find a person to carry

on the role of the King of Hell as presented in the drama is promoting the idea that '*the Karmic Law will never end*' because it will be continued under the next King of Hell's supervision. To investigate how the focus group participants understood the teaching of *Karmic Law* behind this form of postmodern pastiche, I asked the question '*what is the meaning of the King of Hell's additional duty represented in the drama?*' The majority of the participants suggested that the new duty of the King of Hell referred to the idea of the *Karmic Law*. As one participant said:

"At the end of the drama, Mr Watsawat is still the King of Hell and has not retired. The meaning of the additional duty shown in the King of Hell's character refers to the infinite/ endless Karmic Law."

The second point in relation to the King of Hell in *Ngao* emphasising the teaching of *Karmic Law*, is the representation of the romantic feelings of the King of Hell's character. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the King of Hell, as a product of postmodern collage, is presented as a mixture of the key characteristics of the King of Hell in traditional Buddhist teaching and more modern human feelings, in particular, the emotion of love. This is a very different aspect to his character than in representations from a traditional Buddhist perspective. In this respect, *Ngao* shows the King of Hell's romantic feeling of love and concern regarding Kwan, the female protagonist who is symbolic of goodness in the drama. The drama presents many scenes showing the King of Hell's desire to be in love with Kwan. There are many scenes where the King of Hell, appearing in human form, meets Kwan and each scene is accompanied by theme music in the form of a love song. In the scene where she dies, the King of Hell expresses a sense of grief which signifies his sense of love for her. Although the drama attempts to represent the King of Hell in a modern rather than a traditional form, it still maintains the sacred representation of the King of Hell as symbolic of rectitude. At the end of this drama, the King of Hell cannot fulfill love for humans and still strictly execute his duties. The drama thus combines an expression of romantic emotion with a representation of the King of Hell that it is not against traditional Buddhist ideas. This dramatic love story ends as the King of Hell can never be in a romantic relationship with a human woman. During the focus group interviews, the majority of the participants agreed that the fictionalised King of Hell shown in the drama still highlights the teaching of *Karmic Law*. As one of the participants stated:

"The modern King of Hell attempts to uphold the Karmic Law although there are many scenes where the King of Hell takes care of Kwan. In particular, in the last episode, the King of Hell lets her die although he has the ability to give her life. This scene indicates that he is a karmic caretaker."

In the interviews conducted with the producers of *Ngao*, although the *Ngao* producer acknowledged that “the character of the King of Hell was inspired by Dracula in the film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*”, he also added that the key message behind this character was ‘an emphasis on the teaching of *Karmic Law*’. This teaching was represented through scenes where sinners were punished with heavy sentence such as being made to drink extremely hot water called *Nam Kra Tha Thong Dang*, being hit or stabbed with sharp spears, or being burnt with a fire called *Fai NaRok* (as explained in Chapter Four). These punishments were repeated in every single episode in the hell scenes as, the scriptwriter, explained that the scenes of punishment were emphasised: “to warn viewers to avoid religious sins through a scene where sinning characters were punished in line with the *Karmic Law*.” The producers stressed that this way of presenting the punishment scenes was to express the negative results of sinning by showing the sinners being violently punished like tormented prisoners of war. These scenes were inspired by the American film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) directed by Steven Spielberg who loathed all kinds of war because of his father’s experience in the Second World War (Mottram, 2012). As the *Ngao* producer stated:

“I acknowledge that the scenes where sinners were suffering from karmic punishments in hell were inspired by the film Saving Private Ryan directed by Steven Spielberg. ... In Ngao, throughout those scenes, viewers are shown what the results of avoiding the Karmic Law are.”

The scriptwriter also revealed that both the physical appearance of the King of Hell and his romantic feelings in *Ngao*, were employed as a way of attracting audiences to watch the show and then as a way of adding an emphasis to the Buddhist teaching:

“To emphasise the Karmic Law through many scenes in Ngao, first the viewers need to enjoy watching the drama. Then they may learn at least one of the teachings through the characters conversations or the superimposed texts shown at the end of each episode.”

Based on my interviews with the focus groups, it is interesting to note that none of the participants resisted or rejected the fictionalised representation of the King of Hell shown in *Ngao* but actually preferred to watch this postmodern version rather than a more traditional one. I argue that this is because the core idea of the character and the key message represented in the drama still highlights the Buddhist religious message, in this case the *Karmic Law*. All of the focus group participants had a shared knowledge of Buddhist teachings. When the question ‘*how did you feel the King of Hell was shown in the drama?*’ was asked, all participants responded that the King of Hell was different from their traditional image of him but that the modern King of Hell still retained his traditional character. As one of the participants stated:

"I do not think the modern King of Hell rejects the teachings although his physical appearance is not in accordance with traditional Thai imagery. ... However, in the drama, his duty is still in line with the tradition."

All participants agreed that the reason they preferred to watch the modern rather than the traditional version of the King of Hell was because they had been excited by the modern representation of the King of Hell and had never seen anything like this before but, at the same time, the key characteristics of the King of Hell had been retained. As one participant stated:

"The concept of the King of Hell is common knowledge among Thais. I think Thais know what the characteristics of the traditional King of Hell are. However, I had never seen the new version of the King of Hell. ... After I had finished watching the drama, I understood the modern King of Hell would not go against tradition. That is, the King of Hell represented in the drama is not a joker; he is a karmic controller whose job is to take care of the Karmic Law."

In this sense, the results indicate that all participants accepted superficial changes in the modern version of the King of Hell embodied in the drama as long as the key message of traditional Thai teaching represented through the King of Hell's character remained unchanged. In other words, they could make sense of the Buddhist teaching represented through a form of postmodern pastiche in the modern King of Hell. As they already had a common stock of knowledge regarding the King of Hell in Thai culture, they were able to understand the teaching presented in the drama even though it had been styled in the form of a postmodern pastiche/collage. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 57), a stock of knowledge is "reality by degrees of familiarity" through which people can understand reality by drawing on their everyday experiences, oral traditions, literatures, and so on. They add that the stock of knowledge is distributed socially, that is, people add to their knowledge through their everyday lives and experiences in society. As such, they claim that people who live in a society and share their collective culture will share the same stock of knowledge:

"Knowledge of how the socially available stock of knowledge is distributed, at least in outline, is an important element of that same stock of knowledge." (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 61)

In this way, all participants in the focus groups could understand the Buddhist teachings presented in the drama because they were all from a Thai society and culture where the national religion is Buddhism. Despite the fact that there are many forms of postmodern pastiche used in the drama, the participants were able to make sense of it

because the drama did not negotiate or change Buddhist teachings as practised in Thailand.

In the drama *NCD*, the same technique of postmodern pastiche also plays a prominent role in stressing the Buddhist teaching of '*letting go*' through death scenes where the style of the scenes draws on the America movie series *Final Destination*. As Conrich (2015) suggests, the key feature of the films is a unique style in which no character can escape from the death, what Conrich calls the genre of 'the grand slasher':

"In the grand slasher, death appears all-pervasive and generally cannot be escaped or defeated. The victims are part of a scheme or preordained plan, and the deaths are often hyper-elaborate. These are essentially survival horrors and puzzle films, in which death itself can be manipulating a situation and in which victims have to second-guess a system in which the horror that awaits can be protracted and tortuous." (Conrich, 2015, p. 114)

In addition to that, Ndalianis (2012) and Conrich (2015) note that the films usually organise murders and/or accidents into a plan that is determined by a preordained or supernatural power. In particular, the death scenes mostly involve kinetic death where characters are accidentally killed through a process of action or mobility.

"Furthermore, within the *Final Destination* films, many of the spectacular and highly kinetic death sequences are often constructed around mobility – the airplane flight, the roller-coaster ride, the speedway disaster, the train crash or the freeway pile-up." (Conrich, 2015, p. 115)

In Ndalianis's and Conrich's discussions, the death scenes are used as a tool for attracting audiences to watch the movie rather than to promote any ideological message. They claim that the visceral 'kinetic death scenes' in the 'grand slasher' genre are the selling point for the series. They argue that fans of the series expect to watch those representations only for entertainment rather than for any educational purpose. On the other hand, the key function of the death scenes represented in *NCD* is to promote the Buddhist teaching of '*letting go*'. The majority of the focus group participants understood that the drama was constructed around this teaching in the kinetic death scenes. During the interviews, there were three examples of the *NCD*'s death scenes which were discussed by the participants. The clearest examples of this were found in Pimlada's death scene, which highlighted the teaching of '*letting go*' and by comparing the death scenes in the film *Final Destination 5* (2011) and the drama *NCD* (2015).

Arguably, Pimlada's death scene in *NCD* is an imitation of the opening scene in the film *Final Destination 5*, released in the year 2011, where a kinetic death takes place on a building site on a suspension bridge as it collapses and plunges into the water below.

While a female character attempts to escape pitfalls on the bridge by running to hold on to a railing, a fishing boat sails beneath the bridge. Suddenly, she falls from the bridge, and is impaled on the metal mast of the passing boat with her blood spreading across the scene (as depicted in Figure 6.6). This kinetic death scene is full of violent imagery with no obvious ideological message. In contrast, the teaching of ‘*letting go*’ is highlighted throughout Pimlada’s death scene in the drama *NCD*. The scene is set on a skyscraper’s construction site. Pimlada – a female villain – is fighting with Tachin – a male hero – and her friends on the top floor of the building when Rinlane’s ghost appears immediately in front of her. Frightened by the ghostly apparition, she slips and falls to her death (Figure 6.7) impaled on a pile of steel rods within the construction site. This scene echoes the opening scene of the film *Final Destination 5*.

Figure 6.6: The death scene of a woman in the *Final Destination 5* (2011)



Figure 6.7: The death scene of a woman named Pimlada in the drama *NCD* (2015)



The key difference between those two scenes is to be found in the contrast between the Buddhist teaching of ‘*letting go*’ as represented in *NCD* and the absence of any obvious religious aspects in *Final Destination 5*. The key meaning of the teaching, as discussed in Chapter Five above, is a result of holding a sense of self, what Thai Buddhists call *atta*:

“[428] *Atta* (a form of attachment to things or ideas) cannot be found in Buddhist saints. ... Therefore, sons, partners, animals, estate, valuable things cannot be found. ... *Autta* leads to a failure of Buddhism.” (Phra Trai Pi Dok 29: 4612-5616)

The key message of the scene in *NCD* is that Pimlada wanted Tachin as her boyfriend, while Tachin rejected her love many times as he already had a girlfriend *Rinlane*. Driven by her evil passion and her sense of *atta*, Pimlada attempted to murder Tachin at the construction site. She failed to kill Tachin and instead accidentally fell to her death. If Pimlada had not clung to her *atta* by attempting to kill Tachin, she might have been alive at the end of the drama. Thus the key message in this scene is the Buddhist teaching of ‘*letting go*’ (or *anatta* in the Pāli canon).

All of participants in the *NCD focus groups* understood the key message of this scene in that Pimlada's death was as a result of her failure to let go of her *atta*. One of the participants pointed out:

"In the end, she cannot ignore her egoism despite the fact that many characters ask her to stop her behaviour. ... To me, it is karma that she brings upon herself."

Likewise, the scriptwriter stressed that the central message of each death scene in the drama is an emphasis on the teaching of '*letting go*':

"Every death scenes refers to the teaching of 'letting go'. In fact, that teaching is the main message of this show. Each character [who dies] adheres to 'atta'. For instance, Eakkarat died because he desired great respect from all his friends. Choengchai died because of his attachment to money and sex. Similarly, Pimlada died as a result of her egoism."

It is clear that the producers of Thai supernatural television dramas *Ngao* and *NCD* are attempting to attract younger/modern audiences to watch their shows by using the techniques of postmodern pastiche and presenting interesting contemporary looking plots such as the modern King of Hell or scenes in *NCD* that borrow from the *Final Destination* films. In fact, the dramas are used by the producers as a tool for promoting Buddhist teachings through popular entertainment. Therefore, the question arises whether '*all audiences understand the Buddhist teachings represented in these dramas?*'

6.2 Interpretation

To address the above question, this section will explore how the focus group participants made sense of Buddhist teachings as presented through Thai supernatural television dramas. To do so, the focus group participants were asked for their interpretations of: 1) the key message(s); and 2) the Buddhist teachings presented through these supernatural television dramas. At the end of this section, I will discuss the reasons why the TV producers felt a need to highlight and embed Buddhist teachings in their dramas.

6.2.1 Key messages

The data gained from the in-depth interviews with the focus groups demonstrates that all participants understood the key messages in the dramas as reflecting Buddhist teachings. Each drama presents only one Buddhist teaching as its key message. These are the teaching of the '*Karmic Law*' and '*letting go*' for *Ngao* and *NCD* respectively. As

stated in the introduction to this chapter, the focus groups for this study were divided into two subgroups: 1) the dedicated fans who prefer to watch the dramas repeatedly; and 2) the casual viewers who only watch some episodes of the dramas. Interestingly, both the dedicated fans and the casual viewers understood the key messages as reflecting Buddhist teachings. During the interviews, they revealed that they understood the teachings in the dramas through a combination of: 1) the dialogue, and 2) the texts that were superimposed on the screen at the end of each episode. When the question '*what is the key message of the drama?*' was asked, the participants in the *Ngao* focus groups said:

- Viewer 1:* *"You reap what you sow.*
- Viewer 2:* *The Karmic Law, i.e. if you do good things, good things will happen to you, if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you.*
- Viewer 3:* *Be careful, karma will catch up to you.*
- Viewer 4:* *So we should do good things if we have a chance."*
- Others:* *[Other participants nodded their heads showing signs of agreement]*

In the view of the producers of *Ngao*, the key message of the drama was:

"The main aim of this drama is to emphasise the Karmic Law. As you can see, in every single episode, I attempted to show scenes where sinners were suffering from karmic punishments. Why? It is because I want the audience to realise the consequences of karma".

In the interviews with the *NCD* focus groups, they described the key message as:

- Viewer 1:* *"To stop a desire for vengeance by using the teaching of 'letting go'*
- Viewer 2:* *Rinlane'e's ghost was a symbol of revenge. At the end, she was faced with unhappiness because she ignored Buddhist teaching.*
- Viewer 3:* *I think so. The teaching [of 'letting go'] was the best way to stop the karma."*
- Others:* *[Other participants nodded their heads showing signs of agreement]*

The producer of *NCD* said the key message was:

"... about the Buddhist teaching of letting go. I acknowledge that the key message of this drama was created not only by me, the scriptwriter, but it was also approved by the CEO. ... There was a reason why I chose to present this teaching; it is a basic teaching that all Thai Buddhists know".

The quotations above indicate that the focus group participants all understood the Buddhist teachings presented in the dramas. The following paragraph will discuss the reason why all of them recognised the Buddhist teachings in the dramas through the concept of ethnicity as suggested by Anthony Smith (2010).

It can be argued that that all the participants understood the teachings in the dramas because they are of Thai ethnicity in which Buddhist knowledge has been instilled and passed on for generations. As Smith claims, ethnicity is considered as a crucial factor in creating, maintaining, and circulating a national identity within a community where it can be a basis for nation-building:

“If it is true that those units [i.e. ethnic categories, ethnic association; ethnic community] stand the best chance of forming nations which are constructed around an ancient ethnic core, then both ‘history’ and ‘landscape’ become essential vehicles and moulds for nation-building. But their greatest influence is indirect: through the myths and symbols of community which they evoke. Herein lies their ‘community-creating’ potency, and here too we find the roots of their directive capacity.” (Smith, 1986, p. 200)

Smith (cited in Stark, 2013) argues that ethnic categories, associations, and communities should be considered as the three pillars in creating a nation with a collective or national ideology. Ethnic categories can be defined as groups of people who have a collective set of language, tradition, and beliefs. When the people begin to help each other to complete a task, whether it is economic, politic, or religious, the group is called an association. This association is a unit where people share conventions, such as traditions, culture, social regulations, and government policies. This unit he calls a nation:

“Ethnicity in its various forms is very often the basis of nations. When it is desired by nationalists to create modern nations, it is to ethnic categories, ethnic associations, and particularly ethnic communities that they turn for the basis on which the nation can be created. And what are they doing? They’re forging a distinct public culture, they’re regularising the laws and customs, they’re standardising the myths and memories through poetry, music, and so forth, and they are securing the boundaries, in a more administrative or political sense of the term.” (Smith cited in Stark, 2013)

In addition to that, he argues that a nation, where people share their national ideology together, is formed by ethnicity which has been intensively cultivated by former generations:

“The concept of *ethnie* can in turn be defined as ‘a named human community connected to a homeland, possessing common myths of ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of shared culture, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites.’ (Smith, 2010, p. 13)

In other words, ethnicity is a vital vehicle in shaping collective knowledge and ideology within a society. The concept of ethnicity is employed as a theoretical framework in explaining my findings in the sense that knowledge of the Buddhist teachings is integral to Thai ethnicity. During the interviews with the focus groups, I asked them ‘*how did you know the teachings presented in the drama?*’ All participants responded that they had learnt them from older family members, usually parents or grandparents. They claimed that their parents and older family members were their first source of Buddhist knowledge:

“The teaching presented in the drama was not difficult to read. In my own experience, I had learnt many Buddhist teachings and practices such as the Karmic Law, letting go, ingratitude, and more from my mother.”

Additionally, Anderson (2006) and Smith (2010) assert that instilling ideological messages within a community starts with the youth through mass education:

“Even when the national state sought to create a unified citizenry through mass public education, so it too responded to the changing beliefs and conceptions of the nature of the ‘national identity’, which it sought to forge and transmit to the young. After all, most modern states have been ethnically plural and heterogeneous, and most nationalists have sought national unity, and only rarely national homogeneity.” (Smith, 2010, p. 137)

Anderson (2006) notes that the education system, through uniform textbooks, standardised diplomas and teaching certificates, and a strictly regulated gradation of age-groups and instructional materials, is an important element in shaping national core values and the creation of a national identity. Anderson (2006, p. 122) adds that one of the many ways to build unity within a society is the standardisation of mass-education among students so that “they still had read the same books and done the same sums”. In other words, this form of education system can lead to the forming and maintaining of national core values, tradition, culture, and so on. Similarly, the findings of this study correspond to Anderson’s argument insofar as educational institutions, schools, universities, and temples, played a vital role in cultivating Buddhist ideology within the Thai population. During the interviews, all participants agreed they had learnt Buddhist teachings in school; they called the subject ‘*wicha-phra-phuttha-satsana*’ (religious education). In addition, the majority of the participants said that their understanding of the teachings presented in the

dramas was influenced both by classes in Buddhism and by related school activities. As one of them stated:

"I had studied the subject of wicha-phra-phuttha-satsana from primary school to university. More importantly, schools always asked me to attend Buddhist events e.g. Makha Bucha, Vesakha Bucha, Asarha Bucha, [religious festivals] and more. ... As far as I know, today my nephew [twelve years old] still studies Buddhism as a subject and attends Buddhist events provided by his school."

It can be concluded that the key messages reflecting the Buddhist teachings embodied in the dramas are not difficult to read for viewers who have been raised in the Buddhist tradition where knowledge is cultivated by their older family members and is taught by teachers in their schools. The next section will discuss the different interpretations made by the dedicated fans and the casual viewers in terms of the Buddhist teachings presented through television tropes.

6.2.2 Buddhist teachings represented through television tropes

The data gained from the focus groups indicates that there is a difference between the dedicated fans and the casual viewers in their understanding of Buddhist teachings as represented through television tropes in the dramas. That is, the representations, which through conventions of storytelling, scene, imagery, or dialogue contain, references to Buddhist teachings. Although all the participants could understand the key message in the dramas, the majority of the casual viewers did not fully understand the story elements reflecting Buddhist teachings because they had not watched all episodes of the dramas in detail. As a result, they were less able to interpret the tropes just by drawing on their Buddhist knowledge and experience. To the contrary, the dedicated fans clearly understood the teachings represented through the dramatic forms.

The analysis of the two shows demonstrated that the drama *Ngao* had two plot elements involving the teachings of *Karmic Law*: 1) the additional duty of the King of Hell; and 2) the love story running through the King of Hell plot. These plot elements in *Ngao* have already been explained in the section on postmodern pastiche. *NCD* has merely one plot element emphasising the teachings of 'letting go' and the 'Karmic Law'. The following paragraph will examine how the *NCD* fan participants understood these teachings.

The plot element in *NCD* reflecting the teaching of 'letting go' was the ghost of Rinlane. The full details of this scene were described in Chapter Four above. The drama uses the burn wounds on the ghost's face and body to symbolise the karmic damage of engaging in vengeance and committing sins. The number of the wounds increases each time the ghost kills someone (as shown in Figure 4.19). By the final episode of the drama,

the ghost is covered with wounds on her face and body. The scriptwriter has stated that “the wounds are a symbol reflecting her strong attachment to and desire for vengeance”. They then disappear when the ghost stops killing people and follows the teachings of ‘letting go’ and the ‘Karmic Law’. In interviews with both the TV producers and the focus groups, they confirmed that the burn wounds are not cited in Buddhist scripture. However, the wounds can be interpreted as referring to concepts in Buddhist teachings.

The data gained from the interviews illustrated that all of the dedicated fans but only one of the casual viewers clearly understood this aspect of Buddhist teachings, whereas the rest of the casual viewers perceived the wounds as merely representing fear and as a visual symbol of the bad character of the ghost. In particular, the dedicated fans perceived that the wounds were a symbol reflecting the karmic punishment by fire of sinners in Hell (as mentioned in Chapter Five) which Thai Buddhists call *Fai Narok*. In other words, the wounds can be interpreted as referring to a key interpretation of the *Karmic Law* that ‘if you do good things, good things will happen to you. If you do bad things, bad things will happen to you’. As such, the wounds were assumed by the focus groups to have a meaning in line with the concept of *Karmic Law*. Moreover, the participants interpreted the cause of the wounds in line with the teaching of ‘letting go’ as a stage of ‘not holding/attaching to a thing’ and ‘acceptance’. In this regard, the drama uses the physical wounds to show that the ghost is still firmly attached to her desire for vengeance. They added that the way to eliminate the feeling of vengeance was to practice ‘letting go’. As an expression of Buddhism, the wounds effectively illustrated the teachings, even though this representation does not exist within Buddhist scripture. To examine the reasons they succeeded in understanding the meaning of the imagery, I asked the participants ‘how did you know the teachings represented through Rinlanee’s wounds?’ The participants’ answers suggested two reasons: 1) they had watched the drama many times, and 2) they had drawn on their socio-cultural background to grasp the meaning of the imagery. The dedicated fans acknowledged that they watched all episodes of the dramas at least three times. More importantly, the majority of the participants attempted to make sense of the wounds by drawing on the Buddhist knowledge and experience that they had acquired from their families and cultural background. A good example was a female participant who said that her Buddhist knowledge and experience was the key to her understanding of this particular text:

“When I was a child, my father taught me Buddhist principles. One of my favourite stories is a story about a man with a taste for eating birds which is about the Karmic Law. In the story, a man, who enjoyed cooking and eating, always fried, boiled, or grilled birds while they were still alive. He enjoyed listening to the sound of the birds’ final breaths during the cooking. Then one day the man was dying and the sound of his final breath was the same as the sound of the birds he had cooked. The man died in torment, the same as the birds. I believe that evil karma will be returned. ... Thus, I think the wounds are a symbol reflecting the results of karma.”

Interestingly, based on the data gained from all the focus groups, the results indicate that the age and background of the participants had an effect on their understanding of Buddhist teachings presented through the TV dramas. Participants in the age range 39 to 50 and who live or used to live in rural areas showed a more detailed understanding of the teachings than those from other backgrounds; they appeared to interpret the texts by drawing on their life experiences in the rural societies where they were born or lived. The case of the participant above was a good example of this. She was born in an area of countryside called Chiang Rai, a place rich in Buddhist temples and monasteries. She disclosed that her life experience from living in a rural area was at the heart of her understanding of Buddhist teachings:

"I have a lot of childhood memories of Buddhism. When I was young and before moving to work in the capital, I spent much time with my parents listening to sermons, reading religious books, and looking at paintings and sculptures reflecting Buddhist teachings such as the Karmic Law. ... However, today I go to the temple less often than in the past."

This finding corresponds to the previous research by Thapthiang (2004, p. 25) who states that "many young people in general, especially those in urban cities, increasingly fail to attend various religious activities". In other words, many young people consider their religion as alien or obsolete while adopting new ways of thinking about globalised trends and finance. This has led to a decline in Buddhist practices, such as learning Buddhist teachings, attending rituals, and entering monasteries (Thapthiang, 2004). The data gained from the interviews in this study corresponds with the argument of Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 57) that the stock of shared knowledge is created by "general and imprecise information on remote sectors". For these reasons, the older participants from a rural background are more likely to read and understand the detail of Buddhist teachings represented through television drama because they are closer to Buddhism than the younger participants from an urban background.

Clearly, knowledge and experience of Buddhist teachings are crucial to understanding the Buddhist aspects of these television dramas. The concept of myth suggested by Barthes, mentioned in Chapter Four above, identifies the key features in a way of reading texts as semiological systems consisting of: 1) *language-object* – the first level of reading texts by using linguistic terms; and 2) *metalanguage* – the second level of reading texts by drawing on social knowledge. Focusing on the *metalanguage*, Barthes (1993) argues that the way to succeed in deciphering and interpreting meanings is through a consideration of historical and geographical contexts:

“Thus every myth can have its history and its geography; each is in fact the sign of the other: a myth ripens because it spreads. ... But it is perfectly possible to draw what linguists would call the isoglosses of a myth, the lines which limit the social region where it is spoken.” (Barthes, 1993, p. 151).

The key point in reading connotative texts is an understanding of the historical background of the speakers (i.e. economic, political, and religious contexts) and the geographical context of speakers (i.e. tradition, culture, and social beliefs). In this regard, the participant above was able to decode the teachings represented in the television dramas through process of the *metalanguage* reading. That is to say, she had grown up in Thailand, had her Buddhism cultivated by her family members, had learnt Buddhist teachings in educational institutions, and had belonged to the wider Thai Buddhist community. As such, it is difficult to deny that her Buddhist knowledge and experience should be considered as the dominant factor in her understanding of Buddhist teaching as represented in Thai supernatural television dramas. The following section will explore the reason why television crews need to induce audiences to consume their shows, other than for business or marketing purposes.

6.2.3 Perception of the producers on Thai supernatural television dramas

As discussed in Chapter Five, Althusser (1971, p. 128) claims that “every social formation must reproduce” social values and ideologies. The methods of propagating ideologies within a society can be divided between: 1) using a Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) – a system which employs force to control the society, for example, law enforcement, government policies, or regulations; and 2) using an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) – a system which encourages individuals to participate through, for example, being a member of a group. In his view, the way to produce social values and ideologies is to utilise both the RSA and the ISA. At the heart of maintaining, circulating, and producing ideologies in a community is a process:

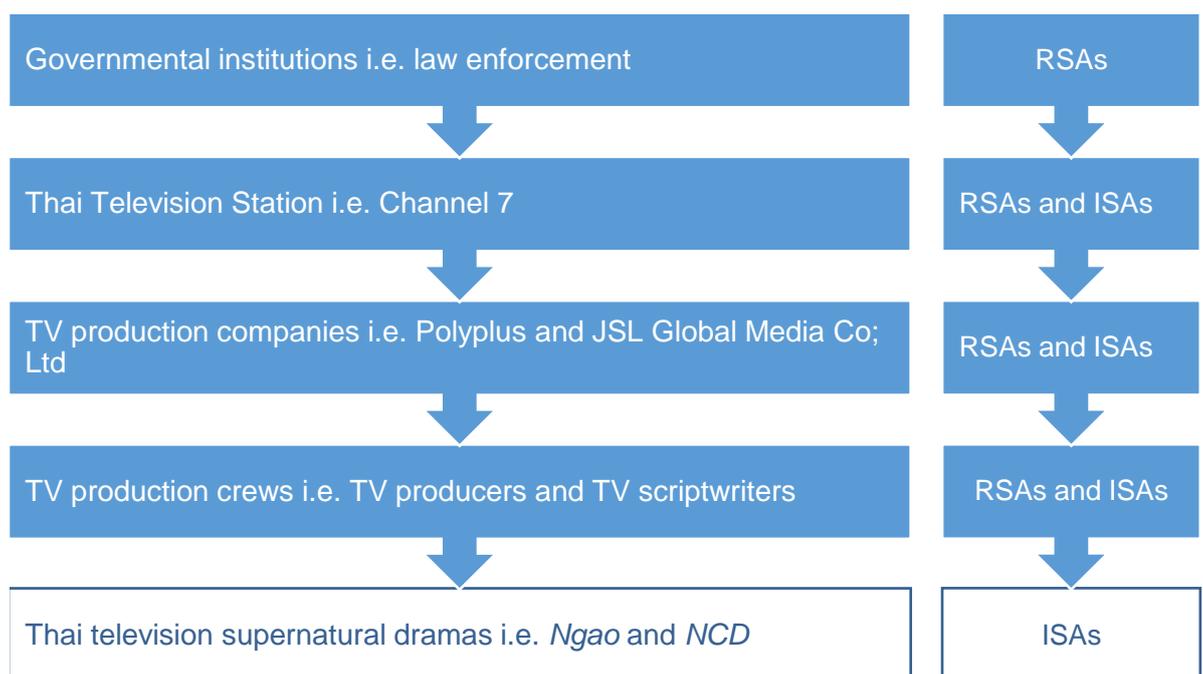
“To my knowledge, no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses. ... As an element of this process [i.e. the total process of the realization of the reproduction of the relations of production], the ISAs contribute to this reproduction. It is only within the process of production and circulation that this reproduction is realized. It is realized by the mechanism of those processes, in which the training of the workers is completed, their posts assigned them, etc.” (Althusser, 1971, pp. 146, 183)

As Althusser (1971, p. 136) points out: “it is possible and necessary to think what characterizes the essential of the existence and nature of the superstructure on the basic

of reproduction”. In other words, any set of social values or ideologies occurring in a society is constructed and installed by a superstructure which has power and influence within that society, for example, the ruling class, police, military, or government. As such, he adds that social values and ideologies are not simply eliminated when a new ruling class or government revokes the previous ideologies and sets out new values and conditions. This is the reason why the reproduction of ideological process is a substantial exercise.

The findings of this study correspond to Althusser’s argument in the sense that the superstructure of society (which employs the power of the RSAs and the ISAs) plays a significant role in determining the contents presented through Thai supernatural television dramas. For the purposes of this study, there are four elements in the superstructure, which are: 1) governmental organisations, fully discussed in Chapter Five; 2) the television broadcaster Channel 7; 3) television production companies, in this study JSL Global Media Company Limited and Polyplus Entertainment Company Limited; and 4) the television production crews.

Figure 6.8: The top-down hierarchy of Thai socio-political organisations that involves with the design of contents and representations shown in the dramas



For the second element in the top-down hierarchy controlling the dramas’ content, there are two significant influences: 1) the objectives of the TV station Bangkok Broadcasting & TV Co. Ltd, broadcasting as Channel 7; and 2) the perspective of the company’s CEO. Focusing on the objectives of the Channel 7 published on the official website www.ch7.com/about_us/en, there is an explicit intent to produce a genre of

television drama programmes that highlights “social responsibility” and maintains “social bonds” among Thais:

“Apart from Channel 7’s successful soap operas receiving popularity from audiences nationwide, these many soap operas also reflected care and responsibility to the society as these soap operas have received so many awards from various institution, such as the soap opera titled *Oon Air Rak* was awarded constructive mass media jointly developing society award from Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, etc.” (Channel 7, 2017)

The perspective of the CEO also has an effect on the direction and contents of productions within the genre of television drama. The Managing Director of the company, Mr Palakorn Somsuwan, has a strong passion for upholding Buddhism and is the key person in emphasising Buddhism through the business. In an interview with an online newspaper *Poo Jatkarn Online*, he admitted that there is a highly competitive market for television programmes, but the contents in his company’s dramas continue to support Buddhist ideology:

“We acknowledge that there has been a very high cost to TV-drama productions. Channel 7 had been the number-one ranking broadcaster in terms of television drama throughout the previous quarters. Some dramas in this quarter have lost popularity with the audiences. However, we continue to distribute contents in conformity with our ethic of social responsibility.” (Poo Jatkarn Online, 2012)

This indicates that Channel 7 employs strict regulations (i.e. RSA) to control content in the genre of television drama programmes. At the same time, the CEO of the channel has a robust intention (i.e. ISA) to uphold Buddhism. In particular, Buddhist teachings play a central role and are principal themes in the programmes. Consequently, the cooperation between the company’s policies and the CEO’s intention has become a successful formula for forcing TV production companies to produce content upholding Buddhist teachings.

In regard to TV production companies as the third element in the hierarchy, this thesis examines two dramas: 1) *Ngao* which is produced under the supervision of Jomnon Risitan Nonpatdee, the chairwoman of JSL Global Media Company Limited; and 2) *NCD* which is produced under the supervision of Orapan Watcharapol, the chairwoman of Polyplus Entertainment Company Limited. These dramas do not differ from the objectives of the RSA of the companies or the ISA of Channel 7’s CEO. I will look at the drama *Ngao* as an example in this case. The policies of the JSL Global Media Company Limited can be explored on their website, <http://www.jslcorporate.com/about-us/vision-mission/>. The motto of the company is that “Life is Beautiful”. The meaning of this motto can be interpreted as the creation of inspiring television, examining social problems and

suggesting moral solutions for everyone who is faced with problems in everyday life. The vision of the company is mentioned on the website:

“Content represented through our programmes seems to be a good vitamin to fix the damaged parts of the mind and body. They let audiences know that ‘Life is Beautiful’. ... We exert our abilities to assert that ‘life is beautiful’ through our programmes that follow eight guidelines:

- 1) Producing TV programmes with social responsibilities.
- 2) Providing great inspiration for audiences.
- 3) Producing quality programmes.
- 4) Obeying the ethics of mass communication.
- 5) Developing the programmes as professionals.
- 6) Promoting people for participating in the social development.
- 7) Upholding and strengthening moral communities.
- 8) Being the premier content empire” (JSL Global Media, 2017)

Moreover, the chairwoman of the company plays a significant role in encouraging her employees to build moral communities through their work. According to reports published in the online newspaper *Poo Jatkarn Online*, she stresses that the JSL Global Media Company Limited is not just a TV production company, but it is a medium for highlighting and solving social problems through Buddhist teachings.

“Each of our programmes is an opportunity to inspire, for example, our talk shows *JohJai*, *Chan Pan Dao*, and other programmes. ... We are not a television company; we are influencers who change our audiences’ lives. For 35 years we have pursued this goal.” (Poo Jatkarn Online, 2015)

The fourth element of this hierarchy is the television production crews, i.e. both the producers and the scriptwriters. The data gained from the interviews with the production crews demonstrate that they follow the policies of the companies but also have their own passion to build ‘*moral Thai communities*’ by cultivating Buddhist teachings through their supernatural television dramas. As the *Ngao* producer stated:

“I admit that Buddhist teachings shown in the drama may run the risk of being less popular among TV audiences because the audiences may find that the contents are difficult to understand and old-fashioned. So I did not add too much obvious Buddhist content to the drama. ... However, the teachings presented in the drama fulfil my ambition of maintaining Buddhism in Thailand”.

The producer of *NCD* described the balance between entertainment and Buddhist teachings in the drama by comparing it to ‘*eating a hamburger full of nutrients in just one bite*’:

“The representation of revenge in the drama through Rinlanee’s character is like the meat in the hamburger. Buddhist teachings are a smaller element; they are like the lettuce, tomato and cheese on the hamburger. The theme of love is the bun that covers the hamburger. Each scene relies on the balance of the ingredients being just right ... I admit that commercial concerns are the first priority but I would not ignore the teachings either.”

The findings above correspond to the view of Althusser in the sense that the superstructure is the framework that supports the dominant ideology within a society. As he states: “I have suggested that the ideologies were realized in institutions, in their rituals and their practices, in the ISAs. ... there is no class struggle without antagonistic classes” (Althusser, 1971, p. 184). In brief, the way to maintain and disseminate social or national ideologies is through cooperation between the RSAs and the ISAs. The results of this study indicate that Buddhist ideology (as the national ideology in Thailand) is maintained, upheld, and promoted not only by the policies of the state and the television channels but through the passion of the television producers themselves. The following section will discuss the impact of the dramas on audiences’ attitudes and behaviour.

6.3 Impact of the dramas on audiences’ attitude and behaviours

One difference between the groups of dedicated fans and casual viewers in this study is in the way their attitudes and behaviour change as a result of viewing the dramas. After the participants had finished watching the dramas, the different impact was seen in both groups. The following paragraph will explore the impact on the participants’ attitudes and behaviour through the concept of ‘fandom’ articulated by Henry Jenkins and other fandom theorists (Grossberg, 1992; Hills, 2002; Barron, 2015) and the concept of ‘social facts’ suggested by Durkheim (1961). This theoretical framework is employed as a tool in explaining the impact of the television dramas on an audience. This section argues that there are three stages of active audience engagement: 1) learning/recognising; 2) practising; and 3) distributing. In the results it is noticeable that the group of dedicated fans achieve all three stages but the group of casual viewers only access the first stage.

To explore the definition of a fan, the English word is derived from Latin and is an abbreviated form of fanatic meaning “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). According to Grossberg (1992), fans are cultural users, who passively read several texts, and are creators, who actively provide appropriate texts to specific popular cultures. In addition, fans employ their experiences and knowledge to interpret media texts (Barron, 2015). Focusing on media studies, the meaning of fans is defined by Jenkins as follow:

“Fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23)

Fandom scholars suggest that at the heart of fan studies is the relationship between audiences and texts (Grossberg, 1992; Hills, 2002). This relationship refers to media texts which are interpreted by audiences in the context of their interest and experience (Hills, 2002). In particular, the meaning of media texts is deconstructed, interrogated, and turned into a variety of definitions based on audiences' mode of reception. Jenkins (1992, p. 23) calls the audiences “active producers and manipulators of meanings” or “active media audiences”. In other words, the texts may have various meanings for different fans depending on their context. Consequently, the texts are interpreted and reproduced by audiences in many forms such as music videos which have been re-edited to express their particular fan culture; performing folk songs which have been rearranged and adapted from science fiction; or circulating media products produced by fans to emphasise their favourite character within a community of fans. In this respect, it indicates that fans need a communal space where they can turn their imagination, which is influenced and filtered through media products, into a new shared reality. This is one of the characteristics of the active media audience in Jenkins (1992):

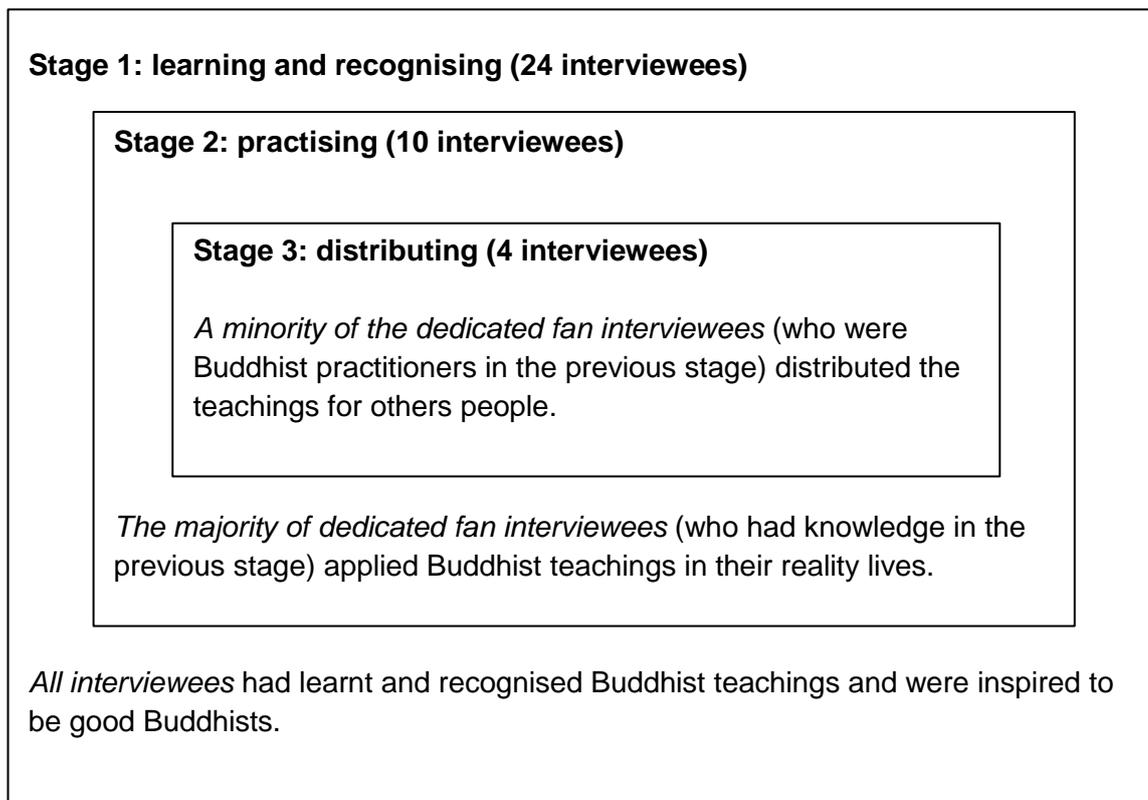
“Fans see themselves as people who dream, who use imagination and creativity both in constructing their culture and in making sense of their social experience. They are technological utopians who see possibilities for human progress to which many of their contemporaries remain blind. ... Fans ... are not simply dreamers who maintain the imagination and idealism of their childhood; they are also 'doers' who envision a better world and are working to transform those dreams into a reality.” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 264-265)

Jenkins' perspective leads to an understanding of active fans in everyday life as both positive and negative critics of culture and tradition. Despite the fact that Jenkins (2013) suggests that the majority of active media fans are widely perceived as viewers who produce their artefacts in opposition to the values and norms of everyday life, it does not mean that this is the case for all fans. In an example of active media fans mentioned in *Textual Poacher: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, there is evidence that fans' childhood dreams and fantasies of space travel, influenced by films like *Star Wars*, inspired them to join space mission projects established by NASA and the US military. In other words, fans, inspired by media products, carry their imagination into their adult life.

For this study the data gained from the interviews with the dedicated fans demonstrates the three stages of active media audiences: 1) the stage of having knowledge of Buddhist teachings, which I shall call '**learning/recognising**'; 2) the stage of

applying the teachings in their lives, which I shall call '**practising**'; and 3) the stage of disseminating the teachings to others, which I shall call '**distributing**'.

Figure 6.9: The degrees of the active media audiences emerged in the fan interviewees as per results of focus group analysis of the study



The results illustrate that the stage of 'learning/recognising' was reached by all participants (24 people). After the participants had finished watching the dramas, they claimed that the dramas could provide knowledge of Buddhist teachings and could be an inspiration to be good Buddhists. They revealed that Buddhist teachings embodied in the dramas were not new knowledge for them but that they had affected their perspectives and behaviour. They read the dramas as a tool for learning Buddhist teachings and as a tool for reminding themselves to '*not forget to be good Buddhists*'. All the participants agreed that one of the criteria for being a good Buddhist was the fulfilment of practices which were in line with Buddhist teachings as explained and exemplified through the storylines and characters shown in the dramas. One of the participants explained how *Ngao* inspired her to be a good Buddhist:

"While the Buddhist teachings shown in the dramas are not new to me, they are a reminder that I should be concerned about being a good Thai Buddhist. After I finished watching the dramas, I asked myself the questions 'Am I a good Buddhist?' and 'How do I be a good Buddhist?' Fortunately, I know the answers, I had just temporarily forgotten."

It is possible that the casual viewer participants could only access the first stage of the active media audience because they only watched some episodes of the dramas. Also the participants pursued many other activities, like chatting and talking with their friends, doing housework, and surfing social media networks and the internet, when they were watching the dramas. Nor did they view the dramas repeatedly. It is possible that the casual viewer participants might have achieved all stages of the active media audience if they had intentionally watched the shows as the dedicated fans had. It can be argued that the audiences' intention is a prominent factor in moving to the second and third stages of being active media audiences.

The second stage of the active media audiences is to apply Buddhist teachings in normal life as the teachings shown in the dramas are considered by the participants to be a guide to good living. The results demonstrated that majority of the fan interviewees (10 people) accepted that they were viewers who took the Buddhist lessons they learnt in the previous stage and adapted them to their daily lives. A clear example of this was found in the interviews with the *Ngao* a male fan. To understand the process of extracting the Buddhist teaching of '*letting go*' presented in *Ngao*, he claimed that the teaching had helped him to recover from a sense of bereavement and to understand the cause of his sadness through his favourite scene - a conversation between two leading characters, Chalinee (a female villain) and Watsawat (the male character who is the human form of the King of Hell). In the storyline, Chalinee attempted to commit suicide because Watsawat had rejected her request of marriage. He compared Chalinee's sadness with his own sense of bereavement; he considered that both lead to grief. He told a story about a car accident wherein he blamed himself for his grandparents' death and was overcome with great grief at their funeral. After he had finished watching this episode, finally, he could overcome his sadness and understood the cause of his grief because he had learnt and made sense of the teaching of '*letting go*' as presented in the drama. The concept of '*letting go*' is a stage of putting something down, in this case sadness, and accepting inevitable truths. He accepted that his grandparents had passed away. As such, he concluded that grief could be resolved through understanding and adapting the teachings to his situation:

"I applied the teaching of 'letting go' in my own life. After I had learnt and understood the teaching, I found a way to stop my regrets; in other words, I learned to accept an inevitable truth."

The final stage of the active media audience is the distribution of Buddhist knowledge to other people. In other words, the fans attempting to share their knowledge (gained from stages 1 and 2) with others. The data obtained from the interviews with the participants indicates that there were few participants (only 4 people) who could reach this

stage. The participants revealed that they shared knowledge with their close friends and younger relatives, usually children under the age of 15. A good example of this was the case of a female participant who explained Buddhist teachings of the *Karmic Law* through *NCD* to her young nieces. As the participant pointed out, she had an extended family in which the households enjoyed watching many genres of television programmes together. In particular, she and her nieces mostly discussed Buddhist contents presented in the drama *NCD*. For instance, the wounds as a physical symbol of evil karma on Rinlanee's ghost, mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, were used by her as a tool in explaining the *Karmic Law* to her niece. She described how: "Rinlanee's ghost was suffering from the visible wounds because as a ghost she killed people; so the wounds were demonstrating the meaning of *Barb* (evil karma) which you guys (her nieces) have to be concerned about". She used the drama as a tool in instructing children because she herself had learnt some Buddhist teachings from her parents through television programmes.

"I was taught by my father when I was a child. In television programmes where scenes included Buddhist teachings, my father usually explained the teachings in detail. For instance, I remember that my father taught me to learn the Karmic Law – meaning 'what goes around comes around' – through a scene where a villain did bad things like killing innocent people, robbing banks, corruption, and so on. Finally, the villain was suffering in jail and then was killed. My father told me that those punishments were the results of a kind of karmic return."

The different stages of being an active media audience set out above show how Thai supernatural television dramas contribute to the maintenance and circulation of Buddhism. The casual viewers acknowledged that the dramas were one of the many tools for learning and refreshing Buddhist teachings but they took no further action when they had finished watching the dramas. In comparison, the dedicated fan participants considered that the best way of maintaining and circulating Buddhism was to reproduce the Buddhist practices by applying the teachings to their own lives and distributing the teachings to other people. This corresponds to the Jenkins's argument that "fans find the ability to question and rework the ideologies that dominate the mass culture they claim as their own. ... I am claiming that there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives." (Jenkins, 1992, p. 284) In the updated version of *Textual Poacher*, Jenkins (2013, p. xxii) claims that contents represented in media industries are "court and maintained" by fan culture in order to serve fans' ideologies. In this study, the stage of being an active media audience has a greater influence on maintaining and upholding Buddhist teachings among the dedicated fans rather than the casual viewers.

Based on the data gained from both audiences and producers, it can be seen that Thai supernatural television dramas are a tool for creating and reinforcing a unity of Buddhism in Thai society. The dramas create a feeling of solidarity and unity in terms of encouraging viewers to be a good Thai Buddhists, to follow Buddhist teachings and practices, and to play a part in maintaining the centrality of Buddhism in Thailand. This kind of the unity is in line with the concept of *mechanical* solidarity developed by Durkheim (1961) who notes that it is a sense of social integration and cohesion between members of a society with shared common values and beliefs, including etiquette, tradition, and religious practices, what he calls the “collective conscience”. He suggests that this force is similar to the internal energy, formed by the cooperation of people in a society, which creates the ties of kinship:

“This solidarity is even so close that among certain peoples, the ceremonies by which the faithful first enter into communication with their protecting geniuses are mixed with rites whose public character is incontestable, namely the rites of initiation.” (Durkheim, 1961, p. 46)

Based on the interviews, the results demonstrate that Buddhist teachings embodied in the dramas have an impact on the building of a Buddhist solidarity among the participants which consists of: 1) reinforcing the Thai proverb ‘*if you do good things, good things will happen to you; however, if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you*’; and 2) highlighting the idea that ‘*Buddhist holy objects have a symbolic value in recognising the Buddha but they have no inherent paranormal power*’.

The majority of the participants suggested that the dramas functioned as a case study mirroring this Thai proverb and confirming that the proverb is still compatible with contemporary Thai Buddhist society. Among the dramatic changes in the aspects of economic, political, and cultural globalisation in Thailand, the proverb is interpreted and perceived by some as meaningless and old-fashioned and that, in fact, doing good things does not always get good things while bad people mostly get good things. All participants suggested that Thailand is a country where problems like political corruption are difficult to solve. One of the participants stated that “I still see many bad people, who are involved in corruption, having a better life than good people”. From the television producers’ point of view, the dramas are created to reflect that if bad people may not get punished in this life, they will still need to redeem their sins in the next life. This idea was presented through villains in both dramas *Ngao* and *NCD*. A clear example can be found in *Ngao* in scenes where a villain, General Pinit, had grown rich from corrupt activities and had a good lifestyle when he was alive. When he died, he was sentenced and punished to torment by the King of Hell. The *Ngao* scriptwriter revealed the reason why this scene was stressed in the dramas:

"I would like to suggest that all people will finally reckon with evil karma even though they are billionaires, bosses, state or public servants. For this reason, I would persuade audiences to do good things rather than bad things."

All participants acknowledged that they already had faith in the teaching of *Karmic Law*, but the drama did emphasise the proverb *'if you do good things, good things will happen to you; however, if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you'* as relevant in contemporary Thai society. As one participant said:

"The drama reminds me to do good things and not to be infatuated with activities leading to the creation of evil karma. ... So I employ the Karmic Law as a compass for my life."

Another idea contributing to the creation and reinforcing of solidarity among the participants is the idea that *'Buddhist holy objects have a symbolic value in recognising the Buddha but they have no inherent paranormal power'*. The majority of the participants noticed that both dramas were different from other supernatural television shows in Thailand in that sacred objects, such as holy water, thread, and knives, were mostly represented in other television dramas as tools for subduing ghosts or demons but in the dramas *Ngao* and *NCD* the objects were used instead as a way of teaching Buddhist lessons. This interpretation of sacred objects is more in line with the core of Buddhist teachings as mentioned in Chapter Five above. Both the producers and viewers agreed that the character of a Buddhist monk was an appropriate choice for disseminating Buddhist ideas because a key duty of monks in everyday life in Thailand is as religious teachers. For this reason, this character was chosen for the main role in circulating Buddhist teachings in the shows. From the viewers' perspectives, all the participants perceived that the monk's character reflected this idea in that:

"The character of the monk in this show does not provide any scared items; however, shamans give some amulets (in subduing Rinlane's ghost for example) to the show's villains. The monk in the drama has only one function; he is a Buddhist teacher. I do not think this idea goes against the core of Buddhist teachings."

The reason why the role of the monk in the drama did not involve the provision of sacred objects or the subjugation of ghosts was because the *NCD* production team did not see any need to present ideas which were against or changed core Buddhist scripture. As the *NCD* scriptwriter noted:

"I will not present scenes or content or Buddhist words which are not compatible with the core of Buddhism. I checked every scene and dialogue before filming. For example, the monk is a character that has the function of a Buddhist teacher based on scripture; this is the reason why the monk does not subdue the ghost. ... Sacred objects are not mentioned in scripture; holiness is not provided by the character of the monk himself."

The majority of the focus group participants accepted that they did not know this before watching the show but learnt the idea from the show. Their perception of sacred objects changed as a result of viewing this show. A survey of the participant's views on wearing or carrying sacred objects showed that 18 participants did not have any individual holy item while 6 participants did have a necklace with an image of the Buddha, holy thread, or a talisman. This minority of the participants explained the reason why they kept these items was because they were a tool for recognising the goodness of the Buddha and had a sentimental value as they had been given them by family members. In addition, they stressed that a necklace with an image of the Buddha and holy objects were not a tool in warding off ghosts as part of their Buddhist practice but, along with prayer and following Buddhist teachings and rites, were an appropriate way to provide good karma. When the question '*what did you do when you were faced with ghosts?*' was asked, all of the participants responded that they tried "to pray to the Buddha" and "to recognise good karma that they used to practise" instead of using sacred objects. This indicates that the dramas function as an educational tool in building Buddhist solidarity among viewers, just as Durkheim (1982, p. 53) claims that "all education consists of a continual effort to impose upon the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting". The dramas, functioning as a religious school, have a tendency to shape the participants religious knowledge and reinforce a feeling of Buddhist solidarity. Therefore, it is possible that the teachings embodied in Thai supernatural television dramas lead to the creation of *mechanical* solidarity among Thai Buddhists.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Thai supernatural television dramas are a tool for promoting, maintaining, and circulating Buddhism as the national religion of Thailand. In particular, the producers attempt to attract audiences to watch their shows through the use of postmodern pastiche/collage; examples including the King of Hell's character which is an imitation of the character Dracula and some scenes which are inspired by modern American supernatural films such as the *Final Destination* series. At the same time, at the heart of the dramas is an emphasis on traditional Thai Buddhist teachings, in particular, '*Karmic Law*', the key teaching in the drama *Ngao*, and '*letting go*' in *NCD*. The dramas consist of a combination of postmodern pastiche/collage and Buddhist teachings which

are used as a tool for preserving Thai national identity through the form of cultural hybridisation articulated by Ang (1996). She suggests that this form is a process of blending globalised media artefacts with localised meaning into media products such as film, television, and media franchises, to promote local culture. This commodified media culture is a form of hybridisation in which Ang (1996, pp. 129-130) claims “it is hard to distinguish here between the foreign and the indigenous, the imperialist and the authentic: what has emerged is a highly distinctive and economically viable hybrid cultural form in which the global and the local are inextricably intertwined”. Ang analysed the evolution of media industries in Hong Kong. In the 1950s, the popular media products were local opera, musicals, and melodrama which represented Cantonese tradition and culture. With the advent of Hollywood films in the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a decrease in the local media products. By the 1980s, however, Hong Kong and local films were once again in the spotlight because they employed and applied the format of Western action-adventure while incorporating Cantonese social values like vengeance for friends and kin, loyalty to close acquaintances, and punishment for traitors. The genre of Cantonese Kung Fu films was popular in that period and was influenced by Western media representation of James Bond style adventures. This led to “the modernized reinvigoration of a culture that continues to be labelled and widely experienced as Cantonese” (Ang, 1996, p. 130). In the same vein, the *Ngao and NCD* production crews acknowledged that there was no way to reject or escape from the invasion of globalised media products in Thailand. They perceived that the globalised media products spreading through Thai society were undermining Thai traditions and Buddhism and leading to a decrease in culture, tradition, religion, and national identity among Thai people. So they attempted to reinvigorate Buddhist traditions through their television dramas by using parodies of Western media products. As the *Ngao* producer said: “I absolutely borrow some characteristics from Western media films to uphold Buddhism. I consider these characteristics a useful tool for attracting audiences; and then allowing me to promote Buddhism instead.” This indicates that the use of postmodern pastiche/collage in these television dramas is no accident and the producers intentionally design and utilise them as an important element in promoting Buddhist teachings.

Focusing on the reason why Thai supernatural television dramas are used as a tool in promoting Buddhist teachings, it can be argued that the objectives of the dramas need to be in line with policies imposed on the superstructure by the Ministry of Culture, National Office of Buddhism, and other governmental institutions in order to preserve and promote Buddhism as the national identity of Thai citizens. The way to preserve national identity and culture is defined by the superstructure which Ang (1996, p. 122) sets out: “every identity must define and position itself in relation to the cultural frames’ affirmed by both political policies and informal popular practices” which she calls ‘cultural imperialism’.

The clear example of this case is found in the study of the Colombian theorist Martin-Barbero which refers to the promotion of folklore in Latin America. Popular and mass cultures have different meanings in those countries. Scolari (2015) argues that mass culture refers to a homogenised cultural industry, whereas popular culture refers to folklore and tradition. In the early 1980s, media industries attempted to promote the local culture which was considered not only as the main concern for government but also an artefact of cultural imperialism raised by locals (Ang, 1996 and Scolari, 2015). As a result, the preservation of the folklore has continued and is labelled as the national identity (Scolari, 2015). In addition to that, Ang adds that the defence and preservation of a national identity need to be confirmed as a function of the citizens and locality. In this way, the superstructure is a major player in determining the definition of Thainess through the *Twelve Core Values of Thai People* proclaimed by the Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-Ocha and his junta, when they seized power and overthrew the elected government with a military dictatorship on 22nd May 2014. The stated purpose of Chan-Ocha's government is to defend the monarchy, the unity of Thailand, and to remove all subversive threats (Wangkiat and Nanuam, 2014). Since the military announced their coup in May 2014, Chan-Ocha has presented a television programme called *Keun Kwam Suk Hai Khon Nai Chat (The returning of happiness to the people of the nation)* starting on 30th May 2014. A key argument of his speech was the identification of disunity as a major problem among the Thai people. According to Chan-Ocha's speech broadcast on 11th July 2014 and published by Thai Embassy and Consulates (2015), he stated that:

“The persisting problems in Thailand that need to be solved urgently require inclusive cooperation from people of all levels, gender and age. I suggest that we firstly define clear core values of Thai people so that we can build a strong nation. The people must first be strong.” (Thai Embassy and Consulates, 2015, p. 3)

One of his solutions to building a stronger nation is through promoting his *Twelve Core Values of Thai People*; the full list of which is:

1. Upholding the nation, the religions and the Monarchy.
2. Being honest, sacrificial and patient with a positive attitude for the common good of the public.
3. Practicing filial piety towards parents, guardians and teachers.
4. Seeking both direct and indirect knowledge and education.
5. Preserving Thai traditions and cultures.
6. Practicing morality, integrity, considerateness, generosity and sharing.
7. Understanding, learning the true essence of democratic ideals with His Majesty the King as the Head of State.
8. Maintaining discipline, respectful of laws and the elderly and seniority.
9. Being conscious and mindful of action in line with His Majesty's the King's statements.
10. Practicing the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the King saving money for time of need. Being moderate with surplus used for sharing or expansion of business while having good immunity.

11. Maintaining both physical and mental health and unyielding to the dark force or desires, having sense of shame over guilt and sins in accordance with the religious principles.
12. Putting the public and national interest before personal interest.

(Thai Embassy and Consulates, 2015, p. 3)

Since those values were announced and broadcast, there have been several institutions, including schools, universities, and local communities, that have responded to the values. According to Namahachai (2014, p. 2), a newspaper reporter who researched the level of acceptance of those values in schools nationwide, it was claimed that “students at all levels will be required to recite the 12 core values of the Thai People, either as part of their daily flag-raising ceremony or in class”. Similarly, a research article of Farrelly (2016) examined the definition of Thainess. He suggested that the values, as the State’s official ideology, may restore order to Thai society and people “can limit the destructive tendencies of fragmentation or anarchy.” (Farrelly, 2016, p. 334)

Furthermore, the government provided a reason why Thai people have to follow those values. The Prime Minister said that the collaboration of three key agencies, the family, religious organisations, and educational institutions, would lead to the creation of a unique sense of Thainess, create moral Buddhist citizens, and restore unity among the Thai people. As he explained on his television programme broadcast on 2nd January 2015:

“As for the 12 core values that have been established through cooperation between the government and the NCPO, I would like to call on all Thais to advocate these values ... We must not forget who we are and most importantly we must not forget the history our ancestors have made in the past. We should be ashamed if we did not value our own history. ... The values should be promoted and understood so that the children are able to adapt these values to their daily tasks. Homes, schools, and temples should be places where children are fostered and taught to be good citizens who contribute to the society and in accordance with His Majesty the King’s wishes. At home, father and mother should also continue to teach their children. ... At school, teachers should teach their students to become productive and honest members of society. ... Furthermore, teachers can take students to temples or to perform religious activities in monasteries, which is very good for them, because religion help us become better people.” (Thai Prime Minister’s channel, 2015)

To underline the importance of those values, the government spent 7.1 million baht (approx. 170,000 GBP) to create a set of animated stickers for the Line mobile phone chat application to promote the *12 Core Values of Thai People* (Achakulwisut, 2014). The set of Line stickers is free to download via Line Store – an online store, which can be accessed via mobile and website. The illustrations of the stickers are depicted in Figure 6.10 (Line Store, 2015).

Figure 6.10: The set of Line's stickers entitled *Twelve Core Values* for Thais sold by the Line Store (TH)



No.1



No.2



No.3



No.4



No.5



No.6



No.7



No.8



No.9



No.10



No.11



No.12



No.13



No.14



No.15



No.16

To spread those values in Thai minds through a memorable song, in 2014 the Ministry of Culture cooperated with GMM Grammy Public Company Limited to create a music video that highlighted the important role of the Twelve Core Values. The music video, simply called *Twelve Core Values of Thai People*, is available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9891PGJI6Y>, is a high quality production involving famous artists, composers, and celebrities and had a production cost of 3.5 million baht (approx. 80,000 GBP). The lyrics of the music video are set out below:

*“Good values - we have them in our minds
If we would love Thailand, the values we have to remember
You must be good if you were born a Thai
Good thinking, good behaving that we have*

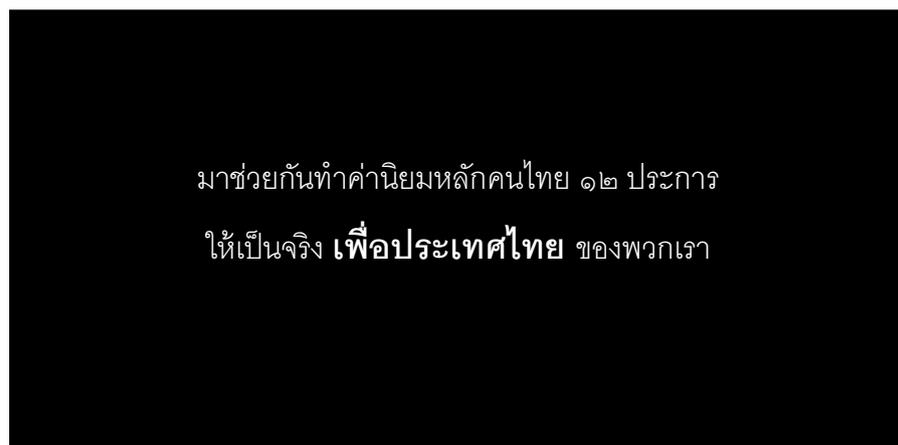
*First, upholding the nation, religion, and the monarchy
Second, being honest and strong in the official ideology
Third, taking care of parents, guardians, and teachers
Fourth, being engrossed in learning knowledge without being lazy*

*Fifth, maintaining the culture
Sixth, keeping morality in your heart
Seventh, sustaining the principles of democracy
Eighth, being strong together and observing the laws*

*Ninth, pursuing His Majesty the King’s statements
Tenth, having the Sufficiency Economy in your mind
Eleventh, being a strong person and don’t make any threats
Twelfth, helping each other to praise Thailand*

*Good values - we have them in our minds
If we would love Thailand, the values we have to remember
You must be good if you were born a Thai
Good thinking, good behaving that we have”*

Figure 6.11: The superimposed texts are highlighted in the MV titled *Twelve Core Values of Thai people*



At the end of the video, there are superimposed texts that urge the viewer to “please join us in the *Twelve Core Values of Thai People*, in which Thailand is a nation of

us, by us, and for us". As can be seen above, it reflects Buddhist ideology and that ideology is underlined through the influential power of the superstructure and strengthened through mass media products that are a significant influence in cultivating the ideology in the Thai mind. Despite the fact that the government does not force people to comply with these values, it employs the soft power of mass media products, TV-drama programmes, Line stickers, and music videos, to disseminate its ideology. These products of soft power allow government thought to indisputably become a part of the everyday life of the Thai people. As the national religion of Thailand, Buddhism is the major faith of the majority of Thai citizens (National Statistical Office, 2014) as it has been for generations. In these ways the RSAs of the state power and the ISA of individual faith jointly play a pivotal role in upholding Buddhism in Thailand.

In general, Thai supernatural television dramas are used as a tool in promoting, maintaining, and circulating Buddhist ideology through the soft power of the media in order to preserve the link between national identity and Buddhism in Thailand. The national religion of Thailand is state-sponsored Buddhism and a form of Buddhist cultural imperialism is used in building a feel of solidarity and unity among Thai Buddhist citizens.

Conclusion

This thesis is a qualitative research project that has explored social beliefs about supernatural beings contained in Thai supernatural television dramas through textual analysis of television texts, in-depth interviews with television producers, and focus group interviews with audiences. The main aim of this research is to explore the meaning of apparitions and ghost stories represented in the dramas *Ngao* (2014) and *Nang Cha Da* (2015) by focussing on: 1) types of ghosts, 2) messages presented in the dramas, and 3) the cultural impact of Buddhist texts on audiences. This chapter will present a summary of the research findings and will discuss them in wider contexts. At the end of this chapter, the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research will be presented.

Postmodern texts

The contribution of this study has been to argue that Thai supernatural television dramas play a meaningful role in promoting, circulating, and maintaining Buddhist teachings, and, as discussed in the literature review, that they are in line with the concept of Postmodernism, as suggested by Jameson (1984), in the sense that postmodern products respond to market forces rather than ideology, what Jameson calls *depthlessness*. Furthermore, Wilson (2009); Hill (2010); Engstrom and Valenzano (2014) have claimed that Western supernatural television series can be analysed and labelled as a surface level of religious principles. Although there are scenes presenting religious objects, they are represented as weapons in warding off supernatural beings rather than as a presentation of the core of religious teachings. In contrast, *Ngao* and *NCD*, which have been examined in this study, present core Buddhist teachings, especially the *Karmic Law*, which is mostly emphasised in *Ngao*, and *letting go*, which is highlighted in *NCD*.

The evidence for the above, as discussed in Chapter Four, was analysed through four types of ghost characters: 1) ghosts from Buddhist texts, e.g., the King of Hell, Siri and Poo-Ma, and Pret ghosts; 2) vengeful ghosts, e.g., the ghost of Rinlane; 3) slave ghosts, e.g., Kumanthong and Phii Pai ghosts; and 4) guardian spirits. The obvious example of the first type is the character of the King of Hell in *Ngao* whose construction is influenced by Dracula (e.g., his wearing a black western style suit and black cape), but whose main role involves making karmic judgements on sinners in a karmic court in Hell. In other words, the key feature of this construction is an emphasis on the teaching of the *Karmic Law*. The King of Hell in this sense is used to represent visually how sinners are punished in Hell if they commit sins or fail to observe Buddhist teachings. The second type of ghost, vengeful ghosts, is best represented by Rinlane's ghost in *NCD* and her

character is presented in line with the Buddhist principle of *letting go*. That is, she attempts to haunt and kill other characters in order to take revenge on her enemies and her physical appearance is used as a symbol of the effects of committing evil karma. To eliminate her sin and her attachment to the desire for vengeance she has to practice the teaching of *letting go*. In other words, the graphic death scenes, influenced by the American movie series *Final Destinations*, are used as a selling point, but the underlying message focuses on the Buddhist teaching. The third type, slave ghosts, are shown in both dramas as akin to the Dementors depicted in the American movie series *Harry Potter*, that is, dark, gliding, wraith-like creatures but the key idea of this representation is another way of emphasising the law of karma. Although this type of ghost is shown as powerful and a tool of evil shamans, they are finally defeated by the consequences of the *Karmic Law*. Lastly, guardian spirits play a minor role in the dramas; that is, there are a few scenes portraying these spirits with a flash of gold lightning as an *indexical sign* of their power. The key message of this character is to retain traditional Thai beliefs that the spirits protect people from evil ghosts. Therefore, it can be concluded that the main purpose of these ghost characters in the dramas is to promote Buddhist teachings and that the research findings indicate that the physical characteristics of these ghost characters are intentionally constructed and represented in a modern form rather than reflecting traditional forms.

To explore the reason why the physical appearance of ghosts in the dramas are represented in modern rather than traditional forms, it can be argued that one of the text producers aims for the dramas was to gain the highest audience ratings possible to maximise advertising revenue. Therefore, the modern style of ghost characters is employed to attract audiences to consume the programmes. However, the producers showed their concerns about religious responsibility by admitting that the dramas are not only for making income from the advertisements but are also a tool for promoting Buddhist teachings among viewers. This idea is similar to the argument of Ang (1996) who notes that the way to maintain ideologies in a country is to adapt to what she calls *global media/local meaning*. As Ang (1996, p. 130) points out: "what counts as local and therefore authentic is not a fixed content, but subject to change and modification as a result of the domestication of imported cultural goods". In other words, the presentation of modern ghost characters is one of the elements in disseminating Buddhist teachings. Thus, I would argue that content embodied in the dramas is similar to the Buddhist classes given by Buddhist monks in temples.

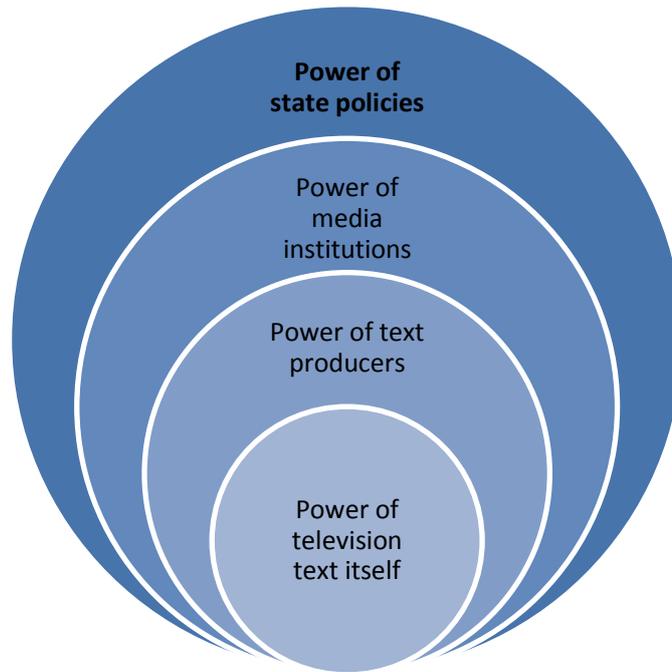
The reason why this kind of drama needs to function as a Buddhist class is that most Thai television dramas show a lack of concern for moral content; they are more concerned with high ratings and revenue than cultivating appropriate social norms. According to MediaMonitor (cited in Khom Chad Luek, 2011), a market research institution

examining 120 Thai soap operas throughout the year 2011, 95 per cent of the shows with violent media content led to imitation or copycat violence among young audiences. To explore this aspect of contemporary Thai dramas, Thai actor Pot Nattawut, who mainly plays heroes, noticed that heroes tend to engage in the same inappropriate behaviour as villains, in particular, they attempt to force female characters to have sex with them, regardless of love, or to kill others for their benefit (Matichon, 2014). In other words, good and evil blend in the representation of heroes which makes it difficult for the audience to distinguish between merit and demerit. In the view of television producer Sant Srikaewlaw, “[dramas] reflect real situations in daily life to attract audiences to watch the shows” (Matichon, 2014, p. 22). Moreover, in the drama *FaiRakArsson* where there were scenes involving sexual intrigue and assault, the director Pisan Akarasenee acknowledged that, “the violent content was the main selling point and a tool in creating the high ratings” (Matichon, 2009, p. 24). This can lead to a negative impact on viewers. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture (cited in Poo Jatkarn Daily 360 Degree, 2016, p. 14), claimed that one of the causes of increasingly violent behaviour among children and teenagers is “a result of consuming violent television programmes”. This kind of drama is labelled by Thai critics as *lakawn-nam-nao*, immoral dramas. However, this thesis shows that this is not the case for all Thai supernatural dramas; *Ngao* and *NCD* are intentionally constructed to uphold Buddhism, a style known as *lakawn-nam-dee* or moral dramas. As the interviewed scriptwriter claimed, “the contents represented in the dramas were not an accident, but they were written and represented with the robust intention that the dramas would be a tool for teaching Buddhist practices to viewers”. Thus, this kind of *lakawn-nam-dee* is designed to enhance the morality of audiences and influence their ways of thinking and behaving.

Media institutions

Content promoting Buddhist teachings and practices in Thai supernatural television dramas is influenced not only by state policies but also by the passion of television text producers, as discussed in Chapter Five. The results of this thesis are in line with the view of Althusser (1971, p. 135) that “the floors of the superstructure are clearly endowed with different indices of effectivity”. In this way, content represented in the dramas is dominated by the superstructure, that is, government policies, media institutions, text producers, and television texts.

Figure 7.12: Power and Thai supernatural television dramas



Apart from the government, which is at the top of the superstructure in determining television-drama content (as discussed in Chapter Five), the next most powerful level is the media institutions, especially television drama companies, including JSL Global Media Co. Ltd and Polyplus Entertainment Co. Ltd. The mottoes of these drama companies express concern about “social ethics on television” and “upholding works/tasks in bonding moral community” (JSL Global Media, 2017; Polyplus, 2018).

In respect of television crews, the Buddhist knowledge represented in the dramas is motivated by their robust intention to support the national religion in which all of them have a shared collective sense of and pride in Buddhism. The scriptwriter of *Ngao* stated that:

“I will create more dramas which include Buddhist knowledge. Buddhism is the national religion in Thailand where people use the Buddha’s thought, as a way of Thai life. I am proud of being part of a team promoting Buddhism and am very happy if audiences apply the teachings to their lives.”

Moreover, television texts also shape the audiences’ thoughts and behaviour, i.e. the viewers can learn that Buddhism is a moral compass which can be a tool for solving problems in their daily lives. The interviewees in the *Ngao* group explained that:

“The drama is similar to a mirror in reflecting what good and evil karma are and how to deal with problems in everyday life through the use of Buddhist teachings. After I finished

watching the drama, I wanted to be a good Buddhist and to apply religious teachings to my daily life.”

In other words, the power of the state and the producers is used in this kind of drama to produce Buddhist knowledge in a way compatible with the view of Foucault (1995, p. 27) that “power produces knowledge ...; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” It means that ruling classes or state policies, which are the topmost levels of the country, have the power to produce “effects at the level of desire – and also at the level of knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. 59). The results of this study demonstrate that state policies employ soft power to highlight the Buddhist content shown in the dramas.

Impact on audiences

Focusing on the audiences’ interpretation as examined in Chapter Six, the results illustrated that both the dedicated fans and the casual viewers correctly understood and interpreted the key Buddhist teachings in line with the producers’ significations. This is because all participants had Thai ethnicity and had learnt traditional teachings from their families. Smith (1986, p. 200) notes that ethnicity is a model for transmitting knowledge regarding “national entities” and is “a basis for nation-building”. Most of the participants accepted that their families were their first Buddhist school; as one of them stated, “The *Karmic Law* was the first teaching that I learnt from my grandmother”. Some of them had learnt the teachings from wider society, from local temples and schools, when they were growing up or when they lived in a rich Buddhist culture. As Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 57) argue, knowledge is socially constructed “by the degrees of familiarity”. One of the participants stated that, “My grandparents and I always went to listen to sermons in local temples at least three times a week”. However, in contemporary Thailand, they acknowledged that there was a decrease in listening to sermons or attending religious events because of their busy working lives. Nevertheless, they did not forget teachings and rituals because they still recognised them through other channels, especially television dramas. The results of this study are in line with the view of Jenkins (2013, p. 23) in the sense that dedicated fans pay attention to media texts more so than casual viewers, and that fandom leads to active audiences who “construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass media culture images”.

The results of this study agree with Jenkins’s view and demonstrate the three degrees of active audiences: 1) the stage of understanding Buddhist teachings, called

learning or recognising; 2) the stage of applying the teachings in their lives, called *practising*; and 3) the stage of disseminating the teachings to others, called *distributing*. For the first degree, all dedicated fans and casual viewers (24 people) reached this stage as they agreed that the dramas could provide knowledge of Buddhist teachings and could be the inspiration for reminding themselves to '*not forget to be good Buddhists*'. However, this stage did not lead them to take any action. It is possible that the casual viewer participants could only access the first stage of the active media audience because they only watched some episodes of the dramas while pursuing many other activities, such as, chatting or talking with their friends, doing housework, and so forth. In other words, the audiences' intention is a prominent factor in moving to the second and third stages of being an active media audience. The second stage was reached by the majority of the dedicated fan interviewees (10 people) who agreed that they took the teachings they learnt in the previous stage and adapted them to their daily lives; this process is claimed by the participants to act as a tool in reducing their sadness and solving their problems, as if it was a '*Buddhist vaccine*'. As an example, one of the participants in the *Ngao* focus group stated that "I applied the teaching of *letting go* as a tool in eliminating my regrets as I had learnt to do from the drama". The final stage was reached by a minority of the dedicated fan interviewees (4 people) who revealed that they shared knowledge gained from the previous two stages with their close friends and younger relatives. An example of this was found in a female participant in the *NCD* focus group who revealed that she used Buddhist contents to teach the *Karmic Law* to her young children. "Being Thai Buddhist is something to be proud of; distribution of Buddhist knowledge is my lifelong ambition," she claimed. The three stages above demonstrate that viewers were acting as students by watching the dramas and the dedicated fans performed much better than the casual viewers in that role.

In this sense, Thai supernatural television dramas are a tool for creating and reinforcing social unity by encouraging viewers to be good Thai Buddhists, to follow Buddhist teachings, and to play a part in maintaining the centrality of Buddhism in Thai life. This kind of social unity is in line with the concept of mechanical solidarity developed by Durkheim (1961) who notes that religion is a way of building unity within a community. The results of this study indicate that the dramas create or strengthen social unity in two ways. The first is that they reinforce the Thai proverb '*if you do good things, good things will happen to you; however, if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you*'. The majority of the participants suggested that the dramas function as case studies confirming that the proverb is still compatible with contemporary Thai culture. However, as a result of the dramatic changes in economics, politics, and cultural globalisation in Thailand, the proverb is interpreted and perceived by some as meaningless and old-fashioned and that, in fact, doing good things does not always get one good things, while bad people seem to

mostly get good things. From the television producers' point of view, the dramas are created to reflect that while bad people may not get punished in this life, they will still need to redeem their sins in the next life. The scriptwriter of *Ngao* revealed that the proverb was reemphasised because, "I hoped that the drama might be an inspiration for creating a moral community". At the end of both dramas analysed in this thesis, villains were sentenced according to the *Karmic Law* and punished in torment. Regarding viewer's interpretation, the proverb was considered as still relevant in society. A participant in the *Ngao* focus group said, "Do I make the religious mistakes shown in the drama?; [No] ... I am afraid of the *Karmic Law*". The second way the dramas contribute to creating and reinforcing solidarity among the participants is the idea that '*Buddhist holy objects have a symbolic value in recognising the Buddha but they have no inherent paranormal power*'. The majority of the participants noticed that both dramas were different from other supernatural television shows in Thailand in that sacred objects were mostly represented in other television dramas as tools for subduing ghosts but in the dramas *Ngao* and *NCD* the objects were used instead by monks as a way of teaching Buddhist lessons. From the perspective of the producers, the scriptwriter of *NCD* stated that, "sacred objects and black magic, according to Buddhist texts, are not the business of monks; thus, they are not included in the drama". From the viewers' perspective, none of them resisted that representation; they preferred this portrayal of the role of monks with one of the participants saying that, "I liked this drama because the appropriate way to represent monks is as religious teachers more than as ghost-hunters [like in other supernatural products]". As outlined above, the dramas, functioning as a religious school, are intended to educate audiences and to reinforce a feeling of Buddhist unity.

Limitations of this study and recommendations for further research

Although this study presents a unique contribution to existing empirical evidence in the field of Thai supernatural television dramas, the limitations also need to be taken into account. Initially, problems with focus group recruitment were experienced and delayed commencement of the study. It was difficult to recruit six people into each group who were available to participate at the same time and place in Bangkok, Thailand. However, this did not have a detrimental impact on the results. To deal with the difficulties, volunteer gatekeepers were used to assist with the recruitment process and to provide a meeting place with a quiet room and audiovisual facilities. The small sample size of the four focus groups (6 people per group) may be viewed as a limitation in this study; however, the diversity of the participants required, for example whether they were dedicated or casual viewers, has generated useful data that challenges existing viewpoints and offers positive findings.

Further research should consider three main areas. First, it would be good if the next study can access the government and Channel 7's policymakers to examine the reasons why the promotion of the national religion by television broadcasting is regarded as important. Second, there are rich and varied supernatural media products in Thailand that are rarely examined, including television variety shows and radio supernatural shows, both of which are popular in the Thai media industry and with audiences. It would be useful to investigate whether, in fact, Buddhist ideological messages are included in the programmes or not and to analyse the reason why they are or are not included. Finally, the neighbouring countries, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, would make an interesting sample for further research exploring audience perceptions and interpretations of the television texts because they understand the Thai language, also watch Thai television programmes, and share the Buddhist faith. Further research in different settings could be useful not only for academic studies but also for professional media producers.

Conclusion

The results of this thesis demonstrate that Thai supernatural television dramas play a vital role in circulating Buddhist knowledge and are an important tool in shaping and reinforcing Thai audiences' thoughts and behaviour. Obviously, Buddhist knowledge represented in the dramas is not new to the audiences; they have a basic stock of knowledge transmitted through the generations. To attract audiences to watch the shows and so to promote Buddhist ideological messages, the form of the dramas, including the use of famous actors/actresses, television tropes, western plots, and special effects, has been developed in line with global media trends using the technique of postmodern collage. However, at the core of the dramas is the intention to promote Buddhist teachings as the dominant ideology in Thailand. Together with state policies and the social responsibility of media institutions and text producers, Buddhist contents contained in the dramas are a vital component in establishing unity within Thai society by functioning as a Buddhist classroom for everyone. Thus, I would argue that Buddhist knowledge and Thai supernatural television dramas are inseparably connected in twenty-first century Thailand.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Title: The Construction of Social Reality through the supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences

Researcher: Nattawat Wongwilatnurak
PhD candidate in Media and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Art, Design, and Social Sciences
Northumbria University
Email: nattawat.wongwilatnurak@northumbria.ac.uk
Tel. 07481 156967

You are invited to participate in a research project, which aims to explore the views and perceptions of Thai viewers on the meaning of Thai beliefs about ghosts and spirits presented in Thai television dramas. The project aims to develop various television programmes in Thailand in terms of the presentation of Thai social beliefs, in order to not only produce the media products for the function of entertaining, but also to preserve the values of Thai social beliefs, such as Thai beliefs about ghosts and spirits that are engaged with Buddhist concepts, from generation to generation.

This information sheet is to help you understand why the study is being carried out and what it will involve for you before you decide if you would like to participate.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of research into the construction of social reality about ghosts and spirits in Thai television drama programmes and the perspectives of Thai audiences is to investigate the continual presence within Thai culture of concerns with social beliefs which are relevant to Buddhism, especially the belief predicated upon the cycle of death and rebirth which has led to entrenched social beliefs about ghosts and spirits that appear in Thai television drama programmes.

In addition, this research will ask you about the meanings of social beliefs that appear in Thai television drama programmes, which have been telecasted on free television channels, and your understanding Thai traditional culture and your perspectives.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this project, participation is completely voluntary. Should you decide to take part, I will fully explain the project and the content of the information sheet. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time and request that your data be deleted if you reconsider your participation within the research.

All of your data will be used in academic approach in order to facilitate a doctoral dissertation at Northumbria University in accordance with university policy.

What will I have to do?

You will be asked to complete a question list and you will then be asked to have a focus group or individual interview with the researcher at a time and location convenient to you in Thailand. The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes and will be recorded by voice-recorder.

Will my taking part be kept confidential?

You will not be named or your work location identified in any documents. Every effort will be made to ensure participants remain anonymous throughout the study.

Recordings and paper transcriptions will be kept in a secure locked place which only the researcher has access to.

Transcriptions stored on computer databases will be password protected to ensure that no one has access apart from my academic supervisor and me.

Only information necessary to the project will be included in the final thesis.

What will happen to all the information collected for the research?

Recordings and paper transcriptions will be destroyed and information saved digitally will be deleted once academic verification is completed and within three years of completion of the study following Northumbria University policy.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the project?

You can withdraw from the project at any time without giving an explanation and without prejudicing your future employment or career progression. Any information relating to you will be destroyed, unless you specifically agree that it can be included in the final report.

What if I have any problems or concerns?

If you have any questions or concerns about any part of this project please contact me, Nattawat Wongwilatnurak on 07481 156967, email, and I will do my best to answer your questions.

Thank you for helping with this research project, Please keep this sheet for your information.

Appendix 2: Participant Debriefing Sheet

Participant Debriefing Sheet

The key purpose of this doctoral research project is to study the construction and representation of Thai national religion (i.e. Theravada Buddhism) through television genre of Thai ghost dramas. The research covers the process of production and consumption of certain television-drama contents as well as the features of the dramas in order to provide an understanding of the ways in which Thai Buddhism is socially constructed, represented, and perceived. This includes 1) the textual analysis of the ghost dramas which have been considered as the outstanding media products facilitating and circuiting the Buddhist ideology in Thailand; 2) the in-depth interviews of the key figures in the production of the ghost dramas is to analyse perspective of the TV text producers and scriptwriters regarding the construction and representation of Thai Buddhist ideology through the ghost dramas; 3) the focus-group interviews with Thai audiences in order to explore their opinions of Thai Buddhism and cultural impacts after watching the dramas representing Buddhist teachings and practices.

The original record of the interviews will not be published. The information provided by the participants will be anonymously archived and used under the conditions of confidentiality (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymization of data, etc.). The data will be anonymously represented and disseminated in the research, publications, reports and presentations. No legal names will be used.

If you have any questions or require any further information, please contact the researcher at the contact details below.

Name of researcher: Nattawat Wongwilatnurak

Email address: nattawat.wongwilatnurak@northumbria.ac.uk

Telephone Number: 07481 156967

Thank you very much for your participation.

Appendix 3: Research Participant Consent Form

Title: The Construction of Social Reality through the supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences

Researcher: Nattawat Wongwilatnurak
PhD candidate in Media and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Art, Design, and Social Sciences
Northumbria University
Email: nattawat.wongwilatnurak@northumbria.ac.uk
Tel. 07481 156967

Type: Focus-group interviews

I, the undersigned, confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project conducted by Nattawat Wongwilatnurak from Northumbria University. I have read and understood the information about the project as provided in the Information Sheet and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation. I also understand that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.

I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymization of data, etc.). The use of the data in research has been explained to me and I understand that the data I provide is to be anonymous.

I agree that the researcher will conduct the photograph, video and audio recording of the interview. I, along with the researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.

Participant:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Researcher:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Appendix 4: Research Participant Consent Form

Title: The Construction of Social Reality through the supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences

Researcher: Nattawat Wongwilatnurak
PhD candidate in Media and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Art, Design, and Social Sciences
Northumbria University
Email: nattawat.wongwilatnurak@northumbria.ac.uk
Tel. 07481 156967

Type: In-depth interviews

I, the undersigned, confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project conducted by Nattawat Wongwilatnurak from Northumbria University. I have read and understood the information about the project as provided in the Information Sheet and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation. I also understand that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.

I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymization of data, etc.). The use of the data in research has been explained to me and I understand that the data I provide is to be anonymous.

I agree that the researcher will conduct the photograph, video and audio recording of the interview. I, along with the researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.

Participant:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Researcher:

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Appendix 5: The List of Questions

Title: The Construction of Social Reality through the supernatural in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences

Researcher: Nattawat Wongwilatnurak
PhD candidate in Media and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Art, Design, and Social Sciences
Northumbria University
Email: nattawat.wongwilatnurak@northumbria.ac.uk
Tel. 07481 156967

Section 1: Television ghost dramas and Government/TV station policy

This section will examine the link between the production of TV dramas and the government cultural policy/TV station (i.e. Channel7) in general i.e. how these dramas may/may not be linked to the overall cultural policy of the country? Besides, is there factor/social impact in raising TV text producers in creating the ghost dramas which are associated with Buddhist teachings?

- How the drama was started? Why did you (or *Channel7*) decide to produce the ghost drama? Why the drama emphasising Buddhist ideology was represented?
- What did inspire/influence you to produce this kind of TV drama? Have you had a practice of Theravada Buddhist? Do you believe that Thai beliefs about ghosts referring to Buddhism?
- Is there any policy from *Channel7* (i.e. TV station) /government influencing you to produce this kind of the drama?

Section 2: Process of TV drama production

This section will provide an inquiry to figure out how is the process of producing the ghost dramas in facilitating/maintaining/highlighting Thai Buddhist ideas, especially Buddhist teachings and practices. In addition to that, the key reason in promoting the Buddhist ideas will be investigated.

- What is the main aim of this drama? What is the key message of the drama that you would like to tell audiences?
- Why do the ghost dramas need to include Buddhist ideology?
- Do you intentionally/non-intentionally represent the Buddhist teachings?
- In the drama (*Ngao*)
 - How did you select the Buddhist teachings to represent in the drama? What criteria are considered for selecting the topics of Buddhist teachings to 'represent' and 'not represent' in the drama?
 - Why did you highlight the Buddhist teachings (e.g. the *Karmic Law* and others) in the drama?
 - Why the characteristics of the *King of Hell* in the drama are different from his features perceived in traditional Thai beliefs (i.e. a new media construction and/or removal of the traditional beliefs)?

- What is the main aim of adding/removing the features of ghost beliefs in the drama? What is the point that you are going to emphasise?
- Do you think the Buddhist quotations at the end of each episode have an impact on audiences?
- There are many repetitions in representing the word of *King of Hell's* character (i.e. 'go down to Hell and redeem your sin'). What is the benefit in stressing this idea?
- In the drama (*NCD*)
 - How did you select Buddhist teachings? What criteria are used for selecting top teachings to 'represent' and 'not represent' in the drama?
 - Why did you highlight the Buddhist teachings (e.g. the *Karmic Law* and others) in the drama?
 - What is the main aim in presenting traditional Thai beliefs about sacred objects, black magic, and guardian spirits? Do you intentionally reflect Thai community? In what way? (e.g. it is a tool in facilitating Buddhist ideas)
 - In the drama, I have found that the issue of black magic is defeated the moral power of Buddhism (i.e. good behaviour, Buddhist rites and objects, and Buddhist teachings). In this sense, did you want to persuade Thais to resist the idea of Black magic in Thailand?
 - Why vengeful ghost characters and Buddhist monk characters are selected as the main character in reflecting the Buddhist teachings?

Section 3: Cultural impact and popularity

This section will explore the perspectives of the TV text producers on the cultural impacts and the popularity of the Thai representation, as well as the success of the promotion of Thai culture through the dramas.

- To what extent do you think TV drama is a way of promoting/maintaining Thai Buddhism?
- Do you think that the drama has success in terms of business and/or circulating the Buddhist ideology, especially the teachings and rituals?
- Do you think Thai TV ghost dramas have been influenced by the Western ghost series/films? In your opinions, is there a form of the Western ghost representations applying for Thai TV ghost dramas?
- In your opinions, why the drama was popular? (e.g., the Buddhist teachings, social beliefs about ghosts, a form of presentation, superstar actors, interesting plots, etc.)
- To what extent does the Buddhist ideas in the drama has an impact on the audiences and societies?
 - If so, in what way? (e.g. audiences' attitudes in practising Buddhist rituals and following the teachings)
 - How did you know the feedback?
 - After the drama on-aired, is there a cultural event which was dominantly influenced or transmitted from the drama?
- Do you have a plan in producing the Buddhist based-ghost dramas in the future? Why?
- Why the ghost dramas are normally represented in line with Buddhism?

Appendix 6: Permission Letter (1)



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มหาวิทยาลัยกรุงเทพ (วิทยาเขตสวนน้ำ)
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โทรสาร 0 2240 1516, 0 2249 6274

มหาวิทยาลัยกรุงเทพ (วิทยาเขตรังสิต)
9/1 หมู่ 5 ถนนพหลโยธิน ตำบลคลองหนึ่ง อำเภอคลองหลวง
จังหวัดปทุมธานี 12120
โทรศัพท์ 0 2902 0299 โทรสาร 0 2516 8553

16 June 2015

Mr Nattawat Wongwilatnurak
Bangkok University (Rangsit Campus) Communication Arts Complex Building,
9/1 Moo 5, Phaholyothin Road, Klong Luang District, Pathumthani, 12120, Thailand
Tel: +44 7481 156967 (UK mobile number)
Email: nattawat.w@bu.ac.th

Dear Mr Palakorn Somsuwan,
Managing Director of Bangkok Broadcasting & TV. Co., Ltd.

I am an instructor at the School of Communication Arts, Bangkok University, Thailand. I have gained a scholarship from the Faculty Development Programme of Bangkok University. At present, I am a doctoral student in Media and Cultural Studies at the School of Arts, Design and Social Science at Northumbria University in the United Kingdom. My PhD research project, *The Construction of Social Reality about Ghosts and Spirits in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspectives of Thai Audiences*, is an exploration of the representation of ghosts and spirits in Thai television dramas and the perspectives of Thai viewers.

It is evident that several television dramas telecasted on Channel 7 are outstanding media products, as they are popular among Thais and play a meaningful role in representing and maintaining valuable Thai social beliefs, especially Thai beliefs about ghosts and spirits. They provide Thai viewers with not only entertainment but also education in terms of the aspects of Thai ways of thought related to the religious principles and social behaviours. Therefore, I consider them as essential for an analysis of Thai television and representation of the social beliefs.

As mentioned above, I am writing to request for the Copyright permission to access and use a portion of the audiovisual footage of the television dramas which are available on the Bugao.TV Official Channel. As a part of my PhD submission, together with a research paper, the partial footage of the television dramas will be inserted in an audiovisual presentation of the thesis as a television documentary. The list of television dramas needed for my research project is as follows;

- 1) Nang Chada (2015)
- 2) Ngao (2014)

I would be very grateful if you can approve this request. I confirm that the use of television dramas as requested will be utilised to contribute to academic scholarship. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries or require further information.

Thank you very much for your kind assistance. I am looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 7: Permission Letter (2)



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อาจารย์ประจำ ภาควิชาวิทยุกระจายเสียงและวิทยุโทรทัศน์ มหาวิทยาลัยกรุงเทพ
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เรื่อง ขออนุญาตเผยแพร่ข้อมูลและขอลิสต์ภาษาถิ่นที่งานผู้ผลิตละครโทรทัศน์เรื่อง "นางชฎา"
เรียน คุณอรพรรณ วัชรพล กรรมการผู้จัดการ บริษัท โพลีพลัส เอ็นเตอร์เทนเมนท์ จำกัด

กระผมเขียนจดหมายฉบับนี้มาเพื่อขออนุญาตเผยแพร่ข้อมูลและขอลิสต์ภาษาถิ่นที่งานผู้ผลิตละครโทรทัศน์เรื่อง "นางชฎา" ผลิตโดยบริษัท โพลีพลัส เอ็นเตอร์เทนเมนท์ จำกัด ตามที่กระผม นายณัฐวัฒน์ วงศ์วิลาสบุรุษ อาจารย์ประจำ ภาควิชาวิทยุกระจายเสียงและวิทยุโทรทัศน์ มหาวิทยาลัยกรุงเทพ ได้รับทุนให้ศึกษาต่อในระดับปริญญาเอกที่ Department of Media, Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences, Northumbria University เมือง Newcastle upon Tyne ประเทศอังกฤษ โดยขณะนี้กระผมอยู่ระหว่างการทำวิจัยเรื่อง The Construction of Social Reality about Ghosts and Spirits in Thai Television Drama Programmes and the Perspective of Thai Audiences โดยงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ มุ่งศึกษาเนื้อหาที่สะท้อนให้เห็นถึงอุดมการณ์ทางด้านพุทธศาสนา รวมถึงมายาคติ ประเพณี และวัฒนธรรมไทยที่สอดแทรกอยู่ในละครโทรทัศน์แนวนี้ กระผมเห็นว่า ละครเรื่อง "นางชฎา" เป็นละครที่ควรค่าต่อการศึกษาในครั้งนี้เป็นอย่างมาก เนื่องจากละครเรื่องดังกล่าว ที่ได้รับความนิยมสูงสุดประจำปี พ.ศ. 2558 และละครยังได้รางวัลจากสถาบันต่างๆ อีกมากมาย รวมถึงเนื้อหาของละครยังส่งเสริมหลักธรรมและพิธีกรรมทางพุทธศาสนา และยังปลูกฝังให้ผู้ชมยึดถือพุทธศาสนาเป็นเครื่องยึดเหนี่ยวจิตใจอีกด้วย ทั้งนี้ กระผมจึงขออนุญาตลิสต์ภาษาถิ่นที่งานผู้ผลิตละครเรื่อง "นางชฎา" โดยประเด็นในการลิสต์ภาษาถิ่นจะมุ่งเน้นไปที่ วิธีการนำเสนอเนื้อหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับพุทธศาสนา เช่น หลักธรรมคำสอน, คติธรรม, พิธีกรรมต่างๆ ที่สอดคล้องกับพุทธศาสนา รวมถึงมุมมองของผู้ผลิตละครในการนำเสนอละครเพื่อเป็นละครสร้างสรรค์สังคมในเชิงพุทธศาสนา กล่าวคือ ละครได้นำเสนอเนื้อหาที่มุ่งเน้นให้ผู้ชมตระหนักถึงเรื่องกฎแห่งกรรม และซึ้งใจให้ผู้ชมล้วนทำแต่ความดี ละเว้นความชั่ว เพื่อที่จะอนุรักษและสืบทอดศาสนาพุทธและวัฒนธรรมไทยอันดีงามต่อไป

จากที่กล่าวไปข้างต้น กระผมจึงเขียนจดหมายฉบับนี้มาเพื่อขออนุญาตวิเคราะห์ละครเรื่อง "นางชฎา" และขออนุญาตลิสต์ภาษาถิ่นที่งานผู้ผลิตละคร ประกอบด้วย ผู้กำกับละครและทีมงานผู้เขียนบทโทรทัศน์ กระผมเห็นว่ามุมมองของผู้ผลิตละครประกอบกับงานวิจัยชิ้นนี้จะสามารถสร้างองค์ความรู้ในเชิงวิชาการ รวมถึงเป็นแนวทางในการพัฒนาต่อยอดอุตสาหกรรมในการผลิตละครไทยได้อีกด้วย จึงเรียนมาเพื่อโปรดพิจารณา หวังเป็นอย่างยิ่งว่าจะได้รับการอนุเคราะห์จากท่านด้วยดี และขอขอบคุณมา ณ โอกาสนี้

ขอแสดงความนับถือ

ณัฐวัฒน์ วงศ์วิลาสบุรุษ

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