

FROM CHAO PHRAYA TO IRRAWADDY: TV DRAMA AND THE LITERARY RECASTING OF THAILAND AND MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT—*From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* is a Thai historical drama aired on Thai PBS in 2022 that reconstructs stereotypes as it reimagines the historical and cultural relationship between Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar). Drawing on the shared literary traditions of *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, this article argues that the drama generates a sense of “intermediality” and “in-betweenness”, employing “national” literature as a means of critiquing Thai nationalism. These texts mediate conceptions of nationhood and identity, fostering shared cultural heritage, while the *Rāmāyaṇa* reflects tensions between state power and individual lives, challenging nationalist discourse.

KEYWORDS: Historical Drama; *Inao*; Intermediality; National Identity; *Rāmāyaṇa*; Thailand–Myanmar Relations

Introduction

Across decades of Thai popular culture, Burma has been repeatedly stereotyped as an enemy. Rooted in the grand narrative of Thai history, this representation has long been a tool of the authorities, as when school textbooks propagate nationalist sentiment which is then circulated in drama, films, and novels (Sunait 1992; 2552). When Thailand faced crises, wartime mobilization between Siam and Burma, especially during the Ayutthaya period, was staged to arouse national unity (Amporn 2003;

Harrison 2010). Nevertheless, attempts have been made to break the cycle of this negative reproduction. The Thai historical drama *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* (จากเจ้าพระยาสู่อิรวaddy), which aired on the Thai PBS channel across 12 episodes from January to February 2022, is a prominent example of these attempts [FIGURE 1]. Not only did the series try to create a new perspective toward Burma or Myanmar, it also challenged the mainstream discourse of Thai nationalism, though the contemporary sense of the Thai nation-state did not actually emerge during that time in the drama. Interestingly, the drama brought the shared literary works, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Inao* (อิเหนา), to promote that theme.

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FIGURE 1: Poster portraying the drama's main characters of the series, 2022 © Thai PBS

From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy was directed by Thai director Chartchai Ketnust (ชาติชาย เกษนัส; b. 1978) and involved both Thai and Burmese actors and actresses. This drama was part of Chartchai's extended project about Myanmar; he previously directed the film *From Bangkok to Mandalay* (ถึงคน... ไม่คิดถึง; 2016) and a series of documentaries, *The Unknown Yodia* (โยเดีย ที่คิด(ไม่)ถึง; 2017–2018 and 2021), which also aired on Thai PBS. Yodia (ယိုးဒယား) is the Burmese name used to identify Ayutthaya people; this documentary aimed to build a bridge between the two cultures by exploring the shared art and culture of the forced migration of the Yodia population after the war between Ayutthaya and Burma. *The Unknown Yodia* documentary provided the foun-

dation of *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*, which used the conceit of time travel by a Thai heroine from the present to the past of the Ava kingdom during the reign of King Bodawpaya (ဘိုးတော်ဘုရား; 1782–1819), whom Thais call *Phra Chao Padung* (พระเจ้าปดุง).

As demonstrated in greater detail in the storyboard in **TABLE 1**, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* tells the fictional story of a contemporary Thai heroine who becomes a Burmese royal dancer in the past. The drama depicts the life of this group after the downfall of Ayutthaya in 1767, capturing the significant moment when the Thai *Inao* was translated into a Burmese performance, including the insertion of poets and translators. Furthermore, the drama presents several performing arts from

TABLE 1: Storyboard (Episodes 1–12)

Ep. Period(s)	Location(s)	Key Events
1 Present (2022)	Yangon	Nutchanat, a Thai woman working in a hotel Myanmar in Yangon, meets Pakon, a Thai chef. She discovers a Burmese <i>Inao</i> book, attempts a dance, and awakens as Pin in the Ava kingdom.
2 Past	Ava kingdom (ca. 1785 Burma)	Episode introduces Pin, servant of Yodia princesses. Composer of <i>Inao</i> . Maung Sa, an Ava performer, admires Pin's dance and saves her following her miscarriage. Nutchanat awakens in Pin's body.
3 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Yangon	Nutchanat returns to the present after Pakon finds her unconscious. Confused between dream and reality, she recounts her visions. Recovered, she joins Pakon to a rural village for authentic Mohinga and they encounter a <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> performance.
4 Past	Ava kingdom	After the village <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> ritual, Nutchanat returns as Pin. Maung Sa asks the Yodia princesses to translate <i>Inao</i> and include Pin in the performance, sparking conflict with the princesses.
5 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Yangon	Nutchanat experiences Yodia life before returning. With Pakon, she pleases the hotel owner with Mohinga, but collapses again.
6 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Bangkok	Nutchanat awakens as Pin and learns her past. In the present, she is sent to Bangkok, diagnosed with hydrocephalus, and becomes a “sleeping beauty”, remaining in the past for long periods.
7 Past	Ava kingdom	The Yodia princesses allow Maung Sa to translate <i>Inao</i> and let Nutchanat/Pin perform. The show is staged for King Bodawpaya after the war. Afterwards, Nutchanat meets Bagong, Pin's husband, who resembles present-day Pakon.
8 Past	Ava kingdom	Bagong searches for Pin while Nutchanat struggles to explain. The king orders the Crown Prince to stage <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> , involving Maung Sa and Nutchanat/Pin. The royal consort, impressed by <i>Inao</i> , requests dance lessons from Pin.
9 Past	Ava kingdom	The story develops the love triangle of Pin, Bagong, and Maung Sa amid <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> rehearsals. Nutchanat/Pin argues with the Crown Prince over the story, while the royal consort reveals romantic feelings and attempts to kiss her.

Ep. Period(s)	Location(s)	Key Events
10 Past	Ava kingdom	The affair between the royal consort and Nutchanat/Pin is exposed. The king investigates; the consort accuses Pin of witchcraft. Nutchanat predicts the king will lose to Siam, shocking him; she is sentenced to death.
11 Past	Ava kingdom	While Nutchanat/Pin is imprisoned, Bagong and Maung Sa fail to secure a pardon. Bagong helps her escape, but they are ultimately captured.
12 Past & present	Ava kingdom and Bangkok	Nutchanat/Pin requests a final performance as her execution. She plays Sida, proving her innocence in fire, but dies. She then wakes in the present and reunites happily with Pakon.

the *Rāmāyaṇa* and parallels this story with the main characters' lives.

Positive feedback from both Thai and Burmese audiences occurred during the drama's PBS airing, inspiring public discussion on the two nations' relationship. For Thai audiences, several scenes from the drama, especially the *Inao* dance, went viral on social media platforms TikTok and X, garnering over one million views (Thai PBS 2565b). Moreover, responses related to the drama, such as academic discussions, criticism, and social media discourse, took place. Mahidol University held an online discussion event about the two nations.³ Discussion on the Thai and Myanmar arts in Thai academia occurred, such as an article by Thadchakorn & Peerapong (2566) which clearly stated that it was inspired by the drama. Concurrently, many people from Myanmar, especially those who live in Thailand, watched the drama and became excited to see their

culture and stories represented in Thai media (Thai PBS 2565a). After the airing ended, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* won over 10 awards in Thailand, including the Outstanding TV Drama of the year in the Nataraja Award and the Nine Entertainment Award in 2023 (Thanatcha 2566).

Although the time travel trope is standard in Thai media, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* deviated from thematic convention. In contrast to well-known stories such as *Thawiphop* (ทวิภพ; *The Two Worlds*) and *Buppessannivas* (บุพเพสันนิวาส; *Love Destiny*), critics commented that the drama was different (Harrison 2010; Saranpat 2024); it sidestepped repeating nationalist sentiment while avoiding glorifying the “good” old days of the Siamese kingdom (Matichon Weekly 2565a; Wirawat 2565).

This article argues that *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* portrays the in-betweenness of Siam and Burma by blurring the boundaries of “national” cultures. It does so through the intermediality of classical literature—text, object, and performance—presenting

³ See งานเสวนา “สู้เรื่องพม่า” ในหัวข้อ “โยทยา-พมานิยม” [*“Understanding Burma” Talk: “Ayutthaya-Burma-ism”*]. Facebook, 30 January 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/Rilca.Mahidol/videos/996037241001747> (accessed 12 Sept. 2025).

Inao and the *Rāmāyaṇa* in hybrid forms that contest Thai nationalism and envision new cultural possibilities. Using an intermedial framework, we examine how hegemonic nationalist discourse and reimagined Siam–Burma relations are facilitated. To begin, we outline the theoretical framework and Thai nationalist context, followed by an analysis of *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s intermedial representations, concluding with broader implications.

Intermediality and the Politics of “In-Betweenness”

Intermediality examines “relations between media conventionally perceived as different” (Johansson & Petersson 2018: 1). Since each medium—such as image, text, or interactive graphic—is apprehended differently, intermediality provides a framework to study their interactions. Although media are often defined as mass communication—television, radio, newspapers, or social media—Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022) highlight multiple layers, from the smallest units of signs to their configu-

ration into forms displayed via screen or speaker, summarized in **TABLE 2** below.

This table illustrates the multilayered ways media interact. Johansson & Petersson (2018: 1) note that intermedial studies examine interactions between old and new media, as well as objects and networks that mix media. Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022: 19–24) identify four modalities for studying media relations: material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic. Material modality shows how media communicate, sensorial and spatiotemporal modalities consider audience perception in time and space, and semiotic modality examines how media represent something else.

Intermedial studies focus on the “in-between” spaces where media cross borders and signify meaning. In these spaces, semantics and physical materials are linked. Klaus Jensen (2016: 1–2) calls this “discursive intermediality”, in which meaning is created through interaction rather than being fixed. As Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022: 6) argue, understanding media heterogeneity enhances comprehension of how medial choices shape communication.

TABLE 2: The Three Types of Media Suggested by Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022: 16–19)

Media Type	Key Features	Examples
Technical Media of Display	Material object for accessing production	Paper, stone, screen
Basic Media Type	Configurations of sign systems	Text, speech, image, sound
Qualified Media Type	The integrated form of basic media for making meanings	Literature, music, visual arts, film

In Thai scholarship, intermediality is an emerging trend. The volume *The Intermedial Aesthetics* (สพฐริยสพฐลลลล), edited by Natthanai Prasannam (2564), examines connections between literature and visual media using the concept of “intermedial dialogue”. Natthanai shows how Sri Burapha (ศรลลลลลล)’s works in contemporary films and novels use books as a medium to sustain his legacy and identity in popular culture. Here, literature functions not only as art but also as a referential medium within the in-between space.

Meaning in these spaces often interacts with social discourses and power relations. The in-between space allows media to mix, reference, and transform meanings, sometimes challenging hierarchies. For instance, internet literature frequently combines media to retell classical stories like the *Ramakien* (รลลลลลลล). When presented as Boys Love fan fiction, these hybrid texts reference shared cultural knowledge while destabilizing hierarchical interpretations and generating new meanings (Saranpat 2025). Intermediality thus demonstrates not only media crossing but also the contestation and negotiation of meaning.

Accordingly, this article analyzes how medial choices in these dramas interact and how these in-between spaces negotiate Thai nationalist discourse. Drama is treated as a qualified medium, combining basic media through screen channels, with *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* conceived as qualified media encompassing books, performances, and the body.

Thai Nationalism and the Construction of Burma as the National Other

Thai nationalism, articulated in mainstream discourse through Thongchai Winichakul’s term “Royal-Nationalist History” (*prawattisat ratcha chatniyom*; ประวัติศาสตร์ราชาชาตลลลล), revolves around pride in national independence. This narrative emphasizes kings who protect the country from crises and enemies, restoring peace and order (Thongchai 2559). While pride signifies national independence, the discourse of “lost territories” (*sia dindaen*; ลลลลลลลล) conveys national humiliation. Shane Strate (2015) describes the lost territories as a chosen trauma designed to arouse nationalist sentiment, calling for Thai unity (*sammakkhi*; สลลลลลลล). This discourse traces back to the Franco-Siamese Crisis of 1893 (Incident of RS 112) when France forced Siam to “cede the land” on the Mekong’s east bank and it recurs in subsequent national crises.

Since this nationalist discourse requires an enemy, Burma has historically served that role. During nation-building, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943), the “father of Thai history”, wrote a narrative that became the primary school-taught history. His major work, *Our Wars with the Burmese* or *Thai rop phama* (ไทยรบพม่า; 1917–1920), shaped the dominant perception of Burma as a national enemy (Sunait 1992). Burma’s conquest of Ayutthaya, annexed twice in 1569 and 1767, reinforced the lost territories discourse, stimulating nationalism.

Thai historical novels from the 1930s to the 1990s often focus on Ayutthaya's fall in 1767, culminating in national restoration under King Taksin of Thonburi (r. 1767–1782) and King Rama I of Bangkok (r. 1782–1809). These narratives didactically promoted national unity and celebrated heroic kings defending independence (Apirak 2547). During the 1997 economic crisis, fears of neo-colonialism spurred post-1997 heritage films such as *Bang Rachan* (บางระจัน; 2000) and *Suriyothai* (สุริโยทัย; 2001) to depict Burma as the national enemy (Amporn 2003; Apirak 2547; Harrison 2010).

Efforts to break this cycle emerged in the 2010s. Following ASEAN integration, Yingluck Shinawatra's government (2011–2014) positioned ASEAN as a flagship policy to prepare Thailand for regional engagement. Despite her ousting in 2014, the military junta under General Prayut Chan-O-Cha maintained ASEAN-focused policies. Inspired by the EU model, this openness aimed to foster political and economic unity in Southeast Asia, promoting friendship-building and reconfiguring the representation of Burma/Myanmar away from past biases and stereotypes.

Myanmar's democratization and development in the 2010s, before the 2021 coup, enabled Thais to visit and experience the country firsthand rather than relying solely on textbooks and media. Thai tourist visits to Myanmar tripled between the early and mid-2010s (Walderich 2022). This exposure influenced Thai literature: Pongsakorn (พงศกร) wrote *Le Luntaya* (เล่ห์ลุนตยา; 2014) and *Kliao Krasip* (เกลียวกระซิบ; 2018), noting in both prefaces that he had been taught to hate Burma but found

its culture fascinating after visiting. His novels challenge stereotypes. Similarly, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* director Chatchai emphasized that history should guide understanding of past conflicts to shape a better future (Matichon Weekly 2565b).

Thai PBS has played a key role in promoting understanding between Thailand and its neighbors. Chatchai notes that the drama aligns with the station's mission (Thai PBS 2565b). Established in 2008 as the "Thai Public Broadcasting Service", Thai PBS focuses on public service broadcasting, aiming to provide information, support democratic engagement, and promote cultural diversity by including under-represented voices. Thai PBS dramas frequently depict "heroism by common people", portraying the lives of ordinary Thais who contribute to society (Tadsani 2564). In contrast to mainstream dramas that often center on elite national figures, these productions highlight the actions and sacrifices of non-elite characters, occasionally addressing issues such as gender norms, HIV stigma, and nationalist narratives. *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* exemplifies this approach. Its intermedial use of shared literary traditions, notably *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is central to promoting these themes.

***Inao* as an In-Between: Reinterpreting a National Canon**

From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy uses *Inao* as a departure point to connect the two nations and two time periods. Thailand's *Inao* is derived from a Javanese tale called *Panji*. It revolves around Prince

Inao, who refuses an arranged marriage to Princess Butsaba (บุษบา), a woman of equal status, but, instead, has an affair with Princess Chintara (จันทะหรธา). This causes war between the kingdoms before the prince recognizes the beauty of Butsaba. The story unfolds through his courtship of Butsaba, the couple's separation, and their eventual reunion.

Inao was introduced to the late Ayutthaya court in the 18th century during the reign of King Barommakot (สมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวบรมโกศ; 1733–1758) as an oral tale that enthralled two princesses, Kunthon (กุนทล) and Mongkut (มงกุฎ). The story was made into two drama plays, *Inao* and *Dalang* (ดาหลั่ง). Although the original texts were lost during the sacking of Ayutthaya, King Rama I composed some parts of both stories again after he established the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok. The drama court play *Inao* became more popular than *Dalang* and was reworked by King Rama II (r. 1809–1824) to become his masterpiece. Thus, although *Inao* is of foreign origin, it is treated as a jewel of Thai national literature (Thaneerat 2018).

The Burmese version, *Inao/Eenuang* (အီနောင့်) was introduced to Burma by diasporic Ayutthayans (Yodia) after the downfall of the city. Under the auspices of Crown Prince Shwedaung (ရွှေဘောင်မင်း; 1762–1808), *Inao* was brought to the Burmese royal palace along with other performances, including *Rama zat* (ရာမဇာတ်), during the reign of King Bodawpaya (Toru 1999; San San We 2019). Scholars believe that the translation method employed was not a direct textual rendering from Thai to Burmese, but rather a verbal process. Siamese princes and princesses recounted the

stories to the Eight Member Commission appointed in 1789⁴ (Thaw Kaung 2006). U Sa (ဦးစ; 1766–1853), who would later become the renowned Lord of Myawadi, was among the Commission members. He subsequently composed the Burmese court drama *Inao/Eenaung*, complete with dialogue, songs, musical cues, and detailed stage directions. One manuscript of *Inao/Eenaung* mentions that U Sa initially wrote the play in 1798; it was first performed at the Burmese court in 1799 (Thaw Kaung 2006).

From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy captures the history of reconceptualizing *Inao* into the Burmese version by using real figures as key characters. The drama is narrated through the plotline of Nuchanat (นุชนาถ), a present-day Ayutthayan woman working in Yangon, who finds a Burmese version of *Inao* by U Sa. This discovery becomes a medium for her to travel into the past, encountering poets before becoming a dancer in the Burmese *Inao* performance. In the drama, *Inao* functions as an “in-between” medium, blurring the boundaries of a national canon and fostering a sense of collaboration between the two nations.

⁴ On 3 December 1789, the Crown Prince Shwedaung (1762–1808)—renowned both as a skilled and courageous army general and as a patron of music, poetry, and drama—issued an order for the translation of stories and plays brought from Siam (Ayutthaya) and Chiang Mai over the previous two decades. To carry out this task, a commission of eight distinguished individuals, including royalty, officials, scholars, writers, and musicians, was appointed to collaborate with Siamese interpreters from Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai (Thaw Kaung 2002a).



FIGURE 2: Nutchanat shows the Burmese *Inao* to her father.
Episode 1, 2022 © Thai PBS

Translated Text as a Medium of Nation and Time

In the first episode, Nutchanat discovers *Inao* in an old bookstore in Yangon. Her Burmese friend, Zin Zin, tells her about the poet, translates some parts, and demonstrates the dance for Nutchanat. Although Nutchanat cannot read or understand the text, this book connects her Thai identity to Myanmar through shared cultural heritage [FIGURE 2]. In the subsequent scene, Nutchanat video calls her father in Thailand and shows him this exciting discovery, voicing her opinion that “I don’t think we’re really enemies like the school teaches us”.⁵

As Bruhn & Schirrmacher (2022) classify the three text types, the book portrayed here functions not merely

as a material object but as a qualified medium—an “integrated form of basic media for making meanings”. Although Nutchanat cannot read the text, it gains significance by referencing the presupposed Thai *Inao* she knows from school. In this way, *Inao* signals its status as part of the national literary canon, linking the protagonist to her Thai identity. Simultaneously, the translated book mirrors the heroine’s journey to a foreign land: “similar but not the same” for the Thai heroine, it prompts reconsideration of Burma/Myanmar’s role.

Crucially, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* uses the Burmese *Inao* as a medium to transport Nutchanat to the past. At the end of Episode 1, she gazes at the book’s cover, prompting a classical Thai dance. The scene moves her from her room into a liminal space before she awakens in the past in another’s body. Episode 2 establishes

⁵ All quotations are from English subtitles from the drama via the VIPA application, the official site of the Thai PBS channel.

this transition narratively through Pin (ปิ่น), who dies after an abortion, before Nutchanat inhabits her body.

The role of *Inao* as a medium signifying the Thai nation reappears when Nutchanat participates in its translation, though the medium shifts from book to performance. Pin, a servant of the Ayutthayan *Inao* composers, Princesses Kunthon and Mongkut, narrates the conflict when Maung Sa (หม่องสะ; i.e., U Sa) seeks the princesses' permission to translate and adapt *Inao* into a Burmese text and performance. Nutchanat, inhabiting Pin's body, becomes his dream dancer. In Episode 4, the drama captures Princess Kunthon's turbulent feelings. Having lost her homeland and become a captive, Kunthon faces the additional loss of *Inao* and struggles when her lower-class servant is cast in the lead: "even though Ayutthaya is no more [...] that doesn't mean the art of Ayutthaya can be taken away. Or adapted into something else with an unproven dancer playing the lead role".

Inao embodies the Thai nation through the two princesses, particularly Kunthon. As Maung Sa observes, "They are ready to let it die when they die. *Inao* is completely tied up with their heritage as Yodia". Although the modern nation-state did not exist at the time, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* employs the Thai nationalist discourse of lost territories, as Strate (2015) notes, to frame Princess Kunthon's anxiety. The translation thus emerges as a perceived threat akin to losing the Thai nation to a Burmese enemy.

Subsequent scenes depict the conflict gradually resolving through

openness and mutual understanding. The drama destabilizes the notion of nationhood embedded in *Inao*. At the end of Episode 4, Princess Mongkut reminds Kunthon: "the origins of those stories are not ours, Your Highness, [...] if someone can make something good from it again, isn't that good?". This dialogue signals that *Inao* was originally not a Thai work but a hybrid composed by the princesses from what they heard. It challenges nationalist assumptions that treat the Thai canon as pure and authentic. Although Kunthon initially refuses, saying "Let it die when we die", Maung Sa's sincerity and admiration for the Thai performance persuade her to allow the translation. In short, the nationalism surrounding *Inao* gradually diminishes.

Performance as a Medium of National Collaboration

After the princess permits Maung Sa to translate and adapt *Inao*, the Burmese version is rehearsed and officially performed in Episode 7. *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* presents this new *Inao* as a hybrid performance combining various basic media—body movement, music, and storytelling—distinct from that which would typically be shown to Thai audiences. The intermediality of the complete performance transforms the familiarity of Thai *Inao* through unfamiliar elements, contesting and negotiating nationalism.

The drama opens with the rehearsal scene, which must be approved by the two princesses before staging for the king. This scene reawakens Princess



**FIGURES 3a–b: The reaction of Princess Kunthon (b) towards *Inao*'s rehearsal (a).
Episode 7, 2022 © Thai PBS**

Kunthon's internal conflict, evident in her shifting emotions while watching the rehearsal. In **FIGURE 3a**, she initially watches Nutchanat dance alone with satisfaction, but her feelings change when Maung Sa joins in. The scene conveys her dilemma solely through facial and non-verbal expressions [**FIGURE 3b**]. At one point, she walks out mid-performance, prompting fear of disapproval among the dancers. Ultimately, she approves, stating, "I had written the play we saw today, but I didn't understand even one word. The music and dance were exceptional".

The new version of *Inao* challenges the princess's authorship of the script. As Jensen (2016) notes, intermedial discourse does not carry meaning on its own but relies on interaction with other media. The performance blends styles of dancing, music, and movement from Burmese aesthetics, disrupting the princess's understanding of the play. Her internal conflict reflects the effect of in-between media, contesting her nationalist perspective while negotiating a new understanding of beauty. The rapid shift in her emotions when the Burmese dancer enters can be inter-

preted as an enemy invasion, occupying the stage and challenging her claim over the play. The drama thus presents two options: dismissal with continued conflict, or approval allowing the play to proceed. Her eventual acceptance signals a shift from rigid nationalism toward mutual understanding and respect.

The official performance before King Bodawpaya is a key scene. In Episode 7, with the king and royal audience present—including the two Ayutthaya princesses—Maung Sa plays Prince Inao and Nutchanat plays Princess Butsaba. The airtime for this scene lasts several minutes, allowing the performance to be presented in detail, including the well-known *Butsaba Siang Thian* (บุษบาเสียงเทียน). The scene features an elegant fusion of Burmese music, dance, and costume, performed by both Thai and Burmese dancers. This hybrid performance blends elements from the two nations, signifying transnational collaboration [**FIGURE 4**].

The episode concludes with Maung Sa and the princesses conversing after the performance. The hybrid origin of *Inao* is emphasized as the princesses



FIGURE 4: The official *Inao* performance staged for King Bodawpaya.
Episode 7, 2022 © Thai PBS

acknowledge that it does not belong to them but derives from tales they heard: “it is now in the hands of a true artist”. Princess Kunthon adds, “It seems that my life will end up here away from home. *Inao* has to be with Amarapura, I suppose”, expressing acceptance that *Inao*, like her life, has become a diasporic part of this land, accompanied by understanding and the willingness to move forward.

In summary, *Inao*, as a medium, conveys national meaning through both literature and performance, linking it to the Thai identity of the female characters. Its translation into Burmese text and performance parallels the princesses’ diasporic lives in Burma. The drama illustrates the interplay between

nationalist sentiment and hybrid performance, ultimately resolving the tension and fostering acceptance of a new conception of beauty through cross-national collaboration. *Inao* thus promotes open-mindedness, suggesting possibilities for relationships that transcend rigid nationalist discourse.

***Rāmāyaṇa* Across Borders: Shared Cultural Roots and Nationalist Discourses**

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is another work portrayed in various media in this complex drama. Originating in India, this epic revolves around the war between the god-avatar Rāma and the demon king Rāvaṇa, who abducts Rāma’s wife, Sita. It has been

widely shared across Southeast Asia and remains popular in mainland countries.

In Thailand, the story is known as the *Ramakien* and underpins kingship through a divine ruler. Rāma, as an avatar of Viṣṇu, embodies duty and dignity as he protects the kingdom. The name Rāma has been associated with Thai kings since the late 13th-century Sukhothai kingdom, including King Ramkhamhaeng (พ่อขุนรามคำแหง). The Ayutthaya Kingdom of Siam, which preceded modern Thailand, was named after Ayodhya, Rāma's city. This tradition continues in the Bangkok era, where all kings of the Chakri dynasty are known as King Rama. These kings historically acted as patrons for the *Ramakien*, both in literature and performance. The Siamese court version of the *Ramakien*, completed under King Rama I between 1785 and 1807, was performed as a masked dance called *khon* (โขน). Originally reserved for the king, it later became accessible to the public and is now considered a central element of Thai national heritage and literature (Srisurang 2006; Ruenruthai 2563).

In contrast to Inao, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was not part of Burmese tradition until the Yodia captives brought it to the Ava court, where it had previously been transmitted orally (Thaw Kaung 2002b). Burmese court drama emerged after Ayutthaya's fall in 1767, with the king as a patron. Between 1770 and 1824, the Ava court flourished in the arts, literature, and foreign knowledge. The Burmese *Rāmāyaṇa* incorporated dialogue, poetry, music, song, and dance. Ayutthayan captives, including dancers and musicians, contributed to this cultural exchange, initially entertaining

Thai residents at the Burmese court. The court incorporated Siamese elements into its classical music and the earliest Burmese *Rāmāyaṇa*, called *Yama Tha-gyin* (ရာမသာချင်း) by Aung Phyo, appeared in 1775 under King Hsinbyushin (ဆင်ဖြူရှင်မင်း; 1763–1776). Later, U Toe translated *Yama Zatdaw* (ရာမဇာတ်တော်) for performance during King Singu Min's reign (စဉ့်ကူးမင်း; 1776–1782), using Yodia song and dance (Sittiporn 2561).

According to Surapon Wirunrak (2553), the Ayutthayan *Ramakien* in Burma evolved significantly during King Bodawpaya's reign under the patronage of Crown Prince Shwedaung, similar to the developments noted above for Inao. Although performances declined during British colonization, *Yodia Zat Kyi* (ယိုးဒယားဇာတ်ကြီး), a specialized Burmese adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, survived. Comparable to the Siamese *khon*, it was adapted to Burmese style and performed at special events. Thadchakorn & Peerapong (2566) argue that the popularity of the *Yodia Ramakien* at the Burmese court reflects positive artistic exchange and mutual respect, in contrast to the usual war-centric historical narratives.

From *Chao Phraya* to *Irrawaddy* captures this constructive approach to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as it does with Inao, by materializing the story through performance. The meaning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is embodied through the characters. The drama's climax unfolds via the performance and the tragic fate of the heroine. In doing so, the *Rāmāyaṇa* challenges mainstream nationalist narratives by reinterpreting and softening them, highlighting transnational connections and shared cultural roots.



FIGURE 5: Burmese performance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* explained by Nutchanat. Episode 3, 2022 © Thai PBS

Materializing the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a Shared Cultural Root

In the Thai PBS drama series *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, intertwined with *Inao*, is presented as a shared cultural root through the perspective of Siamese protagonists. In Episode 3, set in the present, Nutchanat and her boss—and eventual partner—Pakon (ปกรณ) visit a Burmese village where they encounter a performance of *Yama Zatdaw*. The scene features extended coverage of the performance, with Nutchanat explaining its details to Pakon, who is unfamiliar with both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its Burmese adaptation [FIGURE 5]. Through this portrayal, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* demonstrates the cultural continuity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and provides its audience

with a broader understanding of the story's regional resonance.

Reverting to the past, Episode 5 shows Nutchanat visiting the diasporic Ayutthaya village with Maung Sa as her guide. There she encounters a shrine dedicated to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s heroes, Phra Lak and Phra Ram. When she asks how to identify the houses of Yodia captives, the answer is given through the presence of this shrine. As a Thai from Ayutthaya in the present, Nutchanat perceives the shrine as a link to ancestors who were resettled there. This connection underscores the continuity between past Siamese who crossed into Burma and present-day Thais living in Thailand.

Back in the present, Nutchanat's Burmese friend finds her researching the *Rāmāyaṇa* and asks why she is so

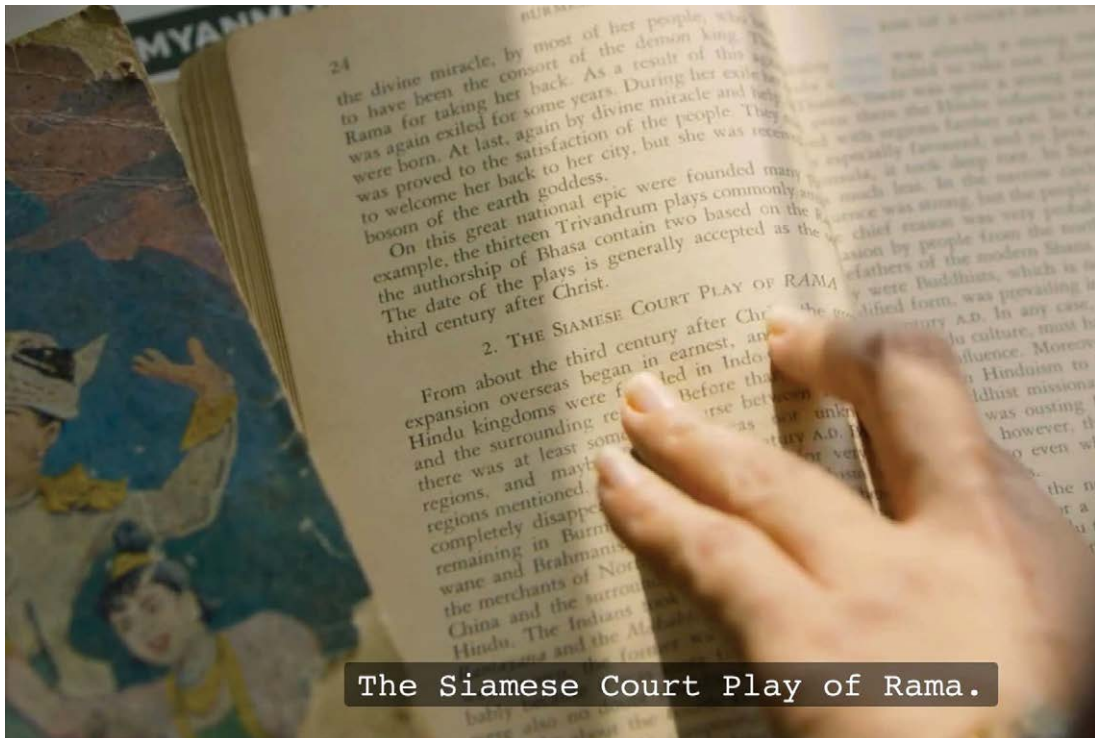


FIGURE 6: The textbook about the Siamese Court Play of Rāma.
Episode 5, 2022 © Thai PBS

interested in the subject. The camera zooms in on a textbook [FIGURE 6] that contains commentary on the Yodia population and the migration of the *Ramakien* to Burma. Nattanaï (2564) argues that the book and this reading scene function as a medium that conveys cultural sharing. The authority of institutional knowledge in the textbook validates the supernatural events that Nutchanat has experienced. At the same time, the dialogue between the protagonists highlights their shared roots: “In that case we both could have the same father’s father’s father’s father then. That means we’re sisters!”. Ultimately, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* promotes the idea of common heritage and mutual knowledge between Thailand and Myanmar, rather than positioning the two as adversaries.

The Body, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the Challenge of Social Norm

Aside from objects and performances, the body functions as a key medium in *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*. This follows Jensen’s (2016: 5) argument that “human beings can be understood as media of the first degree. The human body is a versatile material platform and a host to speech, song, dance, drama, painting, and creative arts in general”. In the drama, characters’ bodies embody the meanings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and reinterpret them to serve the production’s new themes.

In the Thai version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Nutchanat becomes the medium embodying Sita (Nang Sida). The opening scene hints at this connection: a young Nutchanat wears a Sita costume



**FIGURE 7: The Burmese Crown Prince dances as Rāma.
Episode 8, 2022 © Thai PBS**

and dances with her mother, only to faint. The mystery of her collapse remains unresolved until later episodes, when the drama reveals that she first began traveling to the past while playing Sita. Later, after portraying Butsaba in the *Inao* performance for the king, Nutchanat is chosen to play Sita.

Opposite Nutchanat/Sita, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* features Crown Prince Shwedaung, who played an important role in embodying Rāma while adapting the Yodia *Rāmāyaṇa* for the Burmese royal court. In Episode 8, after the Crown Prince's impressive performance of *Inao*, King Bodawpaya—plotting war against Siam—says to him, “It would be even better to use their artform as a weapon [...] to use this art to help us rule more strongly”. Following the King's command, the Crown Prince orders a performance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and seeks to present himself as a great warrior in emulation of Rāma.

He remarks, “It seems like *Inao* is too much of a lover, though [...] Rāma is much more fitting for me, I think”. In the following scene, he acts out the role of Rāma while dancing in his private chamber [FIGURE 7]. Thus, Rāma as warrior is mediated through the body of the Burmese Crown Prince.

Instead of highlighting the usual theme of romantic conflict, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* disturbs the traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* by shifting from the glorification of war to the suppression of the “little people”. While the Burmese Crown Prince emphasizes the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a tale of glorious warriors, Nutchanat, who embodies Sita, becomes inscribed with the meaning of suppression, affected by the patriarchal system embedded in nationalist discourse. This is made explicit in Episode 9, when the drama portrays an argument between the two characters. The Crown Prince orders the removal of the romantic

subplot and the abduction of Sita, while stressing the mobilization of soldiers for war. He insists, “Art, if simply for entertainment, has no meaning. It must serve the nation”. Nutchanat, grounded in contemporary values of equality, justice, and freedom of expression, voices her opposition to his interpretation. Her defiance humiliates the Prince, who perceives her contesting ideas and lower status as a threat to himself and the nation.

More critically, Nutchanat’s anti-war stance and outspoken nature lead to her death as King Bodawpaya prepares for war with Siam. She is accused after a royal concubine slanders her, claiming that Nutchanat is a witch from the future and accuses her of a lesbian affair. During the interrogation in Episode 10, the King demands proof; Nutchanat warns him that his war with Siam will end in failure. She pleads, “Don’t raise an army, Your Majesty. The greatest victory is one where no blood is shed, Your Majesty”. Her words, however, enrage both the King and the Crown Prince, who condemn her as a danger to the nation and sentence her to death.

The series explicitly connects Nutchanat’s fate with Sita’s in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Earlier, while watching a performance with Pakon, she critiques the story: “If I were Phra Lak, I would tell my brother not to go to rescue Sida. War causes so many unnecessary deaths. Do you know when he has Sida back, Phra Ram makes Sida walk into a fire? It’s not worth all those deaths”. Her comments foreshadow her later opposition to war and her own trial by fire. In the climax, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* restages Sita’s ordeal. Nutchanat, requesting to

dance as Sita one last time as an Ayut-thaya dancer, uses the performance to express her innocence and her true intention to prevent bloodshed. “I am so foolish to think that the words of a lowly servant could change the mind of the king. And I am losing my life for it”, she laments. In the execution scene, she performs Sita’s fire trial [FIGURE 8]. Unlike Sita, who survives, Nutchanat perishes—her defiance against patriarchal and nationalist norms costing her life. Her performance of Sita’s trial thus embodies wrongful accusation and unjust suffering, while also challenging the authority of rulers.

As Nutchanat plays Sita, Maung Sa plays Rāma. Wearing a mask, he lights an arrow, draws his bow, and aims it at her. Significantly, after the performance, he removes his mask and turns his face away, unable to bear witnessing such a tragic outcome, having developed a deep bond with her. The despair, sorrow, and pain displayed on Maung Sa’s face serve to humanize Rāma. This act also rebuts the Burmese Crown Prince’s earlier interpretation of Rāma as a symbol of masculine strength, power, and ruthless nationalism. By removing the mask, Maung Sa introduces Rāma’s more humane side, emphasizing that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not solely a political narrative but one rich with deep emotion. Once again, this challenges the interpretation imposed by the ruling class.

Hence, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is embodied through both characters; its meaning shifts to reflect the experience of common people, who must perform their roles under the rulers’ command. While Nutchanat’s life is taken, she



**FIGURE 8: Execution scene of Nutchanat referencing the *Rāmāyaṇa*.
Episode 12, 2022 © Thai PBS**

has a final opportunity to express her innocence through the role of Sita. At the same time, Maung Sa, as a court servant, cannot refuse the king's orders. His act of unmasking and revealing his emotions is the only gesture he can make for Nutchanat. Through the execution, the *Rāmāyaṇa* signifies that both dancers are ultimately servants compelled to perform and obey. As Tadsani (2564) notes, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy*, as with most Thai PBS dramas, addresses the struggles of ordinary people confronting social norms and state power. Furthermore, the drama challenges nationalist discourse that glorifies war heroes and the absolute authority of patriarchal rulers. In doing so, it enables the woman's body to interpret a narrative such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* differently from those in power and questions the

legitimacy of authority imposed on her fate, as with Sita.

In conclusion, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* contests nationalist discourse not only through the play's shared cultural roots, mediated by objects and performance, but also through literature and the embodied actions of the characters. The female protagonist's fate emphasizes the position of common people and critiques nationalist ideals of war and authority, which result in the death of an innocent individual. Rather than reinforcing official definitions of war heroes or state power, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is reappropriated to convey an alternative meaning.

Conclusion

This article has examined the Thai historical TV drama *From Chao Phraya*

to *Irrawaddy* by analyzing the use of the historical dramas *Inao* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* to explore Thai nationalism and reimagining of relations between Siam and Burma. The framework of intermediality was applied. The analysis illustrates that the series is a notable example of a contemporary Thai historical drama attempting to move beyond stereotypical images of the “Other”. At the same time, the drama reconstructs the meaning of “us” by utilizing national literature as a significant medium.

The intermedial approach demonstrates not only the interactions between media, but also the creation of a notion of “in-betweenness”: both literary works comprise multiple layers of media, ranging from tangible forms to abstract signification. The translated text and hybrid performance in *Inao* parallel Siamese identity, which is portrayed as vulnerable to loss to the Other. Yet *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* redefines *Inao* as a source of collaboration, accessible not only to great men but also to ordinary people, transcending national borders. This produces a distinctive configuration seen in both the hybrid performance and the friendship between the two nations.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* continues the theme of shared cultural heritage through objects and performances exchanged

between the two nations, as experienced by the main Thai protagonist. The series employs the bodies of the male and female protagonists as a key medium to contest and negotiate the meaning of the nation. The performances draw from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, yet they are presented in a manner that challenges traditional interpretations. The necessarily tragic ending raises questions about the focal points of nationalist discourse, such as war and rulers, while representing the suppressed spaces occupied by ordinary people under these powers.

Overall, *From Chao Phraya to Irrawaddy* conveys its key message by avoiding romanticization of the past, utilizing time-travel narratives to frame Nutchanat’s question before her execution: “Who says the past is beautiful?”. Simultaneously, the drama contests the notion of a national literature and culture grounded solely in the nation-state. The series explores new possibilities for common roots and collaboration between Thailand and Myanmar. Ultimately, the drama also foregrounds Thai people who reside beyond the borderlands, highlighting a forgotten group of “unknown Yodia”, captive Ayutthayan people, and in so doing reimagines a new relationship between the two nations.

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