

Madam Yee Hube

The Thai TV equivalent of the American soap opera, airing in the early evening rather than during the day, is generally about as semi-mindless and ridiculous as anything seen on U.S. television. Part of its appeal is the very fact that viewers needn't invest much brainpower in the plot development, such as it is. Still, viewed from another perspective these TV shows provide fascinating insights into current Thai values and offer fuel for theological reflection "in the Thai context." "Madam Yee Hub," a generally popular offering, which ran for several months at the end of 2002, provides a case in point.

The story centered on the promise two men, who are old friends, had once made to each other that their granddaughter and son, respectively, would one day marry. That day has come, the problem of the plot being that the granddaughter is a country girl, smart, mouthy, but unrefined while the son is an up and coming diplomat slated to become the Thai ambassador to London. His mother and younger sister vehemently oppose any liaison with the country hick, whose accent is appalling to them. A jilted ex-girl friend and her scheming mother add zest to the story.

While the hero of the tale is the country girl, it is interesting to note that all of the "bad guys" in the story are loud-mouthed, emotional, narrow-minded, selfish women. The main "good guys" are mostly men, including the two fathers and a gay younger brother of the future ambassador. Yet, the male lead is portrayed as an arrogant and repressed city boy, who only gradually falls in love with the country girl—and even after he falls in love is totally inept at expressing his feelings. Yee Hub, the country girl, ultimately wins the heart of the male lead and his noisy, obnoxious mother and sister by becoming the model daughter-in-law, submissive, kind, and self-denying. A woman who knows her role and plays it well, that is, wins out. The male lead, however, has to learn to be less self-involved and more adept at showing affection.

The values: [1] country is better than city; [2] quiet males are better than mouthy females; [3] "real" Thai (again, country) is preferable to Western (again, city); [4] non-confrontational servanthood is better than aggressive, emotional confrontation; [5] rural wisdom is better than urban sophistication (a refinement of #1 and #3); [6] goodness is the ultimate victor over hate; [7] being gay is funny but OK; [8] truth will out in the end; [9] women can be as brave and resourceful as men; and, [10] romantic love overcomes all jealousies and misunderstandings. Embedded within the nearly mindless plot, finally, was the ongoing search for Thai democracy symbolized by the name of the show and the experience of Yee Hub, the country girl, who became "Madam" Yee Hub, the wife of the Thai ambassador to Britain. She is, at once, a "real Thai" country girl who proves that the country wisdom of the demos is best. The whole show was a Thai celebration of the democratic "fact" that you can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl.

One motivation for constructing Thai theologies is that contemporary Thai values value Thai-ness and the rural, democratic wisdom of local peoples. Christian theologies that fail to share in these values will (continue to) be irrelevant to what moves and shapes contemporary Thai culture(s).