

Term Paper

Names:

CHAN Hoi Ting 1155124770

CHENG Tsz Ching 1155166859

LAU Yu Shing 1155110834

LEUNG Kiu Ching 1155164486

**Misrepresentation and Overgeneralization of Southeast Asia
in *Raya and the Last Dragon***

Raya and the Last Dragon (“*Raya*”) is an animated film produced by Disney Studios in 2021. It features a warrior princess Raya seeking out the last dragon Sisú and restoring the dragon gem, in order to resurrect her father and fight against the dark spirit (Hall & Estrada, 2021). The story happens in a fictional kingdom Kumandra where was once united but now separated into five regions. It is the first Disney film representing Southeast Asian (SEA) culture and therefore consists of different SEA cultural references.



Kumandra in “Raya”

Firstly, taking Talon as an example, their architectures are inspired by the floating markets in Laos, Thailand, and Indonesia (Caballo, 2021). Secondly in cuisine, Boun, one of the main characters, owns his boat restaurant, serving the signature dishes in SEA such as Tom Yam and Shrimp Congee. Thirdly, the martial art and fighting techniques are also references to

Muay Thai and Pencak Silat (Caballo, 2021). Apart from all these aspects, the dragon is also an important motif and mythological image representing SEA, as the dragon Sisu is indeed referring to Naga in Buddhism (Radulovic, 2021). However, this representation is not very accurate, and hence we will have a further discussion in the following sessions.



Floating Market and Boat Restaurant in Talon and Reality

Adding numerous SEA cultural references, *Raya and the Last Dragon* aims to attract the SEA audience due to its large market as well as political correctness that tries to be inclusive to all races and ethnicities on screen. Ironically, however, due to the pandemic the film was not released in theaters in some SEA countries. Meanwhile Disney+ channel is not available in most areas of SEA. It makes us wonder who the targeted audience of this film are. After its release, film critics are mostly delighted to see SEA faces appear in a Disney movie but generally not satisfied with the presentation of SEA culture in the film (Bui, 2021). They comment that seeing familiar things on screen does not mean feeling being represented (Bui, 2021). Moreover, the SEA elements in the film are more like gimmicks instead of the main plot that actually introduces the culture and folklore behind it. Putting all the SEA references in the once united Kumandra, it blurs the boundaries and specificity of each SEA country. Thus, the pan-SEA presentation did not appeal to the SEA audience and left the cultural references like Easter eggs in the film.

In this paper, we would like to discuss why Disney chose the pan-SEA approach for *Raya* and its relation with media imperialism. We would also analyze the misrepresentation of Sisu as a dragon instead of a Naga and further examine whether Naga alone is able to represent all SEA countries with other religious animal icons.

Media Imperialism

In one scene, Raya's father told Raya that "We (Kumandra) were once unified, harmoniously as one". Although Kumandra is an apparent representation of SEA, the latter is never even close to unification. Instead, the term "S" has a shorter history than almost any other region of the world (Beeson & Ba, 2018, p.147), and no other region on earth matches SEA's diverse political structures, religious identities and economic variations. (Beeson & Ba, 2018, p.7)

In the ancient times, large empires had existed in SEA, for instance, the Khmer Empire in today's Myanmar and the Kingdom of Ayutthaya in today's Thailand. However, unlike Dynasty Tong in East Asia or the Mauryan Empire in South Asia, SEA had never been governed by one single sovereignty. It has been a network of separate countries where the Chinese called "Nanyan," literally the Southern Ocean, and the Europeans called "East India." At that time, the West simply recognized SEA as a region between India and China, thus, there was no such independent concept as "SEA".

Until the 1940s, in order to combat the Japanese army in the Second World War, the Allies set up a "South East Asia Command" in British Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka). Since then, the term "SEA" was invented and it was initially a foreign tag to the locals in SEA. In 1954, the first regional body SEATO was established with 8 members, including the Philippines, Thailand, the United States, the United Kingdom, and others, serving as a military alliance against the communists in Vietnam and Cambodia. Therefore, it could be viewed as a Cold War product (Acharya, 2000, p.35), akin to NATO in the North Atlantic.

SEATO was not an economy-driven organization, yet one was formed in 1967 known as ASEAN, with 5 initial members, namely Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. From the 1990s onwards, ASEAN was expanded with 5 new members, respectively Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei. Since then, ASEAN had incorporated all of SEA and gained a greater voice on the international stage, empowering

themselves amid two superpowers, China and India. However, contentious debates among SEA countries also intensified, for instance, the South China Sea disputes. (Acharya, 2000, p.144)

In 2003, the Free Trade Area in ASEAN was implemented to boost economic cooperation, yet disparity remains between the member states. Apart from the economy, the political situation among them also varies. (Beeson & Ba, 2018, p.147) To illustrate, Thailand adopted the constitutional monarchy, Singapore adopted parliamentary democracy while the Party of People's Action dominates the power, and Myanmar has been recurrently ruled by the military.

In a nutshell, "SEA" is simply a geographical and strategic term coined by the West during wartime, thus it contains no cultural or historical meanings by nature. On the other hand, "ASEAN" is a term founded by the SEA countries themselves, which strives for economic cooperation and avoids political conflicts. Since ASEAN upholds a long-standing "non-intervention principle" of other's internal policies, it has failed to improve the civic and labor rights crises in countries like Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar.

On account of the above mentioned, ASEAN appeared to be more of an economic union than a united, harmonious community. Therefore, neither SEA nor the ASEAN is ever as unified as Kumandra. Nevertheless, Disney adopted an over-generalized lens on SEA and "media imperialism" could be the reason.

According to Oliver Boyd-Barret (2015, p.3), international media imperialism centered on the inequalities of media power between countries. In particular, powerful media companies dominate the market to voice, meanwhile they prioritize profit, overlook differences and disseminate stereotypical messages, resulting in the suppression of the media in less powerful countries. (Boyd-Barret, 2015, p,13-14)

Unlike previous animated movies such as *COCO* and *Encanto*, *Raya* does not only focus on interpersonal issues but extends the representation to a transnational level. *Raya* hypothesized the most pressing issue for the region is distrust and disunity, therefore, through the representation of Kumandra, it suggested a solution for the region, that is to wholeheartedly

trust each other and to be unified. The underlying message implied that alliance must be good by nature, thus alliance should be the goal for SEA.

Although trust and unity could be good ethics on the interpersonal level, it is indeed an over-simplified solution on the transnational level. As the saying on Indonesia's emblem goes, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” meaning “Unity in Diversity.” Before unity, recognizing and respecting other’s uniqueness should be the foundation. Nonetheless, respecting differences should not be an excuse for tolerating others’ atrocities and inequalities, hence, helping to liberate the people from internal colonialism and exploitation ought to be a priority in SEA. It is necessary, then, not to unite for the sake of unity, but to strive for the same goal which complies with universal basic human rights.

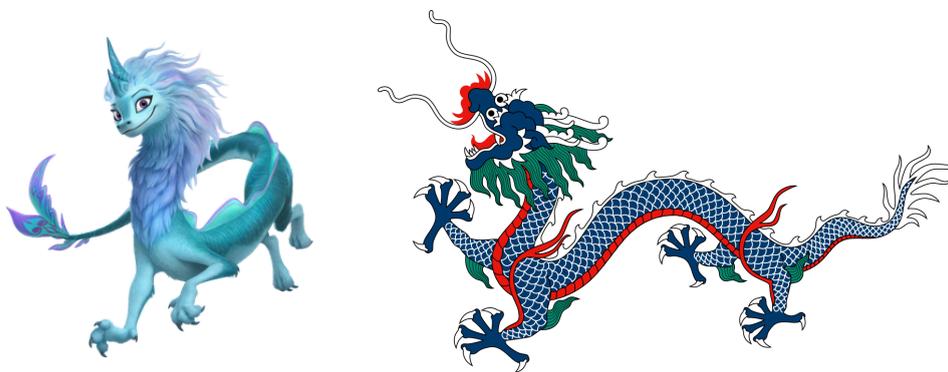
Disney’s Media imperialism reduced SEA into an exotic yet homogeneous world, satisfying the appetite of global audiences. It would be a great movie for children who enjoy magnificent visual effects. Yet regrettably, it fails to portray the heterogeneous and intricate reality of SEA, thus incapable of deeply resonating with the SEA, who have their own distinct culture and history.

Misrepresentation of Naga and Chinese Dragon

In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Sisu is referred to as a dragon and serves as the mythological symbol of Kumandra. Yet, the screenwriter Qui Nguyen claimed that Sisu is indeed a Naga, a legendary creature in Buddhism. Naga is in fact “serpent-like beings who were believed to be closely connected to water and rainfall,” sometimes in half-human half-serpent shape (DeCaroli, 2019). They are believed to have the power of rainmaking and identified as the guardians of the rivers (DeCaroli, 2019).



Naga



Comparison Between Sisu and a Chinese Dragon

Despite having the abilities, Sisu does not resemble the serpent-like image of Naga. Rather, she looks like a Chinese dragon that has furs and claws as the most distinctive feature. Interestingly, in the interview, Qui Nguyen mentioned their thoughts on Naga and Chinese dragon,

“The difference between an Eastern or Chinese dragon versus the Nāga is that a Chinese dragon is based on luck and power. And the Nāga, because it’s water, it’s life and hope. It’s just that slight little difference. We didn’t want a dragon that came in to empower [human protagonist] Raya to hit people more; we wanted one that would inspire her to open up and trust,”
(Radulovic, 2021).

According to what the screenwriter described, they did not want to use a Chinese dragon that represents power to be the emotional support and empowerment of Raya (Radulovic, 2021). As a result, they choose Naga as the symbol and as the moral figure in the story (Radulovic,

2021). However, they seem to misunderstand both the Chinese dragon and Naga as “dragons.” As the symbol and mythology of Naga have traveled in different Asian nations, it does have relations to the image of the Chinese dragon when it comes to China (Zhao, 2019; Chang, 2021). However, it is not the case in SEA context where Naga has long been understood as serpent. It is strange to see the screenwriter finding two legendary creatures having less to no differences, but merely their representations.

On one hand, Sisu apparently takes the ability and representation of Naga while resembling the appearance of a Chinese dragon. It is undeniable that the team mixed up the concept of “dragon” in Asia. On the other hand, we believed that the team did it on purpose. Using the translation of “dragon,” the appearance of a Chinese dragon is widely accepted as a dragon and perhaps easier for the Western audience to understand the signification. If it were the serpent-like body, the Western audience could misassociate the image with, for instance, the evil signification of the snake in the Bible. Nonetheless, claimed to be Naga, Sisu was misrecognized as a dragon and given the body of a Chinese dragon. Hence, it contributes to a misrepresentation in both the name and form.

Can Naga represent all of SEA?

Raya decided to use dragons, or Nagas, as the mythical creatures that connect all the different regions in Kumandra. However, this led us to question whether Naga can sufficiently represent all of SEA. As Naga is an important icon and motif in Hinduism and Buddhism, we would examine how Naga is portrayed in these two religions, and we would also examine other animal icons, such as cows and elephants in major religions in the SEA. Here, we would mainly focus on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

Naga in Hinduism and Buddhism

First, we would look at how Naga is portrayed in Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism originated in India and 99.2% of Hindus around the world live in Asia. While Hindus mainly are from India and Nepal, there are a decent number of Hindus in Malaysia (6.3%) and Indonesia (3.86%, 84% of Bali’s population are Hindus). Buddhism is the second largest religion in SEA that originated in northeastern India, later transmitted and made great impact to SEA mainly through the trade route. The religion is strongly impacting the regions in Thailand (93%), Cambodia (97%), Burma (80%) and Laos (66%).

The myth of Naga and its related religious practices are related to respect to nature. As mentioned above, Nagas are huge cobras, or half-human half snakes, that are worshiped as the guardians of water, lakes, wells and rainfall. The imagery of Naga can be found in the architecture, such as historical monk monasteries. Robert DeCaroli (2019) looked into historical Buddhist monasteries in the SEA region and pointed out the imagery of Naga could be frequently found in historical monk monasteries, especially those with complex water systems. He noted that Naga was not simply a religious symbol of protection in the monasteries, the way hydraulic engineering was designed in the monasteries was to regulate the flow of water, and this method was actually related to the nāga imagery.

In addition, Piyawit Moonkham (2020) also examined the abundant motif of Nagas in Buddhist temples in Chiang Saen Basin, Thailand. Naga is considered to be the protector of land, from its connection to waterways. Her study of the pattern of historical buildings demonstrated the role of the Naga on the pattern, orientation, and characteristics of the Buddhist temples in Chiang Saen Basin. Local communities would incorporate any signs or dreams about the Naga into their building plans when building the temple. People in the Chiang Saen Basin would also ask for the Naga's approval before building private houses, temples or any buildings, especially those near the places where the Naga would come across.

Also in Thailand, the Naga Fireball Festival was an important event. It is dedicated to the fireball phenomenon, which are reddish balls of lights rising from the Mekong river that can be seen annually and this phenomenon is attributed to Naga by the locals. Thus, we could see that Nagas have a lasting importance and relevance on the SEA communities, and people would always associate Naga with water and nature.



Naga Fireball Festival

However in *Raya*, the representation of Naga is on the visuals and very surface level. The land of Kumandra is shaped like a Naga and the five regions are named after parts of Naga. Nonetheless, the movie is not centered around the nature part of the Naga myth. The premise of the movie started when Druun, the evil spirit that turned everything in its path to stone, started to rampage Kumandra. The movie might have used the evil spirit Druun as a metaphor for the destruction to nature, however, the intention is not clear. The origin of Druun was not related to the people or their thirst for power and disrespect to nature. It basically came out of nowhere. Also, the dragons in *Raya* have many different powers, such as shapeshifting and illumination, that are unrelated to water. Thus, we can deduce that the imagery of Naga was used more as an aesthetic choice for the movie, and less so as a cultural choice.

Cows in Hinduism

Another animal that is a very important icon in Hinduism is the cow. Cows or cattles are considered sacred in Hinduism and Buddhism. Cow slaughter is banned in the majority of states in India. While no such laws are in place in Malaysia or Indonesia, the Hindu community still very much respects the cow. Hindus are also known for their low rate of meat consumption and the high number of vegetarians. Aside from religious reasons, the respect for cows may also derive from economics reasons. Cattles have historically been an important aspect of agriculture, and cow dung are used as fuel and fertilizer. The importance of dairy in the diet and the use of milk in religious rituals can also contribute to the sacred status cows received.

Also, the concept of “The Sacred Cow” is also closely related to ecology and animal rights in Hinduism as well. Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush noted that there is a rise in the ecological commitment from Hinduism leaders, as such religion led projects that help preserve the environment and animal rights. Thus, paying respect to cows is also related to paying respect to the environment and the ecology.

“The Sacred Cow has been seen as symbolic of the ecological commitment of Hinduism ... ecological awareness has entered the rhetoric of religious leaders as well as politicians, though sadly not so successfully into their practice,” (Catherine Robinson & Denise Cush, 1997).

The ban on the slaughtering of cows and its protection of cattles have been an important part of history and political debate. They are actually controversial topics, especially in countries with population of people in Hinduism and Islam. The sacred status of cattles in Hinduism contradicts the usage of cow as sacrifice in Islamic tradition, because the slaughter of cattle plays a major role in Muslim holiday, Eid al-Adha. Thus, we can see that cattle and humans' treatment of them have been an important topic in the history of animal rights, as well as the daily life of religious people in SEA. Cows are an essential component in agriculture and many SEA countries have a huge population dedicated to the agriculture industry.

For a movie about SEA, *Raya* should also address the importance of cows in the religious and economical aspect of the SEA communities. Aside from its sacred status in Hinduism and Buddhism, the issue with cattles rights is equally related to the daily life of people in SEA. However, the complex and controversial elements might be the reason Disney decided to not adopt the elements of cow into the movie.

Elephants in Buddhism

While Naga is seen as an important symbol of Hinduism, the followers of Buddhism, the second largest religion of SEA, also worship elephants as one of the holy animals. The Asian elephants are sacredly symbolizing wisdom and enlightenment. As the Buddhist scriptures describe Buddha as the epitome of elephants which represents the image of “calm, poised, and alert”. Specifically, The Lotus Sutra, one of the most influential and venerated Buddhist sutras, describes the images of elephants as “mediating” and “utterly composed” which fits the practice and characteristic of Buddhas. Within the species of Asian elephants, a rare

subspecies white elephant has a more sacred status to the followers of Buddhism. The white elephants represent the uncontrolled mind and liberation, which is the ultimate level of practice of Buddha (Thundy, 1993). For that reason, elephants or sometimes white elephants are the symbol of royal or governance power in some SEA countries, especially in Thailand and Laos.

Elephants in Thailand, specifically, have a high level of sacred status in the people's mind as they are regarded as the national animal. Elephants represent royal power in the nation. Meanwhile, white elephants are used as symbols in many provinces such as Chiang Rai Province, or the former national flag. Therefore, it could be seen that there is a close relationship between elephants and the Thai people, from being used warriors on battlefields, worshiped as religious icons, and faithful laborers to loggers (Ringis, 1996).

Nevertheless, elephants are not represented in *Raya*. This significantly representative holy animal of the region is not depicted or suggested in any way. Instead, Disney created an animal character Tuk Tuk which is the pet of Raya, the main character. Tuk Tuk is a third-pill bug, third-armadillo, and third-pug hybrid which also has the ability to roll into a ball as a means of transportation. From the name and the role in the film, one could relate the animal to Tuk-tuk, a type of vehicle used for urban transportation in Thailand especially in the city of Bangkok.

Islam: No Sacred Animal

Meanwhile, in view of the religious practice of Islam, it is unlike Hinduism and Buddhism, there is no holy animal is worshiped by the believer of the religion. The muslims think there is only one god in the world which is Allah and Allah is the only god that is allowed to be worshiped. Although the Qur'an states that humans could kill animals for any human basic needs, some of the animals are forbidden to kill. For example, cats as they were admired for their cleanliness (Campo, 2009). In *Raya*, there is a cat-like animal Serlot is depicted in the movie as a pet as well as a trained warrior owned by another main character Namaari.

Disney's avoidance to region-/religious-specific animals

While a variety of animals or related icons are found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, Naga, on one hand is a common icon appearing in both Hinduism and Buddhism that could

be seen in ancient architecture, festivals and religious practices. On the other hand, some animals such as cows and elephants are considered sacred in other religions or regions. These sacred animals are protected by laws and engaged in daily lives and their cultures. Naga alone does not resonate with the majority of SEA.

Some animals might be too suggestive to a specific country or religion. As the plot describes tensions between countries, Disney consequently tries to avoid depicting these animals that might arouse dispute and controversy from people in SEA countries. While Naga occurs across SEA Asian countries and religions, and it is relatively more “mysterious” to western audience, Disney pick Naga as the core of this imaginary but relatable SEA-themed film, and they rather make up some new animal such as Tuk Tuk and Serlot to avoid using cows and elephants.

Conclusion

Undeniably, Disney had conducted in-depth aesthetic research into different SEA countries, assimilated a myriad of inspirations and created a visual feast. However, *Raya*'s screenwriter Qui Nguyen once said that the creation of the fictional land of Kumandra was not primarily inspired by SEA, instead, it stemmed from pan-European influences, and she analogized Kumandra with *Game of Thrones*.

Furthermore, Nguyen (2011) explained the rationale of representing each five lands with hybrid cultural settings,

“The easy thing we could have done was, this land in Kumandra was Thailand, this was Vietnam, this one’s Malaysia... But then it gets into a really ugly place of going, oh, well, this country is bad, and this one’s good, and our hero’s from here.”

As a result, the filmmaker blended different cultures intentionally, avoiding any association with a particular country and creating melting-pot scenes.

In addition, the concept of Naga is mixed with Chinese dragons by the production team. The design of Sisu is a mix of Naga and the Chinese dragons, taking the appearance of a Chinese dragon while having the ability and representation of Naga.

Moreover, even though Naga is an important religious icon in Hinduism and Buddhism, Naga alone cannot not resonate with the majority of SEA. Other animals such as cows and elephants are considered sacred and have laws protecting them. They are also an essential part of the religious and economical aspect of the region, and they should also be depicted in the film. However, Disney avoids depicting these animals that are specific to certain regions to fit its hybrid cultural approach. They also would like to avoid any controversy, especially those surrounding animal rights. Using a mythical creature like Naga was a much safer choice and more appealing to the western audience.

As Boyd-Barrett (2015) suggested in his media imperialism theory, powerful media companies prioritizes profits and craves for larger market share. Therefore, it is predictable that Disney is determined to expand its Princess series in the context of SEA, while the company weighed the astonishing visuals for global audiences over the authenticity for the SEA locals.

It is understandable that animated movies do not have the obligation to capture every detail of the complex reality. However, when *Raya* chose to create a story based on transnational relations, it is also expected to respect the fundamental fact that SEA is a region with the most diverse infrastructure of cultures, religions, economies and politics in the world, which should not be over-generalized into one entity as in Kumandra.

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