

The Representation of 'Our Neighboring Countries' in News Coverage: the Case of the Anti-Thai Riots in Cambodia in 2003

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze the news reporting of the anti-Thai riots in Cambodia in 2003 in Thai daily newspapers to answer the following questions: (1) how Cambodia and the conflicts are represented in Thai media; (2) how Thai media take part in creating conflict and culminating violence in Thailand and Cambodia relationship; and (3) how should Thai media take on the role in improving the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia. Based on the analysis of the data, it is found that Thai daily newspapers have an underlying tendency to represent Cambodia and the conflict with bias and violence. Nationalism which is reflected sometimes in the news coverage supports racism in producing, repeating and presenting negative images and stereotypes of 'our neighboring country.' To improve the difficult situation of relationship between Thailand and Cambodia and avoid similar incident, both Thai and Khmer journalists should be more careful when reporting on their neighboring countries.

1. Introduction

Day after day the presses of all nations grind out a stream of news, views, pictures, advertisements, and headlines which go a long way in creating and reinforcing images or stereotypes not only of their home countries but of other nations as well. These images and stereotypes control their attitudes and actions toward the other both in positive and negative ways. As John C. Merrill (1991: 9), professor emeritus at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, the most prolific author on the topic of press freedom and its many adversaries, has written:

Without a doubt many citizens of all nations have images or stereotypes of other nations which they wish – or perhaps would wish if they thought much about these images – to eliminate. And certainly these images do lead to misunderstanding and even to friction among certain persons (and nations) at some times, in some places, under some circumstances.

A clear example of how the 'images and stereotypes' of other nations, created and reinforced by the press, influence people is the case of the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in 2003. The event was sparked by a misunderstanding over

reported claims by a popular Thai television actor 'Suwanan Khongying' that the fabled temples of Angkor Wat - Cambodia's most prized cultural and religious treasures - belonged to Thailand and should be returned. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen jumped on the published rumor and called on his people to boycott Thai products appealing to their sense of nationalism. Mobs of Cambodians took to the streets. Because of so many rumors and national pride at stake, the situation quickly got out of control. The violence which culminated in the burning of the Royal Thai Embassy and Thai businesses in Phnom Penh was both shocking and unexpected. Fortunately, no one was killed.

The rioting not only inflicted extensive damage to Thai-owned properties but severely strained Thai-Cambodian relations. To improve this difficult situation of relationship so that similar incidents can be avoided in the future, it is very important to both Thais and Khmers to find out 'what have we known about each other and what ideologies underline the representation of Cambodia in Thai society.'

This study aims at analyzing the news reporting of the anti-Thai riots in Cambodia in 2003 in Thai daily newspapers to answer the following questions: (1) how Cambodia and the conflicts are represented in Thai media; (2) how Thai media take part in creating conflict and culminating violence in Thailand and Cambodia relationship; and (3) how should Thai and Khmer media take on the role in improving the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia.

2. Critical discourse analysis

The approach for this study is *Critical Discourse Analysis* (henceforth *CDA*). *CDA* is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of texts, which views "language as a form of social practice" (Fairclough 1989: 20) and attempts "to unpack the ideological underpinnings of discourse that have become so naturalized over time that we begin to treat them as common, acceptable and natural features of discourse" (Teo 2000).

Like other approaches to discourse analysis, *CDA* analyses real and often extended instances of social interaction which take a linguistic form, or a partially linguistic form. The critical approach is distinctive in its view of (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and the practices analyzed (Fairclough and Wodk, 1997: 258)

As this study concentrates on the anylysis of a corpus of news discourse, it is based on the idea that the public discourse is an instrument of ideology and that discourse is not only reflects reality but it constructs and shapes it in the way its producers want it to be. Following van Dijk (1995: 243), ideologies are the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members. They have something to do with systems of ideas, and especially with the social, political or religious ideas shared by a

social group or movement. Communism as well as anti-communism, socialism and liberalism, feminism and sexism, racism and antiracism, pacifism and militarism, are examples of widespread ideologies. Group members who share such ideologies stand for a number of very general ideas that are at the basis of their more specific beliefs about the world, guide their interpretation of events, and monitor their social practices.

According to Van Dijk (2000), there are reasons to believe that ideology may exhibit in virtually all structures of text or talk, but on the other hand, we also believe that this may be more typical for some than for other structures. Previous research (Kress and Hodge 1979, Fowler 1981) has demonstrated that the choice of words can determine the way an event is perceived and understood. Furthermore, the meaning of any expression is not invariable, it is determined as much by the context as by the syntactic features of its construction. At each point in text, choices are available to the writer, and at each such point, it is essential to ask: why was this form chosen, rather than one of the other available ones (Kress, 1983b).

3. Data and Scope of the study

This work is an analysis of media representation of Cambodian. It is based on data drawn from the news coverage in the top five popular Thai daily newspapers ‘Thairath’ ‘Daily news’ ‘Khao Sod’ ‘Matichon’ and ‘Khom Chad luek.’ in January-February 2003. The analysis concentrates on the headline and the leads of the news. However, the other articles about Cambodia presented in the other parts of these newspapers are also within the scope of this study.

4. The representation of ‘the Khmers’ in Thai media

In the analysis of the data, it is found that ‘Kha-men’ or ‘the Khmers’ were represented in Thai media as the rumor spreaders, the villains, the cheaters, the robbers and the disadvantaged.

4.1 ‘the Khmers’ are rumor spreaders

The first image of Khmer represented in Thai newspapers is ‘rumor spreader’. It is represented through these expressions;

<i>rumor</i>	<i>to be rumored</i>	<i>buzzing</i>	<i>set a fire</i>
<i>unfounded news</i>	<i>to be mixed up</i>	<i>splashed</i>	<i>= start the news</i>
<i>unsubstantiated report</i>	<i>to accuse</i>	<i>scandal</i>	
	<i>to blow up</i>	<i>widespread</i>	
	<i>to spread</i>		

The unconfirmed rumor, reported by Cambodian media the *Koh Santepheap Daily* on January 27, about Thai actress "Kob" Suwanan Kongying hated Cambodians had accused Cambodia of stealing Angkor Wat and that she would never set foot in the country until Cambodia returned the temple to Thailand abounded in Phnom Penh and some provinces. The actress denied ever having made such remarks. The local Cambodia news later reported that there was nothing to substantiate the quotes attributed to Suwanan Kongying and that it really was all hearsay, but it was too late. What is interesting is that, in addition to the reports that the main cause of the riots was just a rumor, those rioters and their leader, Hun Sen, were blamed and criticized for their irrational reactions toward such a rumor. The picture of an unreasonable Khmers, that they were so 'innocent' that they believe such a rumor and take an action for it, is played up many times. This can be interpreted as a subtle mocking at Cambodians.

4.2 'the Khmers' are 'the villains'

The most obvious representation of Khmer, from the data, is the image of cruel and uncivilized ethnic group. Throughout the text, the Cambodian wrongdoers are represented in headlines as the whole ethnic group 'Khmers' or 'Cambodians' instead of 'Khmer mobs' or 'Khmer attackers'.

The image was created and repeated by the variety of linguistic devices. Such expressions were used to name and describe the incident, the Khmers and the mobs' actions:

<i>Cambodia's barbarian riots</i>	<i>'Black' Khmer</i>
<i>a tragedy</i>	<i>barbarian Khmer</i>
<i>'black' Phnom Penh</i>	<i>wild Khmer</i>
<i>a shameful incident</i>	<i>Khmer thieves etc.</i>
<i>a cruel incident</i>	
<i>a saddening story</i>	
<i>the worst incident ever happen</i>	
<i>to the relation between Thai and Cambodia.</i>	

Great deals of emotional words were chosen to illustrate that the mobs were overreacting and violent, for example:

<i>Rise up,</i>	<i>throw and hurl</i>
<i>beat,</i>	<i>beat and destroy</i>
<i>burn</i>	<i>burn and destroy</i>
<i>rob</i>	<i>search and destroy</i>
<i>invade</i>	<i>being mad and wild then invade burn and destroy'</i>

<i>siege</i>	‘inspect, chase, thump and beat’
<i>jerk</i>	‘beat, destroy, rob and snatch’
<i>to be wild</i>	‘drag and gang rape’

Such modifiers like *brutally* and *madly* were used to modify the mobs actions. Then, such words like *disastrous*, *blasting* and *ruinous* were used to modify the impacts of their barbarity.

In this study, a kind of coherence heightened audiences’ feeling is found. The coherence in the following sentences; linked together by ‘not only, but also’, strongly emphasized the actions of Cambodian attackers and stirred up the readers’ anger against them. For example:

*‘The Cambodian mobs not only burn Thai-owned properties
but also robbed and beat Thais’.*

(Thairath- January, 31st 2003)

The ‘villains’ image of the Khmers can be clearly seen in such headline:

- (1) *Khmers rise up, make riot
Beat Thais
Burn embassy disastrously*

(Thairath- January, 30th 2003)

In this headline, the topic is Cambodians and their actions. The word ‘Khmer’ appear in the prominent position, the first word in the first line. Thus, it was strongly focused. Cambodians are presented as actors. At the same time, such verbs as *beat* and *burn* in the next two sentences were highlighted. By using them in the form of agentless sentences, the negative meaning of those words were more emphasized. As a result, bitterness and anger are easily brought up in Thai readers’ mind because of these focusing on Cambodian attackers’ actions of cruelty.

These images of cruelty were also brought up by using ‘hyperbole’. For example:

- (2) *Thai girl reveals
Moment that barbarian Cambodians
Stare intently and about to rape her*

(Thairath- February, 1st 2003)

To use hyperbole is to say or write things that make something sound much more impressive than it really is. Hyperbole strongly affects the feeling and attitude of the audiences. In this headline, the writer somewhat exaggerates the action of sexual abuse, makes it sound more horrible by using the word ‘จ้อง’ (stare with intention) modify ‘ข่มขืน’ (rape). Some readers’ anger might be flared up when they read such a convincing narration.

Along with this representation of Cambodia, such words referring to Thai national symbols like *Thailand*, *Thai national flag*, *the portraits of revered Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej* and *Thai Royal Embassy* are brought up. It can be interpreted as an attempt to connect and involve all Thai readers to the incident. Some titles of Thai businesses are also mentioned. It is notable that the name that was highlighted most is ‘*Shin Corporation*’ which belongs to Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the sub-headline of the news.

In contrast, when talking about this same event, Thais is presented as victims. The wounded are referred as ‘victim’ over and over, for example: *victims*, *fire burn victims*, ‘*black*’ *Phnom Penh victims* and *sexually abused victim*. Besides, when describing Thais’ action, it is more likely to use some words, such as *tumultuous*, *escape*, *run for (one’s) life*, *try to survive*, *flee* and *save (one’s) live*. The passive construction /tù:k/, which has an adversative connotation, is used. For instance:

/tù:k lu:an la:m/ ‘to be sexually harassed’

/tù:k phrâ:k/ ‘to be separated’

4.3 ‘the Khmers’ didn’t play straight

In reporting the interviews of those ‘victims’, words with negative meaning are chosen, for example: *disclose*, *reveal*, *divulge*, *expose (somebody’s) evil* instead of *interview* in order to imply that their story are totally unpleasant. These words are also used in order to guide the reader to the conclusion that Cambodia had hoodwinked Thai. The choice of words, here, clearly supported the image of ‘tricky Khmer’. Thus, the use of such negative words like *insulting*, *complicated case*, *inside story*, *manipulate*, *conceal* and *create a situation* is also found.

4.4 ‘the Khmers’ thieves

In addition to the reporting that Thai-own properties in Phnom Penh were destroyed and robbed by the rioters, some linguistic devices were also chosen to emphasize that Cambodia was not considerate of Thai’s dignity. The word ‘*dignity*’ has been notably brought up and highlighted over and over. Thai national symbols like *Thailand*, *Thai national flag*, *the portraits of revered Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej* and *Thai Royal Embassy* are brought up. It can be interpreted as an attempt to connect and involve all Thai readers to the incident.

Because of the violence reporting by Thai media, such an idea of Cambodian robbing Thai dignity, thus, may pop up in some Thais’ mind. This ‘national pride’ matter, clearly mentioned in the news report, probably persuades readers to be angry. Some might even want to take a revenge on the Cambodians.

In this headline, the words *break* and *extensively* were used in describing a family of a Thai husband and a Cambodian wife which separated because of the closing of the border. Meanwhile, the writer exaggerated the demands of food and water people in Poi Pet by using such words as *starving* and *lacking food and water*. These are very convincing. These poor Cambodians do deserve some helps from someone who have mercy and humanity. The decision of re-opening the border, more or less, seems to be more acceptable.

Thai media and violence

According to the study, news reporting on the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia and the anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh in Thai daily newspapers did take ... in creating and reproducing the violence in many ways.

5.1 Repeating the conflict in the history

Along with reporting the news, many conflicts in the history of Thailand and Cambodia relationship were mentioned. For example:

- (5) “พิกัดแผนที่ทหารชี้ชัด ‘เขมรลักพาพระวิหาร’
ซ้ำ ‘สร้างวัดตัดถนน’ โอบได้หน้าผามออีแดง
ไทยมีหวังสูญดินแดนให้เขมรซ้ำรอยประวัติศาสตร์...”

(Don't let them steal our land again, just like in the history.)

(Matichon - February, 3rd 2003)

- (6) “เหตุการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นกับสถานทูตไทยและคนไทยในกรุงพนมเปญ
ทำให้เลือดไทยเดือดปุดๆ ขึ้นมาจริงๆ ครับ
เป็นอีกครั้งครับที่เขมรทำกับคนไทยอย่างเจ็บแสบ ไล่ตั้งแต่สมัยกรุงศรีอยุธยา ครั้ง
สมเด็จพระนเรศวร ตอนนั้นเขมรก็เป็นข้าของเรา พอพระนเรศวรไปออกศึก พระ
ยาละแวกก็มาแวงกัด ตีหัวเมืองทางอีสานของไทย ร้อนถึงยอดกษัตริย์นักรบของเรา
ต้องยกทัพไปปราบ คัดหัวเอาเลือดมาล้างพระบาท

ไม่กี่สิบปีที่ผ่านมาจุ๋กษัตริย์นโรดม สีหนุ ก็ฟ้องศาลโลกชิงเขาพระวิหารไป
จากไทย แต่พอเขมรสิ้นชาติไล่ฆ่าฟันกันเอง ก็สีหนุคนนี้นี่แหละที่ชมชานหนีตาย
มาขอตั้งรัฐบาลพลัดถิ่นในเมืองไทย

คราวนี้เอาอีกแล้ว แต่แรงกว่าเก่า เพราะสถานทูตถือเป็นเอกสิทธิ์ของประเทศ
นั้นๆ ที่ไม่มีใครเข้าไปแตะต้องได้ เป็นธรรมเนียมที่ปฏิบัติมาตลอด แต่คนเขมรก็ยัง
ทำกับเราได้ดังคอ

มันน่าคบหาเป็นเพื่อนบ้านกันต่อไปมั๊ยละครับ...”

(This incident did make we boil. We have been betrayed and
hurt by those ungrateful Khmers many times since the time of
King Naresuan and Phraya Lawak, the case of Khoa

Phraviharn then, this time, the anti-Thai riots and the burning of the Royal Thai Embassy and Thai businesses in Phnom Penh. We shouldn't count them as our neighboring country any longer.)

(Khom Ckad Luek – February, 1st 2003)

- (7) “...ลืมบุญคุณข้าวแดงแกงร้อนเมื่อครั้งสิ้นชาติ รู้ปล่อยให้เขมรแดงไล่ฆ่าเสียให้หมดจะได้ไม่มีชีวิตอยู่มา เณรคุณคนไทย !?!...”

(They forgot what they had owed to us during the time of their collapse. If we had known, we should have let those Khmer rouge soldiers kill them so that they wouldn't live and betray us today!?!)

(Thairath - February, 3rd 2003)

The more we talk about the old conflicts in the history, the more we get angry. In contrast, representing Cambodians this way can easily drive the Khmer readers, if they happen to read Thai newspapers, to get angry as well.

5.2 Highlighting the violence scenes

It is clearly seen from the data that when reporting news on the anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh, Thai media tend to pay high attention to the violent scenes. For instance:

- (8) *Burn Thai embassy
Khmers make riots, break Thai king's portrayal, burn Thai businesses
Send Khmer ambassador back*

(Khom Ckad Luek – January, 30th 2003)

- (9) *Cambodia attacks Thailand, burning down Thai embassy.
Hotels and shops destroyed.
Thai government downgrades diplomatic relationships
The Cambodians have attacked Thai embassy and burnt down Thai flags in Phnom Pen because of hearsays.
The attacks turn into riots.
They damage and steal any assets belonging to the Thais.*

(Thairath- February, 2nd 2003)

- (10) *Thai girl reveals – barbarian Cambodians about to rape her.
Clothes torn apart.
Fire victim – Cambodian police steal before helping*

*Victims of Cambodian attacks reveal their nightmares.
A Thai manager of Royal Phnom Pen Hotel talks about
her most horror-stricken moments and her escape.*

(Thairath - February, 1st 2003)

It is clearly seen here that the journalists have tried so much to make it clear to the audiences that ‘what is happening in Phnom Penh.’ They concentrated on describing each scene of the event, especially the violent one, with very few attempts to explain the causes and the effects of the situations. This can easily fuel the Thais’ anger. Moreover, some the writers even used abusive language toward Cambodian. For example:

(11) *‘Rayam Ma Mai Rappathan Ching Ching Na Ai Wen’*

.....
‘Leo Batsop Ching Ching Phuak Khamen Wicha Man’

(Thairath - February, 1st 2003)

Some journalists not only try to convince the government to treat Cambodia ‘as they well deserve’ but also support the tough measures against Cambodia adopted by Thai government. According to Suandusit poll (2003), 89.62% of the surveyed group said they agree about ‘downgrading diplomatic relationships’ measure. And, 39.29% are ‘satisfied’ with what Thai government has done. 70.82% of them are impressed by The Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra because of his authority and leadership. For example:

Enough for Thaksin

Command Thai army;

Gather commando and C130-jet, dispatch to Cambodia

(Thairath, January, 30th 2003)

(13) *Expel Khmer ambassador*

Break relationships

Burn ‘Rong Kluea’ back

(Daily news,

January, 31st 2003)

(14) *‘Som Ransi’ secretly visit Thai*

Be detained and immediately driven away

(Thairath - February, 2nd 2003)

(15) *Send ‘team’ invade Cambodia*

Calculating compensation

(Khao Sod - February, 3rd 2003)

- (16) *Thaksin shrugs off Khmer ambassador*
Refuse to accompany him to have an audience with the king
(Khom Ckad Luek – February, 3rd 2003)

5.3 Shortening the future relationship

By presenting the image of the Khmers as thieves and bad guys, the suspicions against the Khmers was also aroused among Thais. Such as:

- (17) *Border security tightened*
Khmers starving
Alert for ‘pillage’
(Khom Ckad Luek – February, 3rd 2003)

These suspicions are likely to affect Khmer labors working in Thailand as well. Numbers of Khmer labors were driven out of Thailand during that time.

Putting ourselves above Cambodians and questioning them of their ungratefulness stir up more hatred against the Khmers in the readers’ mind.

- (18) “...ไม่คบกับเขมรเราไม่เดือดร้อน หรือร้อนก็ไม่มาก แต่ถ้าเขมรไม่คบกับเรา
เดือดร้อนแน่!??”
(If we lose tie with Cambodia, there's no impact on us.
But they will sure be in trouble should they lose tie with us !??)
(Khao Sod - February, 3rd 2003)

The more issues of ‘hatred’ and ‘dignity’ were highlighted in the news coverage, the more difficulties we have to face in order to improve the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia.

6. Ideology on ‘Khma-men’

Why is it so important to know what ideologies Thais have? Since ideologies are the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members which influence our interpretation of events and monitor our social practices. To know the ideology is to understand why we think, talk about and treat our neighbors that way.

The ideology derived from the analyzing of the representations of the Khmers in Thai daily newspaper is ‘nationalism’, the belief that **Thai is ‘above’ Cambodia.**

Basically, the overall strategy of most ideological discourse is a very general one:

- (1) Say positive things about *Us*
- (2) Say negative things about *Them*

In this study, it is found that Thai journalists not only use some linguistic devices to present negative things about Cambodia and positive things about Thai, they also compare Thai to Cambodian and lead the readers to the conclusion that ‘US’ are better than ‘THEM’ in various ways. For example: while Thai media represents Khmer as barbarian, they also tell the audiences that Thai is more civilized. Thai is better than Cambodian because we are able to think and act calmly in such a difficult situation. It is likely to reach the facile conclusion that the Khmers are “the villains” – they burned down Thai Embassy, after all – and the Thais are “the good guys” – we did not burn the Cambodian Embassy.

While Thai media represents Khmer as rumor spreaders, they also tell the audiences that Thais are smarter than Cambodians because we would never take a rumor as easily as them. And, together with the picture of tricky Khmer, the picture of the untrustworthy nation, which related to the history of wars between Thai and Cambodia, is conveyed to the readers. This leads the readers to the conclusion that Thai is better than Cambodia because we have stronger loyalty than them. And, when Thai know that some Cambodians are suffering from the lack of food and water, we decide to forgive them and re-open the border. That’s because Thais have more sense of humanity.

This finding is consistent with the knowledge of ‘Khmer’ in Thai society. Thailand and Cambodia are portrayed in Thai mainstream history mostly as a ruler and a satellite state. As it is mentioned in Thai history, Thai Kingdom had been attacked in the rear many times by Cambodians during that time. These perceptions make Thais put themselves above Cambodia and assume that they have a perfect right to punish those ‘ungrateful’ people.

7. Conclusion

The relation between Thai and Cambodia is a very sensitive issue. Press should show more concern when reporting or discussing about it. Based on the analysis of the data, it is found that Thai daily newspapers have an underlying tendency to represent our neighboring country and the conflict with bias and violence. A number of linguistics devices are employed in supporting the violent action and negative attitude, and conveying the ideology of nationalism.

According to Kasetsiri (2003), we should keep in mind that history reminds us that some mistakes cannot be repeated. What press should learn from this conflict is that we should be more aware of the ‘power’ of the media. In such conflict, media have to concern more about the effects of what they reported. It is very important to report the truth without adding any bias, personal judgment or emotion especially

when we reporting the news of other countries. Actually, it's not only for the case of Thai and Cambodia, but also for Laos, Burma and other neighboring countries. To deal with our neighbors peacefully and respectfully among those knowledge and perceptions of old historical hurts and wars, it is very important to learn more not only about 'them' but also about 'us' so that similar incidents can be avoided in the future.

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