

CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND MEDIA MISINTERPRETATION: A COMMUNICATION ART PERSPECTIVE FROM THAILAND*

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Received 28 January 2026; Revised 2 February 2026; Accepted 4 February 2026

Abstract

This article examines how cultural translation in Thai media communication produces systematic media misinterpretation in cross-cultural contexts. Drawing on cultural translation theory, Hall's encoding/decoding model, and communication art perspectives, the study reframes misinterpretation as a process of mediated meaning negotiation rather than communicative failure. Using a qualitative interpretive design, six purposively selected Thai media cases—including news reports, documentary-style media content, and digital media texts circulating internationally—are analyzed through discourse analysis and contextual interpretation.

The findings identify three recurring mechanisms: selective cultural articulation, narrative moral realignment, and contextual reduction. These mechanisms demonstrate that media misinterpretation emerges structurally from mediated communicative form rather than representational inaccuracy. The study contributes to communication art scholarship by extending its application to cross-cultural media meaning and offers culturally grounded insights into global media communication.

Citation:



* Qinghao Guo. (2026). Cultural Translation And Media Misinterpretation: A Communication Art Perspective From Thailand. *Modern Academic Development and Promotion Journal*, 4(2), 808-814.;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.>

<https://so12.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/MADPIADP/>

Keywords: Cultural translation, Media misinterpretation, Communication art, Cross-cultural communication, Thailand

Introduction

The expansion of global media networks has fundamentally transformed how cultural meanings circulate and are interpreted. Media texts produced within specific cultural contexts are now routinely consumed by audiences with diverse historical experiences, communicative norms, and value systems. Under these conditions, cultural translation has become central to media communication, shaping how meanings are reconstructed rather than merely transmitted.

Cultural translation extends beyond linguistic conversion to include the negotiation of symbolic meanings, social values, and moral frameworks (Bhabha, 1994; Bassnett, 2014). In media contexts, translation is constrained by narrative conventions, genre expectations, and accessibility demands, often resulting in selective rearticulation of cultural meaning. Consequently, interpretive divergence frequently replaces shared understanding.

Thailand provides a productive site for examining these dynamics. Embedded in global media circulation while maintaining culturally specific communicative traditions, Thai media communication often encounters interpretive tension when addressing cross-cultural audiences. International news reports and documentary media concerning Thai social practices frequently simplify culturally embedded meanings, reshaping moral emphasis and narrative logic. These conditions position Thai media as a valuable context for examining cultural translation and media misinterpretation as practical communicative processes.

From a communication art perspective, misinterpretation should not be treated as communicative failure. Meaning emerges through narrative form,

rhythm, and symbolic configuration rather than information transfer alone (Dewey, 1934/2005). This study therefore examines how mediated forms and cultural assumptions interact to shape meaning in cross-cultural Thai media communication.

Objectives

The study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine how cultural translation operates in Thai media communication addressing cross-cultural audiences; (2) to identify communicative mechanisms through which media misinterpretation is produced; and (3) to reconceptualize media misinterpretation as a process of mediated meaning negotiation from a communication art perspective.

Literature Review

Cultural Translation and Media Communication

Cultural translation is widely theorized as a process of transformation rather than equivalence (Bhabha, 1994; Bassnett, 2014). In media studies, translation highlights how local meanings are reformulated for global audiences through selective framing and narrative simplification (Couldry, 2012). These processes facilitate circulation while introducing interpretive instability.

Media Misinterpretation and Encoding/Decoding

Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding model conceptualizes meaning as produced through interaction between encoding practices and diverse decoding frameworks. In cross-cultural contexts, divergent cultural assumptions amplify interpretive variation. Media discourse studies further emphasize that institutional conventions privilege certain meanings, shaping interpretive outcomes (Fairclough, 1995).

Communication Art and Mediated Meaning

Communication art theory foregrounds the experiential dimensions of communication. Dewey's (1934/2005) conception of art as experience highlights how meaning arises through perceptual engagement. Media texts organize experience through narrative rhythm, symbolic emphasis, and affective tone (Silverstone, 1999), making experiential form central to interpretation.

Research Positioning

While cultural translation and media misinterpretation have been extensively theorized in Western scholarship, fewer studies address these processes within Thai or Southeast Asian media contexts. By integrating cultural translation theory, encoding/decoding, and communication art perspectives, this study provides a culturally grounded analysis of mediated meaning negotiation in Thai media communication.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design suitable for examining contextual meaning-making in media communication (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Six Thai media cases were selected through purposive sampling based on cross-cultural circulation, engagement with culturally embedded themes, and interpretive tension. The cases include news reports, documentary-style segments, and digital media texts distributed to international audiences.

Data consist of media texts and contextual materials related to production and circulation. Discourse analysis focuses on framing strategies, narrative sequencing, and moral positioning (Fairclough, 1995), while contextual interpretation situates texts within Thai communicative norms and global media conventions. This combined approach allows examination of how mediated form structures meaning across cultural contexts.

Results

1. Cultural Translation in Thai Media Communication

The results show that cultural translation operates through selective articulation rather than comprehensive contextual transfer. Across cases, media texts emphasized culturally legible elements for cross-cultural audiences while reducing contextual depth. Narrative clarity and accessibility consistently shaped meaning reconstruction across media formats.

2. Mechanisms Producing Media Misinterpretation

Three mechanisms produced media misinterpretation: selective cultural articulation, narrative moral realignment, and contextual reduction. Selective articulation generated partial representations of cultural practices; moral realignment reframed culturally specific ethical reasoning to align with dominant global storytelling norms; contextual reduction removed interpretive cues necessary for culturally grounded understanding.

3. Media as a Site of Meaning Negotiation

Media communication functioned as an active site of meaning negotiation rather than neutral transmission. Meaning remained open to reinterpretation as texts circulated across cultural contexts, with misinterpretation emerging from interactions between encoded strategies and diverse decoding frameworks.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that cultural translation in Thai media communication is an ongoing communicative process shaped by mediated form. This aligns with cultural translation theory emphasizing transformation and negotiation (Bhabha, 1994; Bassnett, 2014) and extends encoding/decoding theory by highlighting narrative design and experiential form.

Media misinterpretation emerges structurally from communicative strategies rather than representational error. From a communication art perspective, misinterpretation reflects experiential dimensions of meaning-making, where narrative rhythm, symbolic emphasis, and contextual framing guide interpretation. In the Thai context, interactions between culturally specific communicative norms and global media conventions intensify interpretive divergence.

Recommendations

This study demonstrates that media misinterpretation in Thai media communication arises from systematic processes of mediated cultural translation. By identifying selective articulation, moral realignment, and contextual reduction as key mechanisms, the study reframes misinterpretation as meaning negotiation rather than communicative failure.

Theoretically, the study advances communication art scholarship by extending its relevance to cross-cultural media meaning. Practically, it suggests that media practitioners engaged in cross-cultural communication adopt reflexive translation strategies that acknowledge cultural complexity. Future research may integrate audience reception analysis or comparative regional studies to further examine mediated meaning negotiation.

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