

## CULTURAL SHAREABILITY, ARCHETYPES AND TELEVISION SOAPS

'Oshindrome' in Thailand

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**Abstract** / The Japanese television soap opera *Oshin*, which has been broadcast in 47 countries to date, has emotionally stirred worldwide audiences as no previous television series. One reason for *Oshin*'s audience popularity in several culturally diverse countries is the universal appeal of its archetypical central character, Oshin. This article analyzes the *Oshin* phenomenon in Thailand. We seek answers to eight questions dealing with *Oshin*'s history in Thailand, its viewing context, viewers' perceptions of its central character, its storyline, its production attributes, its educational lessons and its cultural shareability in Thailand. The implications and problems associated with the use of culturally shared entertainment media products such as *Oshin* are discussed.

**Keywords** / archetypes / cultural shareability / *Oshin* / soaps / Thailand

Few television programs have stirred audience emotions worldwide to the extent the Japanese television soap opera *Oshin* has. Since it was first broadcast in Japan in 1983, it has been broadcast in 47 countries to date (Table 1). A kind of *Oshin* fever (some call it 'Oshindrome') rages worldwide, and audiences in such culturally diverse countries as Iran, Australia, Thailand, Mexico, Myanmar, Cuba, Belgium, Guatemala, Cambodia and others have been gripped by it. *Oshin* is unlike highly popular US television series such as *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, which are steeped in the 'dog-eat-dog' Western materialistic ethos. *Oshin* is the story of an uncomplaining, self-sacrificing woman who has worked hard, never despaired and transcended one personal tragedy after another in her journey to be a successful businesswoman (Svenkerud et al., 1995; Harvey, 1995).

*Oshin*'s audience ratings were as high as 65 percent in Japan, 81 percent in Thailand, 89 percent in Iran, 89 percent in China, 70 percent in Poland and 89 percent in Mexico, far exceeding the ratings that US exports like *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *The Bold and the Beautiful* achieve with overseas television audiences. In several countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Bangladesh, *Oshin* was repeated due to vociferous audience demand. In Bangladesh, because of *Oshin*'s positive influence in the process of female emancipation, the reruns were aimed to serve as a catalyst for community development activities (Faruque, 1994).

TABLE 1

Countries Where *Oshin* Has Been Broadcast

Number	Country	Year broadcast	Number	Country	Year broadcast
1.	Japan	1983	25.	Bangladesh	1990
2.	Singapore	1984	26.	Peru	1990
3.	Thailand	1984	27.	Pakistan	1991
4.	USA	1984	28.	Bolivia	1991
5.	Australia	1984	29.	Panama	1991
6.	China	1985	30.	Nepal	1992
7.	Poland	1985	31.	Guatemala	1992
8.	Hong Kong	1985	32.	Nicaragua	1992
9.	Macau	1985	33.	Egypt	1992
10.	Brazil	1985	34.	India	1992
11.	Belgium	1985	35.	Romania	1993
12.	Canada	1985	36.	Chile	1993
13.	Malaysia	1986	37.	Uruguay	1993
14.	Indonesia	1986	38.	Jamaica	1993
15.	Iran	1986	39.	Ghana	1993
16.	Sri Lanka	1987	40.	Honduras	1993
17.	Saudi Arabia	1987	41.	Cuba	1993
18.	Brunei	1988	42.	Vietnam	1994
19.	Mexico	1988	43.	Myanmar	1995
20.	Qatar	1988	44.	Paraguay	1995
21.	Bahrain	1989	45.	Laos	1995
22.	Syria	1990	46.	Mongolia	1995
23.	Philippines	1990	47.	Cambodia	1996
24.	Dominica	1990			

Source: NHK International (personal communication, 1996).

There are at least two characteristics of *Oshin* which make it especially intriguing. First, it seems to represent an entertainment media product that is to a large degree 'culturally shareable'.<sup>1</sup> Culturally shareable media programs are those that find acceptance in several sociocultural contexts, cutting across diverse cultural and national boundaries (Singhal and Svenkerud, 1994). Second, *Oshin* seems to represent an entertainment media product which can be termed as being 'pro-social' in nature. Pro-social programs are those 'which depict cognitive, affective, or behavioral activities that are considered to be socially desirable by the intended audience' (Brown and Singhal, 1990). As opposed to focusing on the baser themes of sex, violence and greed (common attributes of 'anti-social' programs), *Oshin* promoted values of love, sacrifice, endurance, forgiveness, family ties and so on. *Oshin*'s scriptwriter, Sugako Hashida, especially wanted the 'over-indulged modern youth' in Japan to know 'the sacrifices that the older generation made on their behalf' (Harvey, 1995: 87). Viewers reported learning a great deal from this television series about the

importance of upholding the above-mentioned 'pro-social' values (Amaralilit, 1991; Brown and Singhal, 1993; Kato, 1991; Li, 1991; Lull, 1991; Mowlana and Rad, 1992; Svenkerud et al., 1995).

When *Oshin* was produced in Japan, it was the quintessential Japanese *asadora* ('morning TV drama'); it was not intended to be a culturally shareable television program (Hashida, 1991). Why then was it popular among audiences in culturally diverse countries? Were the cultural archetypes represented in *Oshin* universally appealing? This article focuses on the reasons for *Oshin*'s popularity in Thailand. *Oshin*'s storyline and the worldwide 'Oshindrome', its worldwide audience appeal, are described. Answers are sought to eight research questions about the *Oshin* phenomenon in Thailand. The promises and problems of culturally shareable, pro-social, entertainment media products such as *Oshin* are discussed.

## What Was 'Oshin'?

The television series *Oshin* traced the life of the central female character Oshin from age seven to 83, documenting the difficulties she faced, and overcame, in moving from a state of abject poverty to prosperity. Oshin's story began in the Meiji era of Japan in the early 1900s, a time when the Japanese people, especially women, faced tremendous hardships. When Oshin was young, her family was so poor that they could only afford to cook rice at special festival meals. Driven to desperation, Oshin's pregnant mother waded into an ice-cold river to induce a miscarriage. This practice of *kuchiberashi* ('reducing the number of mouths to be fed') was common among poor Japanese people at that time. Aged seven, Oshin was exchanged for a bale of rice by her family so that she could serve as a baby-minder in a rich timber merchant's home. She ran away when she was ill treated and falsely accused of stealing. Then Oshin learned calligraphy, arithmetic and hairdressing from other employers, who were impressed by her enduring spirit. In her teens, she fell in love with a handsome young man, only to find out that he was in love with her best friend. Eventually, she married Ryuzo, the son of a wealthy farmer. The business they established was razed to the ground by the great Kanto earthquake of 1923. Oshin then moved to stay with her mother-in-law, who treated her very badly. During the outbreak of the Second World War, her eldest son died in combat and her husband committed suicide. She lost her house and went through many deprivations, but was able to establish a fish-peddling business. Eventually, she became the owner of Tanokura supermarkets, a highly profitable business established on the principles of customer service and product quality.

The TV soap opera used a series of flashbacks to depict the fortunes and calamities in Oshin's life. *Oshin* was labeled by many as a 'four-hankie weepie': just when Oshin's life was beginning to pick up, a tragedy would occur (Haberman, 1984). However, Oshin never despaired, transcending every tragedy that came her way by virtue of personal strength, intelligence and a quiet aggressiveness in looking out for the well-being of her family (Lull, 1991). On one hand, Oshin represented the archetypal image of a

modern woman creating prosperity for her family; on the other hand, she was 'an embodiment of traditional Japanese female virtues, primarily self-restraint and self-sacrifice' (Harvey, 1995: 76).

## Archetypes in 'Oshin' and its Cultural Shareability

The popularity of *Oshin* in such a range of culturally diverse countries might be explained by the archetypes represented in *Oshin* (Svenkerud et al., 1995). Archetypes are forms and images that are part of a universal and collective memory. Archetypes exist 'independently of mediation in each individual' and comprise 'identities of experience' that are common worldwide (Jung, 1958: 130). 'The archetypal hero may be represented in the mythical images of the Warrior, the Lover, the Emperor, the Tyrant, the World Redeemer, and the Saint' (Lozano and Singhal, 1993: 121). Archetypal figures such as 'Mother' and 'Virgin' attract, convince and fascinate all humankind by embodying certain universal patterns of behavior (Sabido, 1980). Archetypes are multidimensional: 'They are high and low, negative and positive, light and dark and so they point to the multiplicity and ambiguity of the human condition' (Lozano and Singhal, 1993: 121). Audience perceptions of archetypes are thus 'flexible' at the individual level and 'structured' at the collective, universal level. For instance, archetypal images (like the 'Mother' or 'Virgin') can generate an unlimited amount of variation in individual interpretation without losing their fundamental identity (Lozano, 1992).

Present-day television celebrities, popular idols and heroes may be represented as purveyors of archetypes (Sabido, 1980; Lozano and Singhal, 1993). At least three levels of universally appealing archetypes seem to be operating in *Oshin* (Svenkerud et al., 1995). These archetypes, which are complementary and interrelated, help in explaining the high degree of cultural shareability experienced by *Oshin*.

First, Oshin reflected the archetype of 'self-seeking individuation'. Individuation is a process of asserting one's unique self in opposition to the pull of the collective (Perlman, 1992). This cultural archetype, reflected in Oshin's desire for self-belonging and self-determination, is depicted in her ascendancy over poverty and tragedy (Svenkerud et al., 1995). As Harvey (1995: 76) said: 'The key to Oshin's success as a cultural icon was her ability to endure, a strength derived from her moral superiority to those who would inflict hardship on her.' This archetype, undoubtedly, resonated with audiences of diverse cultures (Svenkerud et al., 1995).

Second, Oshin reflected the archetype of a 'disobedient female', where a woman reshapes her world and that of others through endurance, determination and curiosity (Allen, 1979). In the television series, the archetypal Oshin disobeyed the social restraints that forced her into oppression, creating a better place for herself and her family in society. While being 'disobedient', Oshin still did not completely reject the prevailing social norms. As Harvey (1995: 76) suggests: 'she [Oshin] was an independent, modern woman ... but well wrapped in a very traditional kimono'. Oshin's

disobedience, in this sense, is universally celebrated rather than condemned (Svenkerud et al., 1995).

Third, Oshin embodied the archetype of the 'heroic struggle'. This archetype is a highly powerful one and finds resonance universally. Oshin's 'heroic struggle' was waged incessantly against 'human monsters, ill-fortune, and poverty' (Svenkerud et al., 1995). Oshin was a hero in the classical Jungian sense because, in the final reckoning, she did not let the monster devour her. Rather she subdued it; and not once, but many times (Campbell, 1971). In this sense, Oshin exemplified the counter-interpretation of Foucault's idea 'where there is power, there is resistance' into 'where there is resistance, there is power' (Svenkerud et al., 1995).

The above three archetypes in *Oshin* – self-seeking individuation, the disobedient female and the heroic struggle – helped stimulate the collective unconscious of *Oshin*'s viewers in various culturally diverse countries, as the worldwide 'Oshindrome' suggests.

## The Worldwide 'Oshindrome'

*Oshin* was produced by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) to restore the sagging audience ratings of its morning broadcast hour (Togo, 1983). Its production quality was high and it had a well-known scriptwriter in Sugako Hashida. Ms Hashida was successful in making the name Oshin a synonym for patience and endurance: 'Be like Oshin', people urged all over Japan. The storyline, inspired by the hard lives of Japanese women who were contemporaries of Ms Hashida's mother, spanned Japan's 20th-century history, awakening nostalgic memories in its millions of viewers. However, the overwhelming audience reaction to *Oshin* in Japan, and in countries where it was exported, surprised NHK.

Many instances reflect the worldwide audience popularity of *Oshin*. The term 'Oshin' became part of the daily parlance of politicians, economists and lay people all over the world. Former US president Ronald Reagan, during a state visit to Japan in 1983, said: 'Endurance, tenacity, and sheer hard work – qualities which I understand are beautifully portrayed in your popular TV drama, *Oshin* – have brought your nation great economic success' (Staff, 1983). When former Japanese prime minister Kakuei Tanaka was convicted of bribery in the Lockheed scandal, he said that, 'I am a male Oshin' (Haberman, 1984). Japanese economists talked about the new Oshin economy: that is, austerity in the face of slower economic growth. A full array of Oshin dolls and Oshin posters, Oshin songs and Oshin *sake*, can be found in Japan and other countries where the television series has been broadcast (Haberman, 1984). Several couples in Egypt named their newborn babies Oshin (Shimbum, 1994). In Hong Kong, the media hailed a woman, who adopted 20 abandoned children, as an Oshin (Staff, 1995). In Iran, newspapers reported a tremendous decrease in the usage of public transportation during the time *Oshin* was aired (Mowlana, 1991). In Thailand, cabinet meetings were often rescheduled to not interfere with *Oshin*'s broadcasts (T. Amaralilit, pers. comm., 4 May 1995). Also in Thailand, the

newspaper *Daily News*, which carried a synopsis of *Oshin*, increased its circulation by 70 percent (NHK International, 1991).

What explains this worldwide 'Oshindrome'? The case of *Oshin* in China, Indonesia and Iran sheds some light on this phenomenon. Li (1991) outlined certain reasons for *Oshin*'s popularity in China: 'The Chinese are used to the realistic characterization of people, the realistically developed personalities of the characters . . . the program fit right into the Chinese tradition of stressing realism.' Also, the Chinese people believe there are three eternal themes in life, love, war and death, and *Oshin* represented these three themes. Lull (1991) identified other reasons for *Oshin*'s popularity in China. The cultural values portrayed in *Oshin* were similar to Chinese cultural values. *Oshin* was greatly admired for her personal qualities, especially for perseverance amid hardship. Many Chinese women viewers identified with this archetypal, self-seeking, self-determining image of *Oshin*.

Surakhmad (1991) provided some reasons for *Oshin*'s popularity in Indonesia: '*Oshin*'s message was simple. *Oshin* dealt with the common problems of human beings.' Takahashi (1991) reported that viewers in Indonesia were touched by *Oshin*'s heroic life-struggle, an archetype that resonates universally. Perseverance and endurance, the qualities that were so well embodied by *Oshin*, also appealed greatly to Indonesian viewers. *Oshin* spurred a great deal of interpersonal discussion among Indonesian viewers regarding family life, altruism and endurance. Indonesian women often gathered in such public places as schools, markets and tea-stalls to talk about *Oshin*.

Zoragh (1991) provided several reasons to explain the popularity of *Oshin* in Iran. First, the theme of *Oshin* touched the 'human chord' among Iranian viewers. Second, *Oshin* embodied old traditional values with modern ones, reflecting the archetype of the 'disobedient female', whose disobedience was being celebrated. Third, *Oshin* depicted the values of self-sacrifice, human struggle and perseverance, which resonate universally. Mowlana (1991) found that the viewing context of *Oshin* also helped its audience popularity in Iran. When *Oshin* was broadcast in Iran in 1986, Iranians faced extreme economic and physical difficulties as a result of the Iran-Iraq War. Viewers felt that *Oshin* exemplified the suffering in Iran at that time. Mowlana (1991) also attributed *Oshin*'s popularity to the lack of program choice for Iranian television viewers.

The effects of 'Oshindrome' were quite profound in certain countries. For instance, in China, many children were inspired by *Oshin* 'and began to help with the housework, became kinder to their mothers, and started studying harder' (Li, 1991: 98). In Indonesia and Thailand, which were both occupied by Japan during the Second World War, the image of Japan changed dramatically after *Oshin* was broadcast. Prior to watching *Oshin*, viewers in these countries perceived the Japanese people as 'cold-blooded, not friendly to each other, egoistic and short-tempered, and sadistic and rude' (Takahashi, 1995: 3). After watching *Oshin*, Indonesian and Thai viewers perceived the Japanese people as being 'self-consistent and good rule-observers, respecting the opinions of parents, and persistent and hardworking' (Takahashi, 1995: 3).

## The 'Oshin' Phenomenon in Thailand

This article focuses on the *Oshin* phenomenon (or 'Oshindrome') in Thailand. While a few studies exist of 'Oshindrome' outside Japan (Zoragh, 1991; Li, 1991; Mowlana, 1991; Surakhmad, 1991), these studies have mostly focused on the audience effects of *Oshin* in an overseas environment, namely in China, Indonesia or Iran. The present research represents the first systematic documentation of 'Oshindrome' in Thailand, one of the few countries where *Oshin* has been repeated. Here we also expand on the nature and scope of previously conducted investigations on *Oshin*. For instance, we investigate the process through which a Japanese media product found its way into Thailand; how the media product was dubbed/translated into Thai to enhance its local cultural relevance; how the viewers of *Oshin* perceived the storyline, the 'pro-social' content and the character of Oshin, including the perceived embodiment of universally appealing archetypes in Oshin.

Specifically, we organized our inquiry of *Oshin*'s influence in Thailand around the following eight research questions:

1. How did *Oshin* come to Thailand? What was the process through which it was translated and dubbed into Thai?
2. What was the viewing context for *Oshin* in Thailand? Who watched? Did *Oshin* spur interpersonal discussion among its viewers?
3. How did our Thai respondents perceive the central character, Oshin? Did they see Oshin as an embodiment of certain cultural archetypes? Did they consider Oshin as a role model for themselves and their children?
4. How did our Thai respondents view *Oshin*'s storyline?
5. Which situations in *Oshin* especially stirred the emotions of its Thai viewers?
6. How did our Thai respondents gauge the production and marketing attributes of *Oshin*?
7. What educational lessons did our Thai respondents glean from *Oshin*? Were they able to relate the situations in *Oshin* to their daily lives?
8. How did our focus group respondents perceive the cultural shareability aspects of *Oshin* in Thailand?

## Method and Data Collection

Our research on *Oshin* consisted of five focus group interviews with a total of 40 Thai viewers (33 women and seven men) of the television series (these interviews were conducted in 1995 and 1996); an indepth personal interview with the Thai scriptwriter/translator of *Oshin*, Dr Thanoo Amaralilit (in 1995); a detailed analysis of the mass media (newspaper and magazine) coverage accorded to *Oshin* when it was broadcast in Thailand; and various other publications and sources on *Oshin*, including interviews with NHK officials and the NHK International (1991) symposium report on *The World's View of Japan Through Oshin*. To our knowledge, no scholarly

articles about *Oshin*'s influence in Thailand exist, which is highly surprising, given *Oshin* was one of the most popular television series ever broadcast in Thailand.

Four out of the five focus group interviews, comprising a total of 36 respondents, were conducted with full-time and part-time graduate students at Bangkok University. Most of these Thai respondents had viewed almost all the episodes of *Oshin* either when it was first broadcast in Thailand in 1984/5 or when it was rebroadcast in 1994/5. A 15-minute episode of *Oshin* was played during each focus group in order to facilitate respondents' recall of the program, given the first set of *Oshin* broadcasts had completed their run on Thai television over 11 years ago. Surprisingly, none of the respondents seemed to have any difficulty in recalling the salient details of the program. The respondents of the four Bangkok University based focus group interviews came from middle-class families, were all between 25 and 45 years old and each had an undergraduate degree. The first Bangkok University based focus group had four respondents – three women and one man; the second group had nine respondents – seven women and two men; the third focus group had 11 respondents – nine women and two men; and the fourth group had 12 respondents – 10 women and two men. Women found greater representation in our focus groups because they displayed higher exposure to *Oshin* (relative to men). Also, the central character in *Oshin* was a woman, and we were especially interested in how the Thai women perceived the protagonist. Each focus group interview lasted over an hour.

A fifth focus group interview was conducted in the Klong-Toey slums of Bangkok and consisted of four women home-makers, whose ages ranged from 20 to 60 years. These home-makers had not watched the first broadcast of *Oshin* during 1984/5, but were avid viewers of the reruns of *Oshin* in 1994/5. These women came from lower socioeconomic class families and none of them had a college degree. This focus group interview also lasted over an hour.

Various open-ended questions were asked of our focus group respondents to elicit spontaneous responses to *Oshin*. On several occasions a response from one respondent stimulated discussion from others in the group. Each of the focus group interviews and the other personal interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed from Thai to English. We draw upon those various transcribed interviews, media coverage of *Oshin* in Thailand and available data sources in understanding the *Oshin* phenomenon in Thailand. Our data sources are mainly qualitative in nature and hence permit a rich understanding of our Thai respondents' perceptions of *Oshin*. We do not seek to make broad-based generalizations on *Oshin*'s effects in Thailand. Rather, we seek to qualitatively reconstruct the 'Oshindrome' in Thailand.

## 'Oshin' Comes to Thailand<sup>2</sup>

*Oshin* was first broadcast in Thailand on the Army Television Channel 5 in November 1984. Thailand was the second country outside Japan where



*Oshin* was broadcast; Singapore was the first. In Thailand, *Oshin* was broadcast on four nights (Monday to Thursday) a week between 9.20 p.m. and 10.20 p.m. Each Thai episode was an hour long. In Japan, 297 15-minute episodes of *Oshin* were produced. In Thailand, four Japanese episodes were combined to make a one-hour program. *Oshin* had audience ratings of up to 81 percent in Thailand (NHK International, 1991). The program was translated and dubbed into Thai. Soon after *Oshin* was first aired in Thailand, millions of people became hooked on it. In 1994/5, *Oshin* was repeated on Thai Television Channel 3, Monday to Thursday from 3.45 p.m. to 4.15 p.m. (this time each episode lasted for half an hour).

*Oshin*'s debut in Thailand was somewhat circuitous. When *Oshin* was being broadcast in Japan during 1983/4, the Singapore ambassador in Japan became hooked on the series (Takahashi, 1995). He persuaded NHK, the Japanese producer of *Oshin*, to broadcast the television series in Singapore. By mid-1984, *Oshin* had begun broadcasting in Singapore, and instantly achieved a loyal audience following. At that time, a Japanese advertising official, who had heard about the phenomenal audience response to *Oshin* in Singapore, became convinced that *Oshin* would draw large audiences in Thailand, given that 'the economic and social situation of Thailand was very similar with that of *Oshin*. Many children in [Thai] rural areas had to go to the town to make a living', as *Oshin* had done in the television series (Takahashi, 1995: 2). Through the efforts of this Japanese advertising official, Dentsu Company, a distribution agent of media products in Thailand, and Ratch Films, a private media company, *Oshin* entered the Thai television market in late 1984.

How was *Oshin* translated and dubbed into Thai? Ratch Films in Thailand commissioned a translator for *Oshin*, but the dialog was not powerful enough, and hence had to be dropped. Then Dr Thanooos Amaralilit, a doctor specializing in tropical medicine at Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok, volunteered for the task (Amaralilit, 1991). He had watched several episodes of *Oshin* when it was being shown in Japan and was highly moved by its poignant storyline. He was highly skilled in Japanese to Thai translation, having translated over 100 Japanese cartoons, films and television programs into Thai in previous years.

In many ways, Dr Amaralilit was ideally equipped to translate *Oshin* from Japanese to Thai: he had spent ten years in Japan between 1953 and 1963 as a medical student and had a deep understanding of the Japanese language and culture. Many of his Japanese friends actually consider him as being more Japanese than other Japanese. Most of Dr Amaralilit's patients at Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok are also Japanese. Also, he is highly skilled in the Thai language; in school and college, he always scored the highest marks in Thai language courses. Further, he had a first-hand knowledge of *Oshin*'s temporal context. During the time he lived in Japan (between 1953 and 1963), Japan's economy was in shambles, and staple food items like rice needed to be rationed. So when Dr Amaralilit was translating *Oshin*, he was, in many respects, reliving his own Japanese experiences.

He recognized that 'many factors go into a drama's success, especially

if there are differences in culture and language. Language is a very important factor and no matter how powerful a drama is, the translation alone can ruin it' (Amaralilit, 1991: 40). So he carefully conducted the translation work for *Oshin*: 'I watched the television series and recorded my Thai translation. I took extensive notes on the emotion in the script. I tried to select Thai words which fitted the emotion but were shorter than Japanese words so that during dubbing we could add *kha* and *krup*, as is the polite way of ending a Thai sentence. Then I tried to say it out loud to see if it fitted the lip movements' (Amaralilit, pers. comm., 4 May 1995). It took Dr Amaralilit an estimated 1000 hours to translate the entire *Oshin* series, a painstaking effort which paid off in terms of audience popularity. As one of our focus group respondents said: 'I liked the dialog'. Another said: '*Oshin* is dubbed very well. People speak Thai very nicely.'

In sum, *Oshin* had a highly capable translator in Dr Thanooos Amaralilit, who understood the cultural and linguistic nuances of both Japan (*Oshin*'s exporter) and Thailand (*Oshin*'s importer).

## The Viewing Context for 'Oshin'

Responses from our focus group respondents shed light on *Oshin*'s viewing context. One respondent recalled: 'It seemed in my family everybody watched it.' Another respondent reinforced this universal appeal of *Oshin*: 'I think people from all age groups and sexes watched it.' A slum-based home-maker highlighted its special appeal for women: 'In my family only the women watched.' One woman respondent told us how she adjusted her schedule to watch *Oshin* regularly: 'If I were home I watched [it there], if I were in somebody's home, I also watched. I sometimes delayed going to the market to watch *Oshin*.'

Several respondents said that *Oshin* spurred interpersonal discussions among them: 'We talked about *Oshin* with neighbors. Especially after episodes that were emotionally touching.'

In sum, *Oshin* seemed to have a wide audience appeal in Thailand, especially among women viewers. Many viewers eagerly awaited the next episode, adjusting their schedule to watch the television series. The plot, the characters and the situations depicted in *Oshin* were subjected to elaborate discussion by viewers.

## Perceptions of Oshin, the Central Character

Many of *Oshin*'s personal qualities were highly admired by our respondents. One respondent said: 'Oshin is generous toward her family. She is grateful to people who help her. She forgives people who do bad things to her. She is cheerful and hides her sorrow.' The same respondent alluded to *Oshin* as being an embodiment of the cultural archetype of self-seeking individuation: 'She sets her own target, and tries to achieve it even though it is difficult.' Another respondent put it more succinctly: 'Oshin is perfect.'

Another respondent commented on *Oshin*'s embodiment of the 'disobedient female' archetype: 'Oshin raised her social status by fighting

oppression and ill-will.' Another added: 'Oshin looks soft but is strong inside.'

Some respondents felt that Oshin embodied the cultural archetype of the 'heroic struggle', especially in the face of excruciating difficulties: 'Oshin suffers because of poverty and war. But she fights and never gives up.' Another respondent commented: 'She picks herself up again every time she falls in life.'

Several respondents admired her self-sacrificing altruistic nature. Others commented on how Oshin always put the happiness of others ahead of her own: 'She bases her decisions on the happiness of others.' Several respondents felt that Oshin represented a fine role model for their children to emulate: 'We want our children to behave like Oshin.' One woman respondent said she could even settle for less: 'If my children have a quarter of Oshin's characteristics, I will be very happy.'

When we asked our women respondents if Oshin was a role model worthy of emulation, the responses were mixed. One said: 'I would love to have her characteristics.' Another said: 'I like Oshin. But I don't want to be her. Her life is too difficult.' Another said: 'Oshin sets a stereotype for women which may be harmful to some women.'

In sum, Thai viewers admired several personal qualities of Oshin, viewing her as an embodiment of the universally appealing cultural archetypes of 'self-seeking individuation', 'disobedient female' and 'heroic struggle'. Some women viewers, however, felt Oshin was 'too good' to be true.

## Perceptions of 'Oshin's' Storyline

Many of our Thai respondents felt that Oshin's story was sad and realistic: 'This is a story of people's lives. It's a sad story.' One respondent said: 'It is too sad.' Others said that the 'sadness' in the story provided a viewing hook for Thai viewers: 'You always want to know what happens next'; 'If Oshin was happy then the audience may not continue to want to watch it because they already get what they want.'

Some respondents said that Oshin's story left an indelible imprint on their minds: 'It's a story which you will remember after watching it once.' Another respondent felt that viewing the series once was enough for her: 'It is very stressful. You will not want to watch it again.' Some respondents suggested how the storyline could be changed: 'Oshin's mother-in-law is too cruel. Please change the mother-in-law character to be a better mother-in-law.'

In sum, the *Oshin* storyline was perceived variously as being sad, realistic, engaging, powerful and stressful by our Thai respondents. Several Thai viewers were so highly involved in the storyline that they suggested how the storyline should be modified.

## Poignant Scenes in 'Oshin'

Our respondents recalled several emotionally charged scenes, as illustrated by the following descriptions:

*The most touching scene was when Oshin was young and very poor. She had not enough to eat but she gave her portion of the food to her grandmother.*

*Oshin's grandmother could not work. To not be a burden to the family, she tried to commit suicide. Oshin ran to save her grandmother. This scene made a lot of people cry. I myself cried.*

*Another scene that touched me was when Oshin's mother went to work in an entertainment bar, and Oshin went to look for her. When she saw her mother in that situation, and her mother saw Oshin . . . it was very touching.*

*Another scene brought tears to my eyes. This was when Oshin's mother was pregnant, and since the family could not afford another mouth to feed, she waded into the ice-cold river water to abort her baby.*

Several other scenes of *Oshin* were indelibly imprinted in the memory of our Thai respondents:

*When Oshin was seven, she worked to support her family. The poor little child.*

*Even in her late pregnancy, Oshin tied her child on her back and worked. I watched and cried.*

*She was falsely accused of stealing by the timber-merchant. I cried when I watched that part.*

In sum, the scenes that *Oshin's* Thai viewers found to be most stirring emotionally were ones that highlighted delicate human relationships between grandmother-grandchild; mother-child; mother-in-law-daughter-in-law; and employer-employee. These relationships were embellished by instances of self-sacrifice, concern for others, unfailing endurance and coping with injustice: a reason for their poignancy.

## Production and Marketing Attributes

The production quality of *Oshin* was rated very highly by its Thai viewers: 'It is a good quality production. It is also well edited.' The actors were commended for playing their roles well, especially Ayako Kobayashi, who played the role of Oshin as a child, and Yuko Tanaka, who played the adult Oshin: 'The actors who were selected were very good. [Those playing] Oshin, from young to old, looked alike.' Several respondents commented on the effective use of music to heighten an emotion: 'Music reflected Oshin's happiness and her sadness.' Also, as previously mentioned, our respondents felt that the dubbing of *Oshin* was excellent. In fact, the dubbing team of Khun Siriporn 'won the prestigious Mat Kha Ra award for dubbing this television series' (Amaralilit, pers. comm., 4 May 1995).

Several of our respondents commended the Thai distributor of *Oshin*, Ratch Films, for effectively promoting and marketing the television series. A primetime slot following a highly popular program was picked for *Oshin*. As one of our respondents recalled: '*Oshin* was broadcast after a popular game show. It helped build audiences quickly.'

Also, during 1984/5, the *Daily News*, a Bangkok-based Thai newspaper, published a synopsis of *Oshin* in advance of its broadcast, urging viewers to

tune in. During the time *Oshin* was broadcast, 'the *Daily News* newspaper sales increased by some 300,000 copies a day' (Amaralilit, pers. comm., 4 May 1995). Most of the new subscribers to *Daily News* were hooked on *Oshin*.

In sum, various production attributes of *Oshin*, including its editing, dubbing, music and acting quality were rated very highly by its Thai viewers. Also its primetime slot and media coverage in Thailand helped to enhance its audience popularity.

### The Educational Value of 'Oshin'

For many respondents, *Oshin*'s life provided useful lessons on how to conduct oneself in daily life: 'It teaches people how to behave.' Another said: 'It teaches us what we should and should not do.'

Some respondents were more specific about *Oshin*'s educational lessons: 'It teaches us to be grateful to our parents.' Another said: 'It teaches people about endurance.' A third respondent said: 'It tells the viewers how to survive.' A fourth respondent said: 'It alerts women about the type of mother-in-law they might have when they get married.' A fifth respondent commented on how viewing *Oshin* helped her learn about Japanese culture and customs: 'Not all people have been to Japan. What made it interesting were the traditions and customs of Japan. The way they dress and perform ceremonies.'

Several of our respondents tried to relate the situations in *Oshin* to their daily lives: 'Oshin's mother-in-law is very cruel. It makes me think that when I become a mother-in-law, I'll make sure I'm kind to my daughter-in-law.' Another stated: 'I have a granddaughter whose parents do not take care of her. She stays with me. Sometimes I look at her and wonder if she can survive like Oshin.'

In sum, Thai viewers learned various educational lessons from *Oshin*, especially about being grateful to one's parents, endurance, survival and other cherished values. Others learned a great deal about Japanese customs and rituals. Several Thai viewers related the educational lessons from *Oshin* to the daily conduct of their personal lives.

### The Cultural Shareability of 'Oshin' in Thailand

Many Thai viewers of *Oshin* felt that the television series communicated with Thai audiences on many levels, especially in terms of the cultural similarities between Japan and Thailand: 'Since Thailand is a country based on agriculture, the lives of the farmers are very similar to those of Japan. . . . The poverty of the agricultural workers, their suffering and hunger are shared both by the farmers of Meiji era Japan [the time-frame in which *Oshin* was set] and the farmers of today's Northern Thailand' (Amaralilit, 1991: 40).

Thai viewers were also moved by seeing the practice of *kuchiberashi* (literally 'decreasing the number of mouths to be fed') being practiced in *Oshin*. In contemporary Thailand, in order to support the family, 'many

young girls, aged 12 to 16, are sent to Bangkok from Isan [a poor area in north-eastern Thailand] to work. This similar practice helped the Thai viewers to specially relate to *Oshin*' (Amaralilit, 1991: 40). The experiences of Thai women also resonated well with those of the central character, Oshin: 'Thai women in general have very strong characters and are hard workers. Women work harder than the men. Therefore, they saw themselves in the portrayal of Oshin' (Amaralilit, 1991: 41).

The Thai viewers were also greatly 'moved by Oshin's humanity and kindness. Oshin was always generous toward her family, the people she worked for. . . . She was constantly trying to show her appreciation and pay back her debts to them' (Amaralilit, 1991: 41). This corresponded to the cherished Thai value of *bunghun* (literally 'indebted goodness').

Other similarities were also identified between Oshin and the Thai way of life: 'The story of Oshin can happen in Thailand. For instance, the ill-treatment of daughter-in-law by mother-in-law. . . . The single parent, mother, raising the children. The inequality between men and women.' Another respondent said: 'There are children [like Oshin] in Thailand who do a lot for their parents. There are daughters-in-law who do everything to satisfy their mothers-in-law . . . even though the mothers-in-law never appreciate it.' Another respondent commented: 'Oshin is polite. She does not raise her voice. She gives up things for other people. This type of person is compatible with Thai society.' Another respondent agreed: 'Characteristics of Oshin suit the Thai way of life well. For example, the quality of *katanyuu* ['being grateful'].'

However, certain aspects in *Oshin* were not Thai. According to Dr Amaralilit (1991: 41): 'Although women in Thailand work very hard, they are not as patient as Oshin.' Also there exist differences in locale, scenery and climate between Japan and Thailand: for instance, 'In Yamagata Prefecture [where a part of *Oshin* was set], it snows very heavily, whereas in Thailand it never snows.'

Several respondents pointed to other differences between the socio-cultural context of *Oshin* and Thailand. One respondent said: 'This is a Japanese series. Not Thai.' Another respondent said: 'It is difficult to find a person like Oshin in Thailand.' Some of our respondents recognized the fit, as well as the lack of fit, for *Oshin* in Thailand: 'Neither is it strange, nor is it similar.' Another respondent said: 'We do not have that kind of difficult life [as Oshin's]. But as for family matters, I think they are the same.'

In sum, on many levels, including the level of cultural archetypes (as discussed previously), *Oshin* resonated well with Thai audiences. Many sociocultural similarities exist between Japan and Thailand, including the heavy burden of work that women carry in both countries. The relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Japan and Thailand are also very similar. Also politeness and a 'cool heart' (*jai yen*) are valued in both societies. While several differences also exist between the Japanese and Thai way of life, these differences did not seem to dampen the cultural shareability of *Oshin* in Thailand.

## Conclusions

The NHK-produced Japanese television series *Oshin* has stirred audience emotions worldwide on a scale that no other television series had done previously. Broadcast in 47 countries to date, the *Oshin* fever continues to spread in 1997 to about five new countries every year.

The present article investigated the *Oshin* phenomenon in Thailand in the larger context of the worldwide 'Oshindrome'. Our data collection procedures included (but were not limited to) focus group interviews with five sets of loyal viewers of *Oshin* in Thailand, an indepth personal interview with the Thai translator/scriptwriter of *Oshin* and an analysis of the media coverage accorded to *Oshin* in Thailand. Rich descriptive insights were gained, despite some of the limitations that accompany such qualitative methods. Our purpose in this article was not to measure the mass effects of *Oshin* in Thailand, but rather to reconstruct qualitatively its history, its viewing context, the viewers' perceptions of its central character, its cultural archetypes, its storyline, its production attributes, its educational lessons and its cultural shareability in Thailand.

Our research on *Oshin*'s audience popularity in Thailand underscored the importance of having an adept translator/scriptwriter, a fine dubbing team and an exciting plot that could grip local audiences. We gathered that *Oshin*'s popularity in Thailand cut across age, gender and socioeconomic boundaries, although women viewers seemed to be especially fond of the series. The character of Oshin seemed to be greatly admired in Thailand for her generosity, cheerfulness and her self-sacrificing, altruistic nature. Thai viewers found Oshin to embody several universally appealing cultural archetypes, especially perceiving her as a model of 'self-seeking individuation', 'disobedient female' and 'heroic struggle'. The storyline was perceived as 'sad' but 'uplifting', given Oshin's ability to transcend one personal tragedy after another. Various scenes of *Oshin* were indelibly printed on the minds of our Thai viewers, especially those involving concern for others, coping with injustice and personal endurance. The production quality of *Oshin* was commended by our Thai respondents, as were its actors, music, outdoor scenes and dialog.

Several educational lessons were derived from *Oshin* by the Thai respondents, especially in terms of conducting one's daily life, managing human relationships and persevering in the face of adversity. Thai people also learned about the history, culture and customs of Japan through the portrayal of Oshin's life. Several of our Thai respondents related certain situations in *Oshin* with their daily lives, utilizing the television series as a guide to their behavioral action.

Despite its Japanese origins, *Oshin* seemed to share several common, cultural elements with Thailand: the agricultural setting, the centrality of rice as a staple food, the poverty of farmers, the sending away of children to big cities to work, the hard-working nature of Thai women, the Thai sense of loyalty, politeness and gratitude, the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, and others. However, *Oshin* was clearly identified as a Japanese series with Japanese characters, locales and customs.

What implications does the *Oshin* phenomenon in Thailand and elsewhere have for producers, consumers and scholars of mass media messages? *Oshin* informs us, in a unique way, about the promises and problems associated with the production and consumption of culturally shareable and seemingly 'pro-social' entertainment media products. In the vast global marketplace of media products, there exist a plethora of seemingly 'anti-social', culturally irrelevant media programs, which are exported from 'media-rich' countries to 'media-poor' countries. This phenomenon has variously been called 'media imperialism', 'cultural hegemony' and the like. For several years, there has been a call to produce more culturally proximate and culturally relevant programs for both export and indigenous consumption (Straubhaar, 1991; Singhal and Svenkerud, 1994). Our research suggests that *Oshin* represents a fine exemplar of such a programming strategy that embodies both 'local' and 'global' appeals.

The production of culturally shareable, pro-social entertainment media programs, in our opinion, holds a special promise for broadcasters of developing countries, who typically have limited human and capital resources to produce quality mass media programming. The potential exists for media practitioners of various developing countries to come together to pool resources, talent and production facilities to create culturally shareable programs to address such common problems as population growth, teenage pregnancy, gender inequality and HIV/AIDS. Scholarly evidence to date about creating culturally shareable, pro-social entertainment media products is encouraging. The Mexican private television network, Televisa, produced several series of educational soap operas, which were highly popular in several Spanish-speaking countries where they were broadcast (Nariman, 1993; Singhal et al., 1993, 1994). Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services has utilized rock music to promote sexual responsibility among young adults in Latin America, the Philippines and Nigeria (Kincaid et al., 1992). In Africa, John Riber, a talented film maker, has created several entertaining films on teenage sexual responsibility and HIV/AIDS prevention, which have gained widespread audience popularity in almost all African countries (Singhal and Svenkerud, 1994).

However, the problems associated with the creation and broadcast of such culturally shareable, pro-social entertainment media products (such as *Oshin*) should also be kept in mind. We should remember that no media product is completely 'culturally shareable', despite the presence of commonly held cultural archetypes (such as those represented in *Oshin*). Also, audience members actively process and interpret media messages, according to multiple readings to even seemingly 'pro-social' media messages. For instance, even among our Thai respondents, one woman said: 'Oshin sets a stereotype for women which is harmful'. Also, the conscious creation of such programs is not value free and presents several ethical dilemmas. As one Egyptian viewer of *Oshin* remarked: 'Who needs imported misery? We have thousands of Oshins already.' Nevertheless, programs such as *Oshin* are quite rare and deserve attention from both scholars and practitioners of mass communication.



## Notes

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2. This section especially draws upon our 1995 personal interview with Dr Thanoo Amaralilit, translator of *Oshin* in Thailand.

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