

Narratives of the Romantic Relationship between Teacher and Student in Thai Contemporary Media: Turning Point in Thinking about Relationships?

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Abstract

The romantic relationship between teacher and student is prohibited by Thai social context and culture; however, there are plenty of Thai narratives which have presented the idea of this relationship in Thai contemporary media, in TV series and films, since 2006. This article aimed to examine six narratives between 2006 and 2015 to indicate the possibility of a specific type of relationship to reveal an ideology that controls the construction of these narratives through Thai contemporary media.

The result is that almost all narratives portrayed that the romantic relationship between teacher and student is an unacceptable one, which correlates with social norms. However, two of the selected narratives represent the possibility of having this kind of relationship; that is to say, an affair between teacher and student can be acceptable when the teacher has no more duty of care to the student in the context of school. These narratives show a turning point in thinking about the romantic relationship between teacher and student in Thai society that challenges convention. Moreover, those two narratives showed that amorous relationships mostly happen when a male student makes the first move towards a female teacher. Obviously, male students' characters are the symbol of reproduction of patriarchal ideology; a kind of relationship that principally relates to pleasure, desire, imagination, and male sexual experience. In other words, the turning point in thinking about the romantic relationship between teacher and student that appears in those narratives still cannot fully conquer the power of patriarchy.

Keywords: narrative, romantic relationship between teacher and student, contemporary media, patriarchal ideology

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Introduction

The romantic relationship between teacher and student is prohibited in many countries; for example in Japan, 2007, a 42-year-old female teacher was arrested because of having a sexual relationship with a 16-year-old student. (MGR Online, 2007) In 2011, a relationship between a 22-year-old graduate student at the University of Idaho and a psychology professor at the same university ended in murder-suicide. (Pruitt, 2012) In Singapore in 2014, a 42-year-old female teacher left bruises on a 13-year-old student. (Digital Media, 2014) As can be seen, the romantic relationship between teacher and student does not always have a 'happy ending' unlike a fairy tale or other types of relationship. In Thailand, there are similar stories in the news. In 2009, a female teacher and male student were found to be having a sexual relationship at the beginning of the year, or the story about the relationship between a male Physical Education teacher and his female student that ended with her taking her own life. (Thairath Online 2015a)

Apart from news broadcast in media as mentioned above, the romantic relationship between teacher and student is also presented in narratives in contemporary TV series and films, in this case meaning only in Thailand. When considering those narratives, they were presented in two opposing types; unacceptable and acceptable relationships. The key question is; the prohibited relationship could be accepted or possible under which conditions and controlled by what ideology?

Scope of the study

This article studied 6 narratives of the romantic relationship between teacher and student presented in Thai contemporary media between 2006 and 2015, which are:

1. *The Sin*, a short film by Sukkhaphisit (2006)
2. *Love, loved, loved*, a short film broadcast on cable television Bang Channel by Mongkolsawat & Wilawan (2013)
3. *Hormones 1st season, ep.12 Growth Hormone*, TV series broadcast on satellite television by Sukmak-a-nan (2013)
4. *Teacher and Student*, a film by Intharaphrom (2014)
5. *Hormones 2nd season, ep.3 Toey and a computer teacher*, TV series broadcast on satellite television by Wachirathammaporn (2014)
6. *The Secret of Grade 12, Room 3*, TV series in *Club Friday the Series 5th season*, directed by Trakulkasemsuk (2015)

The romantic relationship between teacher and student in social and cultural dimension

In the context of Thailand, teachers are the second parents of students, therefore they have a status of high respect. Whenever they do not discharge their duty as much as is expected by society, such as in cases where a teacher falls in love with a student, they would be denounced.

In the Teachers' Code of Ethics, the romantic relationship between teacher and student could be interpreted as taboo behavior. Furthermore, this relationship is illegal within the scope of the Criminal Code if sexual acts take place. Furthermore, Section 285 of the Code states that when a teacher carries out an offence against a student,

they should be punished one-third more harshly than usual. That is to say, under Thai law, a teacher's offence is more serious than one committed by a member of the general public. Therefore, the romantic relationship between teacher and student is unacceptable in the context of Thai society and culture.

People's attitudes to this relationship can be separated into two sides. On the one side, Thai people cannot accept the relationship because they are concerned about the teacher's status, which is held in high respect. On the other side, the relationship is acceptable because love and relationships are uncontrollable. Society should keep out, and both teacher and student should express their love appropriately in the correct time, place or situation. (Thairath Online, 2015b; Thairath Online, 2015c)

Narratives of the romantic relationship between teacher and student: representation through Thai contemporary media

By considering narratives of the romantic relationship between teacher and student presented in Thai contemporary media, they can be separated into two types: the forbidden relationship between teacher and student, and the possibility of the relationship between teacher and student under specific conditions.

The forbidden relationship between teacher and student

Being a teacher is an occupation which is completely controlled by a Code of Ethics and the romantic relationship between teacher and student breaks that Code. In this sense, the Code is a significant conceptual idea that controls those narratives to present it as an inappropriate relationship in Thai society, especially when the teacher is the first to show an interest in the student. This idea was shown in the film *Teacher and Student* and *Hormones 2nd season, ep.3 Toey and a computer teacher*.

The film *Teacher and Student* presented the narrative of an English teacher 'Ton'. He falls in love with his student 'Joe'. Ton steals Joe's school uniform and is caught in the act the second time he does it. However, when caught he tries to persuade Joe to keep his secret, saying things such as "Joe, I love you, truly love you. Tell me what you want, I can give you everything." Ton tries to begin a romantic relationship with Joe and conceal his misdeed. Moreover, when Joe hesitates, Ton asks "What's wrong with a teacher associating with a student?" Apart from asking the question between one character and another, it is implied to be questioning the societal norm, and makes that film seem to be destroying that norm.

Although this film showed that the teacher broke the Code of Ethics, that Code still controlled the direction of the content by giving a vital role to Joe. Joe used the word 'Master' all the time when talking to Ton. When Joe found out that Ton is a fetishist and was smelling Joe's student uniform, Joe called him 'Master' and made him stop. When Ton acknowledged that he loves Joe, Joe asked him "Why do you love me, master?" Joe also said "It's not good at all to love you, master." The repetition of the word 'Master' by Joe in every sentence is to remind Ton of his duties as a teacher under the Code of Ethics. By using that word all the time, the film's producer wants Ton to realize his teacher duty as a teacher, as contained within the Code of Ethics. Hence, when Ton breaks the Code by telling Joe that he will copulate with him if Joe is willing to be his lover, Joe swears at him "You fuck-up!" Ton assaulted and tried to

rape Joe but Joe didn't allow him to, and swears again 'Douchebag!' Joe then left immediately.

As mentioned above, the film *Teacher and Student* showed that the romantic relationship between teacher and student should not be allowed to happen, and when the teacher does not observe the Code of Ethics, the teacher will be unable to coexist in society, like Ton who is bogged down with his sorrow as shown at the end of the film. In addition, it should be noticed that Joe's invective is not only to condemn Ton's behavior, but it could also be implied as homophobic.

In the same way, *Hormones 2nd season, ep.3 Toey and a computer teacher* also showed that a teacher should not begin the romantic relationship with a student because it is contrary to the Code of Ethics. In this narrative, Toey feels that Pin, a male computer teacher, is unusual; he keeps getting up close to her. Meanwhile, when Pin does the same to Tan, another female student, it makes Tan cry. Toey thinks that Tan has faced the same problem so she talks to her. Toey says, "Pin pushed his face into mine, it was terrible, I'm not OK at all." This showed Toey's negative feelings when she realized Pin's behavior contradicted the Teachers' Code of Ethics.

After hearing Toey's story, Tan confessed that she had been harassed and raped by Pin. Subsequently, Toey plans to allow Pin to violate her and Tan will record the video at the same time, to use against him in evidence. When that scene was broadcast, the message 'Sexual harassment is illegal and immoral. Careful advice from parents is required.' was shown at the bottom of the screen the whole time. It showed that the series producer realized that the content was immoral and contrary to the Teachers' Code of Ethics. However, the vital message is to follow the Code, so the producer presented that scene by giving a key role to Tar, a male student in the same class as Toey, who discovered the incident and helped her get away from Pin. Tar asked Pin "How dare you do this? How dare you, you bastard!" This question is not only asked of Pin and questioning his behavior, but it is also a question to any teachers who have violated their students.

In addition to the above question, the utterance of Niphon, one of the school's administrative teachers, who talked to Pin after the incident, showed that this episode of the series has Teachers' Code of Ethics as a way to present the story. Niphon said "You are a teacher! Even if you weren't, you have no right to force anyone to do this!" This narrative shows that 'teacher' is sacred, respected, and should be a good example of behavior. Although Pin said 'I'm also a human,' it is unreasonable because it is shown that the teacher also has to take responsibility for a student's welfare.

Apart from the narratives where the teacher is the first to show an interest in a student as mentioned above, some narratives represent when the student is the first to start the romantic relationship with their teacher, and also show that the relationship is contrary to the Teachers' Code of Ethics. One example is shown in the short film *The Sin* and another in *Hormones 1st season, ep.12 Growth Hormone*.

The short film *The Sin* represented the romantic relationship between 'Suvicha,' a male student in a vocational school, and a new unnamed English teacher who tries to hide his gender and sexuality because it is the principal reason for his previous

unemployment. His gender is male but the sexuality could be defined as a transvestite. Nevertheless, although the teacher tries to conduct himself not to associate with another male, especially as he is in a school where most students are male, when Suvicha comes into his life, his heart is substantially affected.

Suvicha is a student in the teacher's English class. One day he asks to go and live with the teacher because he doesn't want to go home. The film shows them living together in many private places, such as a bedroom and the roof-deck of a dormitory. There are many situations in which the teacher has to suppress his feelings, such as when Suvicha takes off his clothing and stands naked in front of the teacher before he goes to shower, when the teacher gives him a towel in front of the bathroom, or when Suvicha is drunk and the teacher tries to rub his body dry but Suvicha pulls the teacher into a hug and falls asleep. Every time they are close together, the teacher always avoids confrontation because he doesn't want to think improperly towards the student.

It can be seen that the teacher chooses to suppress his feelings although he has the opportunity to do many things to Suvicha when they live together. This film is represented under the framework of the Teachers' Code of Ethics, which control the teacher's behavior; although it also showed that his feelings and the Code are at odds with each other. The Teachers' Code of Ethics, which influences teachers' thoughts, emotions and actions, is emphasized again in the scene when teachers in the staff room are gossiping about an electronics teacher who had sexual relations with a female student and was fired. They use phrases such as "Oh my god! Such dishonor in our school!" "Teacher, a teacher, how shameless!" "He destroyed the reputation of our school," and "Someone who behaves like this should be careful." For the teacher who is starting to fall in love with Suvicha, these sentences have an effect on his mind.

The Teachers' Code of Ethics is emphasized again at the end of the film when it reveals the full story of Suvicha, who is a male prostitute, and the teacher finds out the truth. It makes the teacher depressed because he lavished many things upon Suvicha, but Suvicha doesn't appreciate them, and the teacher sinks into sorrow for a long time.

As mentioned above, the short film *The Sin* represents the romantic relationship between teacher and student under the framework of the Teachers' Code of Ethics, it causes the teacher to be unable to live happily ever after with the student, because duty is more important than personal feelings.

In the same way, *Hormones 1st season, ep.12 Growth Hormone* also showed an instance in which a student starts the romantic relationship with their teacher. In this narrative, Win, a student in Nadao Bangkok School, is the first to show his interest in Aor, an English teacher. However, the romantic relationship between them occurred when they were very drunk and lost consciousness after a party at Aor's home. While Aor is changing her clothes in a bathroom with the door left open, Win walks past and sees her. He feels sexual desire and tries to take advantage of Aor. When Aor comes to and realizes that the person confronting her is Win, she pushes him away and walks out of the bathroom. Nevertheless, the situation was recorded on another student's smartphone. When that clip goes viral around the school, Aor is immediately fired.

The final scene shows Aor walking out of the headmaster's room and on seeing many students she avoids eye contact with them. It could be a reference that what happened in the video clip is very shameful and shouldn't happen to a teacher who has to follow the Teachers' Code of Ethics.

Furthermore, there is a scene in which Nipon, one of the school's administrative staff, comes in the classroom to replace the English teacher. He declares the reason is "Because a vicious story has just happened in our school," which refers to the story of Win and Aor in that video clip, and also shows the evaluation of that behavior, which is bad and shouldn't have happened.

Moreover, the producer also gives a role to students in the school to produce and broadcast a television program 'VR Source'. The moderator interviews students about the clip; most of them have the same opinion of Win.

"I think, if he did this, he should be expelled. Why couldn't he abstain from doing that with the teacher?"

"I wonder what he was thinking. How dare he! Damn him so much!"

"Why don't you take some time to watch the clip? I think that teacher probably went along with him."

"The teacher has no right to do that!"

From the above utterances, the students interviewed in the 'VR Source' program are unimpressed with what happened in the video clip. Some students criticize Win for behaving inappropriately, while some think maybe Aor went along with Win. Although the producer gives a role to one student to say "Win is cool, he managed to make love with a teacher," the producer gives a role to Pop, one of the moderators of 'VR Source,' to slap the first student and say "You pig! She is your teacher!" Also at the end of the program, Khrongkwan, one of the most popular students in the school, gives a warning that nobody should judge others if they haven't witnessed the situation; however, no-one cares about what really happened that night. Most of them are prepared to judge Aor and Win although they have only seen a short clip. That is to say, the Teachers' Code of Ethics is the framework to represent this narrative.

As mentioned above, the Teachers' Code of Ethics has become a moral norm that controls how all producers represent characters' thoughts and deeds in Thai contemporary media. The characters who refuse to follow the Code of Ethics will be punished by society, by condemning them with insulting looks, gossip, invective, and even punishment by law. Incidentally, even if the temptation happened only in characters' minds, they will found to be guilty of the offence. It could be considered that the Teachers' Code of Ethics is a bio-power of the modern Thai state, which controls and specifies the framework of thinking about and representing the romantic relationship between teacher and student through Thai contemporary media, and it also has the power to control and order characters' thoughts and deeds in those narratives.

The possibility of the relationship between teacher and student

Although the Teachers' Code of Ethics is a vital framework of thought in representing the romantic relationship between teacher and student that shouldn't happen in Thai

society through narratives, some narratives show the framework to be negotiable, by representing that the romantic relationship between teacher and student could happen under certain conditions.

In a short film *Love, loved, loved*, the narrative presented the romantic relationship between 'Tin,' a third year student, or a final year, in vocational school, who falls in love with 'Praew,' a university student who is practicing teaching English in that school. Tin tries in a number of ways to show his desire for Praew to make her aware that he loves her, such as often asking question in the class, or trying to offer his motorbike service to take her home, but Praew doesn't show any interest in him. When asked by her friend about if a student were to fall in love with her, Praew quickly answers "Are you mad? I'm a teacher, even if I'm just a trainee." Praew's words show that the Teachers' Code of Ethics has the power to control Praew's mind, and the producer of this film realizes this.

Moreover, when Tin posts a photo of him taken with Praew on Facebook, Praew is given a warning by the headmistress. Praew says to Tin "Tin, do not try to persuade me to go home with you. I am a teacher! You are a student! I have to teach you! You should just study in the class! From now on, do not disturb me. Just go back to focus on your studies." Praew's words show that the teacher's duty and Code of Ethics are the most important things to consider when thinking about how to behave appropriately. The Teachers' Code of Ethics is the framework that controls Praew's thoughts and actions. At the same time, when Tin realizes that he is the reason for the warning the headmistress gave to Praew, he becomes aware of his duty as a student and says "You're in trouble because of me; actually I should do no more than my duty."

However, this short film shows the framework of the Teachers' Code of Ethics is negotiable. As Tin said, "If someday you're not my teacher and I'm not your student, I think it would be better." This sentence presents the idea that the romantic relationship would "be better" if the teacher and the student do not have duty towards each other. 'Time and place' becomes a frame of thought that controls the way to represent the narrative of the romantic relationship between teacher and student in the film; that is, the romantic relationship between teacher and student is possible, but both teacher and student should behave suitably within the right time and place. 'Teacher' and 'student' have duties that they perform to each other both in and out the school, and all the time they still have a duty to each other. But if they both no longer have any duty under the condition of time and place as mentioned, the romantic relationship between teacher and student is allowed to happen.

The short film *Love, loved, loved* represents the maintaining of the romantic relationship between Praew and Tin after Praew finishes her teaching practice in Tin's school, and Tin has also graduated from that school. When Tin's friends send his story to a TV program 'Love me or not?' and make Tin and Praew talk together again, Tin asks Praew to be his girlfriend and Praew accepts. The story of Tin and Praew was taken to produce a narrative shown in that short film. It can be seen that the appropriate time and place in which a the romantic relationship between teacher and student is allowed to happen is when Tin has graduated and Praew is also no longer teaching him.

In the same way, *The Secret of Grade 12, Room 3*, TV series in *Club Friday the Series 5th season*, also shows the negotiation between ‘time and place’ and Teachers’ Code of Ethics. In the series, Aorn, a class teacher of grade 12, room 3, faces pressure from many sides when the romantic relationship between her and Tee, a male student in her class, is revealed. For instance, when the headmaster talks to her after suspecting her secret:

You know what the duty of a teacher is, don’t you? When parents send their children to our school, they may reasonably think that school is the same as their home, and we are their deputies in instructing them, and teaching them to grow up as good people. I understand that a teacher is only human, but you should not forget that since the first day you chose to be a teacher, it has meant that you accepted the Teacher’s Code of Ethics, and it will follow you as long as you still are a teacher. Do you understand?

From the message above, the producer presents that the Teachers’ Code of Ethics is still a framework to control the romantic relationship between teacher and student, because the teacher must perform respectfully in the same way as the parents. When Aorn has a romantic relationship with Tee, she is criticized by other teachers, with posts on Facebook and scornful looks. Furthermore, the Teachers’ Code of Ethics still makes Aorn decide to quit her job, as she says “The gossip was spread, whether it is true or not, the school has lost its reputation because of me, hence I must resign from my job here. It’s my fault, since I let the gossip spread. Please accept my apology. I should take responsibility. The school won’t lose its trustworthiness. I’m really sorry.”

The day Aorn decides to quit her job, the Teachers’ Code of Ethics has the power to control Aorn’s mind and actions more than her feelings. Aorn dumps Tee by shouting “I told you to go to class, didn’t you hear me?” Also, when Aorn says “Tee must accept the truth, the truth that our relationship is wrong. It should end now,” it emphasizes the framework of the Teachers’ Code of Ethics that judges the romantic relationship between teacher and student to be wrong. Although Tee asks “Why, Aorn? We love each other, feel good together. Is it really wrong?” or “What should I do, Aorn, to make you understand that our relationship is not wrong?” His question is not only being asked in the series, but it also asks about the framework of the Teachers’ Code of Ethics. By leaving Tee’s life, it is Aorn’s best answer that emphasizes how powerful that framework of thinking is, at least when there is still duty between teacher and student.

The Secret of Grade 12, Room 3, TV series in *Club Friday the Series 5th season* shows that the framework of the Teachers’ Code of Ethics still has the power to control character’s thoughts and behavior so that their lives are unhappy. Like Aorn said “At that time, I think it will be happier if I do what is right, but it’s not the same as I think,” but ‘time and place’ is the framework of thought that is used to negotiate with the Teachers’ Code of Ethics. For example, at the end of the series Tee goes to Aorn’s house after graduating from school. He takes off his student uniform and asks Aorn “I’m not a student any more, can we love each other now?” This question shows that both Aorn and Tee no longer have any duty towards each other, it is just their feelings that go on. By taking off the uniform, it could be implied as liberation from

his duty as a student. In addition, Tee's question also implies that it is being asked of society too.

As previously mentioned, 'time and place' is a framework of thought that can negotiate with the 'Teachers' Code of Ethics.' Those two narratives of romantic relationships between teacher and student show that both teacher and student who love each other are under pressure from the Teachers' Code of Ethics and how to emerge from that pressure to carry on with their relationship. The possibility of the romantic relationship between teacher and student is under the condition of 'time' and 'place' when both of them have no more duty to each other in the context of school.

By considering the narratives of romantic relationship between teacher and student presented through Thai contemporary media between 2006 and 2015 as mentioned above, the conclusion is: the narratives of romantic relationship between teacher and student can be separated into two types, the forbidden relationship between teacher and student, and the possibility of the relationship between teacher and student. The first one proves that the romantic relationship between teacher and student still falls under the Teachers' Code of Ethics and the relationship should not happen. Moral ideology becomes a vital framework to control those narratives to show that romantic relationships between teacher and student are not acceptable, and when they happen, both of them will be condemned to varying degrees. The other one shows that the possibility of a romantic relationship between teacher and student is acceptable under the framework of 'time' and 'place.' The romantic relationship between teacher and student may happen in an appropriate time and place, and it shows the negotiability with the Teachers' Code of Ethics, which is a mainstream way of thinking that controls people's minds.

Turning point in thinking about relationship?

The two narratives that presented the possibility of a romantic relationship between teacher and student are a challenge to the prohibited relationship under Thai convention. Although the romantic relationship between teacher and student is totally in contravention of the Teachers' Code of Ethics, those two narratives represent the possibility of a romantic relationship between teacher and student that could take place when the student has graduated from high school and the teacher has no more duty to that student either. However, when considered from a legal perspective, the romantic relationship between teacher and student under those conditions is not illegal because the student is over 18 years of age. If there is no force exerted by the teacher, the romantic relationship between teacher and student may be possible.

The romantic relationship between teacher and student presented in Thai contemporary media does not follow social convention. Although these narratives are presented in entertainment media, when one realizes that both narratives were produced from the audience's 'real' experience, or based on a true story, the narratives of romantic relationship between teacher and student lead to debate in society, especially the appropriateness and possibility of this type of relationship. Whether this relationship is acceptable or not, the narratives still create the debate, and make it a hot topic.

Moreover, the narratives of romantic relationships between teacher and student reflect the new generation's desire to change social contexts. In the past, although the

romantic relationship between teacher and student was prohibited, the media sometimes presented news about those relationships. Interestingly, news stories that were presented in the media never showed this as being an acceptable relationship. The possibility of the romantic relationship between teacher and student presented in Thai contemporary media is not only a challenge to the convention and feelings of people in society, which could imply that the strictness of some social norms is decreasing, but it also shows that the romantic relationship between teacher and student is a human desire and a relationship that the new generation could accept, and may also be permitted under law. Whether the 'truth' behind those narratives is true or not, the possibility in narratives of the romantic relationship between teacher and student establishes a new space for the relationship that exists in society, from the forbidden relationship, and it can be regarded as a turning point in thinking about the relationship of people who have a different status.

When considered from the perspective of gender, those two narratives have something in common, whether intentional or not. Those two narratives show that the romantic relationship between teacher and student can happen if there is a relationship between male student and female teacher, and the male student is the first to court the female teacher. By representing the vital role through the male student, it is a reproduction of the patriarchal ideology, because that relationship principle responds to male desire, imagination and sexual experience. Meanwhile, the female teacher in those two narratives just responds to the male student's desire. At the end of those narratives, by giving a role to the male student to succeed in associating with the female teacher, it is still a reproduction of romantic love under heteronormativity that stems from the patriarchy's establishment. That is to say, though the romantic relationship between teacher and student shows a turning point in thinking about the relationship among Thai society, that turning point still cannot conquer the power of patriarchy, which is entrenched in Thai society.

Interpersonal relationships are no longer a private business, but are surrounded with social and cultural matters, which are controlled by the ideology behind them, and its power can harmoniously control the relationships between people in society.

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