

The Politics of Thai Pop and Thai Anthropology¹

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Introduction

Popular culture, as a scholarly subject matter, is rather problematic in many accounts. Students of popular culture in Thailand and elsewhere usually share similar concerns. They have encountered the issues of how to define and identify the scope of a popular culture in question, while they have to convince colleagues and the academic community that a certain form of popular culture is intellectually and scholarly worthy of academic inquiry.

When I delivered the Thai version of this paper in the 1st national congress on Thai anthropology, organized by the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center in Bangkok in late March 2002, I received mixed reactions from my audiences. Since it deals with an overview of popular culture trends and a critique of the ruling paradigm of Thai culture, my presentation was well perceived by the younger generation of Thai anthropologists, who are quite familiar with concepts and reading materials in cultural studies and the in-trend postmodernist anthropology. In contrast, many senior Thai anthropologists seem to have reservations on the studies of subject matters, like fashion, pop music, movies, or TV drama. It is obvious that our old folks simply find it difficult to see most “trendy pop” as cultural forms

One direct criticism on my presentation as well as on many works dealing with various forms of Thai popular culture came from Prof. Srisak Vanlibhodom, a highly-respected anthropologist-cum-archaeologist, who made his illustrious career at Bangkok-based Silpakorn University. As reported in an English language daily newspaper, Achan Srisak “...defended the theoretical approach [namely, structural-functionalism] he has used for three decades, which focuses on groups of people and culture, rather than on an analysis of some individuals, which is a characteristic of the postmodern approach... Postmodernism is too dynamic, so we can’t capture its context. This is even dangerous... He said his young peers should be careful about differentiating between identity and egocentricity. He also criticised the frequent use of the term “culture” by many young scholars. To him, the pre-teen wearing of camisoles at Siam Square’s Centerpoint was just a fashion, not a culture.” (“Old versus the New.” *The Nation*. March 30, 2002, p.7A).

This criticism conveys multi-faucet meanings. I do not want to see it merely as a verbal warning from a senior teacher to his younger colleagues and students on the practices of anthropology in

¹A. draft paper delivered in the round-table presentation at Center of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA, May 21, 20002, 13.30-16.00 p.m. Please do not quote or circulate without my permission.

Thailand. It says something about generation differences among Thai anthropologists when they come to term with the discipline's theoretical shift. Yet, I do not defend postmodernism as a school of thought in anthropology, nor cultural studies as an academic discipline, which was apparently misunderstood by Achan Srisak in many areas. Rather, I would like to link Achan Srisak's comment to the studies of popular culture in Thailand. His quotable remark renders itself as an excellent starting point as well as a challenge to the anthropological studies of popular culture in Thailand and elsewhere.

I would like to take a different stance from this guru in Thai anthropology and argue that popular culture deserves its place in the Thai anthropology discourse. Many popular cultural forms resemble fashions, but they themselves are not culturally worthless. They have become low-taste fashions, not highly valued cultural forms, because they have been condemned by what I call in this paper the "ruling/official paradigm" of the Thai culture. As I put it in detail elsewhere (Pattana Kitiarsa 2002), this ruling paradigm is rather politicized and narrow, thus, inadequate to cope with an ever-changing and highly-diversified nature of the Thai popular culture. In many cases, certain forms of current Thai popular culture are constantly portrayed by the Thai authorities as fragmented rudiments of "un-Thai otherness" from the outset.

I believe that the Thai pop is the most colorfully dynamic and liveliest cultural current, in which mostly young women and men are contesting for and constructing their own cultural selves and spaces. Despite endless encounters with the authorities' gazes and the untiringly fading-away fashion of the popular culture, they are intensively defining and redefining their own generation's cultural identities and placing them in juxtaposition to those of the dominant ones.

The Cases # 1 **"Khun Lum Yai"²**

*"I will never forget it
I will keep it in my heart to remind myself
that you call me "Lum Yai"
I regret it since there are numbers of better names
Why do you call me "Lum Yai"
Or you just see me as an upcountry pumpkin
If you don't love me, I won't mind
But, never call me "Khun Lum Yai"*

*Let me ask you frankly
How do you judge me
You judge me by looking through my heart or just my appearance
I really want to know if I happen to be pretty one day
How would you call me*

Nong Gift, Cherry, Nong Wine

²"Khun Lum Yai." In the Album "Khun Lum Yai," Suphaporn Panpri, Vocalist, Damri Thammaban, Composer. Bangkok: Nopphong International, 2000.

*Why don't you call me by these names
 Or Nong Ann, Nong Un, Nong Bow, Nong Hun
 Yes, Nong Khwan still sounds better [than Lum Yai]
 Nong May is such a fantastic name
 Why don't you make it mine
 Nong Pear, Nong Pim, Nong Firn
 Why don't you use these names, my dear.*

*A man like you will never deserve such a good shaped girl like me
 My body resembles a half-blooded [Thai] American, you know
 I changed my dress up style everyday
 I am always updated with fashion trends*

*My noses are so pointed
 My hair is colored
 My hand-bag is a Crocodile brand
 My jeans are Levi
 If you still want to call me "Lum Yai,"
 You'd better think twice"*

The Case #2 Craze for Fit and Slim Beauty

*Just 30 days, you can be slim and pretty as you wish
 Look, only a month after Emma joins the weight-loss program with Mari France Bodyline,
 Emma's weight was down 5 kilograms
 Plus a total of 23 inches of my unwanted body fat was shed away
 My stomach fat went down 2 inches, waist 3 inches, below-breast areas 2 inches,
 Hip 2.5 inches, upper and lower thighs 9 inches, upper arms 3.5 inches
 Also my leg fat decreased by an inch*

*I accept that Marie France is a true professional,
 Who helps Emma gain a slim body back once again
 With a quick and simple weight loss program,
 Emma does not have to suffer with fasting, heavy exercises, or any medical treatments*

*If you want to have a slim and beautiful body like Emma,
 Marie France can really help you.*

If you don't believe, take a look at Emma.³

³"Marie France Bodyline." *Daily News*. July 24, 2001, p. 11.

The Case # 3
Damned Thai Teenagers!

Wear big-heel shoes
Dress up tightly and show off one's belly cord
Addict to mobile phones
Talk in Farang accent

Be crazy fans of pop singers and movie stars
Wander around in the shopping malls
Love gossips
Love Farang goods and music

Live aimlessly
Have fun in pubs and bars
Use low taste clothes to show off one's body
Enjoy having many sexual partners

Be jealous of good persons
Enjoy deviant sexual behaviors
Date with the millionaires' sons or daughters
Apply a heavy make up
Addict to gambling⁴

The Case # 4
"The Suzuki Motorbike Concert"

A motorbike, a motorbike [repeat]
Wherever you go, take a motorcycle ride, older brothers
Best and Raider are finest models
Suzuki is the most famous motorbike brand
A speedy ride with durable engines.

Wanna own a motorbike [repeat]
Suzuki motorbike is your best choice, fathers
Get a ride together [on the Suzuki like anybody else]
Get a ride together [on the Suzuki like anybody else]
Never mind, even if they have only two wheels.

The blast sounds paen paen paen paen [repeat]
Laen-taen, laen-taen, this is a heart soothing blast
Do you own one, dear?

⁴Phra Pipitthammasunthron. "Thai Kamlang Took Kluen Pruttikam Lan Panthukam" [Thais' Behaviors and Genetics Are Being Assimilated]. *Kom Chat Luek*. January 25, 2002, p. 16.

*Come and buy a Suzuki motorbike
This brand of motorbike has a special place in everyone's heart. [repeat]*

*Please buy a Suzuki, brothers and sisters [repeat]
Please come in to buy and ride it off
Riding a Suzuki motorbike, give you a pride [repeat]
Especially with the new Raider model [repeat]
Holy, holy Raider, Raider, and Raider
Get your money worth using Suzuki
No loss, but a pure net gain
Suzuki always pay you back a handsome profit*

*[Speak] Suzuki, the quality name, you are confident.
Want a motorbike, don't forget the Suzuki
Worth every minute,
Buy a Suzuki, you are always gain.*

Popular Culture, Popular Problems

Popular culture has rather negative perceptions and images in the eyes of Thai authorities, parents, and the older generation. Official voices, especially those from politicians, government officials, Buddhist monks, school administrators and so on, criticize many popular cultural forms and their mediums for their "bad" influences on the Thai society and culture.

Judging from the perspectives of Thai authorities (i.e., government officials, school teachers, social critics, parents, and elder generations, the popular culture can be perceived as follows.

First, many popular stuffs, like fashion, music, values, etc., have foreign origins. They come from outside, so they presents significations of Un-Thainess, which threatened existence and persistence of the authentic Thainess.

Second, most popular icons promote consumerist culture. They damage the nation's economy as well as cultural pride. Thailand has been dominated and exploited economically and culturally by foreigners for generations. The presence of pop icons along with the youth's consumerism will do no good to Thailand.

Third, most popular cultures are assessed as vulgar commercialized stuffs. They are produced for the mass markets and consumed by the mass consumers. They are commercial art products, not real arts in the elite's sense.

Fourth, it is common in the Thai public discourse that popular cultures are blamed for the cause of moral decays in the Thai society. Social problems, like drug, prostitution, extra-marital pregnancy, and other criminal acts, are linked back to many wide-spread forms of popular cultures among the youth.

Finally, the famous Social Re-ordering Program (Jad Rabieb Sangkhom), launched by the Ministry of Interior, is an obvious effort by the authorities in keeping some popular trends under the official control. Led by Pol Cap. Dr. Purachai Piemsomboon, the former Rector from NIDA and professor in business administration, this program aims to eradicate social problems among the youth. It focuses on the legal control of the night-time entertainment establishments in urban areas nationwide. Teenagers and young adults, especially high school and college students, are one of prime targets under this program. These people must be kept away from drug, gambling, and all kinds of adult entertainment media. They must be put under parental and official gazes. In other words, this program wants to discipline “undocile bodies” of the youth and reorienting them to be “good” children and citizen.

The Thai Pop: The Battleground of Identities and Places in the Everyday Life

Kasian Tejapira (1996) discusses “the desire to be Thai amidst the un-Thai exigencies of globalization” and argues that large numbers of Thai people show what he calls the epidemic symptoms of “cultural schizophrenia.” With a critical reading of popular cultural trends of the “1994 Year to Campaign for Thai Culture” [Pi Ronnarong Watthanatham Thai 2537] in the backdrop, he reveals that there is a split personality or fragmented subjectivity among Thai people influencing by the globalization forces. They explicitly or implicitly claim that “...the interiorized Thai self is more authentic than...the projected un-Thai self in the form of dress, behaviour or activity...” (1996:9-10). In other words, Kasian believes that cultural schizophrenia in this case represents a Thai reaction to the forceful penetration of the globalization trends (i.e., consumed goods, information, investment flows, etc) in the everyday cultural landscape. Schizophrenia implies that people are in confusing stage of self-identification and they tend to have split personalities between an authentic Thainess and imported, alien un-Thainess.

With my cases of selected Thai pop presented above, I try to make sense of Kasian’s psychological treatment of the Thai popular culture in early 1990s. Have the symptoms of cultural schizophrenia been still persisting and pervasive in the early 2000s as well? Do Thai people have a clearer picture of their cultural identities now?

Kasian’s analysis is very critically comprehensive, but I think one has to dig a little deeper to the historical genealogy of ruling paradigm of Thai culture in order to understand the more contemporary cultural schizophrenia symptoms. The crisis of cultural identities has its root in the history of modern nation-state of Siam or Thailand since 1939.

The ruling paradigm of Thai culture was an integral part of the foundation of the modern Thai nationhood since the second half of nineteenth century. It was strongly influenced by the European notion of universal civilization. It implies at least three things: superior knowledge, refinement, and a clear distinction between high art and popular entertainment (see Williams 1976:87). This is primarily the cultural paradigm, which was adopted by the Siamese elite who was in dire need of escaping away from being labeled as “uncivilized” (Thongchai Winichakul 2001:58).

Thongchai Winichakul (1993) uses the term “the Other Within” to describe what Kasian might have called cultural schizophrenia, created by the Siamese elite in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In its early form, the uncivilized others or subordinate subjects i.e., Karen, Lua, Semang, Laotian, represented projected un-Thainess in the Siamese elite’s eyes. This process of cultural schizophrenia had been undergoing hand in hand with the “selective modernization”(Thongchai Winichakul 1994:10), in which rulers and elite continued to worship and incorporate proper and desirable elements of Western culture into the modern Thai cultural domain.

How is this historical development of the ruling paradigm of Thai culture relevant to the understanding of contemporary popular culture? It throws light on what I call the politics of the Thai popular culture, where series of encounters between Thai culture as defined by rulers and elite and those favored by the people. Of course, in most cases, popular culture has always been classified or labeled as un-Thainess or undesirable by the authorities from time to time. In late nineteenth century, popular Lao Kaen or Mawlum (folk performance) and some spirit-medium cults were banned in Bangkok during the reign of King Mongkut.

I argue that the messages I read from selected cases of Thai popular culture represents signifiers of cultural struggles in contemporary Thailand. I see at least two major groups of people, who are struggling to define and redefine themselves in the post 1997 economic crisis. The first struggle involves those who subscribe themselves to the ruling paradigm of Thai culture. People in the government offices, teachers, hard-line conservationists, old-fashion parents, etc., have difficult time to understand the current youth cultures. The world order seems to have a radical turn from being calm, bounded to being fragmented and jeopardized.

The second struggle in the stream of Thai popular culture involves young people in the current generation. I see them struggle for their own cultural selves and places. They fight the generation differences and authoritarian gazes of parents, teachers, elder people, and government officials. They have become rebellions in order to search for their cultural selves and places. Here I do not have enough materials and spaces to discuss in details about the emerging identities among the Thai youth via their production and consumption of popular culture.

Kasian (1996) discusses about the psychological sublimation of Thainess in the reinvention of cultural identities. He seems to believe that the Thai in early 1990s hide their authentic Thainess in their heart, while struggled to explain why they have to adopt many un-Thai cultural elements in their everyday life. They usually ended up with acceptable explanations and hybrid cultural forms.

In the cases of some early 2000s Thai popular culture, the sublimation of Thainess have been going among the Thai. Khun Lum Yai’s image, Emma’s slim body, and the popularity of Mawlum Cing are obvious examples of cultural negotiation or hybridization or reinvention. However, I think Thai people nowadays, especially among teenagers or middle age people, tend to care less about being Thai or the authenticity of Thainess. They care more about being updated or modern. As shown in the cases of the flashy teen fashion at the Siam Square’s Centerpoint, un-Thainess is no longer a question. They clearly identify themselves whatever the fashion trends say whether they are Western, European, American Japanese, or Korean. They

actively consume those pop, while the elder generation and the authorities raise the question: "are you truly Thai?"

It seems to me that cultural schizophrenia against un-Thai things has passed its anxiety stage. It has been normalized and gradually subsumed into everyday life of large spectrum of Thai population in early 2000s. Whether they are made in U.S.A., Japan, Korea, Europe, or home-grown, popular cultures are everywhere. No one is able to escape them.

Conclusion

Let me return to the comment on popular culture by Achan Srisak. I would categorize his stance along with those people who belong to the ruling paradigm of Thai culture. He might not resemble every official stance, but his remark sounds very much an authoritative voice within the Thai anthropology cycle.

The fashions of all kinds can be subsumed under the popular culture umbrella. It is difficult to define them, but they are well-liked by the popular. People love it, no matter what authorities say. They produce it, consume it, enjoy it, hate it, want to forget it, or embrace it. They may look like vulgar, meaningless trends, but looking at them carefully and openly, they mean something or many things.

I selected a few cases of Thai popular culture and read them with a special reference to the concept of cultural schizophrenia as proposed by Kasian Tejapira (1996). I argue that popular cultures have continued to be sublimated into the everyday life domain. Despite of their diverse origins, forms, and contents, the Thai society seems to have embraced them to the point that they have become an important part of our everyday life. The enormous presence of media-saturated popular culture in contemporary Thailand makes it possible to say that cultural schizophrenia has already passed its anxiety stage. Many pop icons have been more openly acceptable or irresistible to embrace by the Thai, even though complex issues of being authentic Thainess have been raised from time to time.

Nowadays the forms and contents of Thainess can be as diverse and complex as the meanings of popular culture themselves. It would be non-sense to exclude popular culture from the studies of Thai anthropology. It is noteworthy to say that the arrival of cultural studies and postmodernism in the Thai anthropology cycle since the 1990s has created interesting waves of anxiety and confusion as much as excitement and eagerness among Thai anthropologists.

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