

A Brief Analysis of Popular Aesthetics in Thailand: Subjective Culture vs. Objective Culture

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ABSTRACT This paper deals with changes in popular aesthetics in Thailand. Following Georg Simmel's dialectic dyad of subjective culture and objective culture, it is argued that popular aesthetics in Thailand have moved from being based mostly on subjective culture to being imposed by objective culture. The situation is further complicated when external influences on Thailand's aesthetic objective culture are considered, such as trends from East Asia and from the West. Finally, some of the positive and negative consequences of the shift in popular aesthetics are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Beautiful women are supposed to be tall, about one meter seventy five, with fair skin, large eyes, pointy nose, curly hair and slim. Popular aesthetics in Thailand have shifted drastically in the last few decades from a system based on subjective culture to one based on local objective culture, and finally, to an ideal imposed by a synthesis of objective culture and foreign elements. Thus what is considered to be visually appealing has changed over the years. Popular aesthetics includes everything from fashion to physical traits that are considered desirable. Who is considered beautiful? Who decides who is considered beautiful? Those are just some of the questions that arise when dealing with popular aesthetics and social change.

Thailand is a very good case study to apply Simmel's concepts of subjective culture and objective culture due to its unique history as a non-western country never to be colonized (Wyatt 2003). In addition to that its capital, Bangkok, is a thriving Metropolis attempting to redefine its identity as a fashion hub (Mulder 2000). Furthermore, Thai culture places a lot of emphasis on personal presentation and on external symbols. Finally, Thailand's geographical location makes it the recipient of several fashion trends from East Asia and from the West (Neher 2002).

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What is the link between popular aesthetics and the concepts of subjective culture and objective culture as posited by Georg Simmel? Subjective culture refers to the creative spirit in the individual. It represents the moment of creation and the potential for creation of something unique. The aggregate of those unique creations then come to form objective culture (Ritzer 2008, pp. 172-174). Thus objective culture is greater than the sum of its parts as can be seen by some prominent examples such as fashion and science. A designer comes up with a new creation but once that creation becomes public and part of objective culture it ceases to be part of subjective culture, since the creator loses his or her control over the creation. Therefore, subjective culture deals with the creative figment of individual consciousness while objective culture becomes part of the collective unconscious. The relationship between the two aspects of "culture" is dialectical since the enlargement of the sphere of life controlled by objective culture constraints the freedom of movement of subjective culture. Thus subjective culture becomes a victim of its own success (Ritzer 2008, p. 179). This argument parallels theories of institutionalization of norms both at the societal and international levels. In summary, the accumulation of objective culture leads to the ossification of subjective culture due to the combined effect of the previously mentioned objective culture on the individual. Taking Simmel's logic one step further, one can introduce an extraneous influence on objective culture. In the case of Thai objective culture, the extraneous

influence would be regional objective cultures as well as the standardized “global” objective culture represented by global brands such as Nike and Channel. The previous theoretical framework can be visualized by means of three concentric circles. The innermost circle represents subjective culture, a second circle represents National objective culture, and then several dotted circles represented regional and global objective cultures.

POPULAR AESTHETICS IN THAILAND

Now let us apply the previous theoretical argument to Thailand’s shift in popular aesthetics. As a virulently nationalist country that was never colonized, Thailand can be assumed to possess its own traditional set of aesthetic standards. Those original standards were developed by the accumulation of the subjective cultures of the creative figments of the individual consciousnesses of the Thai people over the centuries. Taking the 1970s as a decade before the onset of rapid economic growth and industrialization, the aesthetic standard of the time can be used as the popular aesthetic standard based on the subjective culture of the Thai people before any major extraneous influences had entered the calculation (Pongsudhirak 2008). Now let us imagine a Thai woman of about 25 years of age thinking about the ideal standard of beauty, an example of popular aesthetics, for a woman her age in the Thailand of the early 1970s. Her standard would be based on two main influences, namely, her individual creative figment, subjective culture, and the contemporary collective standard, the objective culture. Taking into consideration that she was undertaking that mental exercise in the early 1970s it is reasonable to assume that the product of the exercise would be the following standard or closely similar to it: A beautiful woman has smooth light brown skin with a golden shine to it, is about one meter sixty centimeters tall, has strong small dark eyes, long dark straight hair, a small round nose, and a strong healthy complexion. It is clear that the previous description greatly differs from the one provided at the beginning of this essay. How did one system of popular aesthetics turn into another? The following sections will provide a qualitative explanation of how the change came about.

As previously mentioned, Thailand before the 1970s did not have a very developed market economy nor much influence from abroad (Somwung

Pitiyanuwat 2005; Tong Chee Kiong 2001; Tow 2000; Wyatt 2003). However, that started to change in the 1970s with the influx of American soldiers and other concerned parties due to the war in Indochina and the warming of the Cold War (Neher 2002). The first change was internal and it was the formation of a truly national market of products and of ideas. This was partly spontaneous and partly promoted by the central government (Mulder 2000). A national culture was promoted based on the objective culture of Bangkok. The result, was the predictable subjugation of local popular aesthetic standards in favor of a popular standard imposed by the objective culture derived from the subjective culture of the inhabitants of the capital. The change could be seen by the promotion of Central Thai fashion and also by promoting a standard of beauty based on the ethnic features of Central Thais rather than those of ethnic minorities such as Malays, Mon and other Hill Tribe groups (McCargo 2008). By the late 1970s the hegemony of the Capital’s popular aesthetics was assured. At that point the objective culture of Bangkok became the objective culture of Thailand (Mulder 2000).

The influx of foreign capital and soldiers during the late 70s and early 80s introduced a new system of popular aesthetics, mostly based on American “Global” standards of beauty and fashion. The change can be seen in the material side of objective culture produced during those years. Billboards showed taller women with lighter skin. The ideal nose became longer and pointier. Objective Western, American, culture had clearly entered into a dialectical relationship with Thai, Central, objective culture to create something new. The synthesis of the thesis, Central Thai beauty, and the antithesis, Western, American, beauty created a completely new and unique system of popular aesthetics. Children of mixed couples, one ethnic Thai or Chinese and one White foreigner, closely resembled the ideal beauty prescribed by the new system of popular aesthetics. Evidence to the previously mentioned assertion, can be found by taking a look at some of the celebrities who rose to stardom during the early 80s and 90s. Most of them were half western and the few who weren’t underwent surgical procedures to make their features closer to the ideal. A good example of a beneficiary of the aforementioned shift in popular aesthetics was the half Thai half American singer Tata Young.

Tall, with western features, and flawless English, she rose to fame riding on the wave of the Central Thai/Western synthesis of popular aesthetics in the 1990s. Needless to say, the majority of the population did not resemble the ideal beauty represented by the synthesis of Western and Central Thai popular aesthetics.

Popular aesthetics for men took a similar path to that of women in terms of the standardization of Central Thai traits for the entire country. Nevertheless, standards for men were not as influenced by Western objective culture than those for women. That is not to say that men's popular aesthetics did not undergo any changes. The year 2000 can be considered to be a turning point for men's popular aesthetics in Thailand. Due to the rise of regional powers such as Japan and South Korea during the second part of the 1990s and the greater regional identity that was engendered due to the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, more interregional trade of material and objective culture was undertaken (Tow 2000). Thailand had always been an important recipient of Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese Foreign Direct Investment but it was only after 2000 that those countries also started exporting their culture (von Feigenblatt 2007; Togo 2005). Korean Pop Bands, Japanese Comics, Taiwanese Divas, all started to flood Bangkok. Once again the hegemonic popular aesthetics provided by the synthesis of Central Thai and Western elements came under attack by images of metrosexual Korean and Japanese males. Androgyny was the trend in East Asia at the time, both in dress and in physical traits and that standard set by East Asian Popular aesthetics came into contact with the popular aesthetics previously prevalent in Thailand for males. A new dialectic ensued with the Central Thai/Western standard in opposition to the Androgynous standard from the East. The synthesis of the two was a popular aesthetics that closely resembles the traits of Central Thai males with a little more make-up and lighter skin.

CONCLUSION

It can be argued that the two sets of popular aesthetics that developed in Thailand are far removed from the subjective culture of the majority of the population. The average Thai woman lives in the countryside, is around one

meter sixty, has wide hips, short and wide nose, dark skin and small dark eyes. Her male counterpart is also around one meter sixty, has a short and wide nose, dark skin, and hairy eye brows. It is easy to see how his or her subjective culture would deviate from the popular aesthetics currently prevalent in Thailand. The result is that his and her subjective culture is not only constrained by Thai national objective culture but also by the many layers of foreign objective culture that have merged dialectically with Thai national objective culture. In theory one can predict that many men and women will feel unhappy about their appearance and in practice one can see that Bangkok is becoming the plastic surgery capital of the world. Considering that Thailand is still a developing country and that the majority of the population lives in the provinces, it is reasonable to assert that few benefit from the present popular aesthetics with the notable exceptions of plastic surgeons and the few capitalists who control the media and fashion industries.

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