CONSUMPTION OF MODERNITY AND IDENTITY AFFIRMATION THROUGH TOURISM AND INTERACTIONS WITH ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THAILAND

การบริโภคความทันสมัยและการยืนยันเอกลักษณ์ โดยการท่องเที่ยวและการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับชนกลุ่มน้อยในประเทศไทย

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Abstract

This article aims to gain a better understanding of modernity and how it affects the identities of tourists and ethnic minorities in Thailand by utilizing the concepts of identity, modernity, and consumerism, the consumption of experiences. The concept of modernity has further entrenched the "otherness" of ethnic minorities and has allowed tourists, both foreign and domestic, to exploit ethnic minorities for the promotion of their own individuality, modernity, and cosmopolitanism in transnational space. The regulation by the Thai state produces the space of interaction of the exploitation and identity reinforcement. Additionally the Thai state gains economically through the tourism industry. The exploitation is not a policy, but justifications for the exploitation can be understood by understanding the process of the "Other" and consumerism.

Key Words : modernity, ethnic minorities, consumption, identity, transnational space

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อจะได้รับความรู้ ความเข้าใจ ที่ดีขึ้นของความทันสมัย และผลกระทบต่อเอกลักษณ์ของนักท่องเที่ยว และชนกลุ่มน้อยในประเทศไทย โดยการใช้กรอบมโนทัศน์ของเอกลักษณ์ ความทันสมัย และลัทธิบริโภคนิยม รวมทั้งการบริโภคประสบการณ์ มโนทัศน์ของความทันสมัยยังคงยึดมั่นต่อ "ความเป็นอื่น" ของชนกลุ่มน้อย และการยอมให้นักท่องเที่ยวทั้งชาวต่างประเทศและชาวไทย ใช้ประโยชน์จากชนกลุ่มน้อยโดยการส่งเสริมความเป็นเอกัตภาพของชนกลุ่มน้อย ความทันสมัย และลัทธิสากลนิยมในพื้นที่ข้ามชาติ กฎข้อบังคับโดยรัฐบาลไทยก่อให้เกิดช่องว่างในการปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการใช้ประโยชน์หรือการเอาเปรียบและการสร้างความเข้มแข็งต่อเอกลักษณ์ นอกจากนี้รัฐบาลไทยยังได้ประโยชน์ทางเศรษฐกิจผ่านอุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยว การเอาเปรียบไม่ใช่นโยบายแต่เป็นข้ออ้างสำหรับการเอาเปรียบว่าสามารเข้าใจได้โดยการเข้าใจกระบวนการของ "ความเป็นอื่น" และลัทธิบริโภคนิยม

คำสำคัญ : ความทันสมัย, ชนกลุ่มน้อย, การบริโภค, เอกลักษณ์, พื้นที่ข้ามชาติ

In today's world, being modern is being accepted. But what does it mean to be modern? Modernity is a broad murky multifaceted concept that needs clarification. First off, the term modernity implies Western influence and in the context of Southeast Asia, the position of Western culture as the source of modernity is nearly impregnable due to the region's colonial past (Andaya, 1997:391). "Modernity" is a term that is truly a "North Atlantic Universal" (Trouillot, 2002:847). Today's hegemonic capitalist discourse makes modernity nearly synonymous with consumption. Consumerism is embedded in "modern" life and consumption symbolizes modernity.

In this paper I examine how the hegemonic narrative of modernity within the context of Thailand, which stems primarily from urban Bangkok and foreign visitors, strengthens the concept of the "otherness" of ethnic minorities and allows tourists, both Thai and foreign, to pursue individualism and the feeling of being modern. I will be using the conceptual framework of modernity to better understand the transcultural space of interaction created and how it affects the identities of tourists in Thailand.

Modernity continues to elicit an image of newness, as being up to date, and being contemporary. I will look at modernity through the lens of consumption and as a tool of state control. Modernity can promote order, hierarchy, and centrality for a nation-state. Within Thailand, ethnic minorities have been promoted as primitive in relation to the projects of modernity and modernization. Modernity "has everything to do with political economy, with a geography of management that creates places: a place called France, a place called the third world, a place called the market, a place called the factory or, indeed, a workplace." (Trouillot, 2002:849)

This paper argues that the interaction between tourists, both foreign and Thai, and ethnic minorities creates such a place or in other words, a transnational space for a flow of ideas, people, and cultures that transcend not only national borders, but intrastate cultural identity borders to mold and reinforce the identities of tourists and ethnic minorities.

To do that, I am going to have to first get a strong understanding of what modernity means for Thais and Thailand. Through observations of daily life, Thai soap operas, and the analysis of government policies towards ethnic minorities, I will describe a fair representation of the hegemonic narrative of modernity and what it means to be "modern" in Thailand. The narrative of modernity in Thailand shows that Southeast Asia has finally succumbed to the materialist bias of "modernity" as it has evolved in the West (Andaya, 1997:391). Since different agents can perceive modernity differently through their subjectivity it can be somewhat problematic to generalize modernity, but there are apparent hegemonic normalizing regimes in the practices of everyday life in Thailand that make the generalization valid.

Walking around Bangkok or sitting at home and watching popular Thai soap operas, you will be inundated by advertisements and images of modernity, particularly if you find yourself walking around any of the downtown shopping areas of Siam Square, Siam Paragon, the Emporium, and Central World

to name a few. In terms of advertisements, there is one common attribute, modernity. An image of modernity for Thai society is presented through billboards, commercials, magazine advertisements, and other forms of visual tools. Zhang's and Shavitt's (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003) analysis of Chinese print and television advertising presents a good comparative replacement for an analysis of Thai advertising.

It is not that the two cultures are homogenous at all, but the finding's in Zhang's and Shavitt's article are exactly what can be seen on a daily bases while walking around Bangkok or turning on an evening soap opera. Both Thai and Chinese advertisements are full of young, affluent, light skinned, modern people that represent the notion of being new or revolutionary, contemporary, up-to-date, or ahead of the times (Zhang and Shavitt, 2003:28). In that sense, advertising relates modernity with consumption.

The same phenomenon can be seen in Thai soap operas. Amporn Jirattikorn illustrates the powerful image of modernity within Thai soap operas. She illustrates how Shan ethnic minorities in Myanmar "were fascinated primarily by the beauty of Thai actors and actresses, in particular the look of Thai actresses; they say that Thai actresses' style is very modern. Besides, the images of Thailand which appear in the Thai soaps are very glossy, glamorously modern" (Jirattikorn, 2008:47).

The mass media blitz of modernity affects the rural poor in Thailand as well. Thai villagers, especially the youth, complain that village life is boring. "There is nothing to do in a village; the excitement is in the city." (Lefferts, 2004: 131) The images they see on advertisements on television and in magazines are a world away from their reality. The image of modernity is also impacting the Sangha. According to Phra Maha Wutthichai Wachiramethee, the number of men becoming monks has plummeted from five million a few years ago to just 1.5 million.

The concept of modernity is consumed daily throughout Thailand and particularly in Bangkok by the urban population. Modernity in Thailand is not only understandable through the analysis of consumption, advertisements and popular culture, but also through an analysis of Thai state policies.

The Thai government modernization projects for the assimilation of ethnic minorities through homogenization highlights the Thai state's hegemonic deployment of modernity. The Thai state had been creating a national identity project, and thus an "Other", for minorities for over fifty years. Nationalism was and still is part of that national identity project.

Nationalism is a form of memory and is a natural barrier to outsiders. It is deeply rooted identity through an imagined notion of shared traits ethnicity, culture, language and territory. This type of identity sees sameness even in the midst of the most radical changes, political or other, induced by the passage of time (Booth, 1999:251). The hegemonic memory of nationalism presents a homogenous national identity throughout time. That is absolutely true for the majority of the Thai nation-state. That memory constructs barriers to admission to that identity and is exclusionary. Nationalism helps to construct the "Other" and

since many of the ethnic minorities were outside of the Thai state's governance up through the middle of the 20th century they never really constructed a shared memory of engrained "Thainess" or "Kwam Pen Thai" (ความเป็นไทย). The minorities were de facto "Others".

It is pertinent to define who I mean by ethnic minorities. For this paper I am referring to hill tribes (six main tribal groups, Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Mien, Akha and Lisu), sea gypsies, the Sakai, and the Mlabri. There are more minorities officially and unofficially recognized by the Thai state, but I have already made a broad enough definition.

For the most part, while nation building was ongoing in Thailand the Thai state defined modernity as capitalist production and exchange and the state's ability to control the regulation and taxation of the populace, and a desire for progress for the populace. That idea of progress has a foundation in the ideas of paternal leadership, or phokhun (พ่อขุน), development or phattana (พัฒนา). These concepts were entrenched into modern day Thai society under the Sarit Thannarat regime. Even though Sarit borrowed the idea from the famous Ramkamhang Inscription (Chaloemtiarana,1979:172), he utilized them incredibly well to legitimize his regime. Despite the massive 1973, 1976, and 1992 democratic up rises, those ideas continue to play a key role in Thai society.

After Sarit's death in 1963, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn took over, but did not continue with the phokhun image. However, the King did. King Bhumipol Adulyadej continued paying visits to the rural areas, speaking with villagers in person and initiated many development projects (Stengs, 2003:283). Many of those development projects were aimed at ethnic minorities. In present day, the two key elements of the image of the Sarit regime, phokhun and phatthana have remained predominant, but now entirely as part of the image off the King (Stengs, 2003:285).

The image of ethnic minorities that was promoted was one of as self-sufficient, filthy, savage, stupid, and as backwards, in other words, undeveloped. In 1955 the Thai government started a plan to promote the development of the hill tribes, but there was not much coordination and in fact a lot of unnecessary repetition. Six years later, in 1961, the First National Development Plan, 1961-1966, was implemented. It was followed by the Second National Development Plan (1967-1971), The Sixth National Development Plan (1987-1991), and the Seventh National Development Plan, "the master plan" (1992-1996).

The master plan tried to promote the feeling of citizenship among the hill tribe communities, eradicate opium production and use, and to promote economic and social development with an emphasis on the reduction of population growth and raising standards of living", (Kesmanee, 1993:22). Somnuk Benchawithayatham, from the Project for Support of Hilltribe Development Network, has given a grass root assessment of the government policies. "The master plan is based on the same unchanged government perception of the hill tribes as an undignified group of slaves. So the plan is useless. No

difference to those used 30 years ago." (Kesmanee, 1993:25)

That seems to explain why for the most part, the Thai state has seen ethnic minorities as problematic for the Thai state. The former secretary general of the National Security Council (NSC), Suwit Suthanukul, described ethnic minorities as causing the following problems: population growth, infiltration of national security, less control over trade, ethnic loyalties, deforestation, opium growing, drug trafficking, conflicts with neighboring countries, and others (Kesmanee, 1993:17).

The ethnic minorities are seen as modernity's opposites. Up until the 1980s the government was pushing the idea of backwardness of the ethnic minorities. To expedite national progress the Thai state saw that it was necessary to make the ethnic minorities more "Thai". The development was more for assimilation and the integration of the hill tribes into Thai society than raising the standards of living. That changed in the 1990's. The ethnic minorities' cultures became more accepted by the Thai state and Thai populace. They were shown more on television and in museums, with an emphasis on their dress and rituals. While the growing recognition of their identities was a welcome change, it carried the implicit stigma of defining them as of another time and out of synch with contemporary life in the country (Jonsson, 2004:675), again as undeveloped and not modern.

More recognition does not mean that there was more government acceptance necessarily. It is very interesting that the establishment of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, on March 18th, 1960 (tourismthailand.org, 2009) corresponds with the implementation of the First National Development Plan (1961) for the ethnic minorities.

The promotion was to take advantage of their "otherness". That "otherness" is exploited through advertisements and other promotions. The tourism industry's exploitation of the minorities promotes and reproduces the identities of tourists. One may argue that the minorities are financially benefiting, but at what expense? Thailand is growing and has been liberalizing its economy, but economic theory suggests that some groups will be worse off and that group is undoubtedly the unskilled workers. (Stiglitz, 2006:68)

According to the Ministry of Interior's June 2000 regulation handbook, there are about one million hill tribe and minority people in Thailand, of which nearly half have already obtained Thai nationality. That leaves around 500,000 "illegal" residents or those with minority status. Up until very recently, that illegal status did not allow most of them to receive an official certificate after finishing school (Lertcharoenchok, 2001:1), thus depriving them a chance to get a higher education or choices of employment outside of their registered area. Without a documented education the ethnic minorities are stuck and unable to travel freely around Thailand. Again, economic theory suggests that some groups will be worse off and without any documented education; it will surely be the ethnic minorities.

In fact, the system of illegal immigrant labor registration and minority status registration prevents the free movement of labor (Pongsawat, 2008:9). The Thai state fixes those that have minority status in certain spaces and they are not allowed to move freely away from the province that they register in as a minority without permission from high authorities (Pongsawat, 2008:9). According to UNESCO, that makes them more likely to be trafficked and more easily exploited. This situation was articulated by an ethnic Karen boy named Boon, who said, "To apply for higher education, I need an official school certificate," "But my local school refused to issue it, reasoning that I'm not Thai. I was born here and I feel Thai. But I can't study, I can't leave my town and I can't work outside the province although there are no job opportunities here." (statelessperson.com: 2009). Many of the ethnic minorities have nowhere to turn except the tourism industry.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand touts the "primitive" and picturesque hill tribes to attract tourists(Kesmanee, 1993:33). The website itself specifically promotes "the presence of hill tribes and their wealth of unique cultures". Among them are in Chiang Rai as a "home to several hill tribes who maintain fascinating lifestyles" or you can go hill tribe trekking in Mae Hong Song. Yet, the Thai state refuses to give full benefits of Thai citizenship to many of the hill tribes.

Domestic and foreign tourists flock to visit the 'backward" ethnic minorities. The hill tribes are seen as exotic. "All the strangers held their breath as the moment of death arrived. Some turned their backs, but most had their camera ready to record every move." "The pig started urinating and excreting in fear, clearly knowing the end was very near. The tourists kept taking pictures." (Thitawat, December 6, 1990: **Bangkok Post**). These quotes, which describe tourists viewing the traditional slaughtering of a pig by the Mlabri people, really catch the idea of the minorities appearing "exotic".

The TAT website specifically promotes Ban Hmong Mae Sa Mai as a Hmong village that "has preserved their *simple* but splendid traditions and lifestyles." (tourismthailand.org: 2009) It even gives specific directions to the village. "The village can be reached by taking a left turn at Km.12 and proceeding for 7 kilometers. Only four-wheel vehicles in good condition can make the trip. Along the route, you can visit resorts which are open to visitors, including Mae Sa Valley Resort, which offers a 9-hole golf course. A *simple* Hmong village and a 9-hole golf course, that is "modernity".

Minorities in Thailand are fixed to certain spaces. They are not allowed to move freely away from the province that they registered in as a minority (Pongsawat, 2008:9). The Thai state regulates the crops they can grow, thus limiting their agricultural options. The state also regulates where they can live, leaving the ethnic minorities with a lack of opportunities outside of the tourism industry. The lack of documented education compounds the problem. Outside of their unskilled labor, the ethnic minorities' lifestyles and cultures are in essence the only things they have to sell. In their designated spaces of exploitation, ethnic minorities in Thailand experience modernity through the interaction with tourists.

Earlier I described how consumption symbolized modernity for urban Thailand. Once you discuss consumerism you must identify it with capitalism. Understanding modernity through consumption helps to understand the space of interaction that is created. It creates a binary between the seller and consumer of modernity. The preference given to growth in the economy after U.S. foreign aid slammed into Thailand during the Cold War, which helped to create a like-minded international business and governmental elite (Glassman, 1999:675), has changed the Thai state's project of homogenizing minorities into Thais.

The boom years changed Thailand into a "glocalized" version of the U.S. and one of Thailand's most stable and profitable industries was and is tourism. In 1991, about the time ethnic minorities were being promoted more on television, tourism brought in over 100 billion Baht (Thitawat, December 6, 1990: **Bangkok Post**). Today the service industry makes up 44.1% (cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook: 2009) of Thailand's GDP and a great deal of that comes from tourism.

The portion that comes from the exploitation of ethnic minorities comes from both foreign and Thai tourists. The foreign tourists' point of view for unwillingly or willingly exploiting the ethnic minorities is somewhat understandable since they were encouraged by the Tourism Authority of Thailand and typically know little, if anything, about Thailand in depth. But, since Thai tourists also exploit the ethnic minorities' "otherness", there must be an explanation outside of just the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

The reasons correspond with consumerism and the "otherness" of the ethnic minorities. That consumption of modernity is in essence the consumption of cosmopolitanism since both modernity and cosmopolitanism have the same roots in the hegemonic narrative of the West. Societies, like Thailand, that are practicing consumerism are becoming saturated with information-laden signs and symbols. Those signs and symbols help to construct identity (Reynolds and Alferoff, 1999: 241-246). According to Baudrillard, the consumption of objects can distinguish any individual from others (Baudrillard, 1998: 14, 23). By traveling, a form of consumption, to the "exotic" non-modern spaces of interaction and taking pictures, tourists can reemphasize their understanding of themselves as modern in relation with the ethnic minorities.

Since the interaction time in the transnational or transcultural space is occupied by consumption practices (e.g traveling, trekking, photography and buying souvenirs), it entrenches customers or travelers, into a modern lifestyle in which consumption is easily transformed into pleasure and vice-versa (Appadurai, 1996:79-83). Fyfe and Law have argued that visual depictions can construct and depict social difference (Fyfe and Law, 1988:1). The pictures that are taken help to distinguish the individual from the rest of the consumerist population.

Thai Tourists at a Hmong Village (หมู่บ้านชาวเขา เผ่าม้งดอยปุย) wearing Hmong dress

(travel.sanook.com/gallery/galleryws/664141/1151894/: accessed on January 11th, 2013)

The consumption of "exotic" interactions can further embed social and symbolic understandings of modernity. The consumption oriented self is defined through the outside world and its material and symbolic resources (Besnier, 2004:34).

So tourists, both Thai and foreign, travel to these isolated spaces that are regulated by the Thai state in order to promote and define their own individuality, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. The pictures that are often taken or impractical trinkets that are purchased are only to fill up the "cabinet of curiosities" and reminder of the strangeness of the "other" and the superiority of their own societies (Andaya, 1997:395).

Lisu woman selling trinkets to tourists in Northern Thailand

In this milieu the pull of the ethnic minority for the tourist would be the desire to feel more modern. It is important to remember that the transnational space of interaction composites a flow of exchange of experiences not only for the tourist, but for the "other" as well. The ethnic minorities are also affected by the consumption of their cultures. When asked what their understanding of modernity was the Mien hill tribe responded most of the time as "progress" (Jonsson, 2004:680), which surely reflects their Thai education which emphasizes paternal leadership, development, progress, and unity. So while the tourists pursue individualism and the feeling of being modern by interacting with "backward" "unmodern" ethnic minorities, the minorities are interacting with outsiders in exchange for what they see as "progress".

This is reflected by the idea of modernity coming from the interactions with the urban Thais and foreign tourists and even more visibly from the Thai state in terms of infrastructure, healthcare, markets, and schools. The Thai ideology of "development" or "progress" is inserted everyday by schools, media, and advertisements.

Conclusion

This article aimed to gain a better understanding of modernity and how it affects the identities of tourists and ethnic minorities in Thailand. The concept of modernity in Thailand can be understood by looking at the consumption of experiences and the concept has further entrenched the "otherness" of ethnic minorities by placing them in a bi-furcation rubric. The bi-furcation rubric has permitted the "Thai" population and foreign tourists to promote their own individuality, modernity, and cosmopolitanism through tourism. It has also allowed the Thai state to exploit ethnic minorities for economic gain and well-being.

The exploitation is not a policy, but justifications for the exploitation can be understood by understanding the process of the "Other" and consumerism. The regulation of certain spaces by the Thai state produces the space of interaction of the exploitation and identity reinforcement, which does not adequately benefit the ethnic minorities. Over the last fifty years, the Thai state has successfully brought many of the ethnic minorities, which are entangled in its sovereignty, into the global economy. It is not that the previous state projects of homogenizing the ethnic minorities failed, but rather that the state realized that by promoting the "otherness" or "exoticness" of the ethnic minorities, Thailand's tourism industry could be promoted further and could flourish. Today, tourists continue to reaffirm their identities by pursuing individualism vis a vis interactions with ethnic minorities and to gain the feeling of being "modern" and "cosmopolitan".

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