Gloss and Dirt: Bangkok Advertising Production, Labor and Value

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A dissertation presented by

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to

the Department of Anthropology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Social Anthropology

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

September, 2019

Dissertation Advisor: Michael Herzfeld Bronwyn Isaacs

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines new intersections of state power, commercial production and aesthetic trends of popular image making in Thailand. Drawing on over twenty months of ethnographic field research between 2014-2017 with advertising producers, video editors, actors, artists, and media executives, my project explores the politics of the production of video commercials in a time of increased surveillance and censorship. My dissertation offers a timely anthropological contribution to the study of images, labor, and value by providing insights on new market configurations and political contestation within global media industries. During the period of my research, the conservative political, visual, and narrative messages in Thai advertising became increasingly similar to official military media and propaganda, revealing overlapping class and social hierarchies between market and political spheres. My research also reveals an attempt by existing political and social elites to use the power of visual imagery to reassert existing power inequalities and to silence dissent and deter democratic activity. I offer insight as to how the seemingly meaningless media of the twenty-first century does not occupy an uncontrolled, ungoverned space, but rather a diversity of overlapping spaces that distribute images, sound and information according to highly influential hierarchies of power, influence, and control.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation sails into the harbor of submission by virtue of the presence of many wonderful people who made these past years rich in knowledge, adventure and friendship.

Michael Herzfeld combines anthropological adventure and activism in the best possible sense. He is an advisor who never fails with his wit, intelligence and support yet continually surprises with his generosity. Thanks cannot do justice to what I owe him for first replying to my emails as a young undergraduate from far-flung Sydney, sustaining contact over many years, and then welcoming me as his student at Harvard. Since then he has unflinchingly coached me through gnarly theoretical, ethnographic and writing travails to see me here at last. I will always treasure our whispered theoretical and political gossiping on the streets of Bangkok under the hum of chugging traffic, clinking beer glasses and sizzling spicy peppers.

Ajantha Subramanian has been an invaluable gift to my graduate career from the very first year of my PhD. She stands as a force of inspiration to all who know her, generates solidarity among the graduate students and like a gardener, brings forth buds of theoretical insight from all her students. I am especially thankful for the time she has taken to read my writing with so much thoroughness and thought. Mary Steedly was in so many ways a muse and a guide. Her teaching on images, media, film making and writing have made their mark deeply within this dissertation. It is a great sadness to thank her here and not in person after loosing her too soon. Ieva Jusionyte

has been an especially fearless and generous soul in taking me on as her student so late in the dissertation process.

Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Steve Caton, Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, Nicholas Harkness, Sohini Kar and Arthur Kleinman all taught transformative material during my graduate career at Harvard. Enough thanks cannot be given to my wonderful cohort of fellow graduate students in Anthropology. Vivien Chung, Darja Djordjevic, Max Durayappah-Harrison, John Heintz, Ekin Kurtic Wirun Limsawat and Meghan Roguschka. This community of scholars created an intellectual and social home that grounded me with deep roots despite being so far from the places I still call home.

Not to be forgotten too, are the wonderful academics who gave me a thirst for research and then released me to pursue new journeys far afield. Thanks must go to Bill Pritchard, Gillian Cowlishaw, Allen Abramson, Cathey Banwell, Gillian Hall and although he is sadly no longer with us, David Burch. Very special thanks go to Jane Dixon. Without her intellectual generosity and vivacious investment in me as a young scholar, I probably would never attempted a PhD. The anthropology departments at the University of Sydney and University College London furnished me with a vigorous addiction to anthropology.

This research was made possible by generous grant support. My sincere thanks to the Royal Anthropological Institute Emslie Horinman Anthropological Scholarship Fund and Harvard Asia Center for placing me in the field. Grants from the Cora Du Bois Fellowship for Advanced Degree Candidates in Anthropology, the Harvey Fellows Award (Mustard Seed Foundation) and Harvard University Dissertation Completion Fellowship supported me in during the writing

process. For their generous academic mentoring and support during the writing period in Egypt (a turbulent time of which a whole book could be written), I express deep thanks to Naomi Haynes and Helen Rizzo.

The anthropology and sociology department at Thammasat University gave me a gracious and kind welcome throughout my time in Bangkok. Particular thanks must go to Boonlert Wisetpricha, Panarai Ostapirat, Ratana Tosakul, Yukti Mukdavijit, Saipin Suputtamongkol, Nalinee Tantuvanit and the Masters of Anthropology and Sociology students who were so patient, encouraging and inspirational during my visits at Thammasat. Very special thanks must to go to Kevin Laddapong who was the most competent, intelligent and fun of research assistants. I always looked forward to the days I would have the chance to work with Kevin. At Chulalongkorn University, I give deep thanks to Apiwat Ratanawaraha and Villa Vilaithong and at Silpakorn University, Thanavi, Chotpradit. At I was very fortunate to overlap in my research in Bangkok with other PhD students. To Trude Renwick, Hayden Shelby and Rebecca Farber I owe particular thanks for their fortitude and friendship.

The informants and production teams that I worked with in Bangkok are referred to by pseudonyms. I deeply thank these talented, patient and amazing people for all of their kindness towards me. From those people not directly related to my research but important to my scholarship in Bangkok, I take the opportunity to thank David Armstrong, Voranicha Duangbunchuai, Amika Viriya, Wathubee Anantasabkit, Nunteema Buchaboon, Fuadi Pitsuwan, Kerry Hammond, Jasmine Chia, Claudio Sopranzetti, Tyrell Haberkorn and the Hood family.

In terms of learning Thai language, so many teachers in Thailand, Australia, the UK and the US have patiently helped me bend and stretch my flat Aussie vowels into Thai tones. Particular thanks goes to Wipa Khampook from the Thai language program at Harvard for her friendly and effective teaching. Many friends at Harvard read dissertation chapters, became writing companions or introduced me to new intellectual conversations. Thank you Dena Fehrenbacher, Janet Zong York, Micah Wittmer, Hannah Eagleson, Veronika Kusumaryati, Namita Dharia, Reza Idria, Dilan Yildirim, Rachel Thompson, Michelle Choi, Andrew Ong, Aylin Brigitte, Zoe Antoinette Eddy, Nakai Flotte and Damina Khaira. Marianne Fritz and Cris Paul were invaluable resources of action, wisdom and magic at every stage of the PhD and dissertation journey. Other people who I am thank for reading and providing feedback on my dissertation include Matthew Voigts, Kimberly Banks and Catharine Lumby.

With a heart full of love and gratitude I thank those people who most encouraged me, believed in me and celebrated with me the joys and lows of my PhD career. The love, service and encouragement of my parents, Hugh and Rosemary, helped to make even the most difficult parts of my PhD journey a joy. Adam has been my greatest fan, strongest supporter, and my funniest critic. Thank you for turning my life upside-down and helping me grow in all my endeavors.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND PSEUDONYMS

Unless otherwise mentioned I use the phonemic transcription system found at Thai-Language.com which favors an East Coast USA English accent in its transcription.

Names of individuals and productions teams have been changed to protect the privacy of people in my study.

INTRODUCTION

November 2014: Student protestors are arrested in Bangkok for using a three-fingered salute at the screening of the popular *Hunger Games* movie franchise.

Figure 1. Student protestors are arrested in Bangkok. Photo Source: *New York Times 2014*.

October 2015: Thai film director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, declines to screen his critically acclaimed film *Cemetery of Splendor* in Thailand in response to required censorship cuts from the Thai censorship board.

Figure 2. Still from “Cemetery of Splendor," directed by Apichatpong Weersathakul.

March 2016: Theerawan Charoensuk, from northern Thailand, is required to report to the military court for posting a photo on Facebook. In the photo, she smiles next to a red bowl with a New Year message provided by ex-prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

Figure 3. Facebook photo of Theerawan Charoensuk smiling next to a red bowl. Photo Source: Human Rights Watch 2016.

October 2016: Following King Bhumibol's death, the military government bans all public advertising (e.g., TV, film, and billboard) for a period of one month.

Figure 4. Advertising billboards replaced with eulogies in Bangkok. October and November 2016. Photo by author.

The above examples of image control in Thailand refer to things deemed too dangerous to see: photos that should not be circulated, videos considered too corrupt to watch, and postures too portentous to be performed. Why are these images considered so powerful? The above examples do not contain violent imagery. They do not witness government brutality. They include smiling Facebook posts and glossy video commercials. Why then do political actors censor them?

Not only in Thailand, but across the globe, every day, seemingly banal popular public images are counted as powerful in the way they are created, controlled, and circulated. Capital and investment in the creation and censorship of popular images is often overlooked owing to the industry's reputation as frivolous, viral, and shallow. As an industry that provides a strategic communication channel for corporations, political groups and religious bodies, advertising in particular demands attention. In 2018, US$543.7 billion was spent on advertising globally (Statista 2019), and as a result of these investments, advertising is a vibrant fixture on screens, streets, and clothing in daily life almost everywhere. North America is the largest advertising market, claiming 37% of global market share, and the Asia Pacific is not far behind, claiming 33% of such market share (eMarketer 2018).

Beyond monetary investment, creativity, physical labor, and other more intangible resources are devoted to making and moving images that coax the heart, hook the wallet, and nurture consumer loyalty. In this dissertation, I draw on my experience shadowing and working with advertising image makers in Bangkok, Thailand. By investigating the social and political tensions arising from the work of making advertising images in Bangkok, I find that it is possible to see networks, practices, and ideologies that operate behind the scenes across a variety of Thai industries and institutions. In my research, I locate social hierarchies and aesthetic trends feeding

on Thai conservative political narratives and, in turn, circulating those conservative narratives in the production and circulation of images.

In my dissertation, I focus on video advertising, one particular form of image-making and distribution in Bangkok. As I discovered in my research, understanding the production and power of advertising in Thailand necessitates an understanding of other, overlapping forms of image creation, including film and television production, Instagram and photography, digital stickers, news production, and public signage. Nevertheless, video advertising offers a useful focus for my work as it is an opportunity to investigate overlaps operating in economic and political spheres that may be mistakenly thought of as distinct. In terms of aesthetics, the study of advertising also offers a very particular genre for analysis - one that uses fast cuts, idealized images, and short narratives in order to communicate messages that are intended to be received as un-ambiguous. The actual ambiguity of their messaging and its dissonance with its production processes is however the rich, dirty soil in which my research digs and takes root. Capitalistic markets thrive on confusion and false representation about the conditions of production. Although the advertising industry only offers intangible commodities for sale, it is a prime example of an industry that thrives on capitalistic social and political structures – including those that obfuscate information about its production.

Very rarely do the stories of the people who hold the cameras, who train the actors, and who scout the set locations for video advertisements make it past their own busy production communities. Representations of the advertising industry in movies and pop culture typically suggest that the heart of advertising, its creativity, genius, and power reside in sculptured offices where trendy executives swan about dressed in fashionable outfits, convincing clients with their rhetoric and brilliant ideas. In the everyday reality of production processes, however, the creative

responsibilities of advertising agencies typically cease once they have designed a marketing strategy. The responsibility for taking those strategies and making them into materially attractive videos is often out-sourced to small production companies whose responsibilities are far more practical and who operate in a very different social and professional sphere to their contacts in advertising agencies. The lack of literature and knowledge of video production work is identified as a conceptual and theoretical challenge by scholars of anthropology, culture studies, and film (Caldwell 2008: Mayer 2011; Curtin & Sanson 2016).

The Streets of Bangkok: Behind Advertising's Glossy Screens

Apartment and office buildings arise, die and fall in Bangkok with steady rapidity. In a flurry of activity that resembles a hot cicada season, new buildings burst forth into the humid sky encased in a scaffolding of shell and dust. Straining for ambitious heights with noise and color, they briefly amaze those near them. But like cicadas, Bangkok buildings quickly die, leaving behind only the shells. For decades, Bangkok's urban landscape has been fueled by speculative investment and a fear of ghosts in old buildings. The ground ripples with shiny construction projects, shedding their scaffolding next to the tarp and timber tents of temporary Cambodian construction workers. The buildings remain new for eight, 10, and occasionally 24 months. Then, those buildings begin to die, losing their color to the pollution of the Bangkok air. Something once stylish begins to look dated, and attention begins to turn elsewhere. Entire apartment buildings are completely abandoned, their skeletal frames haunting the Bangkok skyline for years, awaiting a new risky venture.

On the city's ever-expanding petticoats, by smoothly paved roads lay freshly painted homes lacing the streets of pretty housing projects. Some of the video advertisements that entice both middle and working class Bangkokians to aspire to these homes depict people not so much

in community as quietly, peacefully apart. The teenaged son is on his computer, the daughter plays downstairs, mum is relaxed in the living room, and dad is with the car. There are other ads that suggest these families will eventually congregate, smiling at each other on the couch, but all ads share a uniform aesthetic: white walls, bright light, and space. A modern division of clean, private living. In these ads, there are no homes that double as a shop house or restaurant; there is no outdoor street market where vendors protect their wares with the help of heavy umbrellas.

Figure 5: Example of a small production house in Bangkok. 2017. Photo by author.

Behind the scenes of those video ads, the people who create them are rarely found within them. Instead, they prefer to work out of some of the city's remaining old homes. Styling celebrities, pushing fashion, and dreaming of dollars, many of Bangkok's production house are small teams located in the hidden pockets of unplanned urban space, in the nooks of small streets behind apartments, small trading houses, and open-air restaurants. Not located in modern offices or equipment warehouses, production houses are in two-story, squat homes fringed by short driveways and dark-leafed trees. Near driveways are house shrines trimmed in gold, and inside old ACs chug cool relief to young interns packed onto single benches. The house kitchens are kept intact, providing a place for team members to congregate, share food, and cook for clients. For the days that roll into long games of patience with no time to go home, there are couches where tired bodies can steal a short nap. Sometimes, these production homes have a few touches of the "adman" aesthetic - a rug that looks like grass or a wall painted in cartoon graffiti. But overall, the production homes remain sparse. Open living areas allow, or require, people to always be together, sharing almost every part of life with their team.

My first experience visiting a production house was sitting squished on the intern bench for a few months in 2014. I arrived in Bangkok that year, five days after the military coup had transformed the city. My first few evenings were spent at my apartment window, staring quietly over concrete apartments during the evening curfew, and my days were made up of missed buses and confused taxis, trying to find my way around the unplanned streets of Lad Prao in North-East Bangkok. Lad Prao, once an area of farms and sparsely dotted houses, in the 1990s became the site of opportunistic residential and commercial development. Apartments, homes, and businesses crept in around unfinished roads and unplanned suburbs. The result was some of the worst traffic blockages of Bangkok, a city already world famous for its peak-hour traffic. Over

the past twenty years, many small production companies with small start-up budgets turned to this increasing urbanizing space, found old buildings, and transformed them into work spaces. While the global advertising firms, such as Oligavy & Mather, JWT, and Y&R were located in the symbolic, prestigious parts in central Bangkok, it was at the periphery of the city that small teams of directors, cameramen, casting agents, and costume assistants would band together to hustle work. Many of these small endeavors would fail. Those that did thrive did so because of two key ingredients: their contacts and their reputation.

I began my internship at a medium-sized production company located in an old, quiet house hidden in the back of *Lad Prao*. The first time I saw the office, a simple collection of rooms in an old home surrounded by a tall white fence, a canopy of squirrels jumping in shady trees, I was surprised by its simplicity. The casting room needed a paint job. There were never quite enough chairs. In what felt like the elbow of the room, an L shaped corner, there was a wooden table with two benches, and here I sat alongside eight other interns. Behind us sat six people in close proximity - a casting director and assistant, wardrobe manager and assistant, a production manager, and an art director. Each day we were not required on set, we would sit like this, elbow to elbow, hour after hour. As interns we had the special responsibility of being given the least amount of work. Thus, we would sit for hours, sometimes for days, with nothing to do. Long hours were marked perfecting the application of eyeliner or playing shooting games on mobile phones. We looked frivolous, but from our corner we were also observing whatever real work we could. The art director sat less than a meter away. A patient audience, we would watch for hours while she sought a photo of the perfect red dress. In our patience and stealth, we shared something with interns and apprentices in other times and places who were also made to feel their position at the bottom of the work hierarchy by their lack of responsibility or direct

involvement in the creative process (McNaughton 1988; MacKenzie 1991; Herzfeld 2004; Simpson 2006; Marchand 2008).

The quiet and slow days felt especially strange because the military faction led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha (henceforth, General Prayut) had recently taken power, ending months of street protests and forming the "National Council for Peace and Order" (NCPO) as an interim government. This momentous event was rarely discussed or referred to. National news did not seem to enter that shady, tucked-away house. Indeed, almost nothing from the outside world appeared to be able to make it past our old stone fence. The pieces of information that we received, discussed, and distributed were almost solely related to advertising and popular culture. Several interns would browse YouTube looking for stylistic inspiration. Hours were spent learning how to pronounce the English lyrics to Katy Perry's song, "Birthday." Everything we saw was an image, a two-minute montage, or a text message of a few lines. News reels, stories longer than five minutes, even movies – these did not enter the production sanctuary.

The production house that I had become attached to had twelve people - an unusually large team in Bangkok. During my time as an intern, I was intimidated by the team members – that is, the paid employees. This was as it should be. Interns were constantly reminded that they were at the bottom of the hierarchy. For example, we always had to arrive to work half an hour before the team. When we arrived, we would simply, silently put our tired heads on the desk, because, of course, we would have no work. We could not eat unless others had started to eat. We were restricted in what we were allowed to wear. Some of the intern girls wanted to wear shorts, or sleeveless shirts, but were told that only team members could dress in such a way. The interns were told that to dress in this way would be too sexy and inappropriate for their status. We were treated like children and had to dress like children in order to help us to remember our

place. During those long days, I also noticed that the company's producer, who, as was frequently the case, was also the boss, was quick to chide not only the interns but also female and transgender team members he thought were displaying the wrong energy or attitude. From my perspective near the bottom of the team hierarchy, I saw that team meetings were dominated by a small group of men. This group of producers, directors, editors, and cameramen would sit in the middle of the room while the rest of us fanned out around them. Women rarely, and junior interns never, spoke.

During this time, I felt skeptical of the way that production team members spoke of each other as family. Each day found me internally seething about the hierarchy that had placed us in creative straightjackets. Surely, in this place, where those at the top ruled over the others, no familial feelings could exist? Over time, however, I noticed things that challenged my expectations. Tired team members would lean on each other, falling asleep on one another's shoulders. They would get excited about food excursions and pile into cars for little adventures together. Groups of guys would play video games and guitar with each other late into the night. By 6:00 or 7:00 pm, I was usually sent home. People would look me and say, "You're not Thai and you're tired" and with soaring relief, I would climb onto my blue bicycle and fly to my apartment or to the bustling local markets, allowing the rules and hierarchy to fall far away. When I returned the next morning, however, I would be shocked to hear that the team members had stayed late - 11:00 pm or midnight. Some of them had been working, but others were simply playing, eating, and chatting. Later, I began to hear about team members going on holidays together: a few days at the beach or a special trip to Japan. I began to see that many of the team members preferred the company of their colleagues to their family or other friends.

When I returned to spend a longer fieldwork period with production teams in January 2016, I would learn more about what this family experience was like. At that time, I came across the old production team I had interned with two years earlier by accident. I had travelled to an area on the Eastern side of Bangkok called *Town in Town,* or in Thai accent "Thau in Thau." I was interviewing a contact at a rising Thai digital advertising company and had an opportunity to walk around the expanding commercial area that I had heard about. In Town in Town, there were some modern town-house companies. Other companies' buildings looked like 1980s beach homes strangely air-lifted to the concrete wilderness of East Bangkok. Still, other buildings were old houses filled with years of dilapidating rubbish. Town in Town- this collection of new production buildings, dated sound studios, ramshackle outdoor restaurants, and street stalls – soon became one of the main sites of my research. I would spend many days and several long nights at the production houses, editing studios, and sound companies that had congregated in this part of Eastern Bangkok.

Among this collection of new, old, and very old buildings, were a large collection of outdoor restaurants. Unstable wooden tables were protected from rainy days by large sheets of thick plastic advertising. Makeshift tablecloths covered with slogans of Pepsi and Mountain Dew had been stapled to the tables and pierced with cigarette holes. On the day I found a table in the middle of the huddle of outdoor restaurants, the logos on the plastic tablecloths were half faded under the repeated burns of sunshine and hot plates. I ordered some fried chicken, sticky rice, and a plate of spicy papaya salad from one of the set-ups of elderly couples manning chopping knives, sizzling woks, and iceboxes brimming with sliced meat and leafy vegetables. When my plate of chicken arrived, a few old dogs walked up, hoping their mournful faces might provoke me to give up anything worth eating. Gnawing the chicken bones in front of the envious canines,

I tasted afresh the cheap, minimalist, yet high quality resources that funded daily production work in Bangkok.

After lunch, I took the time to explore the neighborhood. At the very end of the few old homes, overgrown scarp heaps and atop a thin, smelly canal perched a large, modern, five story building with clean, tinted glass walls, modern furniture, and a museum-style aesthetic. Curious, I peered past the wide balcony and green, hanging plants into the ground floor of the office. Inside, I saw a room made up of dark concrete, thick, wooden steps, and ornamental, human-sized decorative statues of pastel colored rabbits. A few meters past the large foyer, behind a long, thin room of glass, were two women working at black metal desks. With a double take, I recognized the women as the accountant and secretary who had worked at the same production company that I had interned with in 2014.

When I walked into the office, the women looked up with big smiles and called out "Bon!" The women then stood up and ducked their heads into nearby rooms, calling over the company's boss and some of the old workers I knew. The team was excited to see that I had returned to Bangkok for my research, and the boss suggested I visit and do my research alongside them. I found their warmth surprising, but it appeared I had transitioned from a junior intern to an old friend. I returned as a useful team member, I was now more than an intern, I was someone trusted and familiar with the production process. After accepting their invitation to join them occasionally during my research, I found myself helping this company and others as an acting coach, in casting, as an "extra" on screen, with translation, and with various other tasks, especially when working with international clients who spoke English.

On that first day of my return to the modern new office building, I had marveled aloud, telling my old colleagues I was impressed with their new work space. I was surprised when I

received small, half-smiles in reply. The production manager, a woman in her early 30s, looked to the side, then whispered to me that she and her colleagues didn't like the new office. When I asked why, she replied, "It doesn't feel like home." For this team, the company owner had decided to trade the sense of home and family-like comfort that came from their old, home-style office for a building that had space for an expanding number of employees, higher production output, and that expressed style. When clients came to visit for meetings with the production crew, frequently well-dressed members of the client team would pose for photographs. There were many parts of the office space styled with smooth grey walls, large windows, steel accents, and green plants, providing an ideal backdrop for photography. The ground floor had a staggered, stair entrance; the first floor was long with its meeting space, thin chairs, and empty elbow space; the third and fourth floor private work spaces featured eclectic cartoon statues, paintings of an islander woman with a cigar, a vintage portrait of King Bhumibol, and views down to the street below. Clients who arrived in long, flowing dresses, striped turtle necks, manicured beards, and chic black jackets would sometimes vocalize delight "Oh-ooh! *Tai ruup tai ruup* (Photo, photo!)," laughing and mocking their own eagerness to ask someone to take a photo of them in the light-filled, stylish office. It was an office designed with the goal of impressing clients, and not primarily the comfort of the production crew.

While I was relieved that my own status within the team had increased during my time away, the political situation had remained stagnant. The self-appointed Prime Minister, General Prayuth, and the NCPO had repeatedly found new reasons to delay the holding of elections. At the time, I returned in early 2016, General Prayut's military government had proposed significant changes to the national constitution, including a senate to be fully appointed by the military. Described as a safeguard against corruption, the changes were rejected by all major political

parties. Public criticism of the constitution was, however, deemed illegal, and General Prayuth claimed if the Thai public voted against the constitution it would only inevitably delay a national election being called at all[1]. Once again, politics or anything outside of our immediate world was rarely discussed while with the team. The team continued to speak of their co-workers as "family," but with time I began to see these relationships, while strong, were tense with bubbling fissures of frustration and difference of opinion. Such tensions included those members of the team who held political opinions that were not deemed appropriate to be vocalized while with the team. It seemed that appropriate conversation and behavior had to fit within a pattern that would attract wealthy and influential clients.

The New Ordering of Advertising Labor

The industry in which Bangkok production crews work is rapidly changing. In previous decades, large advertisers in many countries released only a few commercials each year. Following the advent of satellite TV and online media, however, there has recently been a strategic shift towards the quick development and release of frequent campaigns in order to attract consumer attention across proliferating channels and media platforms. The world's media markets are increasingly integrated into tighter global connectivity owing to the appetite for cheaper operating costs. Online advertising takes many forms, but in Thailand, as in many other parts of the world, one of the largest shares (33%) of online advertising spending is given to Facebook (THB 4 billion (USD 125.6 million) in 2017) and YouTube (17% and THB 2.1 billion (USD 68.6 million). In Thailand, spending on online advertising is rapidly rising (expected THB 14.9 billion (USD 486.5 million) in 2019) as is Out of Home Advertising which includes mediums such as billboards, ambient advertising, and point of sale displays (THB 11.7 billion

[1] The constitution was later approved in the referendum held in August 2016.

(USD 382 million) (Bangkok Post 2018). TV, however, retains the largest share of advertising investment with THB 50.2 billion (USD 1.57 billion) estimated to be spent on TV advertising during 2019.

While there is no doubt that online media have significantly altered the way that consumers consume and interact with advertising, even online, video advertising arguably remains the most effective medium to reach consumers, producing more "click throughs" than other forms of advertising. On Facebook, for example, video advertising is the medium most likely to engage a click-through response, producing a 9.3% success rate in Thailand during 2017 compared to, for example, photo posts at 4.6% (Statista 2018). The production crews I was working with and shadowing were making video advertisements for both TV and online platforms.

My research is inspired in part by ethnographic studies of advertising in other countries that demonstrate the effects of advertising far beyond providing consumer information (Miller 1998; Moeran 1996; Hernández-Reguant 2004; Kemper 2001; Foster 2007; Dávila 2008; Fedorenko 2014; Shankar 2015). These studies revealed the influence of the advertising industry in shaping political and market ideologies through the industry's pivotal position in connecting consumers to the world of goods and services. Several anthropologists have highlighted the mythological content of mainstream advertising, particularly the production of visual imagery that marries national exceptionalism with style and enthusiastic consumption (Moeran 1996; Kemper 2001; Graan 2013) Many of these social science-based investigations start from the premise that advertising is the prime vehicle for stitching together the two categories of the commodity that Marx called use value and exchange value. Mazzarella (2003, 20) perhaps said it most memorably; "what advertising and marketing professionals do is to attempt to manage the

fault line at the heart of the commodity form in such a way that profit will accrue first to them, and subsequently perhaps, to their corporate clients." That is, advertising processes take advantage of the dynamic malleability of the exchange value of commodities for the purpose of financial gain.

The changing dynamics of the advertising industry call for renewed critical attention to the social and political influence of the industry. The advertising world is more fluid than ever before. At the same time, it is also becoming more diverse in its employee makeup. At the corporate end of the market, consulting firms are encroaching on the traditional work of ad agencies, and the ad agencies themselves are merging with digital content creators in order to survive (Campaign Asia Pacific 2016). Brand management teams pay attention to the opinions of consumers at increasingly faster rates, following online trends and commentary though the use of computerized data collection and young employees trailing internet forums. Alongside these large streamlined service companies, there are thousands of new small production teams generating millions of video advertising products through cheaper and cheaper services. In locations such as Thailand, many of the small production crews are minimally resourced teams of only three to ten people, led by a boss or team leader who negotiates contracts with clients to cast, shoot, and edit high-quality commercials at low prices. Small production companies operating on small budgets have the ability to create fast, flexible advertising campaigns that once required three times their investment. These changes in the industry do not, I argue, represent a democratization of advertising and global markets. Rather, as I will show in this dissertation, drawing more workers into the industry has in some cases occurred alongside the loss of employment protections and a move towards leaner budgets and more grueling work conditions.

This reorientation of marketing strategies towards online advertising, mobile advertising, and other non-traditional forms of consumer engagement, has altered the way large and small corporate clients invest their marketing budgets. Whereas a large client might once have a few advertising campaigns a year, they now look to release new content every week and keep engaged with consumers through online and in-person engagement. With fewer funds available for each individual marketing project, many corporations have looked therefore to lower the costs of production, and Thailand's expanding, affordable production companies have proven capable of answering this demand. Thai production companies attract work from both Thai and international clients because they offer high quality production at lower costs. It is not unusual today for a video advertisement to be designed in New York, filmed in Greece and Thailand, edited in London, and have special effects rendered in Hong Kong. Technological advancements, including the ability to send digital video material remotely and cheaper editing equipment, have also made professional style video making more easily accessible to a broader international cohort of aspiring media makers. This has increased the opportunity for advertising and media companies to seek cheap labor in film and editing production in locations such as India, China, and Thailand. Thai production companies offer to Thai and international clients a popular, high-quality product made with cheap labor[2]. In terms of national audience, Thailand is only the eighth largest spender on advertising in the Asia-Pacific and second, behind Indonesia, in Southeast Asia (eMarketer 2018). For both Thai and international audiences, however, this statistic overlooks the significance of cheap production costs in Thailand, which support large volumes of advertising production on smaller budgets.

[2] Advertising production in Thailand is 25-30% cheaper than in the Philippines and Malaysia and Bangkok is home to 76% of all Thai advertising firms (Escolar 2008; Apiwat & Sarit 2010).

Over the past decade, the advertising industry has expanded in Thailand drawing a large, youthful labor force into its net. As I will further detail, international market media trends, including those toward cheap costs and fast production timelines, have buttressed the hierarchical structure of the processes of production in Thailand, intensifying political conservatism within the industry and the public images that it distributes. During 2014-2017, I spent time with advertising production companies and associated media professionals and workers in Bangkok. These years fell under a time of military rule, a time when image management and manipulation demonstrated the power of public images to serve conservative politics, censorship, propaganda, and the erasure of political rights and expression. Working alongside directors, casting agents, editors, camera assistants, and others making video advertisements, I sought opportunities to learn how the powerful international industry of advertising and marketing intersected with local political shifts in the making, censorship, and circulation of public images.

Research Methodology

The rapid speed of online circulation, including the movement of commodities, media, and connections online can mean that old research methods fail to keep up with the shape and influence of new forms of digital connection (Appadurai 1990). Digital research methods are thus useful for their ability to visualize connections between people and gather statistics. In my research, however, I continued to rely on the power of traditional ethnographic processes, being among people in the same physical space and time. This allowed me to focus on the role of social relationships in the midst of powerful digital changes to social life.

My research methods were primarily ethnographic but also included semi-structured interviews in addition to smaller projects focusing on archival and historical research. Historical

and archival research methods included obtaining industry magazines from the 1980s and 1990s and interviewing people who had worked in the industry for several decades. Originally, I had planned to order the ethnographic research and other research strategies sequentially. Owing to the long time that it took to expand contacts and research access across all levels of the advertising industry, however, it proved more advantageous to integrate the different kinds of research as opportunity arose.

I began establishing contacts in the Bangkok advertising production industry through Facebook, email, and LinkedIn in early 2014. At this time and in later years, several students and alumni among Harvard University's Thai community and some students and professors from Thammasat University's department of Sociology and Anthropology were especially helpful in successfully making initial contact with production companies. I was particularly thankful for this assistance as the people I wanted to meet were very difficult to contact. This was the case across the advertising industry in Thailand from local equipment services to the production companies that were the center of my research to the regional offices of international corporations. For example, through a combination of pursing contacts and persisting in visits and phone calls, I finally secured an interview with one particularly famous Thai production company after three years of occasional contact. Other companies would consider the possibility of a visit or interview during months of conversation over phone calls and emails before finally declining my request for a visit. While this guardedness called for greater patience than I would have liked, it was a useful reminder of the privilege the research entailed. The difficulty of access also helped me to appreciate the high premium placed on client confidentiality and relationships, the existence of small production companies operating outside of official taxation and censorship processes, and the extremely long work hours that many in people gave to their work.

Figure 6: A production team, camera and lighting team, equipment assistants and various others congregate around the advertising set. Wat Thai Ko Yai (approximately 55 km north of central Bangkok). March 2016. Photo by author.

My initial contacts lead to a short research trip in the middle of 2014 and my first internship in a Bangkok-based production company. Some of these original contacts became long-term sites of my research. On my first visits, it was always in an observer or trainee capacity, but as time progressed, I also took on more responsibility and became more useful to those production teams willing to have me around. These responsibilities included providing services as an acting coach, acting "extra," translator, writer, and assistant producer.

Between May 2016 and June 2017, Kevin Laddapong, a master's student in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Thammasat University, worked with me as an invaluable research assistant for approximately five hours a week. Kevin worked with me on several tasks, including reviewing local language books and unpublished theses at University

libraries in Bangkok, reviewing planning documents at the metropolitan office of planning, contacting potential interviewees, arranging for interviews, and in some cases attending interviews with me. When Kevin was able to attend interviews with me, I found his insights discussing the interview material, especially Thai language and slang I was not familiar with, extremely helpful. Kevin's thoughtful curiosity and passion for cross-cultural understanding made him the perfect confidant for unravelling linguistic and cultural questions.

Approximately half way through my research, King Bhumibol, the monarch of Thailand died. The King had reigned over Thailand for seventy years and his death was a historic moment that affected every sector of politics, business, and public life in Bangkok. The advertising industry advertising was placed under a one-month ban, and even after the ban advertising was restrained in its themes and content for some time. This historic interruption influenced both my research questions and methodology. Before the King's death, my experience of working with advertising production crews had opened my awareness to layers of political conformity and censorship under the military-led, post-democratic government operating within in the industry. Upon the King's death and during subsequent mourning period, I had learned more about the political tactics and social hierarchies that gave power to compulsory and voluntary censorship of the media. After the King Bhumibol's death, I deliberately pursued interviews with Thai media companies, advertising industry associations, and individuals working in different sectors of the Thai media industry who I hoped would help me better understand the informal and formal censorship processes at work. I also spent a few months working part time on a research project based in the area immediately around the palace where many public mourning activities took place. This side research strategy overlapped with my long-term research strategies, as

advertising production companies visited and filmed patriotic advertising videos at the mourning site.

Another challenge encountered during my research was the way in which my identity and status was interpreted by those around me. I learned that across all sectors of advertising, I was usually read as a foreign, educated, and "respectable" white woman. When conducting interviews with media or advertising companies, this identity was, to some extent, an asset. When conducting ethnographic observations with production teams, however, it led to many instances of shyness or distance. In advertising production, men older than myself, at the top of the social hierarchy of authority, seemed most comfortable with me, readily reading my social position towards them as *Nawng* (younger sibling) and subsequently often spoke with me confidently and openly as a teacher might treat a student. The titles of *Nawng* (younger sibling) and *Phi* (older sibling) are used across many work places in Thailand, as well as in temples, mosques, churches, educational institutions and in everyday public interactions. The term "Phi-Nawng" is used to address large groups, especially local and national publics by religious leaders and politicians. Using Phi-Nawng as a form of public address, where in English a politician might instead use "everyone" positions the audience within a powerful bind to the speaker. The address is at once both hierarchical and intimate, suggesting family relationships and the ranking of some people over others in one breath (Herzfeld 2017).

While there were notable exceptions, including those people who grew more comfortable with me over time, I found that women working in production and men younger than myself frequently read me as either intimidating, boring, or socially ambiguous. For example, one female art production manager in her mid-twenties, with whom I had a good relationship, sometimes jokingly referred to me using the description *sen. Sen* is a shortening of the phrase *sen*

luk which was slang for someone who is distant and lacks a sense of humour. I believe that my research sometimes suffered because many working in advertising production did not think of me and my work as stylish or fun. Like others doing ethnographic research among people who place a high premium on the expert styling of the body, I was often described as unsophisticated (Liebelt 2016). My lack of sophistication carried over to my frequently awkward linguistic choices. I would sometimes make mistakes in expressing myself and I had little knowledge of the Thai slang that was being spoken around me. I persisted moreover in referring to myself by the nickname *Bon,* which many people working in advertising production told me was too masculine and too common[3]. While these different readings of my status or position was frustrating and isolating at times, it did alert me to the strong hierarchy through which everyday social interactions in the industry were negotiated.

The Contours of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I offer an exploration of image production and distribution in Thailand, especially in regard to the making of commercial images within the advertising production industry. My analysis is built upon ethnographic research conducted in Bangkok, Thailand with advertising and video makers, editors, and distributors across twenty months between 2014 and 2017. Across much of Thailand, and most especially in the capital, Bangkok, images in the form of photographs, portraits, illustrations, digital stickers and videos populate physical and digital space, crowding available space on walls, windows, websites, clothing, vehicles, and sidewalks. My dissertation offers insight into the reason and power of these

[3] In Thailand, most people are referred to in everyday interactions by their nicknames. *Bon* was my preferred nickname but it was so distasteful to some of the people I shadowed and worked with, they asked to call me different names instead. These alternative names included *Brownie, Win* and my English nickname *Bron*. The only reference to my name in the following chapters is *Bon,* which was the name used to refer to me most often.

images. By exploring the images in terms of their social and political relationship to the people who make, share, wear, censor, and watch them, I argue we can take what appears meaningless, and, through social, economic, and political analysis, find conformity and control. The power of a beautiful image or film will always hold a strong mystique and a sense of beauty, perhaps unknowable. Many images that fill our world, however, hold to strong forms of genre, in their content and aesthetics – even if that genre and control is not immediately apparent. In order to understand this control of aesthetics and content, it is important to understand the political and social relationships informing these images creation and distribution.

In **Chapter One**, I offer an exploration of ways in which images in Thailand hold social, political, and religious power. I examine the portraiture of monarchy, celebrity, and other elite personages in Thai images and consider how the presentation and distribution of these images generates a social hierarchy in which the elite are represented as "more than human" or "extra human"[4]. The special representation of elite persons in Thailand is tied intimately to a social hierarchy that pervades all spheres of daily life including the economic, political, and social. I examine how these local hierarchies and aesthetic traditions in Thailand are supported by the particular social status attached to the advertising industry in international consumer and labor markets.

In **Chapter Two**, I continue to explore the influence of political, economic, and social hierarchies in Bangkok through an examination of the processes of censorship at work in the advertising industry. I use the example of the extraordinary censorship and propaganda that

[4] While this analysis may hold some similarities and insights to how images are understood in other parts of Southeast Asia, much of what I describe is likely to be thought of as strange and exotic to many readers. My goal, however, in this chapter's analysis is not only to describe a diversity of experience in how the power of images plays out in different places, but to also point to the importance of understanding powerful images as social and political artefacts.

occurred in the wake of King Bhumibol's death in order to uncover the social and professional practices and hierarchies through which formal and informal censorship processes occur on an everyday basis.

The advertising genre is, of course, not static in form. In Thailand, slapstick and buffoonery were once widespread in advertising videos. Over the past ten years, however, there has been a growth in ad spending, ad awards, and attention for advertising that is sentimental, moral, and pedagogical. This genre of "heart-warming" advertising, sometimes known as *sadvertising*, is introduced in **Chapter Three**. The growth of this new form increased rapidly under the military junta's takeover and consolidation of political power in Thailand between 2014 and 2019. The new Thai video ads emphasize nationalism and reinterpret Thai identity in terms of sentimentality, moral behavior, anti-consumerism, and worship of the monarchy. I examine the rise of this genre of advertising in the context of moral and ethical practices and values shaping everyday work behind the scenes in Bangkok advertising production. Examining some of the moral contradictions experienced by individuals working hard to be both creative and conservative, I draw on observations that include my own fraught position as female body under scrutiny. I argue that particular moral values, such as beauty and friendliness, put production workers in an onerous professional position, in which they carefully navigate competing individual goals and public performances of moral respectability.

In **Chapter Four**, I interrogate the "gloss," the processes of misrepresentation built into the production processes of advertising. Focusing on the role of stereotypes as a key communication strategy within the advertising format, I interrogate the erasure of diversity involved in the processes of advertising production. I discuss the role of stereotypes in attributing value to labor and laborers behind the scenes and the contradiction between narrow stereotypes

on screen and the complexity and diversity of the people who create them. Using examples from Bangkok production crews creating advertisements for motor vehicle and banking products, I also examine the selective borrowing and appropriation of foreign signifiers removed from their original context. I argue that the advertising genre makes use of stereotypes to create a gloss that directs attention away from the social reality of consumer markets and instead roots identity in consumer-citizenship.

The processes of advertising production provide a smoking-gun, incontrovertible, case study for the social constitution of markets, money, and commodities. As an anthropologist, I address advertising from within a tradition that looks at the way humans construct meaning and critiques arguments that present money and markets as universal abstractions (Marx 1867; Mauss 1925; Polanyi 1944; Bloch & Parry 1989; Graeber 2011). Beyond providing a case study of market idiosyncrasy as cultural practices, however, I take a particular interest in the way that advertising production processes provide insights regarding locally powerful cultural ideals and practices. Seeking to be on-trend, advertising creatives attempt to create surprising new images and narratives for the screen. This new work, however, emerges from their social and political experiences and the semiotic registers in which they live and interact, including foreign references accessed virtually. As advertising workers make judgements about aesthetics, value, inspiration, they provide plenty of clues as to the images, ideas, and political narratives currently fascinating a nation, region, or group. As I examine these images, ideas, and narratives, this dissertation offers insight as to how the seemingly meaningless media of the twenty-first century does not occupy an uncontrolled, ungoverned space. Rather, the fast-paced media industries are a diversity of overlapping spaces that distribute image, sound, and information according to highly influential hierarchies of power, influence, and control.

CHAPTER ONE: CELEBRITY AND DIVINITY: POLITICAL AND MARKET HIERARCHIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF PUBLIC IMAGES IN BANGKOK

> "For we believe creativity has great power for society. Because we see that ad people have fire, have inspiration. That they want to see society improve. Because we have the opportunity to join together different stories to a very positive effect."
>
> *Advertising Value: 50 Years Forward, 2017,* (*translated).*

Under dark vaulted ceilings at the premium top level of Bangkok's *Siam Central* mall, stylish and expensively dressed ad men and women glided under large, concentric light displays and pulsing club music. Inspecting buttery pastries while balancing large cardboard cups of coffee, the attendees of the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Advertising Association of Thailand (AAT) rubbed shoulders in black luxury sweaters. Men and women walked across the large foyer in shiny white heels and black leather shoes to greet many old colleagues and classmates. Embarrassingly for the organizers, this special event was delayed by over one hour – the cinematic screen onstage had a technical glitch. For the participants, however, the delay was also an opportunity to see and to be seen by others. The audience was finally called into the giant, dark indoor amphitheater and a beaming spot of light illuminated the silhouette of the small, squared shoulders of the association's chairwoman. Introducing the annual celebration, "for the first year, proudly presented in English!" to her assembled audience, the chairwomen offered the audience a kind of benediction, suggesting the assembled Thai advertising creatives were "part of making a world . . . [that] is still a good place to live." Speakers hailing from global advertising corporations and digital corporations, such as Facebook and Google, then took the

stage. Throughout the day, the speakers reminded their audience that consumer naiveté and brand loyalty were dead. Reflecting on the new speed of consumer feedback, many of the various industry representatives mused that instead of thinking the move towards digital, especially mobile, advertising as a challenge, it could instead be thought of as an opportunity to mobilize and engage consumers in a new way for social good.

Taking their turn to move from the dark wings to the stage spotlight, representatives of the world's largest advertising houses provided visions of consumers as "co-creators" of brand content. Co-creation and consumer communication were characterized in terms of self-actualization and social change aided by new technologies. The chief digital officer from McCann, for example, assured his audience that all successful brands must capitalize upon "three key battlegrounds. . . control, curiosity and trust. . . the defining principles of being human." Through the work of advertising, he prophesied, ad makers would be playing "valuable roles in people's lives" by helping them to "feel a little bit better about themselves." Voices on stage grew in enthusiasm, as successive industry leaders claimed that ad creatives were the leaders of social change via their special power of producing good feelings. In the "50 Years Forward" anniversary book given to the participants, the opening lines introduced social leadership as the "great power" and mission of the Thai advertising community.

Advertising for Society

In this chapter, I introduce the power of public images in Thailand through an analysis of the unexpected connections between the advertising industry and public portraiture of elite personages in Thailand. These elite personages include celebrities, political figures, spiritual figures, and members of the royal family. I examine how the creation, editing, and distribution of these images of elite figures generates and reinforces powerful overlapping social and market

hierarchies. These hierarchies affect everyday practices and experiences of class, creativity, and consumerism. I illustrate how political power shifts at the local level can operate within a global media landscape that is increasingly interlinked and heterogeneous to turn global media markets and technologies into locally specific political instruments. Using events, interviews, and ethnographic experiences from working with advertising and media makers in Bangkok, I provide a grounded perspective into the media politics of Thailand and global media labor markets.

In my analysis, I look beyond Thailand to the broader import of analyzing twenty-first century public images as political instruments. Locating the control of aesthetic rules and flows (Mitchell 2005) in political hierarchies and social relationships, this chapter argues for the necessity of understanding contemporary class stratification and aspiration when pursuing the locus of meaning in seemingly senseless media images. The noisy movement of advertisements and other media images interrupting the teeming screens crowding our contemporary lives can appear ungoverned and senseless. The circulation of media in the twenty-first century is, however, far from uncontrolled. Rather than meaningless, public images moving according to political influence. The circulation of the visual is influenced by what Ranciere (2013, 13) called the "distribution of the sensible." In this phrase, Ranciere referred to the fact that what is seen as evident and reproduced is shaped by the people with the ability and access craft and distributed the images, sounds and language circulated widely. Images, sound and information are created, censored, and circulated according to influential hierarchies of political power and financial investment. Understanding who makes popular images and the everyday creative, ethical, and political tensions involved behind the scenes in public image production is useful for thinking critically about the aesthetics and global movements of capital shaping contemporary social life.

Figure 7. Photo of a speaker onstage at the 50th anniversary of the Advertising Association of Thailand. February 2017. Photo by author.

Events such as the Advertising Association of Thailand's fifty-year anniversary offer a self-representation of the advertising industry as creative, culturally attune, globally saavy and financially successful. Even the style, including new shoes, thick shirts and fresh haircuts, in which the participants chose to present themselves offers a performative claim to social prestige. Although consumers are now labelled in ad-speak as critical co-creators, the advertising creatives at such elite events reserve a space for themselves as the people with "inspiration" and "opportunity" to effect social change. Social change in the vocabulary of the AAT remains a

vague and non-confrontational concept. Looking past the emergence of consumer "co-creators" and behind the screen to the hidden work of advertising production, change has also arrived in a different although no less crucial vein, through the availability of cameras and cheap editing equipment. With smaller cameras and new distribution avenues, including satellite TV and online channels, small companies and crews can offer creative services that were previously the exclusive expertise of a well-guarded industry core.

Bangkok has long been a regional hub of the global advertising world. Many large firms have a South East Asian or East Asian office in Bangkok. The popularity of Bangkok with advertising firms is owing to the local availability of an attractive expat lifestyle, cheap local labor force, and long Thai history of film production. The participants of the AAT fifty-year celebration were almost exclusively Thai, but many worked for companies that had sister offices in Japan, London, and New York. Many of the participants had studied or worked overseas and understood or spoke English, thus belonging to an elite minority of the Thai labor force that enjoys the contacts and reputation of international experience. A small but growing number of this elite AAT attendees worked for or ran a medium-sized Thai-owned marketing firm. Often specializing in digital marketing and social media, these business owners represent a new but burgeoning market sector specializing in online consumer data analytics.

The vision of the Bangkok advertising world offered by the industry elite at events such as the fiftieth anniversary imagines the industry as a posse of social leaders providing expertise in economic and cultural dynamism. This imaginary is not unique to Thailand but reflects a widespread ideology of late-capitalism that looks to private enterprise and individuals to fulfill public services and the work of identity formation (Baudrillard 1970; Rose 1996; Cronin 2000; Jackson 2009; Muehlebach 2012). Owing to its powers of circulation, the advertising industry is

especially well armed in its ability to influence public opinion. The industry's avenues of display and circulation include the traditional media of television and print, in addition to the increasingly important online spaces where marketers engage consumers through the use of images, graphics, videos, games, and other media. These powerful avenues of circulation are influential in shaping consumer identity formation in substitution or contradistinction to the state (see a longer discussion of consumer-citizenship in chapter four).

Thai advertising can be quirky, creative, and innovative. Some of the most famous and popular ad campaigns from Thailand feature socially and politically progressive messages. A Sunsilk shampoo add that celebrated the growing love between a transgender woman and her father, for example, won the 2019 Bronze award at Cannes for creative effectiveness. In 2014, AIS, one of Thailand's largest telecom companies, sponsored a viral advertising campaign featuring young girls and women from poor backgrounds expressing ingenuity and creativity. Thai advertisements offer messages along a wide spectrum of social and political perspectives, and the people who arm the machinery of advertising production represent a range of political opinions.

Nonetheless, political and social messages in Thai advertising typically tend toward the conservative. Advertisements that challenge conservative social or political norms entail an element of financial risk that many clients do not want to accept. The same year that AIS released its heart-warming advertising series depicting successful young women, it also released public statements distancing itself from Thaksin Shinwatra, a former Prime Minister of Thailand whose family had previously owned 49% of the telecom company (Thitinan 2006; Mumbrella Asia 2014). Reviled by many, but especially conservative Thais, for his corruption and association with populist politics, Thaksin's historical association with AIS had a negative

impact on the telecom company, which following an anti-government campaign against the company in 2014, was losing customers to its rivals (Tech in Asia 2014)[5].

The fiftieth anniversary of the Advertising Association of Thailand assembled an exclusive group of the Thai advertising industry's leading agencies. These were agencies familiar with working with contracts worth tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars. Constituting a professional and social elite, the association limited attendance with expensive entry ticket prices. In their discourse of self-promotion, the Advertising Association members described themselves as producers of art, social commentary, cultural authenticity, and even moral sincerity. This characterization of advertising executives as social leaders reflected an international market discourse concerning brand responsibility popular across many marketing sectors internationally. The discussion of social impact was also part of a strategy to stay relevant among the rise of digital communication platforms, where advertising is shared through direct social networks rather than the more indirect social networks of traditional media channels, such as television. The language about social impact also contained a convenient local political message, mirroring the military government's public push for an improvement in moral behavior during the time of their "caretaker" government.

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[5] In 2019, one of AIS's most successful video ads featured an emotionally driven video with soaring orchestral music that encouraged Thai viewers to use social media for social good (27.5 million views on YouTube as of June 2019). The example visualized in the advertisement, was using social networks to bring together experts and volunteers to help clean up Thailand's polluted waterways. See the video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxl9fgxVyd8 . Another popular 2019 video (19 million views on YouTube as of June 2019) features the popstar Lisa Manoban describing technological benefits and rewards of being an AIS customer. Walking upon a CGI stage filled with flashing lights, electronic pop-ups that hint at high-speed internet connection and interspersed with images of luxury shopping spaces, Lisa claims AIS is "The world where all your needs are filled with the most exclusive privileges." See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWneLydB6Ac

In particular, the concept of goodness has gained political traction in Thailand. According to the popular conservative interpretation of *khon di*, potential social and political problems caused by an imperfect constitution, policies, or legal frameworks can be solved through the presence of good people (Callahan 2005). Urging Thai voters to elect *khon di* (good people) and work to make Thailand *di* (good), or follow the example of the King to *tam di* (do good), have become repeated injunctions by conservative political leaders. Soon after the 2014 military coup, General Prayuth wrote a pop love ballad, in which he implored the country for patience, "*Let us be the ones who step in, before it is too late*, *The land [country] will be good soon"* (Kao Sod English 2014). On the eve of the 2019 election, King Vajiralongkorn made a rare public statement encouraging voters to elect *khon di* "good people" and restrain "bad people from having power in order not to create confusion" (Prachatai 2019)[6].

During the period of the military junta government between 2014-2019, overlaps of shared financial and business concerns between government, media and advertising continued to expand. For example, in 2018, the NCPO (the self-named National Council of Peace and Order, that is, the military junta), introduced new media policies in order to allow the Department of Public Relation's digital TV channels to sell advertising on their channels (Pratchatai 2018). This new revenue stream removed barriers intended to prevent corrupt financial and political collusion between government, journalism, media and commercial profit. Meanwhile, the NCPO has flooded TV channels with propaganda in the form of nightly speeches from General Prayuth to the public, preferential treatment for interviews on news programs and banning public

[6] In Thai *khon di* would normally be a neutral term. However, owing to its use by conservative political actors, it is now used in the political context charged with remonstration, or alternatively, with sarcasm. Ordinarily in Thai, the term *phuu di* would be used to refer a person known for their goodness. *Phuu* operates as a prefix in Thai while *khon* is simply the noun for person.

criticism of key NCPO policies and constitutional changes. The NCPO also engaged in quieter exercises of media collusion behind the scenes. One media strategy used by the NCPO military government for example, was engaging in "Native Advertising", in which as a client, the administration paid for published articles with the appearance of regular feature articles in high profile news outlets. For example, in order to mitigate the reputational damage done to the Thai fishing industry following the reports of abysmal reputation for slavery and human rights abuses in that industry, the military junta paid for native advertising articles that promoted the Thai fishing industry's reputation in positive terms (Rueters 2018; CJR Review 2019). The military government also works closely with Facebook to ban political ads paid for by foreign clients (Adweek 2019).[7]

Selling the Dirty Reality of the Market

In 2016, one of the first video advertising projects I shadowed had piqued my interest owing to its unusual project brief. The plan was to film a "reality style" video advertisement in an everyday Thai produce market. The market was selected with care by the location scout. When the junior production members and I tumbled, blearily eyed, out of a minivan before sunrise and looked around at the small market area in Northern Bangkok, I saw why the producer described the market to me as *naarak* (cute). The market had visual appeal because of its large pointed roof, under which three main walk ways ran evenly apart, simultaneously suggested symmetry and activity to the eye. The pointed roof was unusually high, reminding visitors of the slanted eaves that cover Thai temples. Each aisle under the market roof was lined with long, tiled tables, at which every two or three meters a different market stall was stationed. The market

stalls looked as though they had not changed over the course of generations. Elderly vendors stood at tables selling the same kinds of food and products that have been sold in Thai markets over decades: eggs piled in small pyramids, long bunches of green vegetables, meat in thick slabs, dainty Thai desserts, and dry products, such as rice and soy sauce.

As in many Thai markets, the *maae kha* and *phaaw kha* (Mum saleswomen and Dad salesmen) neatly arranged their stalls with food products while the tables and temporary walls behind them were a messy combination of calculators, record books, and plastic bags. Perched above each stall on a wall or pole was a shrine decorated with offerings, such as bright orange chrysanthemums, bright red bottles of Fanta, and small sweets. Below the shrine among the plastic bags and books were large posters of the King and royal family, Buddhist saints, and mythological figures. A few photos of Thai celebrities also winked and blushed from their posters while tiny boxers jostled from miniature TVs the size of large mangoes.

Next to the main market, a smaller covered area held a number of stalls selling ready-to-eat food. Most customers took their food home in plastic bags, but solid concrete tables also invited some of those customers to eat their food fresh from the pan. When the clients who had commissioned the advertisement arrived on set, the team's producer invited me to join him in inspecting these small food stalls. Silently, we walked past men and women in aprons battling smoke, oil, and large tubs of vegetable and ice. Every two minutes, a new dish was prepared, slid onto a plastic plate, and handed or served to a waiting customer. After inspecting each restaurant stall with silence and a steady eye, the producer sat at one of the old concrete tables and gestured for me to join him. After I sat down, the producer sighed.

> What's wrong? I asked. The producer looked at me, paused, and then shook his head.
>
> I heard that the food was good here. But. . . - he looked over his shoulder and left the sentence unfinished.

> What's wrong with the food? I asked.
>
> I can't give this to a client.
>
> Why not? Does it look like it tastes bad?
>
> No. . . He paused again, frowning. No, he whispered, It's not beautiful. I can't give food to clients that looks like this.

In that moment, I was perplexed about why the producer would care more about how the food would look and less about taste. Imagining myself as a client visiting a film set, I wouldn't care too much what the food looked like if it was tasty. The producer however did not want to present food that didn't look beautiful. Later, as I talked with Thai film workers who had experience working overseas, several people spoke to me with some astonishment about the way food was presented on US or European film sets. Food trucks and take-out, these Thai workers told me, did not reflect well on overseas film standards. On a previous occasion in 2014, the producer used the metaphor of a restaurant to explain how he aimed for high standards for his production company. He explained,

> In Thailand service must be important. It should not be like America where people working on set have to queue for a food truck. Clients and guests must be treated with special honour and service. When I started my company I said to myself, that this work is like owning a small Thai restaurant. The quality must be impressive, one for which you want to pay more than the bare minimum. You want to pay 50 bhat [about USD $2] for the better quality, not just cheap and nasty of the cheapest food [which might cost USD $1].

Putting aside the question of food presentation, I decided to ask the producer another question that had been troubling me. I told the producer I was surprised to see three actresses currently getting prepped for filming that day. A simple set of chairs had been set up in the car park where a hair stylist and make-up artist had perched themselves next to the camera team's equipment. Three women with the easy confidence of models seeking work were smiling under the foundation brushes, oblivious to their location. When I had attended the video planning meeting with the celebrity who was promoting the product, he had asked for a video that felt real and un-

staged. Although the production team typically worked with actors, they had said they had planned to film real interactions and real customers in the market. I explained to the producer,

> I'm confused today. When we went to talk over this job with the client, it seemed everyone agreed they wanted this TVC (TV Video Commercial) to feel authentic. Not the studio TV chef feel, but the mood and tone would be the real market, and instead of actors, the team would recruit real housewives from the market to appear in the commercial.
>
> The producer turned his eyes away from the crew to look at me.
>
> But today, I continued, I was really surprised. There are extras [actors] here getting their hair and make-up done.
>
> The producer looked away briefly and replied, We have the extras here 'in case' the producer explained. The problem is the market is not beautiful. *Suay mai phaaw* [Not sufficiently beautiful]. We will try first, but if we cannot find a housewife to film, we will use the actors.

I looked around me and tried to see the market from the producer's perspective. The cooks serving dishes around us moved unevenly and slowly in the heat. Sweat poured down their necks into their aprons. As a car turned in the car park, a cloud of thin, yellow dust rose up filling the air and lightly grazing our face. In the market, decorations and food were colorful, but plastic bags and faded photos were strung together by haphazard cobwebs. It was only 8:00 am but already the customers looked tired and drawn. With slumped shoulders and uneven clothes, many customers looked as though they had worked all night, and perhaps they had. Across the dusty car park, the camera team were helping the camera man into a harness to which the camera was strapped. Like a small herd of swans, paddling elegantly and quickly, the team of about four men streamed in and out of the market lanes. Resolutely trying to find something beautiful to film, the team moved back and forth, intermittently pausing and bending their shoulders to bring the camera down like a bird's beak pecking and investigating a market stall. At first alert, but gradually bored, the elderly market stall holders cooperatively followed instructions they were given. The market holders stood by as an actress picked up three eggs. Then, they stood by for

the same action. And repeat. The morning hours pushed on and all that had been filmed were each of the three actresses picking up a single grocery item. The flock of camera crew men blocked and disrupted the entire market, making it impossible to walk past or do business as usual. The store holders were being compensated for their time but, nonetheless, they started to look bored and annoyed.

By the middle of the day, our team was filming the main celebrity, Woody, who had arrived to perform his infomercial-like presentation. The item for sale was a special frying pan by a brand named "Korea King." The three actresses stood in as "real" housewives. They housewives were actively coached on their specific gestures, words, movements, and expressions. Again and again, the camera crew filmed their astonished faces. With each repetition, the acting coach and director asked the women for even bigger expressions of delight and bigger, happier smiles. The planned video experiment in semi-realism had become as drawn out, detailed, and determined as any traditional television advertisement. Again and again, the women were filmed with their mouths ajar, shocked at the celebrity's cooking skills. On each take, the women acted with exaggerated astonishment.

In the afternoon, the celebrity and actresses went home, and it was left to the production team to film food being cooked and served in such a way that would be more beautiful and stylish than any food ever eaten. The small plates of food would appear in the final TVC as a few seconds of ingredients in a pan and be edited to suggest the celebrity himself had cooked the food. That afternoon, a team of food stylists exactingly measured, trimmed, painted, and perfected the omelets, fish, and arrangements of rice. The camera team spent hours sliding noodles onto plates and experimenting with close-ups of sizzling fish cakes. Throughout the whole day, the level of detail was such that everything moved at a snail's pace. Most of the

production team had nothing to do but wait on sore feet as a food prep team painstakingly prepared agreements to be filmed over and over. Mostly unnecessary, we, the assorted production crew, waited to be useful. We filled the hours by taking photos for Facebook and other social media platforms, leaning on each other's backs, and giving each other shoulder massages. For some of us, the time to be useful never arrived. Instead, we formed a collection of about thirty people, patiently standing in concentric circles around the cooking of a single egg. We had nothing to do, but if rain, insufficient egg supply, or any other hiccup had demanded our attention, we could provide immediate support. We would have raced to raise umbrellas, move our make-shift props, and rally our energy to create a perfect one-second clip of frying eggs.

Figure 8: A food artist's workbench on a set in Bangkok. This artist is perfecting potato chips before they are filmed. March 2016. Photo by author.

Figure 9. Still from a 2016 video advertisement for "Korea King" featuring Woody. Note, this is not from the advertisement described above. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6f_dbs45nfI

There is No Such Thing as "Gold Marble": Towards an Imagined Perfect

Advertising production teams invest heavily in the quality of their fictional images. As in the market, with thirty people gathered around a single egg, it is standard practice for production crews and associated workers, including lighting, camera, food, costume, and editing teams to pour immense labor and energy into the production of tiny details and split-second scenes. As the team's producer had instructed me, the appearance of beauty, not reality, was paramount both on the screen and behind the scenes in interactions with clients. Video advertisements are usually filmed in studios, where under controlled conditions, fake back drops can suggest imagined places of all kinds and where actors (cast months in advance) repeat the same action forty or fifty times. When the production team filming the Korea King frying pan took on the task of filming outside in a real market, they had planned on filming a less-scripted, less-staged interaction. On

the day, however, the production team ended up falling back on many fictional filmmaking techniques they had intended not to use. These techniques included the use of styled actors, repeated filming of the same scene, employing thick camera lenses that blur away market dirt, and pain-staking food manipulation.

The process of fictionalizion, however, was far from complete when we left the market. During the editing process in the weeks that followed, several special graphics were added. One of these graphics was a visualization of the metal layers inside the coating of the pan. In the voiceover, the celebrity excitedly described the pan as containing "eight internal layers!" The graphic simultaneously showed a frying pan split into eight levels of several different colors, emphasizing a single layer of a bright yellow color while the voiceover continued describing this layer as a special layer of "gold marble." Selected close ups focused on Woody the celebrity's face, featuring a warm smile, a strong jaw, and glowing skin without a single blemish. He was surrounded by animated female actresses playing housewives in the market. Woody appeared very tall, authoritative, and almost celestial. This appearance was enhanced through mainstream advertising editing techniques, including image editing to remove facial blemishes, changes to lighting and color pallets, and the re-structuring of time through cutting and montage. The production team also included cute electronic sound effects and animated popups. These popups were used to emphasize the discount in price. The pan, Woody claimed in the video, was usually sold for "15 000" baht, but large cartoon prices jumping on the screen, boasted that instead the pan would be sold "3 300 baht, with another pan free"! During the final editing process, the Thai Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had required the production company remove one part of the script - a voiceover claim that the pan was "good for health." Other than this change, however, the editing went fairly smoothly, and the video was distributed online and on

television. At the time, I didn't pay much attention to the final editing processes of this particular video. While the editing process was lengthy, I was oblivious to the level of scrutiny this work would later merit.

On release, the video commercial proved popular. The beautiful market, charming celebrity, and promoted price discount, together with other Korea King advertisements, achieved the desired interest and a high volume of sales for the importer and distributor. Our production team's work appeared highly effective as were other advertisements made by other production companies. During March 2019, Wizard Solutions Co, the company behind the Korea King brand, was the largest spender on advertising in Thailand, dropping 191 million bhat (6 million USD) on advertising during one month, far in front of the next largest advertising investments by Oppo smartphone at 113 million and Toyota at 105 million bhat (*Bangkok Post* 2017a). Over time, however, public criticism of the advertised product grew**.** A number of parodies of *Korea King* and its exaggerated advertising were posted online. Following public criticism, MCOT, the TV channel on which the videos were primarily aired, began their own investigation on Korea King pan's price while the MCOT chairman questioned the wisdom of allowing advertisers to run videos over one minute in length during primetime TV (*Bangkok Post* 2017b).

In one parody on the YouTube channel, "Por Barn Station"[8], the video begins with soft choral voices singing while white text on a black screen flashes, "The end of waiting. . . Korea King Diamond series!" This is followed by close ups of the Korea King pan where the pan is slowly turned in order to reflect the light. Together with the choral music, the video introduces the pan as a kind of special, magical object. The music then changes to a light, boppy electronic

[8] พ่อบ้าน Station (Por Barn Station).

tune, and a young Thai man stands in his kitchen, greets his viewers, and with a soft voice in a conversational tone proceeds to discuss the Korea King pan. Holding up the simple instructions that come with the pan, the young man says, "I'm going to try this. . . over there" and points to his kitchen stove behind him. When he mentions the Korea King pan, the young man's voice goes soft and trembles slightly. The simplicity of the young man's style, his naiveté, and his straight face make a joke of the gullibility with which consumers bought into the uniqueness of the pan. The young man goes on to cook some of the items (fish, an egg omelet) that were made in the market video for Korea King and suggests that they taste better when cooked in the Korea King pan. Below the video, comments written by appreciative viewers include jokes, such as "Right now, I'm not scared of using the oil when cooking, as much as I'm scared of whatever weird substance is in the coating of the pan!"[9]

The Thai Consumer Protection Board received complaints regarding the pan's quality and conducted an investigation. In May 2017, the Thai Consumer Protection Board found Korea King guilty of fraud. The consumer commission further found Wizard Solutions Co., the importer and distributor, guilty of false advertising. The claim that the pan was discounted from 18 000 bhat to 3 300 could not be substantiated as there was no record of a 18 000 bhat selling price. The consumer protection board also found Korea King guilty of giving false information about the pan, claiming that its description of a special "eight layer" metal including "gold marble" was fraudulent. There was no substance called gold marble, the investigation concluded (Khao Sod News 2017). Approximately fourteen months after the making of the ad, the Thai consumer protection board banned Korea King from advertising in Thailand altogether.

[9] เดี๋ยวนี้ที่บ้านเลิกใช้กระทะแบบเคลือบทุกชนิดแล้วค่ะ และหันมาใช้กระทะเหล็กแทนไม่กลัวน้ำมัน แต่กลัวสารเคลือบผิวกระทะมากกว่าค่ะ

The Korea King example was remarkable for its boldness of fiction in creating a fake story, its widespread criticism, and its eventual censure. As I would come to learn, however, the trajectory towards an imagined perfect and away from the real reflected a widespread trend across not only Thai advertising but the production of public images in Thailand in general. This fabrication is especially the case in news and entertainment media and in the political propaganda that has been especially widespread following the arrival of the NCPO government in 2014. The tendency to exaggerate the appeal of a product or visual image is widespread across commercial and political sectors globally. In Thai national politics, however, a particular kind of power associated with beautiful images has supported a strong use of dramatic visual editing and the creation of fictional content.

Although the Thai public have long been the audience of public images, they are, also, owing to changes in technology and global media trends, increasingly positioned as co-creators. Through technology advances that allow a wider demographic of creators to distribute their images through, for example, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook, the Thai public are increasingly asked to not only adore and worship through public imagery but also align their own personal creative work with dominant and popular political positions. This participation in public imagery with was described by Somsak's (2007) as the phenomenon of "mass monarchy," an authoritative and intimate role of the monarch in the life of the Thai populace that arose in the late 20th century. International scholars are sometimes puzzled at the amount of attention scholars of Thailand give to the monarchy when discussing a range of social, political and economic issues in Thailand. From the perspective of many who live in or do research in Thailand, the reason for this attention is critical. The prosecution of those who are accused of *les-majeste* has, as previously discussed, become a weapon of successive governments and powerful

individuals against troublesome populations and individuals. The inability to criticize the monarchy has effects public discussion and inquiry on topics including Thai history, government, inequality (Streckfess 1995). The Crown Property Bureau meanwhile provides an exorbitant and growing accumulation of personal wealth in the hands of the Thai King. Through technologies such as video, TV and mobile phones, the Thai royal family have, moreover, become more intimate celebrities in everyday life, seen and "shared" more than ever before. Portraits of the King and previous monarchs are displayed on or inside every public (and many private) buildings and a half hour of "Royal News" precedes the main news programs every evening. The new King Rama X does not enjoy the popularity of his father, but his grip over the Bureau's wealth has tightened. The new King has assumed official ownership of the entire wealth of the Crown Property Bureau, a fortune that his father distanced himself from, at least officially by placing the assets under the management of advisors (Japan Times 2018). This makes the Thai monarch the richest monarch in the world, with assets estimated upwards of 30 billion US dollars (Reuters 2019). The wealth, visual dominance, intimate reach of the Thai monarchy, the public suppression of speech, together with the grand narrative of the reign of the long and gracious reign of King Bhumibol, all contribute to an awareness regarding the distinctiveness of living under the Thai state that lead scholars to continually interrogate the power of the Thai monarchy.

Building on the concept of "mass monarchy" Thanavi (2014, 3) argues, the making and promotion of art in honor of the King, *jitdtragam chaleerm phragiiat* (which translates to: art to

celebrate glamour and glory)[10] became a widespread "active agent that helps constituting the supreme status of King Bhumibol." Through digital networks and the immediacy of online communication, the mass public now participate in this image work with greater presence and fluidity. Increased access, admiration, and distribution of portraiture is not however, I argue, limited to the King or the royal family alone. While the King is unique in his power and position, the images of other famous persons are admired, invested in, and distributed in similar ways.

The Power of Public Images in Thailand: Historical & Theoretical Background

For purposes of power and persuasion, beautiful images provide a malleable but intractable tool. Image pedagogies and practices teach people how to how to value and interact with status, photos, religious paintings, and other images. As they circulate among audiences and publics, however, whether as heart throb celebrities posted online, portraits of holy figures, or videos of consumer goods, images function in multiple ways simultaneously. Sometimes, the same image may even support messages that are contradictory. The video for Korea King, for example, proved popular and effective in terms of sales, but at the same time was also widely mocked and criticized. Understanding the power of images must therefore take account of their ambivalent and paradoxically powerless material constitution. Mitchell (1996, 74) warns against treating images as though they wielded great political or social autonomy by reminding his readers that images are typically contradictory and amorphous. Images may seem to promise great power while proving more multivalent than assumed. This does not mean that the ambivalent and ambiguous power of images does not wield a power worthy of study. Rather,

[10] Thanavi (2014) writes this phrase in English as *jittikam chalerm prakiet*. The Thai reads จิตรกรรม เฉลิม พระเกียรติ. My choice of *jitdtragam chaleerm phragiiat* is in order to keep consistency with the other examples of Thai language within this dissertation which, as mentioned in the Preface, is line with the phonemic transcription system used at Thai-Language.com which favors an East Coast USA English accent in its transcription.

Mitchell (1996, 82) warns, “Vision is as important as language in mediating social relations and it is not reducible to language.” Images do become powerful in the service of political agendas, but they do so with great semiotic slipperiness.

In this dissertation, I am more concerned with the processes of production than of semiotic interpretation, but I do not ignore the fact that the messages and associated meanings of the video advertisements circulating among Thai and international audiences also requires critique. Images, in all their slipperiness, are made for the purpose of distributing particular visions. Those who make images are trained in their work towards certain social and political goals. Attending to aesthetic features of video ads, including the plans of product creation and practices of representation, thus informs our understanding of how the making and circulating of images mediates social life. Woody the celebrity smiling on screen elicits a desire for athletic grace, a friendly warmth, and an authority of style and good taste. The video advertisement does not provide these things, but it is made with the intention of evoking a desire for them. Woody the celebrity’s charisma on screen circulates within a social world, moreover, in which certain elite figures (i.e., political, religious, and celebrity) are represented with special gravitas and beauty in the public sphere. Celebrities the world over soar towards the sky on gleaming billboards, and powerful people everywhere use video, photography, and other forms of media to promote their public profile. Thailand is no different in this regard. By attending to local histories of images, however, it possible to attend to how these widespread techniques of celebrity are nevertheless calibrated to different ends.

In Thailand during my fieldwork, one particular calibration that I observed was a merging of political and religious themes in public images of public portraiture. Before turning to this merging of the religious and political in Bangkok during 2014-2017, I first provide an overview

of the historical emergence of public political images in Thailand. In the anthropological study of Thailand, the question of image and surface has emerged as a key theoretical discussion. Understanding a summary of the historical development of powerful public images will therefore provide some context as to why this amorphous element of everyday experience has been seen as so important in the study of Thai social life. In explaining the prominence of images as vehicles of communication and influence and Thailand, I find it necessary to also touch on the role of the monarchy as an idealized political and religious institution. These two themes – images and the monarchy –work their way into the discussions of many scholars who try to understand contemporary Thai social life and the broad prominence of these two themes can appear perplexing without some background context.

The Merging of the Political, Economic, and Religious in Thai Public Images

For centuries, strategic relationships between religious teachers and political rulers have played an important role in the successive political dynasties on the South East Asian continent. One of the longest-standing practices of declaring legitimacy to rule by monarchical figures in Southeast Asia was the sponsoring of religious statues and artworks. Since the arrival of Buddhism from the Indian sub-continent during the first to fourth centuries BCE, political leaders across Southeast Asia sponsored elaborate images of the Buddha and Buddhist holy figures for public display. Curiously, the Pali cannon typically offers a negative view of visual art and considers beauty primarily in terms of the erotic female body, a distraction from true enlightenment (Gombrich 2014). Southeast Asian Buddhism tends to orthopraxy over orthodoxy, however, and over centuries, Buddhists across the South and South East Asian continent have used crafts, dance, theatre, paintings, and sculptures in order to express sincerity of devotion, accumulate merit (religious virtue), and provide visual narrative instruction (Gombrich 2014; Singh 2015).

One interesting example of early Buddhist public religious works in mainland Southeast Asia were *sema*[11], Buddhist boundary stones on which special religious inscriptions would be carved for public instruction. *Sema* stones from the Korat Plateau in North East Thailand dating from the Dvaravati period in the sixth through eleventh centuries AD describe both royal and religious personages, including royal personages who had become monks and praising certain monarchs for their *dharma* (enlightenment/truth) (Murphy 2013, 304). Among the examples of bronze statues and stone carvings of the Buddha from this period, Murphy (2013) describes lavish images that would have required considerable economic investment, further demonstrating the early integration of economic, political, and religious spheres of power in the region.

Representations of the Buddha, enlightened monks and monarchical figures from Hindu and Buddhist mythic traditions featured prominently on temple and palace structures during the Tai (eighth through tenth centuries) and Sukhothai (thirteenth through fifteenth centuries) kingdoms. These public monuments were further replicated and elaborated during the prosperous Ayutthaya Kingdom that ruled much of central and southern Thailand and exerted political influence across the southeastern mainland from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-eighteenth century. After the fall of Ayutthaya, holy images and monuments were used to signal a new royal claim to rule when the emerging Rama dynasty built a new capital *Krung Thep Maha Nakorn* (Great City of Angels, commonly known outside Thailand as Bangkok) (Askew 1994).

In his explanation of the development of monarchical power in Thailand, Tambiah (1976) explains how such investments in public religious art and public works helped to sustain a

[11] Interestingly, the ancient Greek word for sign is also *sema*. Which, in the ancient Greek also could be used to refer to mean boundary, mark, border, signal, omen, mound, tomb or memorial (Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek Online). Thank you to Michael Herzfeld for first pointing out this connection.

mandala model of power. According to a mandala model, Tambiah (1976) posits, there is "a transformative political and economic process that we can tentatively label: from the galactic polity to the radial polity," that is, the movement of prosperity and stability across a geographic area of influence beyond the capital. Tambiah (1976) argues this influence is wielded through the powerful symbolism and political stability of a geographical center of power, ruled by an incarnation of the Buddha with visually evident handsomeness and charisma known as a *bodhisattva*[12], with a political and religious authority (Tambiah 1976, 273). The old model of galactic Thai polity was unified through a powerful center while the different locations on the periphery waxed and waned in the strength of their connection to the center. By contrast, the contemporary model of nationhood includes militarized geographic borders and a personalized monarchy that is figured as the monarchy belonging to nation. Thongchai (1997) describes the development of the modern Thai state as a strategic adoption of Western scientific ideologies of rational thought and techniques of geographic management such as mapping. In this mid nineteenth century aping of Western displays of power and sovereignty, the Thai monarchy also dispensed with many of the narrative and ceremonial displays of canonical Theravada Buddhist works such as the *Vessantara Jataka* which had legitimized the King's authority in his status as a *bodhisattva* (Jory 2002).

Images of monarchical figures were banned for centuries in the Thai Kingdom and the king's visage was kept as a secret from the public. Instead of using self-portraiture, the monarchy spread public fame through the aforementioned construction of religious statues and buildings that royal servants and loyal monks would describe to the public as charismatic signs of the

[12] A King who is a *bodhisattva* is assumed to be a Buddha-to-be, working towards accumulating and perfecting ten virtues (such as wisdom and compassion) (Jory 2002).

monarchy's greatness and goodness (Murphy 2013; Peleggi 2013). In the mid nineteenth century, however, photographs of King Monkut were created and distributed both within Thailand and internationally. As part of a multi-pronged attempt to elevate the status of Thailand as a modern nation state, King Mongkut began a dramatic propaganda program distributing his photo in prominent public places. This shift in royal strategy was extended under the rule of Mongkut's son, King Chulalongkorn, who in imitation of European rulers including commissioning Italian sculptors to fashion his likeness in public statues (Peleggi 2002).

The new strategic use of circulating royal images by the Thai monarchy in the nineteenth century was directed towards two audiences: the internal Thai polity and international political actors. In reference to the latter, efforts to display western-style modernity, technology and political bureaucracy were considered to be effective instruments in warding off a colonial take over (Thongchai 1994). According to the historian Peleggi (2002), the new photos, statues, and monuments of the monarchy also reconstituted the hierarchical basis of social life in Thailand, where an elite social and economic group connected to the monarchy used European signifiers in dress, habitation, and pageantry in order to create a "new sense of themselves" in relationship to the polity as a whole. According to Veal (2013), displays of wealth, which had been an important component of demonstrating a leader's legitimacy increased as techniques for signaling social and political status during this time.

It was during this period of altered dress and its associated changes in social sensibility that the origins of modern advertising began appearing in Bangkok. Westerners with local business in Thailand created and published magazines and newspapers featuring advertisements using both text and image (Vila 2006; Chompunuch et al. 2002). New forms of print media and architectural redesign for the purpose of public promenades and royal encouragement put elite

individuals on display to others in Bangkok as well as other parts of Thailand, the region, and internationally (Peleggi 2002). The strategic importance of elevating reputation through the manipulation and circulation of public images, together with distinct attention to dress and public presentation, continued in importance in Bangkok throughout the twentieth century, especially through the medium of photography and film. In addition to promoting the status of elite personages, the role of photography as a technique for establishing order and social submission, was established through police practices of using staged photography as a form of evidence. As Lim (2016:98) argues that from the cataloguing of mug shots in the early 20th century, to popularization of crime "reenactments" by alleged criminals in the 1950s, "criminal investigation, mass media, and commercial interests were connected from the earliest stages of the development of the criminal justice system in Thailand by photography".

The Thai monarchy were early adaptors and patrons of cinematic technology, using the new technology as a demonstration of their scientific advancement and as a tool for cultivating their public prestige. From the earliest investments in film technology within the nation, the film medium was used as a tool for the promotion of the monarchy and Thai nationalism. Patsorn (2004) describes how the first films made in Thailand were a series of documentary-style films made by Prince Sanphasat Supakit about the activities of his older brother King Chulalongkorn and were first screened at a temple fair in Bangkok in 1900. Thai film companies were later established by royal and noble families with the aid of Chinese owned companies during the reign of King Vajiravudh in 1910-1925 (Patsorn 2004; Boonrak 1992). Prior to the end of the absolute monarchy, the royal family continued to not only make films but also classify and censor the distribution of foreign films in the private sector. By 1930, this required that every

film be officially investigated by the King, and an official list of censorship criteria included that films should not insult any religion, the Thai government, or the country (Patsorn 2004).

A military coup ended the absolute Thai monarchy in 1932, temporarily interrupting the royal centricity to Thai political (re)branding. Under the first decades of government under a constitutional monarchy, the royal family played a reduced public role. Nonetheless, the use of film for political propaganda and the sensitive censorship processes instigated by royal censorship, continued under the new government (Boonrak 1992). Thak (1979) has argued that while the 1932 revolution attempted to dethrone the monarchy in Thailand, no authoritative institution was found to stand in its place. The constitution was therefore reimagined as a gift from the King. Thak (1979) argues that political behavior in Thailand must therefore be understood according to an entrenched political hierarchy where authority is absolute. Conceiving of Thai democracy along western ideal lines, argues Thak (1979), will fail to appreciate the consolidation of leadership, power, and status that endures at the top.

Since 1932, subsequent Thai governments and generations of political leaders have sustained a growing nationalistic machine upon on the paradoxical premise of promoting Thai cultural superiority through the use of European yardsticks for measuring territory, borders, and nationhood (Thongchai 1996). Control and the importance of dress and image circulation also continued to expand in importance during these years (Chompunuch et al. 2002; Peleggi 2007). Between 1939 to 1941, Field Marshal and Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram and Major General Luang Wichitwathakan announced tweleve cultural mandates that were designed to modernize the nation. The tenth madate required that Thai people appear in public in a *riap rawy* (neat, orderly) fashion (Kanjana 2019). This included wearing a shirt (for both men and women)

and the requirement to wear "polite international [Western] style attire" rather than Thai style clothing.

A New Era of Monarchy & the emergence of Video

Advertising companies specializing in video were well established in Bangkok by the 1970s, and by the 1980s, and government investment in local industry proved beneficial to the emergence of small Thai-owned advertising firms (Vila 2006). Although most the first industry executives, cameramen and directors were mostly from Japan, Europe, the US, the first Thai advertising specialist to be recognized as a DOP (director of photography, or head cameraman), Choochart, was established as a cameraman-director by 1974. In a 1982 edition of the magazine "Business in Thailand," Choochart is quoted as saying, "It was damn difficult to prove to the client that a Thai could shoot a commercial. Each time Hans Fergus presented me to the client, the client looked askance. It took me two years to convince them" (Business in Thailand 1982).

During the 1970s, mainstream action films upheld nationalism as a positive narrative force, pitting the army, the policeman, monks, and village scouts against communists, gangsters, and foreigners (Patsorn 2004). During this same period, the Thai state under the military government of Field Marhshal Sarit Thanarat used "active demonstration" to present paternalistic and pro-monarchy conceptions of the Thai state to the nation's citizens (Thak 1979, 144). One such active demonstration was the state-supported "Village Scout" movement, which was a monarch-sponsored community organization designed to increase national loyalty and stamp out rural communist sympathizers (Bowie 1997). The 2014-2019 military government continued to invest in nationalistic films and TV shows, sponsoring romantic dramas about the Thai military forces and films that promote "national values" (Asian Correspondent 2014;

Khaosod English 2017). These government sponsored films and videos have not been broadly successful, and, in some cases, proved quite unpopular. Alternative forms of cinema, photography, and television offering political and social critique have meanwhile flourished among small communities of film and media makers.

During the 1970s, a new genre of films known as *nang sathorn sangkhom* created story lines addressing political and social problems (Patsorn 2004). The tradition of politically critical films continues today with several recent, award-winning films addressing political history from a critical perspective and with others representing political themes in the use of analogy, memory and parody. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, for example, is perhaps Thailand's most renowned film maker. His films have received many local and international awards, including the Cannes Palme d'Or. Apichatpong made several films that offered indirect critiques of military violence, government corruption, and religious hypocrisy in Thailand. Most of Apichatpong's films have, however, been censored before distribution in Thailand. After state censors demanded Apichatpong remove scenes from his film *Syndromes and a Century* before it could be screened, Apichatpong withdrew the film from circulation (Daley 2006) In 2017, Apichatpong announced that the political climate of censorship and arrests in Thailand was such that would make his future films outside the country (The Sydney Morning Herald 2016). Certain TV channels, talk shows, and independent online media channels continue to offer intelligent political critique, using techniques such as anonymity, parody, or selective online streaming as strategies for avoiding censorship and detection. These films, shows, and channels remain, however, firmly within the periphery of Thailand's media industry, and, with a few exceptions, do not enjoy a widespread viewership.

In the 1950s and 60s, the United States and her allies, concerned about the popularity of communism on the Asian continent, encouraged the Thai government to develop an alternative public campaign and suggested an increased public political role for King Bhumibol might be key (Hall et al 2012). At that time, the largely unknown young King Bhumibol, who had spent much of his life living abroad, was promoted to the status of national public figure through publicized tour campaigns. The tours promoted the King and his image to the Thai public across the political geographical breadth of the nation. During the 1960s, the King and his young wife also embarked on frequent international tours with the purpose of increasing their fame both at home and abroad. Queen Sirikit spent extensive time and money with Parisian stylists in order to develop a reputation as a woman of fashion and a favorite of the international news camera (Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles 2016; The Nation 2018). The King himself was an avid fan of photography and often was photographed with a camera in hand. Undeterred by the disavowal of materialism that is central to Buddhist teachings, the Thai royal family's influence in the display of wealth and property ownership of fashionable retail space in central Bangkok has strengthened the social importance of conspicuous consumption in Thailand (Unaldi 2016).

Following the era of cold-war interventions in the Southeast Asian region, Thai political elites found continued political effectiveness in carefully controlling the appropriate display and circulation of images in public. Veal (2013) describes how high-ranking government and military officials and other socially important individuals would have professional photos taken and then distribute them to lower-class friends and contacts in order to display them in their homes. These photographs might feature royal issues insignia visually illustrating the individual's connection to the monarchy. A careful preoccupation with visual propaganda campaigns and attention to images including film, architecture, and virtual materials reinforced

the importance of visual performances and displays to political life and identity. Attention to the visual through censorship, monitoring, propaganda, and investment in public images became a crucial part of displaying modern Thai nationhood.

Several scholars of Thailand note that the preference for visual propaganda by successive governments, together with magic-like capabilities of modern media in bringing celebrities into the intimate sight of the many, have influenced the elevation of King Bhumibol's divinity in the eyes of the Thai public (Pattana 2005; Morris 2000; Jackson 2009). It is overly simplistic to suggest that the Thai people worship the King as divine without interrogating what Buddhist divinity might entail, but practices of honoring the King during both his life and death have certainly increased the King's spiritual role for many Thais. The mid-19th century reimaging of political authority according to a combined cult of knowledge, scientific rationalism and wealth made room for a rehabilitation of the old Vessantara Jataka chronicles to elevate King Bhumibol's spiritual charisma (Jory 2016). King Bhumibol's portrait, for example, is sometimes treated as an object that distributes the King's charisma and presence. Applying pieces of gold leaf (paper) to King's portrait in small squares is one contemporary example of the way that citizens show respect to the King and make merit through demonstrating that respect (Veal 2013).

During my own visits to Thailand, I noticed changes to formal portraiture of the King, where air-brush techniques were used to greatly soften the image and texture of the King's skin. These changes in representation brought the King in closer likeness to images of popular holy figures, including the Buddha, enlightened beings, and holy monks. Thus, even though the King in state and palace discourse is officially assumed to be human, the notion of his divinity "nonetheless runs through popular discourse and visual representations as an ever-present

undercurrent. . . increasingly producing the symbolic effect of an actual god-king" (Jackson 2009, 367).

In 2016, King Bhumibol's rule had stretched across a seventy-year career, traversing the democratic elections of 30 Thai prime ministers and ten military coups. By the time the latest military coup took place in 2014, the elderly King's status had indeed been elevated to that of the semi-divine. As Jackson (2009) and others have argued, this elevation was not the result of government propaganda alone – together popular media, the influence of prosperity religions, and new technologies of image enhancement and distribution contributed to this rise in the King's reputation. In recent decades, the King's image, enhanced by technological developments of airbrushing, light adjustment, and color toning, have proliferated its distribution and display. The King was framed and placed high on the walls across schools, government buildings, homes, shop stalls, and personal protective medallions. Writing about the unavoidable repetition of the King's image, Morris (2000, 281) suggests visual ubiquity of the King's image has not led to "the evacuation of the significance of the monarchy but its intensification." Meanwhile, the use of the *lèse-majesté* law has been increasingly exercised during the 2000s and 2010s in order to protect the Thai monarchy from any form of criticism. The increasing application of this law in litigation and censorship over the past two decades further contributed to cultivating the monarchy's sacredness (Jackson 2004; Kilma 2006). The ability of the ruling King to act as he would wish is further supported by the fantastical size of the family estate. The royal crown property bureau has non-taxable assets valued between 30 and 40 billion USD.

A continued preference for visual methods of propaganda by generations of Thai governments (both elected and military led) has been expressed in financial and technological investment and circulation. For example, a half an hour program of *Royal News* proceeds the

screening of the evening news bulletin on all main Thai TV channels. In another famous example, all cinemas in Thailand are required to play the King's anthem before the screening of each film. This anthem was for many years accompanied by a single image of the King or a slide-show style of changing photographs. In more recent years, however, the images accompanying the King's anthem have become much more elaborate with photos, recolored in sepia and cut and blended to remove the background, as they fade onto and over each other with the softness of disappearing smoke. Lighting effects are used to illuminate the King's face, soften his eyes, and change the tone of his skin. Enlarged on a giant cinema screen, the King looks less like a man and more like a spirit. After King Bhumibol died, the cinema screens again turned to a single static picture of the new King before weaving a montage that included photos of the new King and his father together, arguably, in an attempt to continue to draw on the power associated with King Bhumibol after his death.

Following the ruling monarch, his immediate family and advisors of the Privy Council, the most elite social, political, and economic class in Thailand is constituted by a powerful group of elite Thai citizens who have direct and indirect social and economic ties to the royal family. This group operates in a sphere of "sacred palladia," that is institutions linked to the monarchy, such as the military, universities, and the monastic residence of Thailand's highest ranking monks near the city center (Taylor 2008, 17). This group controls most positions of wealth and influence within the Thai nation, including the top-tiers of politics, government service, military, and education while industries such as "media and telecommunications sectors are still marked by oligopolies and regulations that have to be negotiated through political influence" (Pasuk 2016, 420; Napisa & Chambers 2017). This top class is filled with families with generational wealth and reputation, perpetuating an inner circle of influence and power through shared social

circles, elite education, and their relative proximity to royalty and other people of influence, such as celebrities. Through public respect, influence over the media, and economic strength, this class has significant formal and informal influence over the distribution and creation of public images.[13]

Jackson (2004, 238) argues that in Thailand, the very experience of modernity, what it means to be part of a scientifically and culturally advanced community, is understood through the visual lens in such a way that it "rests on the fetishism of appearances, on the demand for a signifying surface, and on a representational politics in which the processes of enframement are repressed." Circulating idealized images have become a key method for communicating class distinction, beauty, and virtue, three qualities that, as I will discuss further below and in chapter three, are intricately interwoven in popular Thai Theravada understandings of human worth. Thai newspapers are filled with photographs of the stylishly and expensively dressed social elite at official events, celebrations, and religious ceremonies sponsored by private business, shopping centers, and media channels. Turn on Thai television and the casual observer will quickly see that game-show hosts, soap actors, and musical performers present themselves in such a way that includes distinctive hand gestures, facial expressions, and bold choices in fashion and make-up. In what looks comical, cartoonish, or cute to many international audiences, Thai celebrities utilize the visual in order to create a memorable and extra-human reputation.

The display of extra-human and elite images perpetuates and is enhanced by the powerful class mythology that underpins everyday social life. While the monarchy first produced their charisma by hiding the image of the King, the shift towards the theatre of display was motivated

[13] This influence is exercised specifically through forms of informal censorship which are discussed further in the following chapter.

in a political climate of European colonialism in Southeast Asia. Ideals of rational scientific progress popular in the West influenced a reconfigured ideology of social hierarchy in which the role of the King's cosmological authority was reinterpreted through an ideal of knowledge and scientific advancement. This new explanation for prestige who could view the lower classes as justly positioned owing to their lack of merit and their lack of education Vandergeest (1993). Veal (2013) argues that the display of wealth and consumer purchasing "became important as a way of exhibiting not only wealth and social position, but also moral status within a cosmological system".

The working classes, along with political dissidents meanwhile, are at risk at being portrayed in animal and non-human terms. Haberkorn (2019) argues that this dehumanization has been a central feature of state impunity since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Describing the tactic of classifying political dissidents as non human, Haberkorn (2019:17) finds "While the notion that certain members of the polity are less than human has its roots in absolutism aided by Buddhist cosmology, it has been continually reproduced through state violence", that is, Buddhist moral teaching that orders people according to their good deeds or merit is experienced in everyday life through the state's continued tyrannous classification of certain political dissidents and activists as beyond the protection of the law since the late 1930s. Streckfuss (2012) further elaborates on the collusion between religious hierarchy and racial hierarchy, describing the way that the Thai monarchs and politicians in the early 20th century borrowed from racist classifications of 19th century ethnic hierarchies in order to elevate a generalized Thai identity that was distinctly central Thai in language and Buddhist in religion.

The Thai advertising industry, as is the case with most media-related industries and indeed private business in Thailand, is dominated at the top tiers by the exclusive class of the

economic and social elite. The most famous Thai and international marketing and advertising firms are located in prominent locations in downtown areas of the city (Apiwat & Sarit 2010). Benefiting from decades of investment in film and marketing from both local and nonlocal sources, the Bangkok industry has developed an international reputation for high quality advertising development and production. Japanese and American marketing companies began investing and developing local advertising businesses after the introduction of national Thai television in the 1950s. Bangkok quickly became a preferred regional base for international marketing and media companies owing to its affordable luxury and social freedoms available to expats. Thai owned advertising firms further grew in the 1970s when the government invested heavily in domestic service industries (Chompunuch et al 2002; Villa 2006). Over the past two decades, the Bangkok advertising industry has grown significantly, owing to increased demand for advertising services alongside increased availability of camera and editing technology. Meanwhile, among young Thais, film, marketing, and related sectors were popular careers and college majors. In 1990, investment in Thai advertising amounted to 14 million baht, but by 2013, it had increased to 139 million baht (approximately $43 million USD) (Bangkok Post 2014).

The vast majority of advertisements in Thailand tend to be politically and socially conservative as does the increasingly self-censoring Thai media more generally (Jory 1999). Over the past ten to fifteen years, Bangkok's advertising community has earned a new reputation for its use of sentimental, emotional, and moralistic themes. Although these advertisements do not yet account for the majority of Thai advertising, they are among the most difficult and expensive to make and are quickly increasing in popularity among consumers and corporate clients. These sentimental video commercials typically use relatively long screening times of

three to five minutes and sad narratives or sentimental montages. Nationalism had long played a prominent role in many Thai commercial campaigns, and many of the new sentimental style commercials, make heavy use of nationalistic themes and well-known Thai landmarks. I discuss the popularity of these new sentimental style ads, sometimes referred to as *sadvertising*, in chapter three.

Attention to the Visual in Thai Studies

In her study of the Thai monarchy and its ritual functions, Gray (1991) provides a helpful analysis of the way that Thai political images can exercise spiritual power. Examining the powerful role of ritual in Thai political life, Gray elucidates the importance of beautiful presentation and the primacy of sight over the other senses in the practice of Thai Theravada Buddhism. Gray explains that according to popular teachings of Buddhism in Thailand, beautiful sights, such as temple art and architecture, ritual, and portraiture play a crucial role in stimulating the senses and propelling people towards dhamma (the way to live/ cosmic order). by contrast Gray (1991, 46) argues, speech is understood to be a "relatively devalued form of communication." According to Gray, this hierarchy of the senses explains why those playing the political game chose to rouse and influence the masses through the use of visual media. Another influential scholar of Thai visual culture, Klima (2002), pays particular attention to the role of images of death. Studying the movement of images of the dead as a focal point of meditation and circulating black market images of government brutality not available on mainstream media, Klima argues that images can be considered as a form of witnessing. According to Buddhist conceptions of nothingness, argues Klima, an image can reveal ignorance within the viewer. With the power to "scratch the eye" and "stick to the heart," images and appearances, Klima

(2000, 193) argues, “have indeed come to be magically invested with the power to make the world.”

Owing to the influential power of visual communication in Thailand, further analysis of the role of visual media in Thai political and social life is provided by several prominent scholars. Morris (2000) and Van Esterik (2000), for example, pay particular attention to the role of surfaces in channeling desire and communication. Glossy brochures of, for example, a flourishing economy and politicians’ “sweet talk,” argues Morris (2004), can be taken as realities in themselves. That is, the public does not necessarily demand or expect that public performances have a real connection to the facts they claim to represent. That is, images and surfaces in Thailand are sometimes read as more important than the “facts” behind them. Rather, successful performances carry their own value. According to Morris (2000, 193), photos, images, and appearances are “magically invested with the power to make the world.” These academic explanations of images offer a nuanced theoretical extension of the critical Marxist study of popular culture that finds its theoretical roots in the cultural critique of the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools. In the early twentieth century, scholars in the Frankfurt tradition argued that a collusion of government, market, and media actors were fostering political lethargy and intoxicating viewers with mass produced advertising and entertainment.

The relevance of this critique has been sustained by scholars including Morris (2000), Klima (2002) and Jackson (2004) among others, who point to the way Thai mass media images are circulated by conservative actors for the purpose of declaring authority and demanding performances of submission. With particular attention to local forms of alternative political and religious practice, however, these scholars also draw on the Birmingham schools’ work from the 1960s. These scholars attended to the culture and interpretations of the working classes,

especially alternative performances and images co-existing alongside and critiquing mainstream culture and media messaging. The Birmingham school's scholars developed their critique during a decade in which global markets were changing rapidly as governments released protections and limits in areas, such as trade and finance. These changes are sometimes described as a neoliberal rolling back of the state and the rise of private enterprise in everyday governance. While the rolling back of the state and the rise of private enterprise continues to make itself felt in the making of consumer-citizens across the globe, as many scholars have argued, local governments frequently support the extended reach of neoliberal markets, rather than allow those markets to function interdependently.

Governments frequently intervene in trade and finance policy for the benefit of large corporations and financial institutions (Ferguson 1990; Ong 2006). In Thailand, the state also remains in many ways an unpredictable but powerful market actor, intervening in monetary policy, trade, and finance. For example, the Thai stock market (SET) continues to be highly monitored in unusual ways. All stocks are traded in two markets, one for Thai citizens and an "Alien board" for foreigners. While investors can pay to "cross" to the other board, they do so at a cost. Thirty percent, or 15 of the 50 companies that constitute the Thai SET can also be considered "family firms", in that they have family-founding ownership or descendent share equity ownership amounting anywhere between less than 1% to 70% of the company's shares (Hammond 2014) It has proved intellectually and ethically important for scholars of Thailand to investigate Thai markets and governance from the margins of political and economic opportunity in Thailand. The considerable power of the Thai state, media, and political actors' mainstream cultural narratives of nationalism, consumerism, and conservativism also warrant greater investigation.

In their attention to the relationship between alternative and mainstream practices and opinion, Morris, Jackson, and others have emphasized a split in Thai public life between outward submission to powerful institutions and private skepticism. Morris and Jackson argue this duality is tolerated, even expected by the Thai elite. The space allowed for private skepticism is, however, I argue, shrinking. This is, in part, owing to the integration of social life with new forms of digital technology. The data collection of correspondence and expression on online platforms allows for new forms of intrusion and governmentality. In one example, the mother of a well-known activist was arrested on the charge of using a single word *ja* (translated to "yeah") to a contentious political comment on a private message on social media (BBC 2016). Outside of cyber surveillance, the NCPO has also been enthusiastic in removing "illicit" urban spaces, including the infamous sex strips of Bangkok and Pattaya (Bangkok Post 2014).

The space for privacy may be shrinking but performances of political complicity or consumer enthusiasm, no matter how intimate, do not erase capacity for critical and independent thought. Jackson (2004) has argued that the Thai establishment's "regime of images" demands enthusiastic performances of submission in public while acknowledging space for alternative opinions in private. The advertising of the Korea King frying pan may seem trivial, but it illustrates the point clearly. One night, towards the end of my fieldwork, I went to a friend's home for dinner. As I talked about my research and discussed the exaggerated style of Thai advertising, my friend, a middle-class stay-at-home mother who had previously worked in the media industry, agreed with my suggestion that Thai advertising sometimes employed a highly exaggerated style.

> For example, Korea King. . . my friend suggested, they say, 'Oil never sticks but it *sticks'*.

I responded,

I was there during the film shoot. Did you know the advertisement was using actors?" I asked.

My friend nodded vigorously,

Yes, I could tell but . . . *mai ruuuuuu yaak seuu* (I don't knooow, I wanted it)! When I saw the ad with Woody (the celebrity), I wanted it.

The popular Thai epistemology of sight over the other senses provides further insight as to why the current military government has been so quick to control the photographs of people it views as political threats. Calendars featuring the previous prime ministers and brother and sister team Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra were banned in early 2016. Cute but mocking stickers featuring members of the royal family were removed from the *Line* messaging platform only minutes after they were released the same year. As certain kinds of color and style of image are deemed important and associated with the powerful, they can become popular with a large population who share and recreate the images and aesthetics according to the style modelled. Celebrities hold a particularly influential role in this regard, although their longevity among the emulated elite is more tenuous than those from royal or established families. In Thai advertising, however, the representation of celebrities such as Woody, as tall, glowing figures of authority with almost non-human aura, reinforces the popular aesthetic that represents elite personages as powerful and virtuous beyond ordinary human capability.

Figure 10. Shrine with holy and royal portraits in the background of a film set. 2017. Photo by author.

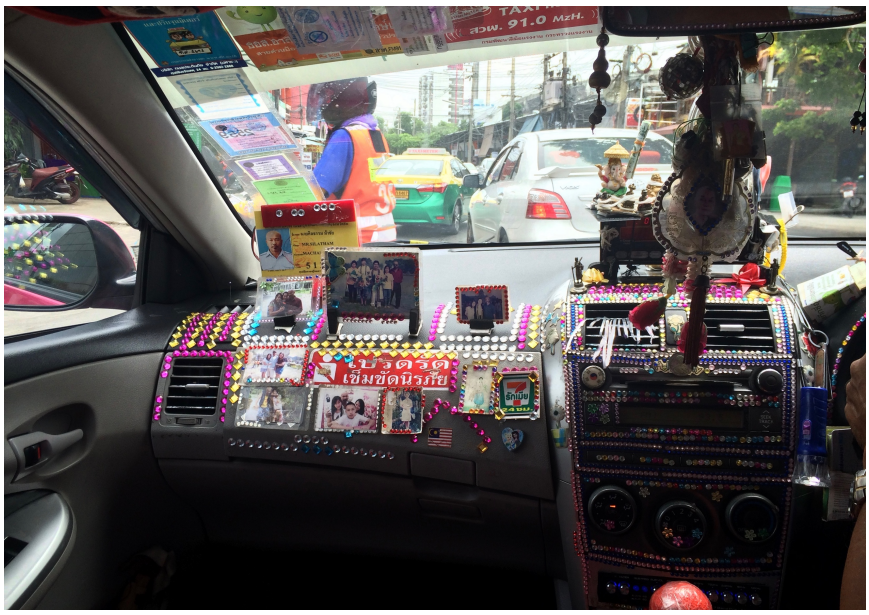

Figure 11. Portraits of family and holy figures and cute phrases. E.g., “Love Wife 24 hours,” decorated with plastic stickers in a taxi, 2017. Photo by author.

Celebrity, Monarchy, Divinity: Narrowing Beauty, Strengthening Status

The advertising industry is arguably the central furnace of image production in Southeast Asia. The industry's volume of production and pace of distribution moves with the speed of a blazing engine churning out technological innovations and new aesthetic trends. These trends and innovations are influenced in turn by an international movement in advertising and art, especially Japan, Korea, the US, and Europe. However, I argue, Bangkok advertising is best understood as an instrument of local political and social power. While advertising made in Bangkok features image aesthetics shared in other locations and is undeniably influenced by the technological and ideological trends from further afield, Thai advertising images also mirror and extend local styles of representation.

Very recently, for example, a trend evident in Thai advertising has been the use of lighting effects to transform celebrities skin into glowing orbs of light. Illuminating objects and people to the point of extra definition is also a widespread digital editing trend (Dorrian 2008). Bangkok editors have told me that transforming the skin and sky to the extent that it glows with a pale, moon like luminesce, a more circumscriptive practice. According to editing teams working in Bangkok, the technical and aesthetic editing trend to make video images lighter, white, and softer, was first popularized in Japanese films and TV series, but it is now most enthusiastically practiced in Thailand especially in advertising. The editors I spoke to were feeling bored with the glowing light effect, but told me it was nearly always required by the directors that they worked for.

Thai actors' rising and falling popularity sometimes reflects the economic and political influence of their country of origin or of their family members. Actresses and actors of European-Thai ancestry, *luk krung* (half children), as they are known, have been the popular

faces on Thai television for several decades. Other looks have peaked and fallen. For the past few years, light skinned Chinese- and Korean-looking actors and actresses have been popular, edging out the popularity for the previously popular Japanese look. The fashion for such exotic looks on screen elevates the status of those with international connections while markedly eclipsing the majority of Thai people's skin or facial features from the definition of high beauty. Beauty is reserved in commercial images for those who look different, exotic, and increasingly, non-human. Medical technology is popular for altering bodily features in order to bring them closer to the trending desirable form. Technology, such as skin lightening apps, can aid in creating extreme forms of representation that make the body increasingly unfamiliar.

During my time working with production teams in Bangkok, I spent many hours with editors "improving" video images for advertising. Important tasks included airbrushing, changing backgrounds, and shaping body features. Color correction was also universally essential. The task that took the most time, however, was altering lighting onscreen. There are various kinds of lighting effects used in advertising. One afternoon, for example, I watched a team of three editors improve the green lightning effects outlining football players. The football players who were, in their speed and strength, promoting a green puffed pea snack, jumped high into the air, and kicked the soccer ball with such force that it streamed across the sky and into space. The editing team spent several hours altering the green effect of the halo lighting effect around the players. They had received feedback from the client that the client wanted a brighter, larger green light that would be in harmony with the bright green of the puffed pea snack. Packed into the small, dark room, several production team members on the couches at one end of the room and at the other, the editing specialists seated astride swivel chairs in front of the computer screens, our small group sat in small, quiet darkness together. For several hours, the professional

editors worked with the editing flame effect, increasing flame size, color, and intensity. After a few hours of work, the football players were leaping off the road surrounded in a blaze of green fire. As soccer players, their legs were relatively thin and their fast bodies lean. The green flames turned their already air-brushed, lightened bodies into fireballs of energy and power.

Green lightning lends the body a dazzling "jewel like" intensity not unlike the editing styles used for highlighting products for sale in CGI editing across the globe (Dorrian 2008, 47). Much of the everyday lighting and editing work that I observed during my time in Bangkok was, however, of a subtler but no less transformative effect. Adding green lighting to the bodies of soccer players is the kind of editing effect that is quickly recognized as a work of fiction. When the video is released, the majority of viewers would recognize immediately the special lightning effect as a comic book visual style. While such exaggerated animation is common in Thai advertising, increasingly, many advertising video jobs were moving away from such obvious animation in preference for a different color palette and style that utilized new video editing tools to render a whole-screen tint, or color wash, that would bring out the yellows and whites of an image. The effect of this editing was to create videos that were washed in sepia-like colors and or lightened the entire video by removing color depth. These forms of editing removed contrast and shadows and arguably represented the world as soft, streamlined, and clean. This style was often used for achieving a nostalgic or dreamlike quality.

In addition to these lighting effects, editors' work also included changing the skin tones of celebrities and adding lighting effects onto their skin. In this work, the human face or arm becomes like a kind of lamp. This luminosity works in tandem with the widespread practice of lightening the skin tone, so that the final effect is quite different in both color and luminesce from the original actor's skin. Lightening the skin tone with color pallet tools in the editing stage

is popular across the Asian region, reflecting a widespread valorization of lighter skin tones that has influenced ideals of beauty and class in many parts of the globe (Glenn 2009) [14]. When the skin is targeted as vessel of bright light however, lightening tools that add intense luminosity are applied and the skin is transformed until it becomes visually unlike human skin and the most luminous surface on the screen. When the viewer sees the screen, he or she may notice blurry light sources such as lamps in the background. The face or the body of the celebrity, however, holds a stronger definition in the foreground of the image, and light glows out from the body across the entire room or area featured on the screen. Frequently, editors in Bangkok will add a very small, blurred light outline, like a thin halo, around the actor to accentuate this strange skin effect. This light is not nearly as noticeable as splashes of green lightning. However, the effect is similar in that the human body of the actor is set apart from the regular image. The celebrity is defined as separate, the source of light, set apart from the world of objects and people that do not produce light. The skin is not like a sun or a lamp. The luminescent skin glows bright, smooth, and more textured and defined than skin as usually seen on or off camera.

[14] As in many parts of Asia, in Thailand lighter skin is thought to be more beautiful than dark skin and skin lightening cremes are popular beauty products sold in all mainstream convenience, supermarket and beauty stores. While working with and shadowing production companies I encountered the use of racism towards people of African backgrounds, the use of blackface, and a broad acceptance that lighter skin was more beautiful than dark skin. I originally included a discussion about these practices and norms within the dissertation but as they distracted from my main arguments, I removed it. I intend to discuss them in a different piece of writing.

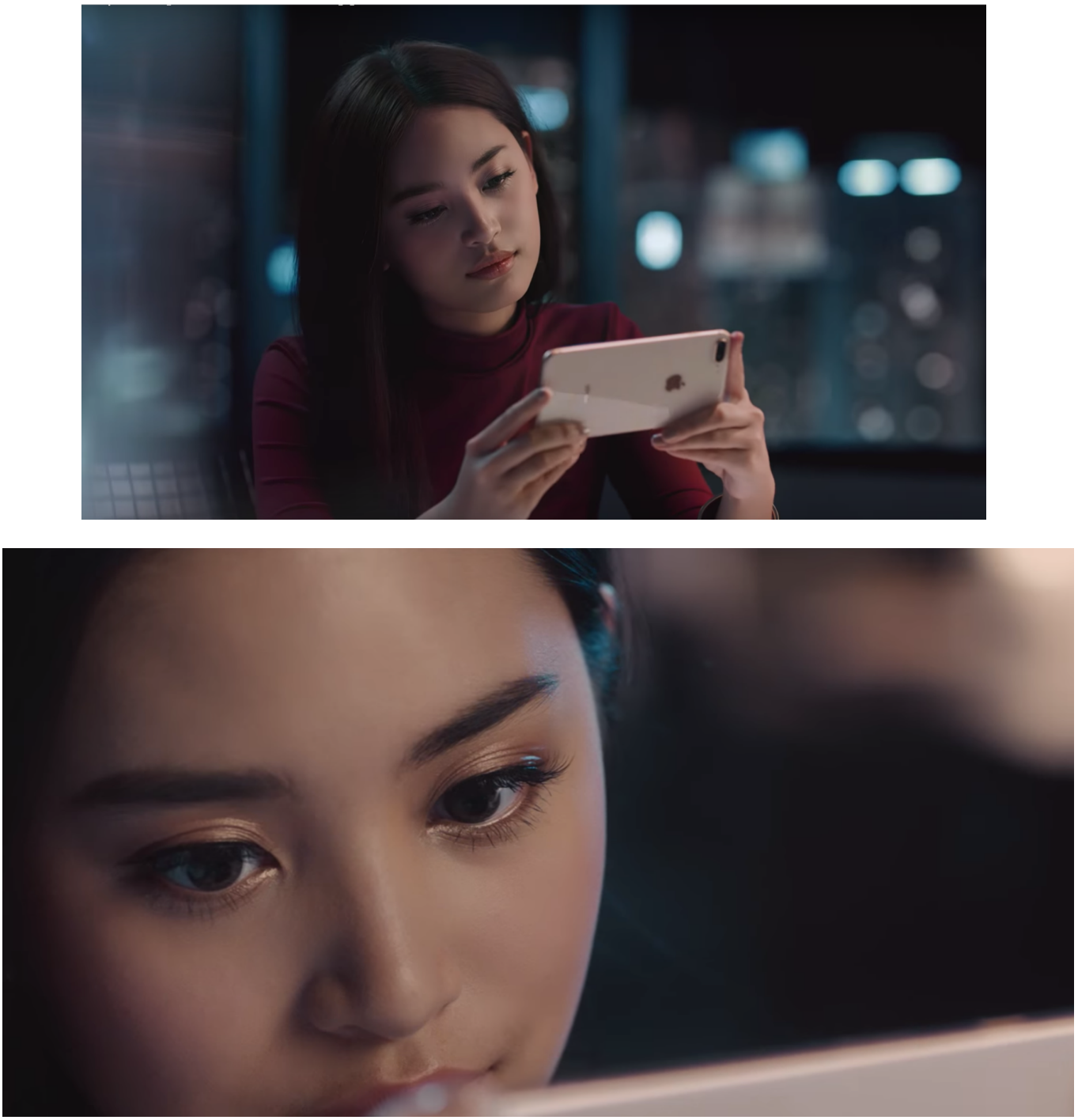

Figure 12. Two stills from a 2018 Truemove H (telecommunications company) advertisement, *Chat jayn tuk kwaam roo seuk gap troo moof ayt rerm piang 17500* "Every Feeling is clear with iPhone 8 on Truemove H 4G HD Network, start at only 17500" youtube.com/watch?v=S3hYkE9Ly1U . Stills are cropped to emphasize the white light used to emphasize the side of the face.

Figure 13: Still from 2018 DTAC (telecommunications company) advertisement, *dee taek mee kleum mai laew nag or lam gwaa leun gwaa leun gwaa ngai* (DTAC's new wave has arrived. How is bigger, superior, smoother?) www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVuseBXMB1U . Stills are cropped to emphasize the luminosity and extra-definition of the skin. Note the luminesce of the actor's faces appears disproportionate in the context of the background light sources available.

Figure 14: Still from DTAC's 2019 video *Ngern mai por eek laew si na* (Not enough money again) youtube.com/watch?v=LE1A_0L2BPI . Notice that the brightest part of the screen is the right-side of the actresses' face and that her skin appears to glow with an inner light.

New digital techniques for altering the body through easily available technology narrow the frame in which beauty is found. The competition for achieving this beauty was presented as a dilemma to me by the manager of a Bangkok-based drama academy. This academy, basing itself on the model of Korean drama academies, attempted to provide intensive training in singing, acting, modeling, and other performance arts aimed at creating Thai celebrities. In a long board room with dark, cushioned walls, crystal lights, and a dark brown board table, the manager explained to me his pitch[15]:

> "In the past, if a casting agent was trying to find the right actress, he might audition three actresses and of the three, he would take the most beautiful. Now, however, all three of those actresses are beautiful, in fact, they have all been to the same [plastic surgeon] doctor, so in fact they actually look the same. Therefore, who will the casting agent pick? The actress who is only beautiful, the actress who is beautiful and can act, or the actress who is beautiful, who can act and can also sing?"
>
> "Well, I suppose he will pick the most talented actress, the one who can dance and sing," I replied.
>
> "Exactly," returned the manager, "it is not enough to be beautiful now. You have to be trained too."

While the manager's point was to emphasize the need for actresses' training, his comments also clearly illustrate another point – there is now a surplus of beautiful actresses who increasingly look alike. What, then, is this model of beauty aspired to, recreated, and copied? The manager's comments provided a clue- the form of beauty aspired to is something that can be aided or achieved through surgery and medical intervention. In particular, some of the most popular operations in Thailand for women are the changing of the nose, chin, jaw and eyes. The goal seems to be a flat, heart-shaped face with smooth skin, a small, pointed nose, and large, open eyes. The skin also must be young and very light in tone. The manager went on to explain that

[15] This interview was conducted mostly in Thai with a few sentences in English. I constructed the interview quote from recording and notes together.

work opportunities for most female leads will peak around the age of 19 whereas for men, it is the early 30s. As I have understood it, from the perspective of applying make-up and editing skin, this is in part because the epitome of female beauty must include skin that is as supple and soft as possible. With the added power of an expensive camera lens, a young woman's face can appear on screen as something beyond what is witnessed in everyday life to create a softness of texture and reflection of light that captures the eye because of its very ambiguity. The face glows as part of the air-brushed scene, the skin of cheeks and the forehead become the softest of soft textures, and the line between the soft cheek and the world around it becomes indistinct in a way that creates ambiguity about what is on screen and the extent that it is human or beyond human.

This understanding of color and beauty operates within the larger, metapragmatic Thai politics in which certain people are elevated above others. That is, a strong social hierarchy in class, prestige, and politics supports and works with a strong hierarchy of beauty that places certain people in a certainty of position. The visual elevation of people with high status has already been introduced in this chapter. The work of elevating status through visual performances is also a popular practice among the middle and working classes. Enter homes across Thailand or sit in a taxi or restaurant, and you will inevitably be sitting under the smiles of family members across the walls. Very often those photos are of family members in prestigious moments - moments of graduation, meeting royal family members, or on holiday. There may be the indexes of leisure time and travel - a beach, a summer dress, or a beach hat. These photos of graduation, holidays, and meeting the royal family are certainly moments of emotional satisfaction and nostalgia. The reoccurring selection of these particular moments display family intimacy, love, class, and lifestyle activity. The photos operate as markers that arguably attempt to elevate the social position of the family as a group in their own eyes and eyes of others.

In addition to family members, important public persons are also regularly found on office walls, vending carts, taxi dashboards, work benches, and other places of work. These photos are again also found in the home and frequently posted across social media. Important public figures whose portraiture is often displayed include politicians, members of the monarchy, celebrities, and holy figures, such as monks. Entering a restaurant that features a photograph of, for example, King Bhumibol, the Queen, or other family members, such as Princess Sirindhorn, can provoke comments and admiration from guests. The hierarchy of photos and images can even be viewed as a vertical hierarchy in space. On meeting with the manager of a star and talent company, I inquired as to what he thought about the influence and power of celebrities in Thailand. "In your opinion, are celebrities," I asked, "considered something special, different to normal people?" "Ah, yes!" He replied with a smile, "You may have noticed, when you visit the market, many market holders will have several photos on display. At the top is a photo of the Buddha, below that, a photo of the King, and lower than that (here he smiled and spread his hands a little) are photos of celebrities."

The use of visual distinction in elevating elite personages in Thailand emerges out of a constellation of historical, religious, technological, political, and market influences. Spiritual figures, monarchical figures, and celebrities do not exist on a single plane in popular Thai imaginaries. There are, however, areas of overlap between the three that allow for slippage in category shifting. For example, I have previously mentioned the popular Bangkok editing technique of outlining a celebrity with a thin outline of light. This technique mirrors a technique popular in Thai formal painting in which a holy person or important political figure is set apart from the background of the painting through the use of an outline that resembles a white or yellow light. The popularity of lightening the color palette of an image in advertising, moreover,

shares a strong overlap with certain Thai TV programs, especially those aimed at the Bangkok middle classes. These programs also employ a light color palette and a soft blurring of background image. These visual distinctions are not dissimilar to the forms of editing practiced by non-elite persons through tools such as beauty apps, camera lenses, and computer manipulation. The ubiquity of smart phones, beauty apps, and cheaper cameras has increased the kinds of image editing strategies available to broad publics in many parts of the world. Beauty editing apps are especially popular in Southeast, South and East Asia where the final edited photo product created is so significantly transformed from the original person that it is sometimes unrecognizable[16].

Access to the most powerful forms of image alteration and distribution remain limited by price, privilege, and access. The skill required for achieving successful photo edits in a style that is convincing has itself become a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979). I witnessed how skilled image editing is a form of cultural capital during my time behind the scenes working with production workers who had time and technology to invest in improving their own image in addition to those they worked for. Many of the young people I worked with, especially women and transgender men, spent hours each day working on images they would post to their social media pages. Experimenting with new editing apps, using the company's professional cameras, styling outfits at work, practicing new cosmetic techniques, and learning poses were some of investments in time and effort that workers pursued in order to elevate their social, creative, and employability status on their social media feeds. The value of an image presented in the mode of an elite personage in Thailand follows in the train of centuries of religious art on the

[16] The use of light editing technologies and techniques also clearly embeds a particular form of racism, which I plan to discus in greater detail elsewhere.

subcontinent and two centuries of Thai political campaigns to elevate the public profile of the monarchy.

The exercises of improving, editing, and creating a stylish and admirable images are, I argue, socially and professionally circumscribed by social hierarchy. A network monarchy and status hierarchy that McCargo (2005) describes as distributing social and political influence from a political center to a network of distributed connections, shape how images are made and circulated. Popular Instagram accounts of celebrities and influencers (with followers in the millions), for example, universally include indexes of wealth and status, including holidays at the beach, luxury clothes, cafes, and cars. In regards to the ability to make beautiful images, moreover, the impact of this skill is harnessed by an individual's (and team's) social status. As I go on to describe in further detail in the following section, digital, video, and talent workers trying to succeed in the marketing and video industries frequently found their ambitions curtailed by their lack of social reputation and high-status contacts. A reinforcing cycle was evident in which success and status was tied to appropriate behavior, but demonstrating appropriate behavior makes it difficult to advocate for professional opportunities. Aura as manifested in beauty, reputation, and authority were interlinked in a self-preserving clique, which preserves those at the top of the social hierarchy in their own set-apart group.

Aura and Authority

As I have described so far in this chapter, the roles and relative power of different people working behind the scenes in video production in Bangkok is strongly circumscribed. While I witnessed skill, creativity, and talent valued daily, the first priority in daily labor practices of negotiation was smooth relationships and smooth *riiap rawy* (neat, orderly) presentation. The concept of *riiap rawy* has been used by Thai political leaders to call for order within hierarchy

model of state, bureaucracy and people at least since the 1957 coup lead by Field Marshal Sarit (Thak 1979). As Herzfeld (2017) explains, a "bourgeois concern" of *riap rawy* has been instrumental in projects of spatial cleansing, gentrification and urban planning.

In my experience with Bangkok production crews, *riiap rawy,* was an important barometer of work done well. Being *riiap rawy,* that is, having certain ability with style, physical appearance, and manner was equally important. A smooth, humble, and neat appearance was often described to me as the most important quality in employees, yet it was also clear that being *riiap rawy* and humble would never be sufficient for success. There were many calm, neat, quietly frustrated employees who were *riiap rawy*, but they did not necessarily have the opportunities and rewards come to them that they had hoped for. At first, I could not see or understand the difficulties or motivations that influenced those around me to act in such compliant ways. It seemed as though they were quick to accept limitations put upon them and reluctant to push for more opportunities or benefits beyond what they were given.

I gradually came to learn that one largely unspoken quality that was crucial to industry success was summed up in a concept, *barami* that I heard translated variously as "aura," "merit," "prestige," "contacts," and "reputation,," although translated by most scholars as "charisma." The exemplary embodiment of this quality was sometimes described as King Bumbiol, Rama IX, who, especially in the years proceeding and following his death, was spoken about repeatedly in terms of his *barami*. During my time in Bangkok, I noticed that the concept of *barami* could both refer to a person having a large network and/or refer to the respect and success that lead to the presence of the network. Depending on how the term was used, *barami* was thus both evaluative and descriptive.

Several scholars (e.g., Persons 2008; Veal 2013; Johnson 2014) have written how the King's reputation for *barami* lends authority and respect to other high-status figures who are thought of as close to or similar to the King in character. Although as Jory (2002) notes however, the use of the term *barami,* (from the Pali, *parami*), is intimately tied to the representation of the King as a *bodhisatta,* and thus has only remerged in public discourse in regards to the King in recent years. For the most of the second half of the twentieth century, the term *barami* had appeared only as a "relic" in "politics, business, military circles, and even the criminal world. . . to describe the often-intangible power of 'charismatic' leaders who are able to attract a large following of supporters and exert influence" (Jory 2002:63). It is thus not surprising that there is considerable semantic slippage in regards to the way *barami* is used, sometimes containing spiritual associations, and at other times used as a description for a person's large professional network.

When working in production companies, I sometimes found it difficult to find people who could articulate to me how they understood the importance of *barami* and its importance to success. Often, if I asked someone, they would admit *barami* was important but struggle to explain why. Once, however, I sat in on a heated meeting in which some of the junior employees spoke in an usually direct fashion to their team's producer about what they wanted changed on their latest advertising video project. Some of the junior employees suggested that Gun, their male colleague and fellow team member, could be trusted to be the project's head camera man, but conflict broke out when this man was suggested. One team member asked if Gun, who had the reputation of being quiet but a bit of a rascal, had sufficient *barami* to be put forward as head camera man. In the end, the producer sided with those who thought the suggested colleague was not respected and known enough to be given the job. A few months later, I saw that Gun was

given his first opportunity to act as head camera man. This opportunity was given on a day when there were few clients at the set.

While some working in advertising production would not always talk directly to me on the topic of barami, there were others who were quick to complain about their experience. One production team, *Burrito Production*[17], was made up of four friends in their 30s who worked together. I met the *Burrito* team in a small and overcrowded co-working café in central Bangkok. The team worked on different video projects, including small TV series and advertising campaigns. They were flexible and willing to try different things, so the team looked for media work in a range of different sectors and mediums. The *Burrito* team explained to me that, yes, they worked hard, and they got work, but they would never have fantastic work opportunities because of their lack of a strong reputation. The right reputation, they explained, only came from attending the right university and from knowing the right people. Reputation was only possible if you were born into the right family. Gear, who worked as the director on the team told me,

> There is intimacy in Thai culture - as there is in other countries. But in Thailand the intimacy is not a beautiful thing. It's a difficult thing. When you interact with others, say in a certain way you *chit hai* (screw up) , well, Thai people don't *thalaw gan* (argue). The one who has no power will not try and mess with someone who has power. Even if their age is the same, it doesn't matter. If you're from a small group, you're not going to mess with a big group. You have to know your *yuu bpen* (status) and act accordingly. . . The reason for this is not the sweetness of tradition or the *khwaam bpen kon thai*

Here gear used the term *khwaam bpen kon thai* [essence of Thai people] mockingly, alluding to a repressive national stereotype found in many advertising and propaganda campaigns (Tejapira 2002)]. Gear continued,

> It is a terrible system that we are born in. . . . It is something to do with *konecshon* (connection). . . If you are a *kon dua lek* (a small person) . . . and you dare to *sauh* (be assertive/impertinent), or say something without thinking, you will have problems and won't have work in the future.

Here, Jeab, Gear's friend and colleague joined in, also using the English word "connection",

[17] This interview was recorded and transcribed.

> It's all about the *konecshon*. If you are born in a high-class family, you're going have a lot of connections. When you go to college, what kind of friend will you have, high-class friend or normal like us? Yeah, that's all about *konection*.

When I asked the team if they could explain further about the difficulties in trying to succeed in the industry, Gear explained how his team was small enough to be thought of as freelancers, a status accompanied by all the insecurity that freelance work brings. Since they were freelancers, the director had to work harder than others to make the team attractive. Here, Gear used the phrase, *dtong chorp kii na,* a slang phrase that could be translated as, "make the face bullshit".

> As freelancers. . . whether in media or other sectors, we need to be attractive to survive. You need to make the face bullshit. . . You need good connections … people you know from the same university, or maybe from a workshop or festival. But this is all about connections. If you are born into a high class family, you will have good connections, and you will go to a good university, which is more good connections. There are different classes in this industry…. There is the *chon chan tam ngarn,* (the class of production people who do the work), which is not the same as the *chon chan jaang ngaan* (the class of employers), the people who have power in the industry and own the work. There is a division between these two classes. If you work *buang lang* (behind the scenes), you need to make connections, and you can do that if you are *khohn suung,* ("up there"/ high status). You can also bring yourself "up there" if you use personality. If you make yourself extrovert, then you can make connections, let everyone in the room know that you exist and present yourself …you still have to be careful however, that people like you, at the same time, you need to be cute and humble.

Here, the director's female colleague joined in, "Yes, you can start from zero and rise, but in Thailand, that's very rare."

As mentioned previously, academic and popular critiques of Thai economic and political disparity have pointed to the exceptional exclusivity and influence of the Thai super-elite, a small class with great influence. The protected privilege of this super-elite is displayed daily through public performances of merit, virtue, beauty, and style. For example, the heads of corporations, businesses, institutions, education, and government frequently lead their respective teams, employees, and students in neatly orchestrated Buddhist merit and celebration ceremonies. The elite, in addition to certain celebrities and influencers, are invited as special guests to public and private events, such as store promotions, the celebratory opening of new buildings, and the launch of new government projects. At these events, the elite are photographed smiling and well-dressed. These events create short, effective messages of beauty and merit. Advertising operates as a perfect parallel industry to these performances. It provides an industry in which performances of beauty and status are perfected. Many of the powerful and successful people in advertising, a prestigious and lucrative industry, are those people with great *barami* – reputations for merit, charisma, and extensive contacts.

The role of respectability in gatekeeping access to work in the film production industry, is not unique to Thailand. Behind the scenes of Bollywood production, Ganti (2012) describes how ideologies of respectability and elitist discourses are used by industry gatekeepers to prevent the presence of potential employees and artists they believe would harm the industry's prestige. The expression and acquiring of *barami* in the Thai industry however, had a particular inflection in terms of gender and class. While the team from *Burrito Productions* thought of *barami* as something almost impossible to develop without the right family and education, others closer to

the top of the industry hierarchy thought of *barami* as gained through talent and moral activity. For example, Austen, a famous creative director of a large advertising firm, saw organizational skills and humility as the key to building one's *barami.* Like the director of *Burrito Productions*, Austen also understood intimacy and humility as a source of tension but from a different perspective.

> Austen: "This is another thing about Thailand. We are respectful and we show humility. . . we have respect for seniority. This hierarchy creates a tension. On the street you call people brother, sister. You don't do this in other countries. But on the bad side, we also kill our own people, like when the Red shirts [political supporters of the Shinawatra family] come out. So there are both good and bad sides. . . the management style is respectful, to speak less and listen more, we look up to those people. Not the articulate.
>
> Bronwyn: Is this respect related to *barami*?
>
> Austen: Yes, respect is for those who have the ability to organize and build. To spend time with people and build trust, or those come along and already have a reputation. Success is not for the smartest but the diplomatic, not for those who "do the job" and make demands. Not those who are *deuu* (stubborn).
>
> Bronwyn: Is this the same for men and women or is there still some gender imbalance? Can both men and women have *baramai*?
>
> Austen: (Pauses, leans backs). There is gender equity in this industry. Its already an open time. Women are very successful. Our chair lady [of the marketing firm Austen works for] is a woman who is a woman like this. When she walks into the room, you (here Austen spreads his hands out and looks alert), even if she doesn't talk. You feel her aura. A person who is not successful is a person who talks too much, a successful person listens, knows when to talk and talks to the point. They are very . . . humble, polite, well dressed and sweet as possible.

The conversation then moved on to new workers joining the industry and the competition from freelancers (the term the Burrito team had used to describe his team):

> Austen: Students now don't want to work for big companies. That want to be freelancers, open a shirt store in Chatujak market [big weekend market in Bangkok] or open a cafe.
>
> Bronwyn: With freelance culture is it harder to understand the industry? To see who is present and where work is going?
>
> Austen: No, because we are not interested in those smaller companies. Big companies work with companies like ours, we don't worry about the small companies that would be

> working with freelancers. Big brands won't stay with us if we use freelancers, they want a team that is dedicated and accountable. They rely on the Thai reputation for commitment and service.

Gear and Austen provided very different perspectives on status, charisma, and opportunity within the industry. From the perspective of Austen, a middle-aged man with a local industry reputation for leading successful and expensive campaigns, patience, sweetness, and humility would attract the reward of a positive reputation. Austen suggested that freelancers, young people who wanted to pursue their own opportunities outside of established companies, and working class political violence were part of a shared cultural problem. Austen's evaluation of freelancers and demanding young people was offered in moral terms and not primarily a criticism of their work quality. From Gear's perspective, however, moral expectations for humility and sweetness presented a bind on opportunity from which it was almost impossible to escape unless an individual was lucky enough to have high-status connections and education.

Austen's evaluation of status, moral worth, and opportunity were enshrined in the institutional promotional language and industry events of the AAT (Advertising Association of Thailand). The AAT was originally created in the 1960s with the intention of promoting ethical standards and community in the industry and since its inception has worked closely with successive Thai governments to support a thorough censorship of video ads. In the mid-1990s, the AAT negotiated with the government to develop a new AAT staffed "TV censorship board" giving more responsibility of censoring TV video ads to TV stations and the AAT. The reason given for this new privatization of the censorship was the strictness of the law and the difficulty of commercial competition. The AAT, however, remained exclusive in its membership, which constituted established agencies and respected academics.

Both in Thailand and internationally, the advertising industry represents itself as a socially creative, entrepreneurial endeavor. In markets and in media, advertising agencies are

perceived leaders in culture and technology. For example, in their celebration of 50 years - the AAT described the work of "ad people" with "Every determination. Every inspiration. Every creative thought. Every power of cooperation. To make great ads, that change society." No mention was made in their celebratory language, however, of the production labor which makes their creative work possible. The association does not include any production houses in its membership, and with the exception of some small awards such as the year's best "lighting assistant" it almost never acknowledges the role of labor beyond an advertising firm's creative and strategic work.

When I asked representatives from advertising and marketing firms to describe the role of production crews in the advertising process, advertising agency representatives sometimes told me that production houses were not important and were considered "mere labor." I argue that this response demonstrates a blindness to, or misrepresentation of, the creativity and responsibility undertaken by production crews. In the current market of digital advertising, some clients who desire more frequent, and cheaper advertising campaigns, are cutting out the role of advertising agencies in the production process and going straight to the production house to ask for both creative and production work. When I ask people working in large advertising agencies their opinion on this, they are often surprised at this, not thinking that production crews have the talent or resources for this work. This surprise demonstrates a presumption about the boundaries of human creativity and a presumption about the need for and place of experts in the production of creative material.

Visual Exclusivity of the Extra-Human:

In this chapter, I have argued that the Thai political and social elite are represented to the Thai public in visual forms not readily available or applied to the social majority. Although

cheap digital tools introduce new opportunities for image alteration and beautification, access to skills and material assets for making beautiful images is a form of cultural capital restricted to the elite and upper middle classes. These practices emerge from a long historical precedent of using religious objects in public to increase the reputation of political leaders, and elevating the prestige of the monarchy and top tier social elites though public statues, portraits, and dress styles on public display. Thailand's current political, monarchical and celebrity figures promote themselves to the public through visual channels especially photography and video. The communication of something more or extra-human is critical for representing these special figures and involves a variety of practices: the use of lighting effects, color pallets, airbrushing and special CGI effects. Attempts to elevate public personas through visual investments can of course fail. An image campaign that represented General Prayuth in a newly relaxed look including blazers and baseball caps, was mostly interpreted as comical and inauthentic (Prachathai English 2019). Efforts to use photography and video for political and social influence, whether successful or unsuccessful, reflect ongoing shared aesthetic techniques of production and representation across religious, political, and celebrity spheres.

Figure 15: A photo from General Prayuth's new image campaign. Released March 9, 2019. [Image from Prachatai English 2019]

Changes to the structure and speed of social organization and market operations within the advertising industry can appear organic and unregulated. Just as fast, unregulated financial activity can be mistakenly idealized as operating without human intervention, the marketing industry's conceptualization of consumers as "co-creators" mistakenly represents a population's majority, youth, or working classes as exerting an organic influence over popular culture, images, and marketing. Graan (2013, 174) argues that the "rise of the consumer citizen has generally been associated with depoliticizing effects." In this chapter, I am not questioning the social and political power of youth or a population majority, but I am arguing that examples of

consumer criticism of a brand over social media or consumer participation in branding exercises does not represent a meaningful shift in the aesthetic ownership of popular culture or the social movements expressed in marketing campaigns.

In Bangkok, the professional and social leaders of the advertising industry continue to conceive of creativity as a form of expertise that reinforce existing class inequalities. In so doing, they share the prejudices of creatives working in many other markets across the globe (Flew and Cunningham 2013; Bonte and Musterd 2009). The Bangkok advertising elites reserve for themselves a particular kind of creative expertise, however, that conceives of social leadership, *barami*, conservative political bias, and aesthetic style in a mutually reinforcing relationship. This powerful "habitus" in Bourdieu's sense (1977) produces shared dispositions and tastes that may be produced unreflectively. Studying the production processes involved in aesthetic choices provides the opportunity to trace the lineage of certain aesthetic and, sometimes unreflective, evaluations in terms of class. The representation of Thailand's elite as a supernatural or extra-human visual presence arguably, however, goes beyond class distinctions of taste. Rather than maintain a privileged preference for the abstract which Bourdieu (1979) describes as a mark of social distinction, Thai image makers invest in images that represent the powerful with lighting and CGI effects that push the boundaries of the human into the dream-like, the supernatural, and extra-human.

Beyond Thailand, a global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld 2004) circulates popular aesthetic trends in photography, video, fashion, and other forms of design that buttress class hierarchies across vast geographic distances and cultural differences. The trend towards skin lightening in cosmetics, medical technologies, and digital color and CGI enhancements is, for example, widespread across the Asian continent (see chapter four). Political and social hierarchies in

Thailand, and mainland Southeast Asia more generally, take these global aesthetics and subvert them, adopting international trends for their own visual projects of status differentiation. Within this project, the production processes of advertising in Bangkok operate within a space that is dominated by the values of the Bangkok middle class. These processes are also reliant upon the manual work of both working class Thais (especially in the services of lighting assistants, cooks, drivers, and other support staff) and the manual labor of young, compliant middle class workers, who frequently find themselves trapped in terms of professional or social advancement. These experiences and conditions of work remain, however, overlooked by the industry's own representative bodies and in their own self-representation. The current conditions for market success under global capitalism require no investigation or transparency into the processes of production in the visual commercial industries. I argue that the profit-making success stories of the advertising industry benefit from widespread ignorance about the conditions of production. Industry leaders manufacture market visions of value creativity by social leaders and hide the value provided by cheap labor in locations such as Thailand.

CHAPTER TWO: STIMULATION AND STIPULATION:

CREATIVITY UNDER CENSORSHIP

May 20, 2016

To Mr ___ ,

Regarding: Permission to Use Clip ___ .

Our company ____ has received a commission from ___, to produce the viral video ____ for the project *The Pride of Thailand*.

The Pride of Thailand project is the result of the cooperation of the Thai Foundation for National Identity together with *Iconsiam* mall in Bangkok. This project will invite the Thai population to participate in the preservation of Thainess by sending stories in the form of videos and photos etc. on the topic of Thainess [*khwaam bpen thai*], Thai lifestyle, Thai traditions, famous Thai places, and Thai people of renown etc. In collecting these stories together, the intention is to celebrate the glory of the Thai King.

Accordingly, our company has viewed your video about Muay Thai boxing by ____ on Vimeo. We consider this video to be ideal for use in our project. Therefore we ask for your permission to use this clip. We will use it after receiving your permission. Below are further details of the clip and our project. We attach out storyboard and examples of the clip we would use with your permission.

We sincerely hope that we will receive your help and we thank you for the opportunity to share our plans for this project with you.

Yours Respectfully,

_____, Post Producer, _____ Production Company.

Translation into English of a letter requesting video permissions to a French Director sent via Facebook. I assisted the post-producer in translating the letter in Bangkok and communicating via Facebook messaging with the French director who owned the desired clip.

Advertising campaigns emerge in Thailand within a national media ecosystem where social status is stitched together with a thread of political conservatism. Sometimes, this interweaving of politics and media is obvious, such as when advertising production houses take part in propaganda projects like the "Pride of Thailand" campaign quoted above. The "Pride of Thailand" campaign was a marriage of convenience between an elite shopping mall and a national foundation for Thai patriotism. Together, these firms operated on the understanding of consumers as "co-creators," inviting people to send in stories, photos, and videos celebrating Thailand to an accompanying "Pride of Thailand" website. The participation of consumers was orchestrated through the use of celebrities, the desirability of the consumer objects, the opulence of the mall, the inspirational theme of the videos, and the beauty of the golden graphics on the accompanying website. The entire project was blatant in its intent to celebrate and create patriotic consumer-citizens. Examples of such overtly patriotic work are not difficult to find in Bangkok. At the same time, Bangkok's advertising production workers and larger media industry become complicit with more subtle but pervasive forms of censorship. Creative practices, including concept development, artistic vision and editing, are sites of everyday censorship that strengthen the power of everyday political hierarchies. While there are important exceptions

(both in content and creative individuals), the industry's overall structural hierarchy supports an environment of everyday self-censorship and patriotism.

Since the 2014 coup, the Thai military government has been pursuing political and social legitimacy for a new era of establishment politics. Essential to this political project is routine propaganda and censorship of bodies, texts, and images in public and semi-public spaces. In the previous chapter, I argued that this propaganda project of the military government builds upon a long history of making and circulating images of the elite as personages "more than human." In that chapter, I began to explore the ways in which this locally produced hierarchy intersects with a broader set of international market relationships in which production-savvy and subservient young Bangkok ad-makers are positioned as ideal creative labor in this online, image-lifestyle-conscious industry. In this chapter, I offer a more detailed picture of the daily work and experiences of these Bangkok ad-makers and the social relationships that constitute the media industry's powerful hierarchy. I explore how these workers, such as the post-production producer who wrote the above letter, seek success and social acceptance within a media industry and consumer market that rewards patriotism and political conservatism. I explore how a strong Thai social-political hierarchy and everyday practices of self-censorship operate in tandem.

It would be possible to explore this powerful political relationship from the periphery – through the experiences of those positioned as dangerous outsiders and to focus on the frustrations of those for whom this order prevents social and economic opportunities. Indeed, this might have been the expected anthropological approach. Instead, with a view to utilizing an anthropological critical perspective in a different direction, I chose to utilize ethnographic participation, with its capacity for cultivating human empathy, for the purpose of understanding the motivations and experiences of the market-savvy, politically conservative, or complicit,

middle classes. By spending time and working alongside Bangkok ad-makers, I learned to better understand the creation and nourishment of currents of political conservatism in Bangkok. In particular, I observed and took part in the factory of patriotic feeling, the production and circulation of emotions created for the purpose of rousing patriotism and consumerism.

The ethnographic stories from this chapter center around the censorship of media and creation of propaganda that emerged in the months following the death of the Thai King Bhumibol, Rama IX, in October 2016. By investigating the censorship and propaganda that followed the King's death, I uncover the everyday social and market relationships that sustain censorship practices in contemporary Thailand both within and outside of such singular historic moments. In doing so, I see the historical event as an useful analytic for uncovering larger social structures in the midst of change (Gluckman 1940). I argue that censorship and propaganda need to be understood through their material forms and the technology by which they are created and edited as well as the genre of media in which they are interpreted and the social relations through which these processes are sustained. In other words, I follow other social scientists who view the creation, circulation and experience of emotions and affects as shared social phenomena and investigate both the production of shared semiotics and meaning as well as particular characteristics of the work themselves (Pinney 2008; Ahmed 2004; Van Alphen 2013).

All the King's Men: The Streets and Screens Turn Black

Figure 16. The grounds of Siriaj Hospital, Bangkok, October 12, 2016, Photo by Author.

In October 2016, a series of photos spread rapidly across Thailand. Gathering momentum in repetition and distribution, the photos broke like a pandemic over news and social media. Within days, they were featured on the front page of news sites across the world. The photos were portraits of old women. The women dressed uniformly in pink shirts, which after a few days were exchanged for black ones. They sat on the ground, knees bent, and the camera, similarly creeping low to the ground, captured these elderly women, gathered closely together in pink shirts, thick glasses, and cheap pearls in expressions of distraught weeping. Below their soft lined faces, chins tilted past wailing mouths towards their chests, the women cradled and stroked the wide, gilded frames of the portraits that were nestled in their laps. These photos of the women on global news media had popular ubiquity not because of the particular women they featured. Each photo contained many different women. None of the women were famous, young, or beautiful. The photos were popular because of the unusual level of grief displayed by the women. Elderly women directed tender, maternal emotion towards the inanimate portraits that they held as tenderly and tightly as they might cling to a suffering grandchild. To many global

eyes, the women's tenderness, reflected in their eyes and the cupping of their arms, towards the portrait was bizarre. This was especially the case because the portrait was not of a close family member, but the elderly, ornately dressed monarch - King Bumipbol, otherwise known as Rama IX. In Thailand however, the photo of the women clutching the portrait was powerful not for being bizarre but as an emotive expression exemplifying a widely shared social grief and fear. Two of the most popular names for the King were *nailuaang*[18] and *por* (father). His portrait, to many, had a social, personal, even spiritual efficacy. Official announcements from the palace said that the King was in the hospital. It was rumoured, however, that this was no ordinary hospital visit. Many believed the King was dying.

King Bhumibol, Rama IX , had been monarch of Thailand for over seventy years when he died on October 13, 2016. On that particular day, I was working with P'Mad's production team, who were busy editing an advertising video for household paint. The day was very quiet. Whispers of death were thick across the city. We heard that elderly women were weeping on public trains. Smart phones, typically in the hands of team members almost as frequently as additional bodily appendage, were even more constantly in the hands of their owners, seeming to never leave the hands or eyes of those around me.

I spent most of the day in the darkness of a sixth floor editing studio, where the production team, huddled within tiny rooms with thickly curtained windows, kept busy with the details of editing sound, color, and comic timing. The solitary sound of a hired voice-over actor perfecting his pitch, extending and adapting his vowels, raising them higher, holding them

[18] This is an intimate reference to the King that could be translated as "inside the palace" but is also sometimes translated as "in the heart." A popular sticker found on cars in Bangkok features the words *nai luaang* in Thai and the words "Love the King" in English inside the shape of a heart.

longer, reverberated across the slowly moving minutes and hours. The visiting client team sat in a long row on heavy brown couches in darkened rooms, watching the grey-haired vocal artist strain for maximum animation in his voice. At lunch time, P'Mad, the producer, was especially serious. Usually sharp and fast-thinking, today he distractedly repeated the same stories he had told me days earlier. Over a pungent meal of northeastern curries, stringy with vegetables and fermented fish sauce, P'Mad shifted tone and told me a new and uncharacteristically dark story. It was about a recent advertising film shoot up in Chiang Mai. The camera team was on two quad bikes, following a group of young actors in a jeep. The film crew perched on the bikes, angling out for the best shot. The crew sped down the dirt road, acrobats' bodies and equipment plunging with every turn and bump. At one turn, the bikes crashed. The lead camera man died. "The TV ad was never finished" P'Mad concluded.

In the late afternoon, our team emerged from a dark, crowded editing room and made our way to the elevators. P'Mad walked into the elevator with eyes fixed on his phone, then turned to me with frozen face. "This is it. Gone." I paused. P'Mad showed me a tweeted article by the *South China Morning Post*. The article had been posted and then officially retracted. "Are you sure?" I asked. P'Mad replied, "Sure," as he held up his phone, showing the now deleted tweet. P'Mad's certainty threw me, and I wondered what his networks or assumptions, were that would give him such certainty. We emerged from the elevator and P'Mad told me he was going back to the company office. I mentioned I was planning on meeting some Harvard students and alumni on the other side of the city. P'Mad asked me, "Are you sure you want to go? They will understand if you don't go." Caught off guard, I didn't know what to say. Only later did I realize his challenge. P'Mad thought we should stay close at this time. Who would go out if his father had died?

After a long ride across the city, I arrived at the restaurant where the alumni group were meeting. Not long after we arrived, around seven o'clock, a large TV in the restaurant cut to an official announcement in black. We all gathered around to watch. Like many royal TV announcements, it was in royal language, filled with conventional phrases about the King's righteousness. The form and function of the TV was completely transformed. No longer did I see endless laugh tracks, cartoon pop-ups and advertising. Instead, I witnessed something I had rarely seen in Thailand: black and white TV. The broadcast studio was bare, with a grainy, unsophisticated backdrop. It was not the work of creative young freelancers with new smoke editing tools. Instead, it looked like a studio from a time warp – the style and technology of the 1960s. The palace announcement, was followed by a similarly somber message from General Prayuth. There were rules. Everyone should dress in black. Ordinary media programming would be cancelled for a few days and some programs for one month. There would be a year of mourning. Nothing seemed to be a law- but everything seemed to be compulsory. I turned to my friend, Trude Renwick, a PhD student at Berkeley, and asked if she was interested in going to see what was happening at *Sanam Luang*, the park and roads around the Grand Palace.

The roads, normally thick with some of the world's worst traffic, were strangely sparse. Eventually, we found a taxi and asked the surprised but willing driver to take us in front of the grand palace. A small group of people, maybe 50 in total, had gathered to stand in front of the palace gates. We asked a few of the middle-aged ladies around us why they had come, and they said they had been walking home from work, but when they saw the palace, they felt compelled to stay a while. A few women had lit candles and placed them on the public utilities box on the side of the road. A few people muttered prayers or whispered. We saw the soldiers at the gate salute and allow an official car to pass through. The night was quiet in a way Bangkok almost

never is quiet. It was quiet as though a TV in the background, always in use, of a small Bangkok restaurant was unexpectedly switched off. We couldn't hear the Bangkok traffic or the sounds of the river or people slurping noodles on the street. Small candles cast a flicker, and tall street lights dropped an orange glaze over the quiet faces staring at the palace wall.

The following day and periodically, I went back to Sanam Luang and the palace. What was at first a haphazard and unorganized gathering, gradually became more structured and controlled in terms of space, comportment, dress, and activity. On the first few days, visitors wandered in every direction, crossing each road as it suited, sitting in the large public park on large sheets of foil. They lit candles near the palace wall. Teenagers grouped together, giggling, elderly people napped. Homeless people and visitors from other provinces slept in the area overnight, and during the day foraged food from the many people who walked around handing out odd snacks. Strange picnics were constructed out of bizarre combinations. On the fourth day, I found myself seated on the grass, slurping on rice congee with a side of pineapple cookies and under-sized apples, served with the bright red drink known as "Blue Boy." Within a few weeks, however, new fences were placed around the grassy areas of the park, and visitors were restricted to the pathways that formed a giant oval circumference around the park. By the second month, the palace and park space were becoming highly controlled. Following political protests on the Sanam Luang site in 2010 the area was fitted with new lighting and CCTV cameras, a new fence, caretakers and security personal (Chatri 2012), the park now had new security, the requirement to show ID in order to enter, bag screening, and several soldiers and police restricting and directing movement.

The censorship clamp-down on the public space around the palace escalated. Within a month, it was difficult to imagine this historic part of the city any other way. Those who visited

regularly in the first month, however, knew that the transformation had been experimental, gradual. By contrast, the ban on public images, television, and advertising had been made instantaneously, overnight. All TV programing ceased from the time of the death announcement. In the morning, the people of Bangkok awoke to a world where the large billboards, advertising screens, and subway televisions were black. In an unusual but telling move, both Facebook and Twitter demonstrated their own integration into local politics by announcing a one-month advertising ban on their respected platforms.

An early clue to this speedy transformation was right in front of my eyes - Thai citizens swiftly copying, adapting and sharing images posted on social media. Prior to the official announcement of death of the king's death, across the country pale pink symbolized good wishes for the king's health. Originally worn by the elderly King in honor of his wife, using pale pink on a Facebook or Instagram post became a sign of a citizen's desire to follow in the King's path. As the same shade proliferated across social media platforms, it also created a shared community color. The shared color signaled belonging and conformity within a community of concerned, praying, weeping citizens. Two days before the King's death, I went to see the women praying for the King outside his hospital. Those women wore the same shade of pink on their shirts. Instagram posters echoed the prayers of the old ladies by the hospital, using the same color indicating their good wishes for the King.

At the time of the official announcement of the King's death, many across the nation watched the television and observed its unusual grey-scale color. Before this moment, some people had already posted exclamations of sadness and deleted them at the rebuke of colleagues or friends, but now the posts of sorrow flowed freely. At first, most of the posts remained in pale pink. Illustrations featured the King's face in a thoughtful pose. Older women I knew posted old

photographs of the King, but the young people in production companies posted illustrations that looked like they came from a children's book. Childlike aesthetics were popular at that time. I had only recently attended an art exhibition where young adults curated nostalgic childhood objects: the food, cartoons and toys once familiar to them. Within a few weeks, childlike illustrations of the young king in military uniform also became a popular theme.

Across the internet and beside public roads, companies and organizations changed their public presence. The first to change were websites, Facebook pages, pop-ups, and media logos, which were replaced with simple black boxes and ornate cursive scripts with condolence messages. In the morning, people in Bangkok found that most of the advertisements on billboards around the city had been taken down. Some already sported new signs of condolence while others would have images and messages memorializing the King within a few days or weeks. The TV channels, all of which had been suspended, showed the same official announcements and featured black and white documentaries about the King. The stations would be allowed to control their own programming within two days, but the color of TV logos, TV presenters, stages, and decorations would all remain in grey scale, and programming was censored. Citizens quickly followed the example set by media and corporations. For only twenty-four hours, sad citizens circulated the pale pink posts. Then, the posts were replaced with images and text having greater conformity. All images, text, and graphics were rendered entirely in greyscale.

Figure 17. At Sanam Luang, October 14, 2016, Photo by Author.

Figure 18. Also at Sanam Luang, October 14, 2016, Photo by author.

Figure 19. The streets surrounding the Royal Palace, October 14, 2016, Photo by author.

Thai citizens were not legally required to change their own practices to fit with media channels, yet within a day, a majority of Facebook and Instagram profile pictures I saw online had changed their color to black or grey. Almost without exception, every Facebook or Instagram profile I saw, whether on my own feeds or on the devices of others, was either a single black box, a portrait of the king, or a simple message in black and white. Thai netizens were, moreover, using social media eight times more than on a normal week (Coconuts Bangkok 2016). Many people chose a black background with the Thai numeral for nine written in white, sometimes featuring underneath a simple phrase, such as "I was born in the era of King Rama IX" (popular in both Thai and English). Hashtags that rained and resounded across the walls of cyberspace included "Love the King," "I love my King," and "Thailand may not be the best country but we have the best King." This final popular phrase also made its way to t-shirts and into corporate video campaigns.

The national comparison central to "may not be the best country" reflected what Herzfeld (2016) identifies as a Thai "crypto-colonial" perspective of the nation state. The Thai nation-state, argues Herzfeld, offers an example of a widespread, but especially elitist preoccupation with the political evaluations of powerful outsiders, especially those from western powers. This preoccupation is heaviest among the Thai elite, but its impact extends beyond macro-level government concerns. The combination of resignation, humility, and pride in slogans like "Thailand may not be the best country but we have the best King" presents a form of nationalism that can be read as both modest and non-threating to powerful outsiders and simultaneously as projecting internally a strong authority. During the time of the King's death, Bangkok media and its consumers were aware of the international media gaze that turned toward their public grief. The widespread use of patriotic slogans in both Thai and English provided the opportunity to

participate in a patriotic act through the circulation of a statement that was aimed simultaneously at Thai and international audiences. In the months that followed the King's death, phrases like "Do good like Father" that were more directly designed towards the Thai audience grew in popularity.

The public participation in the official mourning program was broad in its publics and personal in its enthusiasm. On the first few days of mourning, everyone on the streets of Bangkok wore black clothes that looked oddly put together. Many people looked like they had pulled together what black clothes they had in the back of their cupboard. The clothes looked old, worn thin, and out of fashion with the current styles. Within a couple of days, however, many in the Bangkok middle classes had bought new outfits and walked around in the stiff fabric of clothes that have rarely been washed. Sparkling silver broaches in the shape of a Thai nine adorned thick black colored shirts and black lace blouses. From the buses rolling in from out of town, people from up country continued to arrive in odd-hanging skirts and worn-away trousers. In Bangkok, however, the mannequins in every shop window, from the street markets selling shirts for 80 bhat (US $3) to the designer shirts in brand store windows (US $300), were dressed in black.

In terms of displaying the body, the popular dress style during this time was modest. Across popular newspapers and social media, concerned Thai citizens engaged in *"chaonet juaak yap"* [literally, "netizens stab and destroy"], that is, the online berating and/or teasing of someone thought to have offended everyday social norms of decency or insufficient display of patriotism. In other examples, there were media reports of men and women being physically attacked for wearing clothes that were red or green in color (Kao Sod 2016)[19]. Sorrow was

further felt in public life through the silence hanging over public spaces. In places normally buzzing with music, TV, or chatter, there was a profound audible absence. People spoke quietly and, less often, as though they were in the midst of a solemn event. The silence was heaviest at busy public interchanges, on public transport, and in large crowds. The lack of noise gave the impression that some celestial being hand turned down the volume on a magic sound desk in the sky.

Images circulated that copied other images. Both on and offline, people quickly brought their mourning into line with what others were also circulating. In the weeks immediately following the King's death, the streets of the city became places of decoration. Businesses and schools set up special commemorative portraits, decorating pictures of the King with thick ribbons and rosettes in white and black. Bangkok's advertising and media industries were not only complicit with the changing spaces but also provided a form of image leadership and generated content thick with sentimental emotion. Beyond obedient, they were hyper-sensitive to possible offence and proactive in displaying emotions of grief and national loyalty. These emotions were most clearly displayed through a new series of patriotic, corporate-sponsored eulogistic videos that were shown repeatedly on TV and posted online in lieu of traditional advertising. The new videos were almost universally in black and white, featured choral or orchestral music, and included montages of either the King's life, Thai people mourning the King, or both. The videos first began circulating towards the end of the one-month ban on advertising. They were sponsored by the largest (and most nationalistic) of Thailand's corporations. After the official one-month ban on advertising ended, rather than resume business as normal, many companies continued to produce eulogistic videos rather than regular advertisements. These larger companies performed a particular market and social leadership role

by providing an example of how to follow government's ongoing request to halt the distribution of *ban theerng* (entertaining) images in favor of "appropriate" public media.

Many Thais influenced by Theravada Buddhism understand images as a potential spiritual or epistemological simulacrum – an image may reveal truth not otherwise accessible (Klima 2002). The removal of everyday advertising, social media profile pictures, and public decorations across the nation and the replacement with black and white images of the King is therefore not merely a matter of decoration or sentiment. It is rather a remaking and rebranding of political relationships within the national framework. Owing to the concentration of sculpting and ornamenting public areas in Bangkok, the ethical regime of images also reintroduces social and political authorities in Bangkok as the origin of the nation's pride, dignity, and spiritual power.

The Authentic Monarch: Filming the Perfect Eulogy

My own involvement in the making of public images of mourning for King Rama IX came about through P'Mad's team. About a month following the King's death, P'Mad first mentioned the possibility of a special project. P'Mad told me he was going to consult with a big-name client who wanted to make a patriotic video at Sanam Luang, the park next to the palace and the main site of public mourning. If the video were to go ahead, P'Mad explained, his production team would be responsible for much of the creative direction in addition to the filming and editing. It would be a sensitive conversation with the client, P'Mad said, and while it would be a great thing to do, it was by no means certain. About a week later, I learned P'Mad's proposal had been accepted. At the time, the entire production team was buzzing with the task of making the video. At the team meeting, we crowded along the company's longest table. Sitting knee to knee, we perched under a new portrait of King Bhumibol. The portrait was of the young

King in military uniform and it was embraced by a gold frame thicker than a camera man's muscled arms. This gleaming new decoration looked down over the muted tones of grey walls. The black-clad production team, who had put away their phones, sat on the edge of their seats and leaned in over the table with uncharacteristic concentration.

The assistant directors led the afternoon's discussion, explaining that this filming experience was a unique opportunity. Although they would go in with a plan, much of the work would have to be initiated on the day. An unusual degree of improvisation would be necessary. On a flat-screen TV, the assistant directors interspersed photos of activities they had seen on their scouting trip to the palace area with popular images of public grief shared widely on social media: teenagers collecting rubbish and old people with damp eyes. A short video capturing an old man's eye welling with a single tear was played on repeat. The young male assistant director described the *moot en tone (*mood and tone) as one of sorrow and pride. The director and his assistant spoke of the importance of including a diversity of faces, ages and backgrounds. The images would include faces of regular Thai people rather than celebrities and stars. The video would represent the heart of the nation.

On the day of the shoot, I met the team at Sanam Luang park. One of the production managers carried a large bag of sandwiches, but there was little time to eat. Today, the team was small, lacking costume, hair and make-up assistants as well as a lighting team and cooks. With everything on our backs, for the first time working with advertising crews, I was reminded of doing documentary work. Not tied to any location, we were operating with fast, nimble movements. We didn't have to worry about large trucks or expensive meals in order to appease grumpy movie stars. We introduced ourselves to people walking past, tracked down those teenagers collecting trash, rehearsed with our impromptu stars just once or twice, and filmed

short segments of speech and activity with the hope that they might fit our patriotic, visual bill. P'Mad walked over to me and asked me to walk with him for a while. "I want to make sure you understand what is happening here" he said. "There is a lot of bad western media that doesn't understand. They say the people here are manipulated." I looked back at him and nodded. "I know several BBC articles have been banned here," I said. "Yes, they write badly." He shook his head vigorously.

We split into two teams, and I walked with a small group of about five people – a casting director, production manager, assistant director, and two camera men. The assistant director suggested that we get a shot of someone engaged in the patriotic activity of posting a photo of the Royal Palace on Instagram and called me over to be a hand model. I was surprised at this request. My hand had previously been inspected before as a potential model – and found insufficient. Today, however, there was a smaller team, and I was counted as the best choice. I held the phone cradled in my hand, and the camera man carefully stood behind me, holding the camera over my shoulder in line with my left cheek. The assistant director grabbed my elbow and helped to steady my arm. With the other arm, he grabbed the camera man and helped to steady the camera. Together, a three-bodied-camera machine, we successfully captured the shot.

The assistant directors were insistent on filming specific moments. The directors were set on getting good footage of volunteers who were giving free haircuts, and filming this this took considerable time. We spent about two hours at the small tent by the river where volunteer barbers were giving free haircuts. Motorcycle drivers would leave from the same spot, carrying older members of the public on free rides. I could see some of the team were getting frustrated. They had incredible endurance and patience and were used to this grueling, all day, outdoor work. However, they were not used to filming live activity. They would miss the shot they

wanted because they expected a motorcycle driver to pause for them. They couldn't rearrange the tent where haircuts were done to get the camera angles they wanted. The rest of us, production assistants, acting coaches, and editors, sat around waiting for hours, pretending not to notice the failed shots and practicing patience.

In the afternoon, the team spent about two hours at a nearby old Bangkok community called Pom Mahakan, filming short interviews with the elderly residents. The Pom Mahakan community was a collection of handsome wooden houses, old twisted trees, and vibrant social and political life situated between the city wall and the public waterway. One of the young assistant producers, Fon, had been the one to suggest filming there. Fon had family links to the community, owing to the fact that her grandmother had once lived there. The Pom Mahakan community was also familiar to me as the site of Michael Herzfeld's (2016) decade-long research. I had read articles on the struggles of the people living there against city planning renewal of the area and heard Herzfeld speak often about the community. The community was under threat of eviction and had been engaged in a strong political struggle to gain recognition in the wider public in order to win public and bureaucratic support against the destruction of their homes. I knew that the community were keen to present their home as a "living museum" - a place where Thai and foreign tourists could come to experience architecture, crafts, and community that held strong links to past generations. In many ways, they had embraced, even promoted, themselves as a syncretic symbol of Thai tradition and diversity (Herzfeld 2016).

The production team spent a few hours filming spoken segments from a teenager, an old woman, and the elderly leader of the community. The directors chose to film the community members within their cluttered, dark, wooden houses. Without light and clear features on the screen, it was as though the speakers stood outside of time. On camera, they spoke from the

romantic past with the voice of the community's long love and respect for the King. The local political urgency of those statements, statements that were supposed to amplify the community's public reputation as ideal citizens and hopefully secure public support for their cause, was lost in our patriotic project. Ongoing evictions were never mentioned by the team; they had no place on the screen. We had entered this community on the plane of a performative strategy. We were here to film voices of tradition, of authentic Thainess. The wiry, passionate leader of the community offered a long speech on the inspiration of King Bhumibol and how the community had actively modeled themselves on his good works. This speech was filmed, certain phrases filmed several times, as the assistant directors would ask him to repeat himself again and again. However, the man's voice, and the moral authority that came with it, would never make it to the public audience. What finally made it to the final cut was a four-second segment – the old leader holding a portrait of the King, filmed in a dark, ancient room, offering a short phrase of emotion –*luang yuu nai hua jai kon thai tuk khohn (*the King lives in the heart of every Thai person). In the darkness, this leader of great strength and endurance, who had fought against successive city governments and promoted social order within his community, appeared much older and frailer than he really was[20].

As it grew dark, the day of filming among sweating crowds in their best black clothes drew to an end. We sat on plastic stools and ate brazenly spicy noodles at a street stall. Our bodies were tired, but we teased those who couldn't handle the chili peppers. In Bangkok, consuming spicy chilies has particular class and cultural implications. When middle and upper class Thais consume spicy dishes together, it presents an opportunity for cultural intimacy,

[20] As Michael Herzfeld notes however, the leader in question was feeling the stress of the impending destruction of the Pom Mahakan.

owing to the fact that people from these classes are more likely to express a taste for blander food with fewer chilies and spices as a mark of cultural and spiritual refinement (Herzfeld 2011). Waiting for the team driver to fight some of the world's worst peak hour traffic and pick us up, we then rested our tired, sweaty bodies on the curb. Our knees under our chins, thankful for a spare piece of hot road-side to sit upon, we relaxed for first time that day. Tey, the transgender casting agent and acting coach, fought off exhaustion by asking for help with his English. He was valiantly trying to learn to say "masturbate," but the "tur" and "ate" were proving impossible for him. After thirty minutes of practice and dirty jokes, his pronunciation probably sounded closer "mattress." And as so often when finishing a special job on set, we took a team photo after the day was done. Our small team stood at the end of the park, behind us the golden lights of the palace framed the purple-dusk sky. In totality, we had not been able to film everything we wanted. The specific images of devotion our story board had dreamt of did not always exist. This, however, would prove to be immaterial.

Figure 20: The production crew congregate at the entrance to Pom Mahakan and take photos outside the distinctive heritage homes. November 2016. Photo by Author.

Fictional Possibilities: Editing the Sanam Luang Video Advertisement

My experience of days filming on set typically began with the production team meeting their small transport vans at the office in the early hours of the morning (usually between 2:00 and 5:00 am). Those days finished when those same vans returned to the office around midnight (although sometimes as late as 4:00 or 6:00 am). Once we arrived at the shooting location, the number of people who poured out of various vans never failed to surprise me. Every task had a primary person responsible and an assistant, and many of those assistants had their own assistants. There were trainees whose job for the day was confined to a few minutes of straightening clothes, and many junior trainees would have nothing to do for hours on end. The large number of people on set made sense to me over time. I observed how the large number of

surplus assistants helped to increase the status attached to industry work. Responsibility was something trainees waited for patiently and obediently. There were, moreover, people on set who seemed unnecessary, but actually played an important role. Sometimes, this was a pretty assistant or stylish director's wife who provided a beautiful face for the company. I once thought the presence of post-production editors on set was the most bizarre waste of time. The role of these team members was confined to computer graphics and video editing. Once the video was filmed and assembled, they would include special effects, build cartoons, "stickers," and text to be added. On a shooting day, they had effectively nothing to do, as the content had not yet been filmed. They added yet another seemingly wasted group to the already glutted team of weary, patient bodies. Slowly, I came to understand that the presence of those editors on set, although rarely needed, was a time intensive, but invaluable resource.

The post-production editors were there to provide the eyes of fictional possibility. The directors and camera team might film an inept violin player on set and ask the post-production editor if it would eventually look professional. They would film steaming dumpling and ask what might be possible to improve in post-production. The dumpling did not look soft enough, bright enough, and the steam curled in the wrong direction. Would it be possible to edit this later? The editors present would then showcase their skills, affirming what they thought was possible to fix "in post" at a later date. Effectively, the post production team members were the barometers of video reality. They judged what was possible to manipulate beyond what the camera could capture in real time. When they looked at a filming studio or a street full of mourners dressed in black, they looked with different eyes, seeing what could be added and what could be erased. They took the view before us and offered a different reality.

The political power of this work spoke most fiercely to me when we filmed the patriotic video at the Sanam Luang park. The directors wanted to film images of devotion - and some of the images they wanted, they found before them. Adorable children, smiling old ladies, and people speaking with sincerity and emotion. However, by now certain images had become the indexical public shorthand for royal devotion, and these images could not be found during our filming day. Images circulated by the government and played in news cycles and cinemas included citizens standing neatly in line holding images of the king and people holding placards with phrases of love and sadness resolutely above their heads. These frequently circulated images and videos so, so much in demand, were not found at the actual location of mourning. However, the editors assured the team that fact would not prove a problem. The images were easily available online and could be added in splices of one to two seconds into the company's video montage. In order to give the video montage the appropriate sense of dignity and emotion, the editors would use orchestral instrumental music. The chosen tracks were made in Austria, bought online, and added as a soundtrack. While the editing of videos was usually not a team project, in this special case, the entire team sat around the long central table on the second floor and watched the highlights reel produced. There were smiles and audible sighs as a small child looked up while having his hair cut as old ladies smiled at the camera. The clips shown were very short, only a few seconds long, and usually in slow motion,. The tension of working in a less controlled environment, of not being able to produce exactly what was dreamed of in the planning stages, was palatable. Nonetheless, the editors had done their job. They had slowed time on screen to create more emotional moments. They had created and spliced in the images of people holding signs with messages of sadness as though they had actually existed on location.

The power of video editing lies in the technical specifics of advertising video as genre of communication. Techniques such as montage, sound effects, special effects, and the short run time of thirty seconds to three minutes combine to create a genre that can be used to create a simple but powerful message. In the words of Stanley Cavell (1979), video advertising as a form of television media requires from the viewer, not absorption and thought, but "monitoring," that is a particular kind of looking where the viewer scans or gathers information of "repeated crises or events that are not developments of the situation requiring a single resolution, but intrusions or emergencies." As the viewer sits, scanning short clips and sounds and preparing attention for certain expected eventualities, they are put through an experience of anticipation and expectation. This genre of media differs, for example, from a film or long-form video that makes use of long shots and a slowly unfolding narrative. A longer shot in a film allows a viewer time to absorb a more complex understanding of place, person, and otherness. Sound effects, such as music and climatic sounds (for example, cymbals, lightning clashes, human gasps, cheering, bells and electronic sound effects), are used in advertising not to introduce unfamiliar feelings and spaces but to increase tension and create reactions of shock and surprise.

Following the King's death, Bangkok's production houses adapted their skill and familiarity with the genre of advertising to create eulogistic videos under contract to various corporations. For those working in the production houses, the making of these videos could be a special experience owing to the seriousness of the subject matter. It was, moreover, unusual for a team like P'Mad's team to work as a small, light unit without the benefit of hair stylists, make-up artists, and actors. Despite these differences, however, P'Mad's team made their eulogistic video using the same genre and skills employed in their regular advertising. The final product was rendered in grey-scale and did not include cartoon pop-ups or funny sound effects. At the same

time, like a regular video advertisement, the final product was a series of shot clips, set into a montage, and punctured by a sound track of climatic orchestral music. When certain images could not be found at the filming location of Sanam Luang, the team used their skills to re-create them or used images found online. Jumping between emotionally laden images, the team's final video provided the viewer with a simple, narrow message of Thai citizens' sadness at the death of the King.

An Extraordinary Death, an Ordinary Censorship

Censorship, patriotism, and propaganda marched lockstep during the new regime of images in the months that followed King Bhumibol's death. During the time set aside to mourn King Bhumibol, mammoth social and political energies were directed towards revitalizing citizen's loyalty to the nation and their hierarchical position within it. This historic moment, the new and renewed networks of power that operated throughout, were integrated into everyday business and social practice. Practices of censorship and propaganda creation and distribution were already well in place prior to the King's death and would continue after the main mourning period was over. The Thai media industry's response to the King's death was a unique and visible moment like the blooming of lotus, drawing the attention of those who pass by. The lotus flower grows from a plant with deep and extensive roots, spreading its leafy cover across wide spaces of water. Likewise, the social and political practices and structures by which censorship and propaganda gathered global attention during the time of the King's death were growing, working and covering public space both prior to and after this exceptional time.

During the time of increased censorship, army units did not march into the national television stations and take over national programming. The production teams who crafted propaganda images, the media channels that enforced censorship, and the corporations that

decided on significant changes to marketing strategy were operating within the continued social, market, and political relationships that undergirded everyday business. Bangkok's many production teams were ready with the required skill and, very often, political and social sentiment to make public images that would not only comply with censorship regulations but also flood Bangkok's streets, cyberspace, and television airtime with expertly crafted propaganda.

Understanding the everyday structure and practice of hierarchy and censorship in the Thai media makes it possible to understand the creative and extraordinary ways media professionals and other Thai citizens in Bangkok mourned the death of King Bhumibol. Censorship in the form of state control and media stipulations were significant at that time, but much of the patriotic conformity expressed by Thai netizens and citizens was additional and beyond what was required by the state. As I would learn, the censorship rules themselves were vague, relying on certain values or ideals, for example *riiap rawy* (neatness, respectability) and *khwaam siia jai* (regret, sorrow) rather than specific technical requirements. Moreover, while sorrow over the King's death was by no means universal or undifferentiated, it was, overall, expressed in remarkably uniform ways. The impetus for this uniformity was given greater force through the ritual and control circumscribed around important state symbols and geographic spaces, including the palace and the rituals that occurred there.

In the previous chapter, I introduced Jackson's (2004) description of the Thai "regime of images," a historical description of changing censorship around public images serving political elites' desire for a civilized "representational politics" of nation building. Jackson argued that the historical changes in the treatment of images by Thai elites lead to a widespread policing of public images alongside a contradictory bureaucratic disinterest private life. Since the 2014 coup,

however, the non-policed "private" space has been shrinking as a regime of controlled images pervades and redefines the "public" space. Infamous sex strips in Bangkok and the beach town of Pattaya, tolerated for decades by successive governments, have been, at least in part, "cleaned up" by the military government[21]. Within a year of their coup, the military was asking Thai citizens to spy and report on each other online. Included in newly encouraged forms of social surveillance, was a revived "Cyber scouts" program that asked for volunteers to find and report on threats to national security and the monarchy[22]. New forms of authoritarian control have also included requiring children to recite ten national values at school, banning all political meetings in public places, criminalizing students reading 1984 in public and handing out sandwiches, and an increasing implementation of "lèse-majesté" laws that encourage some citizens to report others for any comments they make critical of the monarchy. The new constitution put in place under the military government in 2016, moreover, not only restricted the number of democratically appointed senators (others are appointed) but also included a new special role for Buddhism in the state. Whereas previous constitutions had stated the monarch was the protector of all religions, the 2016 constitution in section 67 now reads, "The State shall patronize and protect Buddhism and other religions. With a view to patronizing and protecting Buddhism, . . . the State shall promote and support education and propagation of principles thereof. . ." These new forms of censorship and intervention strengthen distinctions between patriotic insiders and non-patriotic (or foreign) outsiders, patriots and dissidents.

In order to understand how censorship and propaganda were being promoted and policed by those working in Thai media industries, with the help of Kevin Laddapong, my research

[21] *News.com.au* 2017.

[22] *Privacy International* 2016.

assistant, I reached out beyond my regular circle of acquaintances to those with greater knowledge of censorship and patriotic programming in Thailand. In one meeting, Kevin and I had dinner with a group of media and advertising employees in their early 20s to talk about the censorship processes that emerged following the King's death. At a small Japanese restaurant serving big plates of curry on long tables along deep-seated booths, five young advertising and media workers welcomed my prompts to discuss their experience at work in the months following the King's death. This group of young people working in media were of mixed political opinions and backgrounds. In their opinion, their own personal sentiments and political opinions in the context of their work, however, were of little import. Each young person spoke of operating within a hierarchical work process where everything from the work done to the atmosphere in the office was set by those in senior positions. Even those in senior positions, remarked one young woman, do not "know what is going on" because "the palace will tell the government what is wanted and the government tells news agency. . . the media know the same as the general population." This woman gave the example of news programs being allowed to return to air after a two-week ban, but the employees working on those programs having to work with a lack of information about what kind of entertainment or political news might be deemed inappropriate. A young man working for one of Thailand's largest companies, CP, suggested it was easy to "understand how to act," with "*sam ruaam dtuaa eng* [self-control, composure]," and help the company show a public face of *khwaam siia jai* [sorrow/regret]. The young woman pointed out, however, that the entire process was far from transparent. Under a monarchical-military government, it was easy to know you had to be obedient, but it was not easy to know what the future might bring, allow, or prosecute.

Figure 21. Examples of billboards covered with patriotic slogans and advertising at 7 Eleven rendered in black and white. Photos by Author, in Bangkok, November 2016.

After seeking interviews with employees in the media purchasing industry, an advertising production contact put me in touch with a senior manager at Starcomm- a large transnational media company and subsidiary of Publisize media holding group. The company offices were in a central part of town. When I walked past the US embassy and into Sindorn tower for the meeting, I was immediately aware that I was no longer on the sets and back-room offices full of perspiration and daily sweat. The entrance atrium of the Sindorn tower included a feature wall with a large waterfall fountain. In a large, air-conditioned area behind glass windows was a picture of the new King, Rama X, surrounded by flowers. The large lobby also featured an art installation dedicated to Rama IX entitled (in English and Thai), "Illumination," featuring paintings and photographs of the King in different aspects of his career. Finally, towering at the height of two stories within the elegant lobby was an immense painting of the deceased Rama IV with his wife, Queen Sirikit.

When I arrived for my meeting at 9:00 am on the seventh floor of the building, I was escorted to a meeting room and prepared to wait. My meetings with media and advertising executives typically began late, anytime between a mere ten minutes to as much as ninety minutes. My interviewee, Pear, in this case was ready in ten minutes. Pear was a middle-aged lady with a no-nonsense bob of hair, wearing a simple thick cotton shirt, a black cotton hoodie, and a small diamanté pendant in the shape of a cross. Our interview, mostly in English, covered several topics, including the intense social connections across Thais working for the major global advertising players: Leo Burnett, Oligavy and Mather, Dentsu, and Y&R. On the basis of strong relationships among university alumni and the social power of the Advertising Association of Thailand and its sister agencies, the Media Association of Thailand, and the Digital Association of Thailand, Pear considered the community across Thailand's large media industry to be very

close. Like many others working at established media and advertising agencies, Pear argued relationships and respect often came before profit in the Thai media industry. Those working at the most prestigious agencies, Pear explained, were loath to undercut the quotes offered by their competitors because their future success depended on their reputation with the industry at large. Using the concept *barami*, meaning both respect and professional contacts (as discussed in chapter one), Pear explained[23], "Media buyers will also need to have *barami*, because they need a reputation to attract the buyer. . . they work for a long time to build this reputation."

When I asked Pear about the censorship and media changes that took place following the King's death, she responded,

> Pear: You're asking the right person about this. I was working with the Media Association to distribute information about what to do at this time. The effect was mostly at the level of media. Creatives could keep making content [to be screened at a later date], but Media [companies] had to change what they were doing and coordinate the changes. The timing of the mourning period was one and a half months. Officially from the government, it was required for one month. But everyone was careful not to go too far at this time. We talked to Google and Facebook and also got their participation. I forget for how long, but I think it was their support for two weeks. We had to coordinate the full support including billboards. . . All the main brands acted carefully, looking to each other to see what kind of response they would offer, and what kind of marketing they would present. The government asked brands not to be overly . . . what's the word. . . ?
>
> Bronwyn : *Bangtern* [entertaining]?
>
> Pear: Yes, for one year. . . At that time, there were rules set by the government, but everyone looked to the main media providers, like Channel 3, Channel 7, Thai Rath, etc. to see what they would do. So at that time I would call the channels every day and ask about their strategies. Someone times they would say "for this week we are doing this." But a week was the longest period we could know, often we would have to call back every day. Then we would distribute that information.
>
> Bronwyn: Do all brands want to participate and show support?
>
> Pear: Actually not all brands want to participate, but they know (. . . Pear trailed off)

[23] This interview was conducted in majority English with some Thai. I took shorthand notes during the interview and typed up the notes afterwards.

> Bronwyn: . . . That they have to act appropriately?
>
> Pear: Yes, (nods) , they know that have to act appropriately. Some brands put up condolences and offer special messages but this is mostly the biggest corporations, like Singha [beer company], PTT [energy company] etc. Other corporations are just silent.
>
> Bronwyn: The response from the big corporations is because of population pressure?
>
> Pear: Yes, there is consumer expectation but it is also. . . The management and ownership … they are attached to the monarchy.

In the interview, Pear explained that from her perspective as a distributor of information to TV channels, media strategies regarding the content and timing following the King's death were unpredictable, but they were also highly predicated on the influence of powerful companies and individuals. In my questions to Pear, I had assumed that the corporations demonstrating patriotic censorship were largely motivated by consumers' popular sentiment – an attempt to meet the consumers with a sentiment that mirrored their grief. Pear, however, did not immediately attribute patriotic censorship to consumer demand and instead returned my attention to the social and political hierarchy present within the media industry. Pear saw enthusiastic censorship and propaganda as a top-down decision by influential and powerful individuals.

While many employees working in media production may not have been able to guess what would be deemed to be appropriate and when, the decision on such questions were not random or flexible. Rather, a number of larger companies and media outlets provided examples of what appropriate media content looked like, and other companies and employees either imitated them or silently avoided participation. The creative and strategic decision-making structure was fundamentally social in that media workers relied on daily news of appropriate content changes from their information sources. This structure of change and shared information was confirmed to me by media workers across different sectors of the industry. For example, a young worker at Thailand's PBS (Public Broadcasting Station) told me that the rules and

instructions her team followed at work were “unofficial.” For example, using the black and white greyscale on news programing was “not a direct order to PBS but started with a government pronouncement on the day of the King’s death. The official announcement set the tone and then the other channels copied and learned by themselves.” This young worker confirmed that all their censorship instruction was communicated orally. In her opinion, “most people working at PBS are conservative in their opinions. . . so modifying news programs is a natural result for them, they do not need official instruction.”

A news journalist who had worked for the popular Thai newspaper, *Dayli New* (Daily News, would later explain to me in an interview, that Thai journalists working for the largest media corporations, were part of a single group chat on their mobile phones. On this app, government departments of public relations departments and foreign affairs send press statements along with photos that the journalists are required to use instead of using their own discretion to select different photos. Individual politicians would also use the phone chat apps in order to request or lobby for certain stories to run. Elaborating on the role of mobile phones in altering the structure and practice of Thai media, the journalist remarked that mobile phones had also lead to the rise of “mo-jo” (mobile journalists), who write stories and send them while on the move between news locations. The rise of the smart phone as a mode of infrastructure in Southeast Asia has fundamentally alerted the kinds of video advertisements made in Thailand. The new advertisements include longer, narrative videos and a faster release of new material in order to attract social media junkies. So too, the mobile phone with its “distinct material qualities that influence the media that travel” (Larkin 2008: 290), has affected the kinds of news media being produced, leading to the rise of shorter news pieces released in closer temporal proximity to the events reported.

The dramatic censorship that occurred throughout Bangkok's media, streetscapes, and public bodies following the King's death thus operated through a process that was paradoxically both informal and highly controlled. Curious to learn more about how this highly uniform, extensive, and voluntary censorship took place, I continued to ask different employees in advertising and media about their experiences. During a few visits to a medium sized digital advertising firm in downtown Bangkok, I spoke with members of the Creative Strategy team about how they had handled censorship process. Team members noted that in the first 100 days following the King's death, there were no particular rules they had to follow, but rather they followed the "suggestions from our clients." One example of changed strategy was by the supermarket chain Tesco Lotus. The creative manager told me that three months following the King's death the chain store had altered its regular end-of-year marketing campaign,. Rather than encouraging people to buy more for the end-of-year festive season, the company had instead created an advertising campaign based on the idea "helping people together." This example illustrated the way that large Thai companies had continued to alter their campaign strategies beyond what was required, months after the event of the King's death.

The manager also described the atmosphere in the company office the day after the King's death, explaining,

> The two different Facebook teams and the Line [messaging app] team had to quickly coordinate together. This is different to how we normally work. Within a few hours we changed client's social media pictures to black while confirming with them other photos and messages to use. . . some big companies have their own web marketing teams to manage this, but for others, we do it for them. . . It is a big industry today, but really what the problem is, is not the size but the lack of regulation. There needs to be more *janubun*[24]. I trained in advertising and marketing and learned about professional ethics at university . . . but now, with digital advertising, there are many people working with digital skills who do not have the training and knowledge in ethics. It's a problem and

[24] From *Jarata-* doing good, and *bun-* merit. In business and professional settings, this word used as a translation of the English term "ethics."

> government censorship is not necessarily a bad thing. The mood and tone must be censored. . .

The emphasis on self-regulation and concern in regard to the slipping ethical standards of industry workers was something I had often heard from high profile industry members. In my conversations and observations, it appeared that the more senior the individual, or prestigious the company, the more likely they were to be concerned about the ethical standards of those outside of their social circle. The motivation of even small companies and media workers to comply with the censorship and propaganda standards set by example by the larger companies was also predicated on the combined global market and the local social-political hierarchy described in the previous chapter. A producer at one of Bangkok's largest production companies would later tell me how important it was to "preserve the industry *rabohpniwaeht* (ecosystem)*."* Her production company, she explained, relied on a good relationships with the major advertising agencies because of their ability to arrange media air time and "work with the censorship board."

How Do We Make Practitioners Behave Themselves? Ethics for a New Media Industry

In my interviews with production companies, media, and marketing agencies on the topic of censorship, I found a correlation between the seniority of the interviewee and the extent to which they expressed concern about industry ethics. In this correlation, the Thai advertising industry offers a well-defined example of the social hierarchy observable in conservative Thai politics more generally. Those at the top of the industry, the company directors, producers, and those working for large international firms speak with authority and those towards the bottom, doing the creative and physical labor, are at the social and moral periphery and have little to no voice on what industry practice should be. There are no unions in the Thai advertising industry (and very few labor unions in Thailand generally). While there is a Thai Advertising Association,

Thai Marketing Association, and Thai Digital Association, these associations' members are overwhelmingly made up of marketing, media, and advertising agencies. Production, lighting, and equipment companies as well as other important companies in the industry whose work involves manual and service labor are not participating members in these associations. This concentration of social, political, and market prestige among an elite, self-selective group has considerable implications regarding the representation of industry standards and ethics. When those at the top of the industry speak with the assumption that they are the ethical gatekeepers of the industry, there are few voices that would challenge them.

Among people of influence, there are certainly those who hold to political opinions more critical than those commonly expressed. It is however strategic for these individuals to perform, or comply with, a strongly conservative position. To create advertising that is nationalistic, and/or moralistic, projects the creator as a person of moral esteem, a person with *barami. Barmai,* as discussed in the previous chapter, attracts fame, respect, clients, and money. As noted previously, however, many Thai creative artists lack the social and material resources to play this hierarchical game of moral esteem successfully. As elsewhere in the world, artists have easier access to video cameras and editing software, which has allowed those on political and professional peripheries to make and distribute video projects more easily. There are Thai amateur and semi-professional news, image, and video makers who create critical commentary and comedy with the intent of provoking political change. In the not so distant past, the main way to distribute these other kinds of film and images would have been through unofficial channels such as bootleg videos (see Klima 2002). Today, however, there are many internet and satellite channels that stream content not accepted on mainstream television or news media.

There are, moreover, famous examples of Thai film makers who left advertising, directing, and camera work in order to begin a new career making political films.

The power of political conservativism and social hierarchy within the Bangkok industry is so powerful that any media content or media maker representing a position that is non-conservative, or critical of establishment politics, including the military government, is routinely categorized as peripheral and alternative. Of course, establishment, or conservative politics in Thailand contains a range of policies, beliefs and factions, some of which contradict, or are in opposition to each other. Even the alliance of between the military and the monarchy is far from stable. In June 2019, a pro-royalist lawyer accused General Prayuth's brother of committing lese-majeste when the General's brother and sister in law were photographed sitting on ornate chairs that resembled thrones (Kaosod English 2019). Those who are looking to find work within most media companies, organizations, and supporting businesses know however that critical political thoughts are expected to be kept away from work. For example, I regularly visited one small video advertising production company where the main director had a critical attitude towards the military government. During work hours, this director was very focused on his work, readily working with pro-military clients in Thailand and Myanmar. Late night supper conversation, however, was a different matter.

One night we pulled up in his pickup truck to a nearby roadside restaurant. This director's preferred place to eat was a roadside stall, protected from the rain with sheets of plastic containing advertising dating from the '90s and decorated with broken clocks, lop-sided trees, and street dogs. The director's preference for an informal setting for dinner was not unusual in the Bangkok production industry. Sitting in the broken plastic chairs, eating fried chicken, and drinking beer with ice was an escape from a workspace styled with comfortable couches, sleek

metal chairs, and flat screen televisions. The contrast between the two spaces was bizarre to me, but a regular, mundane transition for the director who didn't blink when his good friend stepped out of a flashy convertible to join us in our plastic shack party. Over the clinking of ice in our glasses, the director outlined his position, "Military government is bad for business. . . during the coup we lost clients, now we've lost our accounts team." Swearing and shaking his head, the director went on to complain how the military government's physical presence and interference in business was stifling business opportunities, creativity, and political freedom. While holding this opinion privately, in public, like the politically conservative P'Mad, this director was also a man who cultivated *barami.* He was well respected for his work, gave work opportunities to trainees, and enjoyed sharing his time and knowledge in guest lectures to university students. Unlike P'Mad, however, he offered quiet grumbling rather than enthusiastic political support of the military government and their allies. Another producer I knew, Nok, a middle aged woman who had similar political sentiments, told me, "Things are more difficult for the industry under the current government. I'm not a fan of Taksin [Prime Minister from 2001-2006], but he knew about the economy. Under the current government, there is too much control and no support. Censorship has increased and there is too much emphasis on *watthanatham an dee ngaam kong bprathaeht thai* (promoting beautiful representations of Thai culture).

The prominence of social and political conformity within the Thai media industry effectively pushes alternative voices and content to the periphery. Those who oversee the industry, however, express anxiety about changing media technology and the struggle to maintain the informal practices and sentiments of political and social conservativism within which they operate. A current board member and long-time Secretary General of the powerful "Advertising Association of Thailand" (AAT) who helped to write their censorship guidelines,

lamented to me his concern about new online and satellite media channels that, in his opinion, were outside the realm of good influence[25].

> Board Member: It is a difficult situation. Thai society grew up with government control. We don't have to think under government control, just do what they say. Then the government lifts the control and . . . Well, you know what happened. . .[trails off]
>
> Bronwyn: [Unsure of what to say]. . . Political unrest?
>
> Board member: [Nods] A lot people are now speaking, a lot of people are now advertising. They are like. . . crazy. They do not have self-control. Not like other. . . countries. We need media to have ethical standards. AAT are aware of this issue and we try to push for this. . . But this is very different to online advertising. It is very different to censor online advertising. How do we make practitioners know about ethical standards and behave themselves?
>
> Bronwyn: Are you referring to the fact that anyone can advertise now? Small companies. Net idols, youtubers?
>
> Board member: Exactly - and with satellite tv - do you know we have satellite TV now? There are over 200 channels. If you talk with them, you see they are trying to survive but they don't have the knowledge [about advertising ethics] and they don't want to learn it. We have not been able to censor the satellite TVCs. Most ads on satellite are illegal. They show ads that never got FDA [Food and Drug Administration] approval.
>
> Bronwyn: Are they ever caught or prosecuted?
>
> Board member: Very very rarely. If the FDA identifies an ad they can prosecute - - but with 200-300 channels, how can they? The government is aware of this and is trying to inquire to the AAT how the standards can be enforced. But it involves a lot of people. And the satellite stations have local mafia [protecting them]. . . But a good point is that not a lot of people watch these stations.
>
> Bronwyn: But what about the internet ads? They can be quite popular?
>
> Board member: If it is a reputable brand, then they will probably adhere to good standards. There are companies we worry about. And we try to work with the DAAT to work together on education.

According to the AAT board member, the Thai advertising industry was facing an uncertain future owing to new technologies that supported the introduction of the "mafia" and

[25] This interview was conducted mostly in English and I noted the content down in shorthand and typed up the notes soon afterwards.

untrustworthy opportunists. The board member represented those operating outside of the AAT sphere as "crazy" and "without control." In my own interviews with popular net-idols, I had found examples of net influences working within a very structured and similarly hierarchical system, tailoring content thought too alternative in order to attract more corporate sponsorship. Reflecting an opinion common among Thai conservatives, however, the board member suggested that the larger Thai population was not sufficiently morally or professionally developed to enjoy social, political, and technological freedoms known in other countries. In the board member's view, the reputation of the high-status Bangkok advertising industry was under threat because it was increasingly marked by the influence of those who were ethically unreliable.

Anxiety regarding the industry's ability to self-regulate was evident again in my meetings with an assistant professor of communications at one of Thailand's oldest universities. This professor, who volunteered his services in the national censorship process, explained that although certain censorship rules were quite strict, there was a great deal of work in the interpretation of the rules. The problem, as the professor described it, is that "*phaap tii kloom khreuua* (images are vague)." The job of a censor, this professor explained, was to make images less ambiguous, to make the message clear. The professor and board member were in agreement that the members of the AAT (mostly large, prestigious advertising firms) would consistently produce appropriate content. As the professor explained, they were "older companies with company morals." Even if there were smaller companies who wanted to join the prestigious community of the AAT, the "AAT might not want them to join." In his interview, the AAT board member confirmed this self-selecting exclusivity of the AAT. The board member explained that the AAT had no new individuals join the AAT in over twenty years and that

companies or organizations who had joined their influential organization amounted to less than one company per year.

The professor and the AAT board member described to me a similar history of changing censorship laws in Thailand. Both men described the change from government-controlled censorship to a modern era where media and advertising companies were responsible for their own self-regulation. In the words of the AAT member, "We had a total censorship process until 1994, the government regulated all advertising until that time. Now, there is private, self-regulation through the AAT and main channels for TV and radio. . . . In 1994, a new board was created, with one representative of the AAT - we call it the 'TV censorship board.'" In their interviews, the AAT board member and professor spoke with the authority of those who were appropriate gate-keepers of Thailand's censorship process. The government, in their view, lacked the industry expertise to manage the process. Censorship was a responsibility a select group were qualified for, but this select group of gatekeepers and social authorities were now threatened by new forms of technology that allowed unaffiliated media creators to avoid and elude censorship processes.

Concern regarding laxity in professional ethics was an ongoing concern voiced by industry leaders during the time of my research. After the death of King Rama IX and the censorship processes that proceeded it, those concerns appeared to be given an extra space to be voiced and acted upon. On May 31, 2017, the AAT and DAAT (Digital Advertising Association of Thailand) released a long discussed set of guidelines for a "self-regulatory mechanism" of digital advertising. Since the military takeover, the junta-government had been calling for stronger surveillance and standards in the distribution of online media and information. The support from media industry actors for surveillance and censorship had not been unequivocal. I

heard of concerns within the industry regarding creative freedom and the sometimes bizarre processes involved in the bureaucracy of censorship. Many senior industry figures across academic, agencies, and large production houses did, however, echo the concerns above, arguing that the influx of new digital workers, operating outside of the established companies and university instruction, were bringing unprofessional ethics in their sensationalized and sloppy work. On announcing the new guidelines, the emeritus president of the advertising association of Thailand was quoted on the AAT Facebook page as follows,

> "The situation has changed. Content requiring auditing is growing. The number of skilled personnel is insufficient. New rules and regulations are added to the clarification process. And there is the presence of representatives of digital TV operators. It is necessary to strengthen the self-regulatory process of the advertising profession need to be in line with technological change in television broadcasting. . . Self-regulation of the advertising profession is a cornerstone. It is valuable for all sectors to continue and adapt to the context of the digital age". [Translated]

Mr.Wittawat Chaiyan, honorary president was also quoted, "The combination of a single standard will benefit more members of the advertising association . . . The country [Thailand] also has a single law. In a business, there should be one standard"[Translated]. In announcing these new guidelines, the AAT were attempting a public signal that their moral, conservative control and understanding of the industry was in line with the current moment- both politically and technologically. Arguably, the statement produced came across as no less "vague" that the images the professor had described. Not long after the announcement of the new guidelines, the fear expressed by some industry leaders that they were losing their authority within the industry appeared to be justified when two military-owned media stations – a radio station and TV station - announced they would be establishing their own, separate censorship process (Brand Buffet 2017]) Although it amounted to only one TV and one radio station, the move was read as a signal by military leaders to the media industry that they did not sufficiently trust the professional ethics of the mainstream media. The Thai media industry thrives on a paradoxical

image of being both creative social innovators and morally respectable social leaders. The announcement of further regulations challenged the industry's creativity, but, more importantly, it also challenged the industry's public respectability and self-image as an elite, trustworthy group of social and market authorities.

Citizen Participation in Propaganda

In examining censorship practices within the Thai advertising industry, I have argued that censorship and propaganda are not extraordinary interruptions to everyday creative and market activity. Rather, censorship and propaganda season and structure everyday social relationships, motivations, and practices within Thai advertising production and distribution. Owing to the high social status and moral authority given to those who are positioned at the highest levels of Thai business and media industries, political conservatism becomes the default banner under which respectable and widely distributed work is done. While the existence of a paranoid military government and the dramatic event of King Bhumibol's death created extra incentives and occasions for censorship, those incentives built upon a conservatism built deep into the foundations and everyday practices of the Bangkok media industries.

During the era of media censorship following King Bhumibol's death, enthusiastic examples of street decoration, social media posts, and eulogistic videos, together with the thorough censorship of media channels and street-side advertising in Bangkok, went markedly far beyond what was officially stipulated by Thai law or even government recommendation. Moreover, while there were examples of personalized displays of grief, many media stations, corporations, production companies, and individual citizens followed each other in the colors, editing tools, scripts, words, portraiture, and representative images used. As I have discussed in

this chapter, from the perspective of those working within Thai media, guidance on what was an acceptable public image during this time was communicated through existing social and market relationships, travelling down a fairly clear hierarchy from a select group of corporations and media stations, and throughout the industry as a whole. There is widespread voluntary participation in the project of nationalist propaganda among the Bangkok middle classes. This participation, however, is conducted with varying degrees of fear and critique of the military-run state. Through an interweaving of class, ideology, violence, and desire, everyday practices of censorship demonstrate a variety of creative choices where hegemony and domination overlap in everyday practice.

The time of extraordinary grief and censorship that followed the King's death reflected, and operated within, the ongoing intersections of Thai politics and media markets within which competitiveness and opportunity is dominated by powerful corporations whose social and political interests frequently coincide with the conservative political elite. As my interviews with participants in Thai censorship processes illustrated, the Bangkok media industry leaders understand themselves to be not only business leaders but also social and moral leaders of the nation. Rather than challenge the authority of the military government, they instead attempt to prove their trustworthiness as conservative social creative workers. Those in the center of media power guard this reputation jealously, perceiving political and ethical threats from an expanding circle of media production. Such producers include new content producers who are not as closely connected to the traditional media circle of relationships forged through university alumni and business networks.

The Thai advertising industry exists within a political and market framework that is motivated toward self-censorship and propaganda. Everyday creative processes include the

production of a plethora of propaganda signifiers – creative choices that promote conservative ideological positions. In the following chapter, I will offer a more detailed explanation of the rise of a particular genre of pedagogical advertising in Thailand. “Sadvertising” has emerged as a successful genre of advertising favored by Bangkok advertising makers and attracting widespread, viral attention through its feel-good, moral messages. In my current chapter, ethnographic accounts of the production of propaganda creation and interviews with industry representatives illustrate how the very form and genre of advertising prove useful to conservative politics. Advertising provides a piece of short video that stimulates in order to grab attention and condenses meaning to distill a simplified message. Trading complexity for clarity, the genre and production of advertising is optimally primed for the communication of nationalism and political ideology.

CHAPTER THREE: BEAUTY AS CURRENCY: MORALITY AND AESTHETICS AS A FORM OF VALUE

In the new media era of video streaming, Thai video ads wash up in unexpected places. Their virtual waves sweep back to Thailand via the streams of new work opportunities and other more mundane interactions. One morning, for example, I was jolted awake by a phone call from my sister. I had spent the previous day in windowless rooms in Bangkok observing meticulous editing of video commercials. My sister had news of a video commercial that had made its way to Sydney, Australia from Thailand. That morning my sister's phone call and her stories from Sydney momentarily ruptured my insular days of minute colour edits and voiceover takes. With something between a deep groan and a chuckle, my sister started her story. A few hours earlier in the teachers' staff room in a Sydney girls' high school, the school dean had attempted to motivate the school's teachers towards better behavior. The dean, my sister explained, had asked the teachers to "show acts of kindness" to each other. The dean's choice of instruction and motivation was a 2014 Thai video ad.

The particular ad chosen by the school dean that day, "Unsung Hero," was a Thai Life Insurance video featuring a series of sepia-colored, softly-lit clips that portray a poor man who chooses to help others instead of pursing his own material advancement. The man is tall but hunches his hidden muscles under uneven shoulders and a rumpled shirt. Deceptively handsome, the man meditates shirtless in a hot room and laughs as he lifts a heavy food cart onto the roadside. The man hands out gifts of bananas to old ladies, gives up his bus seat to a female conductor who laughs at him, and relinquishes the contents of his wallet to a woman and her small daughter,

seen begging on the street. Over the phone, my sister, and her colleague who subsequently joined our video conversation, told me that the screening of the video ad had created some tense conversation in the Sydney school staffroom. Some teachers claimed (strangely, considering the video was clearly from Thailand) that religious, and specifically Christian schools, produced kinder students. Other teachers, my sister commented, found this offensive while others were simply bored, having first become familiar with the video years earlier. Other teachers, however, had teared up in the emotional scene in which the small daughter finally collects enough money to go to school and described the video as inspirational.

For an advertising video made for a Thai audience to be adopted as pedagogical material in an Australian workplace, it must have social and moral influence far beyond its direct marketing goals. Australian teachers are not interested in purchasing Thai insurance packages. Australian teachers do, however, create and practice moral communities, make moral judgements, and instruct their students in moral expectations and ideals. In recent years, Thai video ads with moral themes, sometimes referred to internationally as "sadvertising," have been hailed as industry innovations for their viral success, becoming familiar to audiences in unexpected places. Bangkok-based advertising firms and production companies are now internationally famous for video content dripping in emotion.

In this chapter, I examine moral values, practices, and challenges that I found to be prevalent in the processes of advertising production in Bangkok. In the first part of the chapter, I examine some of the moral contradictions of spirituality, respectability, beauty, and affability that motivate, bind, and position workers in their daily work. I look at how Theravada Buddhist practices of merit-making and appeasing spirits add a spiritual current to the market practices of selling consumer goods. I investigate the value of beauty in daily Thai production practice, in

particular, the treatment of beauty as an indicator of moral goodness and professional value. For women in Thailand, who have fewer avenues for advancement in most religious and professional spheres, developing beauty becomes a rare avenue to increase moral recognition as well as social and professional prestige. I also consider the way that intimate social expectations and romantic relationships influence behavior and professional aspirations in the work place.

Beautiful, subservient young Thai bodies become extremely valuable to the success of large advertising firms and the international firms that recruit their services. Following Ahmed's (2004) invitation to study emotion through the lens of social performances located in the surface of the body and the "left impressions" of objects, in this chapter, I attend to the way emotions and moral norms are read as operative in others. They augment the social and economic hierarchy at work in the advertising industry within Bangkok and the international media market. Ahmed (2004: 6) argues that studying "affective economies" offers a strategy through which to better understand the accumulation of emotions around objects and practices. According to popular Thai Theravada Buddhist understandings, moreover, emotions display a person's inner essence, and therefore the kinds of emotions that people display may be understood as a reflection of their character and value (Cassaniti 2015). In advertising production work, the cultivation of particular emotions is a work and a discipline – a social practice through which people practice self-discipline and "respond to objects and others" (Ahmed 2004:10).

Turning then to the fast rise of the new pedagogical genre of advertising, in the second part of the chapter, I examine how a local political climate of enforced conservativism has channeled everyday moral life behind the scenes of advertising production towards particular kinds of content for public consumption. In Thailand, popular religious and nationalistic discourse frequently presents morality in terms of obligations to care for the fortunes of the

family, to seek status through morality, and to live in peaceful relationship with both human and spiritual beings. Owing to Buddhist ontological emphases on illusion and non-existence, images are perceived as moral and spiritual pedagogical tools in these endeavors. These approaches to ethical life are in contrast to the emphasis on freedom, reflexivity, and sincerity in western philosophical and religious traditions, especially the emphasis on orthodox speech prevalent in Protestant traditions (Keane 2002, 2006). Instead, the orthopraxy of arranging objects, self-presentation, and crafting surfaces all contribute to "shared aesthetic sensibilities that draw and hold together communities of Buddhists" (Samuels 2010, 107). Understanding images and the processes of image production as surfaces and practices that generate and shape spiritual and moral communities offers an opportunity to consider the values and activities that shape the influential Bangkok advertising production industry.

Figure 22. Still from "Unsung Hero," Thai Life Insurance, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaWA2GbcnJU*

Following several anthropologists of ethical life, including Keane (2009, 2010, 2015) Jackson (1996, 2011) and Lambek (2002, 2010), I understand ethical life via "ordinary" and everyday activities that have the potential to signal the boundaries of moral communities. Popular and theoretical understandings of ethics and personhood in western traditions have often emphasized the idea of the isolated individual making rational ethical choices rather than partial persons inextricably tied to the social, material, and spiritual (Laidlaw 2002). As Lambek (2002) and Keane (2015) have argued, however, many kinds of improvisation, irony, and performative play can be ethical practices even if they take place without full consciousness of the participant. Certain kinds of ethical action may even become habitual to the point that they are not reflected upon. This does not mean such rituals or habits constitute "unreflective sleepwalking" (Lambek 2002, 15). In order to conceptualize the tension between the unconscious everyday and the ethical stakes of the everyday, Keane (2015) suggests paying attention to moments that constitute "ethical affordances," that is, moments that can be interpreted as invitations to accept responsibility towards others.

Shrines and Merit: Spiritual Themes in Everyday Production Work

We arrived at the production's office in *Town in Town* at half past three o'clock in the morning, and stumbling over each other in our sleep, we climbed into the cushioned arms of the waiting vans. Within minutes we had lumbered out of the small streets and turned out onto Bangkok's highways. Suddenly, with a jolt, we were hurtling down the highways at speeds I had not thought possible in this traffic logged city. The city's highways, her concrete arteries, usually clogged with buses, cars, and motorbikes inching and weaving in close formation were, at this ghostly hour, transformed to another realm. Less than half awake, I half-heartedly closed the window's lace curtain and heard the unfamiliar sound of a seat belt clicking. Sparking confusion

in my sleepy consciousness, I had never before heard or witnessed a production team member wear a seatbelt. I was not the only one who thought tonight's journey was especially fast.

For production teams working in the outdoors, every moment of sunlight is a critically rare resource. Today's project was one of the most expensive and extensive of the year's work schedule, and our driver raced under the cover of darkness against the sun to deliver his human cargo to the chosen beach location. After a few hours of breakneck driving, I jolted awake from a thin, exhausted sleep and realised that the speeding van had slowed. Our driver was carefully navigating a sandy-dirt road through an unknown darkness. Outside the van, it was now pitch black, the street lights far behind us. Then, gradually, beams of light began to pierce the dark- the beams of other vans – one, two, three. . . twenty vans – all carrying large numbers of crew and equipment to this quiet, isolated beach. I sat forward in my seat. I knew as soon as the van stopped and side door opened, we would have to spring like grasshoppers. The day ahead of us was long, and there would probably be little to do on first arriving, but it was not acceptable to emerge slowly from the comfortable van. Jumping from the van with litheness and speed was an indication that a team member respected the importance of the day's work. It meant that an employee understood the time-pressures of the day. On the rare occasion, when someone was slow to leap from the van, their tardiness would always be commented on by another team member's curt injunction, *bpai laaeo!* (Let's go already). No one wanted to be criticized in front of others.

This morning we jumped out of the van and made our way to where a white tent and some mobile lights had been set up at the back of the vans. As we walked over to this tent, distinguished from the darkness, shadowy shapes moved all around us. As eyes adjusted, we recognized the bodies of equipment crew. Nimbly weaving through the night, the production

crew pulled extension cords across the sand, unloaded heavy equipment from vans, and primed generators ready for action. The air was clear and salty with a strange crispness we were not accustomed to in Bangkok. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” suddenly punctured the soundscape of buzzing insects and gentle waves. By the light of van headlamps, I saw that the equipment crew had broken their usual silence to warn a driver narrowly avoiding a camera crane as he backed up his van on the sandy dirt.

Over by the tent, makeshift round tables had been set up in close proximity. Each table was edged by white plastic chairs. The production team members had taken one table, piled their bags in the center, and found a way to steal some rest. Some of the team sat back to back, others leaned against the bags on the table, and an assistant director laid his head on a friend’s shoulder. A period of waiting began. Dawn gradually arrived, and some of team walked the few meters between the tent and the beach foreshore to take photos. Filming at the beach was not unusual, but taking stylish photos was a valuable opportunity to catalogue and distribute images of the self and team members as well-dressed, carefully posed bodies. Soft dustings of pink and orange floated in the sky. The beach, sky, and sea all blurred together in a soft backdrop. The beach itself was lovely and the sky so fine that for a moment I felt disappointment that nothing would be filmed until after the sun had risen. In a moment of recognition, I saw that this moment, the early morning dawn on a clear beach, was the place and moment I had seen that most resembled the hues and tones added by post production teams to video campaigns. By the time we started filming, the sun had risen higher, the sea was a darker blue, and the sun projected a stronger light, defining the bodies of the actors more clearly. This did not matter because the color of the sky on the day of filming was largely immaterial. During the course of post-production, the director would change the color of the sky more than once.

Behind the vans and against a steep hill covered in jumbled, jungle plants, Bell, the company's secretary and all-round production manager, had set up her regular impromptu shrine. Every time we filmed outside the office, no matter the terrain, Bell, within the first twenty minutes of arrival, would choose an appropriate location - the side of a driveway or the corner of the road – and carefully position a plastic stool, sometimes stacking two together. Although the circumference of the stools was only the size of a white dinner plate, into that small space, Bell would arrange several pieces of fruit, some red drinks in plastic cups, a few sticks of incense, and bright orange marigold flowers. The day I asked Bell about this task, she explained it was her responsibility to do it every time the company went to shoot. The shrine, she explained, was a kind of gamble. Probably nothing would happen, but if there are any spirits or ghosts, that might cause danger on set, the shrine would, perhaps offer a decoy and prevent the problem.

Staring that early morning at the shrine against the hill of tangled jungle, I realized that I had developed new eyes for the invisible spiritual world on set production. When I had first inquired about the shrine, I had mistakenly assumed the shrines might attract good things, positive spirits, or help. Now, as I looked at the mass of twisted vines and shady shrubs, I saw an untamed place where unsatisfied spirits might be assumed to be lurking. I remembered a night, not long ago, when I had spent time with a production team in Saraburi province, filming scenes for a ghost movie they were making as a passion project on the side of their advertising work. That night, I had shared a room with a hair and makeup artist who had fearfully explained to me she wanted to have the hotel room light on the entire evening. Bad *phi* (ghosts/ spirits), she explained, could be lurking around the hotel. We were in a remote area surrounded by unfamiliar jungle and who knew what had happened here in the past?

Figure 23. Shrine set up in wilderness area. February 2017. Photo by Author.

Now that I had been working with this team for a considerable time, I was aware of the seasons and rhythms of Buddhist practice done for the protection of the company. Once a year, often around the time of the company's birthday, a group of monks would be invited to the company office. Four or five monks, some senior and others young men, would arrive with prayer cushions and fans emblazoned with elegant embroidery their temple's identifying symbol. The monks would lead the production team and visitors, including regular freelancers who worked with them and a few close, visiting clients, in a time of prayer, feasting, and alms giving. Senior members of the production team would approach the monks kneeling and silently offer envelopes of money. Shortly after this, a great spread of delicious food, first for the monks, secondly, for the team, would be enjoyed on large mats set along the floor of the office.

The senior producer and owner of the company team, Pae, was a man clearly concerned with religious affairs. In addition to making trips internationally to meet famous Buddhist monks, he would often update me about his support in terms of donations and marketing advice to the Thai temples and monks he most respected. Like many of the more senior and high-status workers in the industry, for the past three years, Pae had regularly been giving free educational talks at various universities, workplaces, and institutes. Depending on the audience, Pae's presentations were sometimes full of slapstick and bawdy jokes and sometimes told a more serious story of how he had struggled from his rural roots to become a successful producer in the city. Pae's purpose in giving these presentations interwove spiritual, social, and economic motivations. On one occasion, when I asked Pae why he spent so much time giving these free talks, he told me, "To make friends, to make contacts and give inspiration." On another occasion, when the hosting university professor handed him an envelope with cash, Pae told me he would donate the money to his favorite temples. He explained, "As a Buddhist, I don't accept money for this. . . I do this for the students, to help the temple, to do a good thing."

One day, Pae took me with him on his visit to one of his favourite Bangkok temples. Pae's temple was attached, geographically and financially, to several charitable foundations. In pinks and greens within brightly coloured concrete structures was an orphanage, one home for disabled men and another home for disabled women. I followed Pae on his regular circuit, stopping in at each institution, saying hello to someone, and making a cash donation along with a prayer. Twice Pae did me the honor of asking me to make merit for myself instead of him, instructing me with the words, "Take this money to the charity box, but don't just throw the money in. Say a prayer and think of the good health and good things for your family." Visiting the temple attached to the charity compound, we walked around and saw a hall full of people in

chanting prayer and monks receiving visits from their family and friends. Despite his support for this particular religious community and its charitable projects, Pae criticized the temple monks' insincerity. "It is a good temple for Bangkok," Pae he told me, "but it still has many problems." Better temples, Pae suggested, were located outside the corrupting influence of Bangkok. If he were to ever become a monk, Pae went on, he wouldn't do it here in Bangkok. "Sometimes I think of becoming a monk," he said; "I would live in the forest in a quiet monastery, and practice good Buddhism." "And your wife?" I asked; "What about her, can you leave her to become a monk?" "Oh yes," Pae replied, "she can come to visit, but she would continue with her life here in Bangkok"[26].

Pae's success and reputation was built upon a contradictory moral twist. In his itinerant teaching seminars, Pae would attempt to push and challenge his impromptu students' ideas of what was morally and publicly acceptable. He would claim that successful creative teams were \ groups of friends where employees should speak up and criticize something if they did not agree. Thai creativity, Pae would argue, was stifled because Thai people think too much alike and are not willing to speak up. Describing what was essential to creativity, Pae would say, "*Nisai khaawg creative dtaaek dtaang mark* (The habits of a creative person are very different)." To illustrate his point, Pae sometimes liked to shock his audience by showing photos of himself dressed in drag, tiny bikinis and long hula skirts, dancing with other men in bright dresses, their hair adorned with flowers. Pae also loved to show his audience an advertising video he was proud of in which his team had cast sixty men who looked like "thugs." The men were assembled as a choir and made to sing loudly and threatening in a way that made a video that

[26] In Thailand, it is common for men to ordain as monks for a temporary period of time. Many Buddhist males will ordain as monks at some period during their life, sometimes only for a few days while others will ordain for weeks, months or even a few years.

was incongruous and memorable. Working with unusual, even non-respectable people, Pae would say, was important for a creative. Pae was someone who embraced socially shocking behavior both for his own enjoyment and for the success of his work. On the other hand however, Pae was also a devoted Buddhist and a family man. He would tell his student audiences that a creative person must "*Mai mee eego –nee samkhan maak"* (Have no ego – this is very important). In all of this, Pae was the classic ideal of an upstanding moral citizen. His attitude and performances of national devotion would be not out of place from any Thai government promotional campaign. Drawing on the moral ambivalence of Theravada Buddhism, Pae presented the right practices and good deeds that he needed for success in his spiritual and professional life. In this dual-channel strategy, Pae hedged against spiritual and professional risks of enthusiastically engaging in practices, conversations, and relationships that challenged mainstream social norms.

In his everyday work as the leader of an advertising production team, Pae navigated a world in which the enthusiastic, orderly, and beautiful presentation of his team was essential to both his moral stature and his economic success. Each day at work, but especially when negotiating with clients or out on set, was an important day because it involved the careful work of crafting beautiful images. The success of these images would depend, in Pae's accounting, on his team's smooth appeasing of the spiritual world and the smooth appeasing of their corporate clients. The annual lavish merit ceremony with visiting monks who would chant and bless Pae's production company was another important investment with the power to align the spiritual world in aid of the flourishing of Pae's business, his creative work, and the fortunes of his employees. In terms of everyday spiritual investments, Bell's attending to the small, colourful spirit shrine provided a repeated precaution against the threat of misbehaving spirits. Even if, as

Bell explained, they could not know if the shrine would be required or, if required, effective, the practice of making a shrine, like Pae's regular visits and donations to his favourite temples, offered an everyday opportunity for accumulating merit and for presenting a face of moral respectability.

Corporate concerns regarding market branding, together with Thai social hierarchies, combined to incentivize respectable companies to hire production companies that could provide a respectable public face. Many activities in the everyday work of advertising production, such as cross-dressing, sexy poses, long hours in the close physical proximity to people outside the family however, signified questionable moral standards. Visually prominent displays of moral respectability and spiritual activity, such as annual blessing ceremonies and neat spirit shrines, were effective strategies for counteracting personal and external concerns about moral fitness in the midst of work processes and habits that were "very different."

Public Respectability, Military Paternalism and the Female Body

Endeavors for public respectability on behalf of production teams and their corporate clients fit conveniently with the military government's campaign for improving the behavior of Thai citizens. Moral censure by the military junta included, for example, the censure and banning of "free hugs" by young volunteers at the mourning site at Sanam Luang palace area following the death of King Bhumibol (Kao Sod 2016). General Prayuth, the acting prime minister, took a particularly active interest in standards of moral presentation in public life. The General suggested the influence of westerners in Thailand was partly to blame for the corruption of the nation's youth. For example, Prayuth often criticized the dress choices and provocative dance moves of *Lum Yai*, a teenaged female performer and sent military officers to inspect *Lum Yai's*

clothing choices and to count the number of "twerk" dance moves she performed in a single performance (Kao Sod English 2017). On more than one occasion, General Prayuth also compared women with skimpy clothing to toffees that were unwrapped and no longer good for eating. The week before the Songkran holiday in 2016, for example, the General joked in a televised interaction with female students, telling them to dress "*suay dee"* (with good beauty) and to pay attention to "*mai dtaeng dtuaa bpoh"* (must not to dress in a porn style*)* and *hai du dee* (pay attention to appearances)[27]. The female students around him laughed nervously. The General then went on to mime opening sweets and throwing them away, describing how "*phuu ying meuuan thaawfee"* (women are like toffee), "open them and you don't want to eat them"[28]. As Herzfeld (2017) has discussed in reference to Prayuth and others, the motivations for autocratic rulers such as Prayuth in publicly censoring the female body can be more nationalistic and paternalistic than they are religious. Moreover, many of the General's public criticisms of women during this period were broadly received with ridicule and laughter. Nonetheless, the caricature of elderly masculine disapproval offered by General Prayuth, albeit an outlying example, sat within a spectrum of public condemnation of the display of female bodies during the period of the junta's rule, especially during the mourning period of King Bhumibol[29].

The NCPO government instructions on modesty were repeated in instruction for young people in television programs and on street signs. At the time following the King's death, there was an extra level of criticism levelled at people, but especially women, who were thought to be dressing immodestly. One day when researching the mourning activities surrounding the King's

[27] See Herzfeld (2016, 91 & 2017, 298) for a discussion of *hai du dee*.

[28] See *TNN* 2016.

[29] See, for example, *Kao Sod News* 2016.

death, for example, my friend Trude Renwick from the University of California, Berkeley, and I helped a young police office working in the Kao San road area, famous for nightclubs and backpacking hostels, translate a sign's text to English. The sign offered instructions for appropriate behavior around the palace area after the King's death. The instructions included "Do not to have parties or drink alcohol in the street" and to act *riiap raawy*, "neatly," *bplaawt phai*, "safely," and moreover *mai dtaeng dtuaa bpoh*, literally, "do not dress in porn style." The young officer had written "No porn dressing," but I suggested "Do not dress inappropriately." While the request to dress appropriately is more vague than the Thai instruction of *mai dtaeng dtuaa bpoh,* I could think of no helpful translation without first assuming the reader understood what is considered "porn" style dress in Thailand. When I first began interning with Bangkok production companies, I was sometimes shocked at the tiny shorts and skirts female team members would wear. I learned, however, that short shorts could be considered acceptable or borderline appropriate. A tight t-shirt or blouse that many American girls might wear to work, however, would be inappropriate. Items of clothing or objects that suggested inappropriate sexual activity did not translate easily across different media publics when Bangkok advertising workers were working for international clients. One Bangkok production team told me about a job where they had made a video commercial for a Chinese company. The video included a brief scene in a bathroom in which a yellow rubber duck had sat innocently in the corner of the bathtub. The client had apparently been shocked and asked that the scene be re-shot in order to remove the offending duck that his team understood as a reference to pornographic activity.

Figure 24. Example of instructions for dress. For mourners going to see King Bhumibol's coffin, publicized on and offline in 2016-2017. Titled "Dressing Up" or "Dress," the poster includes instructions on shirt sleeve and dress length.

Figure 25: Dress instructions at Sanam Luang. For those people wanting to visit the palace compound following the death of King Bhumibol. Photo by author, March 2017.

Disguised Value: Service, Sweetness and Social Relationships

Although many Bangkok production workers present themselves to others on social media as stylish and upwardly middle class, they also mark themselves visually in many of their posts as distinctly different through public acknowledgment of their physically difficult work conditions. In photos, Instagram posts, and conversation, some workers romanticize the long hours they work, the long distances they travel to get the perfect shot, and the hours they stand outside in the blazing sun. Romanticizing hard labor is found in many industries globally, but pride in physical labor and outdoor work is unusual among the Bangkok middle class, among whom there is a tendency to draw a powerful narrative of distinction that imagines a strong cultural and spatial divide between the educated and *siwilai* (civilized) from the city and uneducated laborers from rural areas of Thailand (Mills 1997; Thongchai 2000).

Long days on set require a team to be at work for over twenty-four consecutive hours. The team might start at 3:00 am and finish at 6:00 am the following day. After a long day of shooting with an early morning finish time, some teams might go home and then come in late around midday. However, on many days when teams would only go home in the early hours to shower and return by 5:00 am for the next day of work. There were, moreover, long days and nights that blurred together in the dark editing rooms. A few hours' sleep was stolen on a couch before stumbling back to the computer. Production teams were often full of youthful employees in their twenties. The young workers used their energy and their exhausted bodies for their clients' benefit and for the reputation of their team.

Massage, caressing, hugs, and other forms of physical touch were used to help alleviate the exhaustion and physical challenges of long days on set. It was not uncommon on set to see production workers, and among the camera and lighting assistants, touching each other

physically in order to alleviate pain and exhaustion. Some men would hug each other from behind and stroke each other's shoulders. Others, wordlessly, or with a laugh, punch or tap another man on the arm. Lighting and camera assistants would sit close together, back to back or legs wrapped around one another, their bodies pressed against each other on tiny wooden boxes, the only seats available. Men, women, and *kateoy* (cross dressing and transgender men) would give each frequent massages- especially back and shoulder massages. Massages often happen on a long day on set but were also given in the office when someone complained of a sore shoulder or feeling stiff. Early with my days on P'Mad's team, a young assistant producer, Jam, found my massage technique wanting and took me aside to instruct me how to improve my moves. Twirling strong, straight thumbs in front of my face and then applying them firmly in circular motions along the ridge of my shoulders, Jam instructed me to use the weight of my body to press down into the focal point of my thumbs to alleviate tension across a co-worker's back. When I asked Jam where she learned her massage skills, she said she had learned from her grandmother but that her boss had also brought in a professional to teach the entire work team to become competent masseurs and masseuses.

Beyond providing massages, being in physical proximity to others was also an important part of the way that workers interacted with the technology of their craft. When holding heavy cameras or lights, workers often supported each other physically. Physical intimacy was, in my experience, frequently accompanied with flirtatious jokes. Jam explained this flirtation as *app khuy gan muea mee sp-ark click-gan* (speak secretly and sweetly with each other and then there is a click or a spark). Jam didn't use Thai words to describe this connection but instead used Thai-English in the form of "spa-ark" and "click gan" (click together). Jam went on to say, "Then people really talk, they flirt, they use *kham saawy khaaw* (literally, "necklace words,"

referring to the use of words that describe a person's characteristics like "Cute, Fat or Bossy Aunty"). Taay, Jam's co-worker, went on to explain this flirting lead to many people in the production industry in relationships with other people in the same industry. She elaborated, "I met my boyfriend, an editor, through work, plenty of people meet this way, because well, we have no time, so how will we ever meet anyone else? The way it works is usually actors will be with directors and casting directors will be with art directors. . . there is a pattern." Jam went on to say, "I miss my mum and dad. They ask me, when are you coming home? We really miss you. I miss them too. If I worked in an office, maybe around 5, 6 or 7 pm I could go home . . . If I work in an office, I won't be happy. If I work here, I can't have a family, can't have kids. But I don't know if I want that and well, I like my work." Several other women also told me they regretted not having time to have their own families. Although there were exceptions, most production workers who I spoke to on this issue accepted it as a standard expectation. In this respect these middle-class women from Bangkok were not unlike working class woman from northern Thailand who travel to Bangkok to work but must quit if they want to return home and pursue family life (Mills 1998). More broadly, the choice of both male and female production workers to live separate from their spouses and children, or to forgo family life mirrored that of millions of Thais who either chose not to have children, or chose to separate their families so that the parents can work. Bangkok is the only megacity in Thailand, and many families in Thailand leave the children with grandparents in rural area while the parents work in the city. Other families split the mother and father so that they can take up work opportunities in different places (Richter 1996).

The workplace, on the other hand, was a place where social relationships flourished. As Wilson (2004) describes in her ethnography of women's economic lives in Bangkok, the

relationship between capitalism and intimate relationships was not a removal, but rather a reframing. I asked different production workers why they might quit one company for another, but they frequently described their decisions in terms of their relationships. Money sometimes played a role, but workers would often take a pay cut for the sake of good relationships. The importance of relationships within each production team was especially clear to me when I went to visit an all-female production crew. When I asked how they chose their employees, the director said to me,

> Hiring people here - partly we hire who we think is good, but partly it is also their own judgement. Because each side has decide in regards to the chemistry, --if we will be a good team . . . seriously we are closer than family. It is not secondary relationships, it is primary relationships here. Everyone knows when my mum is sick or if someone's dog is going through chemotherapy. We spend all our time together. We even go on holidays together. We eat lunch and dinner together. We have to have a lot of flexibility at work and our friends and family cannot relate. They cannot understand why we cannot say, 'I will be available on Tuesday for dinner'. Because we do not know what will happen on Tuesday, maybe we will have to work late, and so we spend time with each other, when we have free time.

Pae, the producer who carefully managed his reputation for Buddhist practice and outrageous behavior, chided me for taking my own long-distance relationship too seriously. One day, thinking I looked stressed, he asked me to sit next to him, "You should not allow love to worry or distract you," he said; "You know my wife and I. My wife is like a friend who will always be there, but the love is no longer romantic, she knows. . . I have friends at work." At this, the director dropped his voice and leant his head toward me. I wondered if some of those friendships were more than friendships. I paused,

> ". . . Are you saying work is more important than love?"
>
> "No," the director replied, "But work comes first. This is what it means to be professional. But you will leave us for love, I see it."
>
> "No," I replied, "I need to leave Thailand so I can complete my Ph.D."

> At this, Pae looked incredulous and raised his eyebrows. “Stay here Bon,” he said, “It is better if you work here.”

The social investments and sacrifices made by Bangkok production crews share similarities with the volunteer labor provided in flexible, service, and creative industries elsewhere. As Muehlebach (2012) argues with regard to voluntary labor in Italy, popular ideologies of work and leisure under contemporary capitalist regimes posit individuals as the center of social and moral responsibility. Special status is awarded to those who are willing and capable of acting as good economic and social subjects by, for example, performing unpaid services. It is typically easier for middle and wealthy classes to find time to perform such unpaid labour. This leaves the working classes at risk of being evaluated as morally deficient if they voice calculating claims for monetary compensation.

While Bangkok production teams are typically firmly middle class and are (with the exception of interns) paid for their services, they are also expected to provide professional and social services beyond their contracted obligations. Most teams expected to work whatever hours were necessary in order to meet the requests of their clients according to the client’s schedule and took pride in the level of trust placed in their team by the client. One day I was attending a lecture on Raymond Williams in the anthropology department at Thammasat when I received a series of text messages and phone calls from Bell, the secretary and production manager mentioned above. The Singaporean arm of a Chinese technology firm was negotiating a contract with Bell’s team and Bell wanted to know how to tell the Singaporean client that the quoted price was already reduced and could not be reduced further. I called Bell during a break to talk with her

about the English translation. Bell sounded flustered and stressed so the end of the lecture, I headed straight over to her team's office.

By the time I arrived at the office, Bell was more relaxed. Bell explained that team's producer was leaning towards rejecting the contract, because the client wanted "too much for too little". In order to help me understand what she meant, Bell pulled up an email from the client on her computer. The email's attachment was long document listing extremely detailed information requested by the client. The document was in English and requested information such as the production company's official name, address, legal representative, three years of evidence of tax auditing, registered capital, profits for previous three years, cash flow, examples of three previous jobs, number of staff, occupational health and safety procedures (Quality and EHS compliance). Another section asked for any conflict of interest on behalf of the production company, including if employees spouses, children or parents were investors in the client's parent company in China. Yet another section asked for a bank credit rating, and other financial details.

As I scrolled through each page of the document, my eyes widened. Bell looked at my incredulous face and explained "many companies would not require this, working with Thai companies is not like this". When I expressed that providing the required information would be a lot of work Bell agreed and said, "I think we will cancel as the price is too low and this process is too long". There may also have been some cultural bias in Bell and her team's assessment of the way that the Singaporean conducted their negotiations in a style different to Thai companies that they worked with. I knew however that the producer from Bell's team was someone who took

pride in his strong social relationships with his clients. The team kept written contracts and records for each job, but understandings with clients and employees were largely worked out orally in face to face interactions, and over chat on social media platforms. My own interview before being welcomed to work with Bell's team had occurred over Facebook messenger, where cute digital "stickers" had been part of the way I and the producer who interviewed me communicated.

The usual method of contracting agreements for many small and medium sized Thai production companies was closer to the extemporized production processes Ganti (2012) describes in the production of Bollywood films. Ganti (2012) describes a fragmented and decentralized Indian production industry in which everyday production processes include holding meetings where people do not write things down, skipping storyboard creation owing to a lack of time, using production offices for rest and socializing, improvising lines so that new scripts are developed in front of the camera and an oral work culture where spoken commitments become contracts. Ganti (2012: 213) argues that this style of film production offers a challenge to Weberian style bureaucratic film making preferred in colonial India and American Hollywood. A number of Thai production workers told me stories of working with Indian clients and film crews that, in their view, confirmed a greater degree of improvisation as typical of Indian production. Many Bangkok production companies also however, used similarly informal and decentralized daily work processes, relying on oral agreements and negotiating agreements over the informal channels of Facebook messenger and Line chat, using work spaces in ways blurring the lines between professional and private life and relying on improvisation in order to source new tones of voice or lines on set.

Under the Thai contracts the Bangkok production team usually conducted, the team's collegiality and social investment in their work place were taken advantage of by corporate clients who could request the production team to work long hours to deliver new versions of the advertisements until the clients were satisfied. Within these local business relationships however, a mask of friendship and flexibility covered over the extensive work that would be required. The Chinese-Singaporean client had demanded an accounting of the Bangkok production team's financial trustworthiness rather than express trust in the team but demand special treatment on the basis of that trust. This Bangkok production team were proud of their reputation for providing their services with an attitude of affability and flexibility and felt that a detailed contract insulted the extra effort they put in every day to go above and beyond in making their clients happy.

At another production company, the one made of all female workers, the director mentioned described to me how her team was constantly at the service of her company's clients. In a deep tone heavy with ire, she said to me, "It is worse now that it was 10 years ago. Because now we can be called upon to be available 24 hours, because the internet makes that possible. You need to make yourself available in NY time, LA time or in Germany. So that might mean talking at 3am in the morning. Going to bed late to get their instructions, and then being up early to tell your team how to implement it." A female producer at a different production house stood out, however, because of her team's decision to challenge the underlying assumptions under which their company provided services to their clients:

> "We had a meeting in the company, about a decade ago" the producer explained, "where we decided, ok, we'll get less money, but; we'll have families, we'll have lives [we will work less]."
>
> "Is it possible to do this?" I asked.

> "Yes, it's possible, it's up to you," the producer replied. "Stop picking up the phone. They [the client] phone you because they need someone to talk to - phone at 11 and talk until 3am, because people enjoy it when you show them attention - you give them service, you give them massages, you treat them like a *super*god."

In this quote, the producer drew a link between the social sacrifices production teams were willing to make and the benefits that accrue to their clients. Enthusiastic, flexible labor is clearly an asset to the movement of capital in the international advertising industry. Beyond the resource of cheap labor, Thai production teams also provide a particular form of emotional labor that this producer identified as reinforcing a sense of social hierarchy between client and contractors. The social and emotional labor Bangkok production teams provide is distinctive among the many forms of emotional labor where "seeming to 'love the job' becomes part of the job" (Hochschild 2003 [1983], 6) owing to the combination of emotional and physical services involved. As the producer mentioned in the quote above, some clients expected physical attention from production workers. This physical care included massages and attending to physical comfort on set through comfortable seating, arranging fans, providing high quality food, and other forms of improvised attention in ever new locations. In a few cases (although not the majority), some producers admitted clients occasionally would ask the production team to organize for prostitutes to take care of male clients.

Thai production crews have a reputation abroad in the film industry as being friendly and accommodating. This reputation is celebrated by The Thai Office of Tourism that promotes Thai film production. Large Thai production houses with websites in English also use this reputation to advertise their services. For example, on their website, Benetone Films writes, "Best of all, Thailand is an exceptionally service-minded country with a strong reputation for being friendly and hard-working." Such advertisements suggest that Thai laboring bodies are fundamentally distinct from the international clients who desire their labor, and in some way also

more culturally pure than the internationally influenced Thais that work for large advertising firms. In these advertisements, the social intimacy with which Thai production houses work together in relationships that resemble kinship ties, or what Sahlins (2013) calls, "mutuality of being" are essentialized as a pre-formed benefit of Thai culture. Glossing these relationships as Thai culture looks askance at the lifestyle sacrifices and social bonds, practices, and obligations that undergird everyday work. The creative and social investments given and sacrificed by production crews goes largely unrecognized as it is glossed in the few existing representations and discourses of Thai production houses as typical Thai "friendliness" and "emotional nature." I argue that what is glossed in promotional talk as Thai "friendliness" is not some inherent Thai atmosphere or essence, but, as I will argue further in the next chapter, is produced within the context of intimate social relationships taking place within the workplace. Such intimate social relationships, including their expectations, favors, and motivations, produce labor for hire that is relatively cheap, freely available, and flexible.

Beauty as Professional and Moral Value

I had come to Bangkok to do long-term fieldwork following four and a half years of study in graduate school. As a graduate student, I lived in the buzz of looming deadlines and the rush of feeling productive. One of the greatest challenges for me during my research with production teams in Bangkok was refocusing my energies and motivation towards daily painstaking games of patience and providing polite, pretty, and quiet forms of assistance. That is, I soon found I was valued and welcome in the space of many production teams because of my comportment and attitude. To my initial surprise (and sinking disappointment), it became clear that I was often most useful to production teams because of this slow, quiet service. My pride

took a strong, fast hit when I quickly learned that my film skills, creative ideas, my ability to get things done, were usually considered either irrelevant or unhelpful.

One producer told me soon after meeting me a horror story, which I took as a warning. The producer mentioned that there were many interns in his industry, but very few of those interns were non-Thai. This producer had worked with hundreds of interns, but it was a non-Thai intern, a young man from Singapore, who had been infamously offensive. The intern's two greatest offences, the producer told me, had been firstly, offering to direct a TVC and secondly, sitting on a chair with his feet casually up on the table. The latter was certainly something that immediately caused me to lean back in shock. Feet in Thailand are considered dirty -both physically and symbolically. Combining such a faux-pas with a nonchalant attitude was in contradiction to everything the producer expected an intern should be. The bold offer to direct a TVC, however, was an offense I needed more time to process. I personally respected such as bold offer. How could I be successful without boldness and enthusiasm? It was a brazen act for an intern to offer to direct a video. But was there anything lost in just telling the intern "no," I wondered?

I learned skills and confidence, were not necessarily considered the best assets in this industry. Young assistant producers and directors told me when picking new interns, the necessary quality they sought was not skill but neat presentation and attitude. Being *riiap rawy* that is, neat, well presented and well mannered, was considered the most important quality for a potential employee. The same producer who complained about the Singaporean intern later told me with a laugh "I can teach skill but I can't teach prettiness. So it's better to hire the pretty intern than the one with skills." The producer was aware that his team had gone to universities to study various majors, such as communication, performance or marketing. Beauty was not

considered less important. It was an essential form of value. Beauty, however, was instantly marred if it was presented in a way that is impolite. When hiring interns, a junior producer told me she sorted through the large number of expressions by "looking at the way they express themselves in email and chat [in online messaging], do they speak *maarayaat* (politely, with etiquette), do they present themselves as appropriate, *riiap rawy* (neat/ orderly) and helpful?"

One night, after I had moved from the Eastern to the Western side of Bangkok, I was walking home from the Bangkok skytrain. At that time, home was the top level of an old Chinese-Thai style shop house where I rented a room that had previously been used by the son of the retired couple who still lived there. On my way home on that dark, warm night, I heard an unusual sound interrupt the usual cacophony of cars, buses, and pedestrians in evening banter. First, in the distance and then closer and louder, I heard wave after wave of loud cheers rising over the busy street. I was familiar with evening cheers interrupting the night. In eastern Bangkok, I had lived near a sports' stadium and on football nights, my evenings of eating spicy somtam and writing fieldnotes would be punctuated by spontaneous sounds of thousands of people in delight, leading me to look up from my typing and wonder if a goal had been scored. This night, over on the Western side of the city, far away from any sports stadium, I heard a strangely similar sound of cheering. It was also obviously very close.

I pulled out of my ears the headphones that were helping motivate my tired feet to take me home and looked for the source of the unexpected cheering. On drawing close to a small technical college, I followed with a slight sense of trepidation the source of the unusual noise. I saw a brightly lit outdoor meeting area and the backs of thousands of students. My eyes drew wide as I moved closer and saw a large stage on which twelve transgender men stood wearing university uniforms, impeccable hair, stunning make up, and beauty pageant sashes. Turning to

some female students near me, I asked what was happening and the young women said it was the annual beauty competition for students. They explained there would be three categories: women, men and transgender men. I marveled that such an event could attract such a large and enthusiastic crowd of peers and remembered again how beauty had been a deciding factor in the hiring of interns. Students with high grades might be given some opportunities, but in the advertising industry in Thailand, grades and skill were often eclipsed by attitude, comportment, and physical presentation. I remembered an occasion months earlier when I was shadowing a team making a video advertisement for a Thai university. On that occasion, we were tasked with casting university students instead of actors in the video for the sake of authenticity. In casting the students, however, we paid little attention to what they studied and instead focused on their abilities to smile for a camera, to tilt their head and pose, and to walk across a room. After every few auditions, the casting director mumbled that the students were not sufficiently beautiful for the video. Despite the detailed photo editing that would eventually include removing acne, reshaping nose outlines, and lightening skin, the casting director worried that the human product before him was failing as a material resource.

Popular correlations between beauty and morality or human worth is not unique to Bangkok advertising communities. Ethnographic observations regarding witchcraft and the evil eye provide many examples of popular beliefs regarding people with unsettling appearances and the power or tendency to inflict harm on others (Lykiardopoulos 1981). Recent ethnographic studies of the practices of beauty in everyday life have found correlations between social status and beauty (Jarrín 2017), and between moral respectability and the work of beauticians (Hester 2015). In Thailand, Mills (1998) has described the way that young women view the pursuit of beauty and style as a vehicle of self-empowerment. The young women that Mills studied

sometimes lamented the loss of style and beauty that they had gained during periods of urban employment but sacrificed for the pursuit of marriage and family ties.

The role of beauty in enhancing moral and social reputations in Thailand finds a long tradition in teaching of Theravada Buddhism and the social life of the palace court. Van Esterik (2000, 129) in her analysis of these entwining monarchical and religious traditions, provides multiple examples of Buddhist texts and palace traditions that fuse together morality, status, and appearances where "the attributes gentleness, subservience, silence and virtue are intertwined with the attributes of grace, composure and beauty." In popular Buddhist texts such as the Jataka, for example, male beauty is provided as evidence of the legitimacy of political command. Courtly women of true beauty, however, do not practice political command in religious stories and texts, argues Van Esterik (2000). Instead, women's beauty is often expressed through practices of submission and service. This discrepancy, arguably, directly continues to affect the way that male and female beauty works both on and behind the scenes in the Thai media industry. While both male and female beauty is prized in production work, women face greater pressure to provide beauty and pleasantness while men are able to use performances of politeness and subservience more selectively.

The religious influence of texts and a tradition idealizing beauty are mediated in everyday practice. Buddhist texts exist in multiple versions and, while the Thai palace preserves a fixed cannon, the influence of multiple texts arguably makes itself felt. In Buddhism, moreover, orthopraxy is typically viewed as more important than theological orthodoxy. Buddhist texts in Thailand are not considered authoritative without the benefit of parallel instruction, tradition, and efficacious practice. Thus, while tradition and texts undoubtedly hamper women's ambitions in elite spheres such as the monarchy and military, beauty has also been an important consideration

in women's success in the political and market spheres. In chapter one, I discussed examples where women who have succeeded in the advertising industry are sometimes described in terms of their beauty and aura. Prime minister Yingluck Taksin's most important point of authority to the majority that voted for her was her relationship to her elder brother, but her beauty was also a crucial factor (New York Times 2011). It is possible, therefore, for a woman to appropriate the status accorded by beauty for her own purpose. Nevertheless, the powerful conceptual bridging of beauty with gentleness can become a daily hurdle, especially for women with ambitions to advance in authority in professional spheres of work.

Interpreting beauty as sign of moral goodness in the social spaces of advertising production was affirmed to me during fieldwork during a conversation with a famous Bangkok influencer (that is, lifestyle guru with an online following). The beauty blogger Peary told me that she helped to supervise several online beauty channels and minor celebrities. I asked Peary if good character and ethics were important for success in her industry and she replied that "*Kwam suay maak gwaa* (Beauty is more important). If there is no bad news, everyone will assume that a beautiful beauty blogger is good." This assumption, that beauty was an indication of good character, was one repeated to me on many occasions. The popularity of the association of beauty with goodness was pervasive in professional and public life far beyond the media and marketing sectors.

As discussed in chapter one, reputation, success, and status in the Bangkok advertising industry, are as in other areas of established, conservative business, rooted in a reputation of goodness and *barami*. In these contexts, beauty is not only a valuable commodity on screen. Beauty is also a sign to clients of the respectability of the advertising agency, production company, or other business. The stereotype of beautiful women as a useful asset for attracting

interest by foreign clients is well known. To Thai clients, however, the presence of stylish, beautiful women is more importantly a promise of success and status and a sign of a respectable business. New, junior, or untrusted team members may be prohibited from dressing stylishly when at work as beauty is reserved for those with status. The beautiful body of a woman is a valuable commodity whether in front of the camera, behind the scenes, attending a meeting with a client, or even in the dark editing rooms where editing teams with bent backs and stiff necks examine each scene with a surgeon's precision.

The Practice and Bind of Beauty

Beauty was a constant practice, topic of conversation, and aspiration for many production workers I spent time with. For many women and transgender workers, every day was the opportunity for a new outfit combination, a new performance: Adidas tracksuits with earrings like chandeliers; t-shirts with tassels, mini-skirts and wrist bands like buckles; and, fat baseball caps embossed in gold and round bucket hats covered in Hawaiian prints. On shooting days, some groups of workers would co-ordinate their look. Many teams had matching shirts. One team I worked for had team t-shirts in a variety colors. Sometimes, we were instructed by the producer which shirt we should wear for that shoot, but often the small team members would band together to choose. During my time with this particular team, a new female team member was employed. The new member was in her mid-twenties, short, slim, and when first arriving, had an alert but demure countenance. This young woman initially dressed in long pants, tied her hair back, and walked around the edges of the room. Before a few months had passed, however, this new employee's style and attitude had changed. Very quickly this woman was wearing thick eyeliner, wore her short hair down around her eyes, and walked around in mini-skirts with her

eyes peeled and shoulders back. I marveled that this young woman's success in transforming her identity in the office and among the team. As discussed in chapter one, new interns and employees were typically expected to dress demurely in order to indicate their lower status. A woman who dressed with such confidence, walked with authority, and rarely hesitated to speak indicated that she was being accepted, or at least tolerated, to act with such attitude. I knew that if an intern or another new employee had tried such an attitude and style they would have been quickly rebuffed. I soon saw, however, that this young woman's work as a graphics editor was sorely needed and greatly appreciated by the team she worked for. The young woman offered a critical resource to the company and walked confidently in that knowledge.

I observed several other new employees who also adjusted their style and attitude after joining the team. It would take many months, if not over a year, before they began to dress, walk, and talk in a more assertive manner. One young woman was one of the quietest production workers I had ever met. She rarely spoke but crouched on the edge of the set and stood in the room with eyes opened and feet ready to move. When she was needed, she would pounce into place. Quieter than the paws of a cat, she would jump in to fix the collar on a shirt, fetch a shooting board, and melt back into the side of the frame. This young woman had once been an intern for the company and continued to dress like one - thick, long jeans, large black t-shirts, and sensible sneakers. I had been told that it was this attitude that had endeared her to the company that had hired her. Although quiet, this young woman was always included in extra social events. Going to lunch, to dance at a club, and in photos, she was always included. She might dress and act like an intern, but her inclusion by the others marked her as part of the group.

After about a year had passed, this new employee's role in the company had slightly shifted. I noticed, both on and off set, people had started to rely on her more and more. Rather

than being an assistant to the costume team, she acted as though she could manage the wardrobe responsibilities on her own. She waited less for other's instructions before jumping to act. Rather than looking constantly to the faces of others, she looked directly at the location of action and made her own decisions. The young woman was still very quiet but began to change how she presented herself physically. Nearly every day, she would now wear lipstick, thicker make-up, and eyeliner. She posed more in photographs, head angled to the side, back arched, and mouth pouting. For these two employees, there had been a mirroring between their importance to the team's work and their decision to assert themselves as more noticeable in space through costume, make-up, gesture, posture and speech. These two young women were hired when they were demure and *riiap roi* (neat) in their presentation. The form of beauty that they presented however changed after they spent more time with the production team and as they became more important assets in daily work practice. These women channeled their beauty into a different social position and aesthetic aspiration once they had the security of their place within the team. In his analysis of the class politics of beauty and neatness in Bangkok, Herzfeld (2017) argues that popular middle-class Thai concepts of beauty have acted as productive tools of neoliberal economic policy and political conservativism. In the context of architectural design and renewal, for example, concepts of beauty including *suuay ngarm* and *riiap roi "*superficially softens and masks the structural violence of sometimes brutal economic and social discrimination (Herzfeld 2017, 297). Just as beauty accords status, so it also excludes, demarcating between people and places considered beautiful and those considered disorderly. For the young women working in some production teams, self-presentation was both an expression and a generator of their value to their team. Presenting their bodies in a stylish manner, the women confidently demanded others to see their worth. Sometimes the young women pushed the boundary of what was

considered appropriate dress for the workplace but did so confident in their knowledge that they were valued, skilled workers in their team.

Figure 26: A hairstylist finishes his work on an elderly actress' hair at the beach. February 2017. Photo by author.

During my time working with Thai production teams, I was further able to understand the potential and the bind and of beauty differently when my body became closer to what many in the production crews thought of as beautiful. This transformation was mostly unintentional, and it took a few unexpected experiences to convince me that this change had occurred. Like many women working on Bangkok production sets, I had developed a self-consciousness about my value to the team. Although my ability with English was considered useful, it was marred by the fact that my accent was tarred by its Australian sound, which was considered low on the ladder of ideal English accents. I was allowed to help with developing lines in a script or story board,

but I was not a very valuable English teacher and was not an ideal candidate for English voiceovers. In other words, I struggled to meet the standards of middle-class beauty that would mark me as valuable in the workplace. In describing the effort required when gaining access to powerful corporations, or wealthy social groups, anthropologists often talk about "studying up" (Nader 1964: Malefyt & Moeran 2003). In my time with production teams, my own status slid between being a respected, educated, white girl to being an unstylish, uncool, useless outsider who was insufficiently beautiful, stylish, or connected to be of value. Some very kind producers and teams were happy to have me spend time with them or interview them. Most people working in advertising were not interested in meeting me. This was certainly understandable owing to the long hours at work, but it also seemed to be a reflection of the fact that I was not exciting or stylish. I was not worth taking a photo with. As I understood it, the limited amount of respect and welcome I had been able to create for myself in at least one production company was related to the way I presented myself physically. A polite and quiet demeanor was part of the way I made my presence acceptable to the team. It was also appreciated that I increasingly dressed with a certain level of care.

On one occasion, for example, I was excited to secure an interview with a representative from the AAT (Advertising Association of Thailand). An interview with a representative from the AAT was something I had tried to arrange for over a year, and when I was finally welcomed to speak with Aj. Niwat, a senior member of the board, he asks me to meet him at TBWA, a marketing agency in a wealthy part of town. After navigating the imposing entry to the building, I walked around the corridors of the first floor, trying to figure out which glass door framed by abstract sculptures was the reception of TBWA. Finally, after finding the right place and sitting awkwardly on something that resembled a giant squiggle, I was welcomed to a meeting room to

interview Aj. Niwat. During the meeting, the head of TBWA walked into the meeting room, caught my eye, and nodded,

"I saw you walking around the lobby," he said to me in English.

"She is a PhD student," Aj. Niwat replied.

"She looks like it," replied the head.

At the time, this response made me smile. I liked my outfit, an over-sized black t-shirt, a long skirt in geometric shapes, flat black sandals, and a thick silver necklace tied in a knot. Later, however, I realised that perhaps my clothing looked out of place to the man from TBWA, and the comment may have been an insult. I had been faulted before for wearing things that looked "cheap."

When working with production crews, I was usually quiet unless spoken to. I would wait for a relaxed and appropriate moment in the office or on set before I would I dare to start a conversation or ask a question. I realised several months into fieldwork that I walked more slowly, walked into rooms more softly, and slid doors closed slowly. I sat with my elbows towards my body and knees pressed together, conserving space. My hair was longer. I regularly wore light make-up, and I tried to dress with more attention to detail. When, in previous years, I had done research in Bangkok's outdoor vegetable markets, I had worn bright collared shirts, no makeup, and long shorts that allowed the air to breathe. Now, I wore shirts with pastel geometric shapes and tight, patterned pants.

There was no denying, moreover, that I was valued in a certain way in some teams because of my visual presentation of whiteness. On days that I dared to show up to work messy, without makeup or wearing old clothes, I instantly ruined the effect. On such days, I might be greeted by team members with a sigh and "Are you tired, Bon?"

One day on set however, I was surprised. The wardrobe manager, a serious woman in her early thirties, walked up to me and asked me for a favor,

"Bon, can you be a Mademoiselle?"

"Who?" I replied, confused.

"Help us with the shoot, it's like Next Top Model," the manager replied, referring to the reality TV show.

We were shooting a video ad that day for a laundry detergent, and the wardrobe manager apparently thought I should stand in as an extra in the shoot. About an hour later, the wardrobe manager asked me to follow her to the wardrobe room where, among the impromptu clothes hangers and hairdryers, she pulled out the sleeveless, black jumpsuit. Slowly, she looked at me and back at the jumpsuit. "Can you try this on?" the question hung with a series of other questions hidden behind it. By this time, I had been in living in Thailand consecutively for about ten months and unintentionally dropped two clothing sizes. The wardrobe manager had apparently assessed my new body size and thought I might be useful.

Inside the toilet cubicle, I stepped into the black jumpsuit, felt the cheap polyester cling to my skin and reached behind me to tug up the zip. I was tall enough that the suit had to stretch over my shoulders, but the zipper did up smoothly without nicking my skin. Looking in the mirror, I looked with a jolt at a slender woman clocked in a thin, form-fitting black suit staring back. I walked back to join the team of costume and casting assistants, and when the wardrobe manager saw me, her mouth fell into a relaxed position with relief. She rummaged around in some large, plastic Tupperware, found some bangles for me to wear, removed my small earrings for some bright, dangling ones, and gave me some lipstick. Self-consciously, I applied the dry, red stick to my lips. The wardrobe manager then looked at my feet, and within seconds she was

holding set of six-inch towering heels. Up close, the heels looked old, cracked, and dirty. I strapped them around my feet in a series of endless strings crisscrossed across my foot. The shoes were almost impossible to walk in, but leading me by the hand, the wardrobe manager wordlessly presented me to the director and assistant director for their approval. Their silence probably only lasted seconds but I felt nervous and like time stopped until the director smiled, nodded, and assented, "Ok." I was led over to a place at the front of the set where I was given a clip board and instructed to press my shoulders back, to clap my hands, lift my eyebrows, and gasp as though I was judging a fashion model. Standing next to me was a male comedian who also acted as a fashion model. Together, we feigned astonished admiration as the video advertisement's main actress, a young woman in a dress billowing with clouds of polyester strutted down a raised catwalk.

Figure 27. Still from video advertisement in which the author stands in as a fashion judge.

Standing in those towering heels for the few hours while we shot the scene, I realized I undergone a physical transformation that allowed my body to provide a new level of usefulness to the team. I could feel the jumpsuit riding up my buttocks and my feet were killing me. Every time I moved my arm more than an inch, the bracelet on my wrist fell to the ground. The jumpsuit and the heels made it impossible to bend over. Instead, I had to slowly twist my body and lower my tightly bound legs until I could pick the bracelet up. After many months of being peripheral to the team, however, I also felt the relief of becoming useful. Another day soon after, I was enlisted to be a particular kind of extra, one of four "chic" background women. In the video, a female celebrity talked about her life. The visual mood was glamorous. The young woman was wearing red, gold, and pink and walking across a soft pink background while talking about the highlights of her career. In one scene, she walked as though "on air" (in reality, on a rail-less treadmill that was edited away in post-production) while four chic women, all dressed in white with white bob wigs and thick sunglasses, sat looking on. Using team members to act as these employees saved the company money and work. The casting director expressed his excitement at casting one of the new young interns. With her light skin, oval face, thin nose and high cheekbones, the intern was excitedly described as having a Japanese look. Then, I was also cast to play a role along with the second young intern and team member. The four of us sat in a row hidden under our wigs and over-sized sun glasses. Our anonymity, however, was powerfully defined. An anonymous woman, I realised with a flash was not an invisible woman. Covered in wigs, glasses, and thick wooly white vests, we were unknown. Pale skin, slim legs, and face shapes, however, were very evident. Sitting on tiny stools, toes screaming in shoes too small, backs aching from frozen poses, we were statues, ornamental. I knew my value this second time as a frozen, aching, silent ornament was once again tied irrevocably to my skin tone and my new

slim frame. Despite the pain and the peripheral role in that moment, I felt thankful just to be of some value. When I caught myself feeling that way, I wondered at my insecurity.

Over some days of self-reflection, I realized I had become increasingly conscious of performances of beauty, style, and personality I could offer to the production teams I was working with. This transformation in awareness and effort had been difficult and far from straight forward. On numerous occasions, I had offended people by using the wrong compliments. I would be asked which of my fellow team members was the most beautiful and because I awkwardly stammered and suggested everyone could be called beautiful, I offended people for failing to give credit where value was thought to be obvious. One woman asked me if I liked her earrings, and I said, "Oh they're great! Did you buy them at the market?" At my response, several team members laughed and teased me, informing me they were an expensive purchase.

I had to learn new words to describe performances of beauty and style. Someone who looked unsophisticated, I was told, could be called "*Lotat"*(Lotus) and "*Big See"* (Big C). These terms referred to Bangkok hypermalls selling cheap products and were used to describe a woman who looked cheap. *Waak* referred a woman who ineffectively covered her neck with white power and "*Sadaw"* was yet another word to refer to a woman who looked ugly. *Chanii* was rude slang to refer to a young woman and used to tease other women on set. *Nok* was an annoying woman who flirted and *teh* was someone who was inconsiderate, not turning up to their commitments. Other words used to insult other's appearances had more salacious meanings such as *huabok* to refer to a young boy performing a homosexual act. Some teams also had their own code words such as *"Doremon*,*"* the popular chubby blue and white Japanese cartoon character. The word *Doremon,* often accompanied with a sigh or the roll of the eyes, was used as a veto of an actor or

model during an audition, or as an expression of frustration on set. If the casting director, wardrobe manager, or their assistant muttered "Doremon" to our team, we knew that they thought the actor or model was ugly and therefore a waste of time.

As I became conscious of my new value in terms of offering an acceptably beautiful body to the production team, I also developed a new admiration for the large number of girls in this business who presented as "Toms," that is, women with short hair who used male postures, such as sitting with knees wide apart, and wore androgynous or boys' clothing. Presenting as a Tom was a signal that usually (but certainly not universally) was interpreted as signaling romantic and/or sexual attraction to women. Many of the successful older women I met in the production industry presented themselves as Toms or identified themselves to me as such. There is a spectrum of presentation from women who looked like men to women, who with softer clothes, the occasional bow, or tapered pants, present more androgynously. In most cases, these women successfully and professionally occupy positions usually given to men. They were camera men, producers, and directors. Toms who were interns were very rarely called upon to be "beautiful" for the team. They had to be *riap roi,* that is, neat and well mannered, self-controlled, and quick to serve. But they were not evaluated or used for the purposes of being beautiful extras on set, and they were rarely called to take photos with clients and top producers. Toms were more likely to be given opportunities outside of casting and costume to learn editing and care for camera equipment. I rarely heard anyone call them cute, or beautiful, or speak softly with them. In fact, I noticed some senior producers and directors speak to them more harshly, criticizing them more frequently than either the female or male interns. Although the Toms were women, they had, in a limited sense, been able to exploit the cultural intimate secret about the façade of beauty. Although beauty was assumed to be a moral good, it was also clear that beautiful, *riap roi*

presentation often limited a person's or group's opportunities. Beauty, especially feminine beauty, was a valuable resource, but without connections or other advantages, it was difficult to direct the value of beauty towards personal profit. Acting inappropriately, speaking and dressing in non-feminine ways, might mean that a person had to take a cut in terms of their reputation, but it might also provide an avenue to hustle, learn new skills, and assertively take opportunities. Social hierarchy would certainly continue to make itself felt, but taking off the bind of beauty was one way to try and make your value count, to be recognized and evaluated in on a set of work and professional criteria more regularly given to men than to women.

Buffoons to Buddhism: Sadvertising and the Politics of Public Morality

Advertising production processes in Bangkok are, I argue, practiced through constant ethical evaluations that shape how the industry operates more than what is shown onscreen. These ethical evaluations, however, contribute to powerful social norms that together with the rise of establishment politics in Thailand provide a creative environment ideal for nurturing new pedagogical advertising genres such as *sadvertising*. The popularity of Thai sadvertising among international audiences arguably reflects shared market experiences of economic hardship and social isolation shared across international borders. From within Bangkok, however, sadvertising works as a complement and creative support to the circulation of political propaganda in public life in Thailand. The emergence of the sadvertising genre is an abrupt shift from the established advertising genres. The moral content of sadvertising, however, echoes strains of conservativism within many preexisting Thai media channels. Both in terms of content on screen and the production processes behind the scenes the emergence of the sadvertising genre demonstrates a marked shift and deserves further investigation.

During the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s, successive Thai administrations and their political allies, including the USA, conceptualized the spread of capitalism and consumer lifestyles in Thailand as an antidote to the threat of communism (Derek, Hirsch & Li 2011; Phillips 2015). Video advertisements during these decades frequently featured beautiful faces, upbeat music, slapstick humour and farmers stereotyped as crass, dark skinned, and ignorant. In the 1990s, there was a rise in MTV-style fast music videos utilizing pop music and sex appeal. During the 1990s, Bangkok production teams also earned fame within the international advertising industry for producing beautiful hair commercials. According to one female producer I spoke with, during the 1990s, this producer would meet with American stylists who had been sent to Thailand in order to learn the secrets of beautiful hair preparation and film technique.

Eight to ten years into the twenty-first century, the first examples of videos from the sadvertising genre appeared. These pedagogically laden videos were dramatically different to the general genres of working-class buffoonery and sexy, fashionably dressed teens. The new videos were typically three to five minutes (long by industry standards) and were expensive to make, requiring lengthy time on set, reconstructed streets, extensive post production editing, and expensive camera equipment necessary for achieving the soft glow of the romantically glowing screens. Sometimes referred to in Thai as *khoht sanaa riiak namdtaa* (advertising that calls for tears), the emotional style was recognized by audiences as very different from the widespread production of ads that were *bantheerng* (entertaining) through their use of good-looking young people, sexy outfits and gestures, brightly coloured pop ups, and funny sound effects.

These new ads, dripping in emotion were originally made only for Thai audiences. The success of the ads as viral videos shared overseas on YouTube, Weibo, and other online platforms, motivated some agencies to adapt the same style for overseas audiences with mixed

success (see next chapter, on the failed Pepsi advertisement). A representative from Bangkok's largest and most famous production company, credited with creating the new genre of ads, told me that her company now travels to Ad Festivals held in cities across the Asia Pacific in order to recruit new clients. "The cake is small," N told me, "and with the new media [online and mobile advertising] it is even smaller." N also stressed that on the global stage, although Thailand had received some recognition for the new emotional style advertising, "The ads that get awards, that get likes and views, they are mostly Western Ads. . . a lot of work [in Thailand] is co-production, the overseas clients come here because it is cheaper. Sometimes it is not cheaper but they come here in order to enjoy the beach for a week." N's own production company had in fact won awards and fame for its successful examples of sadvertising, but she spoke to the wider market trends of wealthy advertising and production firms exporting some of their work to Thailand owing to cheaper costs, good service, and agreeable work climate.

The emergence of sadvertising initially received considerable skepticism and pushback from the Bangkok production community. N told me that she and her colleagues would "fight with clients for a better message." Giving the examples of producing ads for a skin whitening cream or for an oil company, N said, "we have to have respect for our occupation. . . we can't change the message. . .[but] we have responsibility to ask the agency and client "Why not do it this way? Why not tell this story?" Following continued successful campaigns, production teams that were initially skeptical also began to show interest. Pae, the producer I described at the start of this chapter, had initially told me in 2014 that he was very critical of sad and emotional advertising. His own preferred style was comical, melodramatic, humorous, and surprising. When at that time, I mentioned in conversation that Thailand was becoming famous for its more emotional and heart-wrenching style of advertising, he shook his head at me and said, "This is

not good strategy," and "These producers miss the point. . . how will the audience understand the product?" I was surprised, therefore, when I visited Pae a few years later to find that his own preferred style of filming, while still comical, had become more emotional in its style, and he was even producing advertising that was closely related to the sadvertising genre in style and content.

Politics of Emotion

Pae's new emotional campaign featured a three-part series on the themes of exasperation, aggression, and depression. The campaign was designed to promote a brand of *Ya Dom* (smelling remedy). There are several kinds of *Ya Dom*, but its popular, mass produced form is a small plastic vial, the size of a small lipstick container. The product is used by a wide sector of Thai people for various purposes, including distracting the nose from bad smells and fighting nausea and exhaustion.

This particular campaign rebranded the smelling stick as clean, scientifically tested, and useful for the purpose of calming an overly anxious or angry individual. The desired message was to introduce a modern, scientific product for the promotion of health and social wellbeing. The underlying message of the campaign was, "Don't be angry, don't be depressed. If you find yourself moved to anger or desperation, practice calmness, breathe deeply." Through the warm and chiding words of comedian and actor named Udom Taepanich, three different individuals presented over three different advertisements were chided out of bursts of anger and depression. Each individual was also presented with their own *Ya Dom* with which to practice calm breathing. Udom instructed each character, "slowly breath in, slowly breath out," to find focus and see their anger and worry disappear.

The characters represented in each advertisement stood in as stereotypes widely known in Bangkok. Each stereotype, moreover, represented a lifestyle or a character type about which there was much public frustration and criticism. The first character was a young man frustrated by his current place of employment. In the video, the young man ranted nonsensical phrases and threw his papers around his desk. When Udom asks the young man what he will do if he quits his job, the young man suggests he will borrow money from his father and mother. This character offered a stereotype of a young person who put their own happiness ahead of parental obligations and threatened his family with financial insecurity. In a gentle tone, Udom the comedian reminded the young man of his responsibility towards his parents and asked the young man to be more content with his current work situation. In editing this video, the team leaned towards a humorous tone that was more in keeping with their regular tempo and style. Although it had originally been cut, extra material was added in order to allow the young's man humorous rant about his job to continue in greater detail.

The second video was the most popular and featured a young male driver with a strong case of road rage. With an accent from the Northeast and a red polo shirt, this character was styled to index red-shirt activists, a politically frustrated working class who had witnessed their elected government lose office in the military coup. Despite the red shirt, however, the entire video, like the others in the series, was put through a post-production edit that lightened the image to pastel-like tones. Distinguishing features from the roadside, such as billboards, were blurred out and the video's location appeared ethereal and dreamlike. In the video, the young man becomes extremely angry when another car almost swipes his own, yelling loudly, the young man suggests he should get out of his car in order to attack the other driver. This storyline was also representative of a topic of widespread social rumours and fear in Bangkok - young

men trapped in terrible traffic and frustrated by bad driving or damage to their car, who would erupt from their cars in fireballs of anger and physically attack the person driving the car who had offended them. Many such confrontations on Bangkok's roads had been captured during the past few years on car-dash video recorders or on mobile phones and uploaded for popular viewing on social media. In this particular advertising video, the stereotype of the man with road rage was layered under an aesthetic of political activism. The visual representation of the angry driver in a red shirt nodded towards a popular Bangkok middle class belief in working class political activity as the cause of socially bad behavior and public danger (Sopranzetti 2017). In the TV advertisement, Udom the comedian reminded the angry young man of his family, a young daughter and girlfriend, who would miss him if he were to attack the other driver and perhaps fare badly. Through the combination of wise counsel, slow breathing, and a *Ya Dom* smelling stick, the angry man was brought to a place of quiet calm. Concluding, "*sangkhohm men yaeh laaeo"* (society is already rotten), the angry driver calms down, plugs in his seatbelt, and decides to proceed calmly on his way. Whatever political and social anxieties the man might have had were now set aside for the happiness of knowing he was good to his wife and daughter.

The final video was difficult for the team to cast, shoot, and edit. It told the story of an overweight young woman considering ending her life because she was ignored by a boy she had a crush on. The young woman was gently prodded by Udom the comedian to admit that ending her life was selfish. A feel-good message, "You are valuable despite what others may say" was the desired take home message, but in the video it was clear that being overweight and unbeautiful remained undesirable. The stereotype of the suicidal young woman spoke to a media saturated by melodramatic stories of women crazy in love. Women attacked people, killed people, and hanged themselves because of love. As in the other videos, the message offered

resonated with Buddhist and politically conservative themes in its pedagogy. The viewer was instructed to not be over-swayed by emotion, not to give in to anger, and to manage her heart and think of others.

In editing the video, the production team spent extra time trying different cuts and arrangements of the material. Accustomed to working with comic story lines, the production and editing team had to work hard to find the right balance of sensitivity and light-heartedness. The producer, director and editing team knew that their brief was to create a video that was sympathetic to the story of the sad, overweight young women. A drive to mock the woman through close-ups that emphasized her bouncing cheeks and pouting lips were difficult for the team to dispense with. A joke, in which Udom asks the young woman sitting atop a building, "Which way do you want to go down?" was also considered insensitive and cut. It was apparent to the production team that edits that included close-ups of the young woman's plump, sad face and pouting lips too quickly veered towards insensitivity for the sake of humour. The prejudice towards the beautiful female body in the form of a thin, elegant and gracious woman was difficult to dispense with when the opposite was ripe for comedy in exaggerated difference.

The three advertisements were hailed as a viral success by Pae's production team. The release of the video campaign was made primarily on Facebook, where the videos were shared thousands of times. The second story of the angry driver received the most attention and admiration. In the days that followed the release of the videos, Pae told me that of all the thousands of projects he had done, this series was the campaign of which he felt most proud. Somewhat surprised, I asked him if this was really his preferred style, as I remembered him telling me that emotional ads were not smart for selling products. Pae replied that it was very rare that a company would give them an opportunity to make a story so touching, stirring, and had a

good message for society. Pae then invited for me to go along with the team as they filmed the next video in the series.

At first blush, it seemed as though this next video ran on a different theme. The purpose of the video was to introduce the beautiful, clean facilities and standards to which the smelling sticks were made. Seeing these two video series, the three characters, and the mode of production as different sides of the same coin, however, offers a helpful illustration of how the currency of beauty and the practice of morality are linked in everyday production work. In the moral universe among which the production workers of Bangkok were operating, to be beautiful was a neat equivalent to being good.

The film site for the video was far on the northwest outskirts of Bangkok. The material filmed this day would be contrasted to the footage of the *Ya Dom* company's modern production facilities. Here, in this small part of town were old alleys over putrefied water, dark teak houses with rotting walls, and a hot, bare concrete playground, smelly and small. The cameras were set up in a dark little street at the rear of the small town and pointed at an old home emptied to offer a make-shift film set. Inside the home, a combination of budding actors and housekeeping staff from the production office were conscripted to act as a family business making home-made smelling salts. A large smoking wok was set up at the back of the kitchen to make the family home appear smoky. The actors were instructed to wipe their noses on their hands, play with a pet dog, and behave with a nonchalant attitude with lowered eyes, hunched shoulders, and drooping frown lines. The effect was so Dickensian that I was confused as to if this was supposed to be comedy or melodrama.

The footage collected that day then went through a lengthy editing process. There were concerns that the footage shot was too insulting to poor, family businesses. The team wanted to

make the client's product, smelling sticks produced in a lab, look clean and modern, but they found it difficult to hit the right tone. Ordinarily, the team's production style was to make characters and comparisons as over-the-top and melodramatic as possible. Such a melodramatic style however would not work in this case – it would be too disrespectful. Exaggerating the flaws of the poor family business would project an attitude of disdain. Although some among the production team might privately laugh at such a dirty business, social expectation demanded some compassion. Over several days, I saw Pae, his face in an attitude of consternation, work on the video with the directors, editors, friends and clients. The producer showed the video to the company interns, to me, to the comedian from the first series and from each person he asked for his or her reaction, gauging our emotional reaction and trying to edit the video in such a way that would criticize without showing disrespect.

The moral and ethical value produced behind the scenes in producing *sadvertising* videos clearly work in parallel with the moral projects of the Thai state. There are political differences and ethical conflicts behind the scenes. The video outputs made by Bangkok production companies and the practices and values upheld within everyday work, however, typically meld consumerism and nationalism together. This shared mode of good, beautiful behavior is a visual narrative of beauty, status, and morality. As discussed in chapters one and two, class plays a significant role in shaping economic and political opportunities in Thailand. It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that belonging to the working class precludes consumerist desire or attempts to benefit from patriotism to the nation-state. Herzfeld's (2016) research with the Pom Mahakan community in Bangkok provides a clear example of a working class working-class community utilizing demonstrations of nationalism in order to win strategic and popular support for their land-rights claim. Walker's (2012) study of Thailand's political peasants offers

an example of how twenty-first century villagers in Northern Thailand draw upon, rather than reject, the paternal care of the state as a strategy for the accumulation of monetary resources and symbolic inclusion.

In line with Walker's understanding of dispersed power within the Thai context, I outline an example of everyday ethical and moral activity that while replete with its own internal tensions is frequently experienced as in line with, rather in opposition to, the conservative moral claims of the state. My analysis, therefore, is quite different from many conclusions arrived at in the study of "moral economies." Classic studies of peasant resistance from within the social sciences examined the way in which the politically oppressed may turn to alternative moral and political allegiances in an effort to evade the overbearing demands of the state (Thompson 1963; Scott 1977). This kind of moral division and motivation is not especially relevant in the case of Bangkok's production workers who tend to be politically conservative. Across Thailand, moreover, even disadvantaged groups may choose terms of patriotic expression when they advocate for their respective communities (Walker 2012; Herzfeld 2016).

Beautiful bodies Working for Supergod Clients.

In this chapter, I have drawn on ethnographic material with production workers to demonstrate the ethical practice and deliberation fraught within the daily work of advertising production in Bangkok. These deliberations occur at the level of aesthetic judgments, social commitments, spiritual calculations, and moral inspiration. Much of this ethical activity and deliberation occurs at the level of the body. This includes the body's surface as a canvas of beauty, in the skills learned by the body, the expression of intimacy, and the delivery of the body to physical exhaustion. As production workers cultivate skills and exercise performances of

politeness, neatness, and beauty, they are moreover cultivating skills that allow them to comply with and seek benefit from social, political, and market hierarchies.

I reflected on the way that production workers cultivate specific forms of beauty, skill, and social intimacy in their bodies as a way of cultivating their moral and market value. Forms of presentation and moral quality, including style, beauty, and being *riiap rawy*(neat) become in some cases requirements, in other cases aspirations, and sometimes, paradoxically, also impediments to individual success in the production industry. I learned through my own experience, and that of those that I worked with, that the way that beauty, *riiap rawy* presentation, and affability (especially lack of complaining) were considered moral requirements for production workers, especially women.

Academic criticism of the unstable, precarious work conditions that predominate in post-fordist creative economies have drawn attention to the transformation of the representation of workers as individual, self-motivated agents. This chapter presents examples of flexible, creative workers, but it belies the representation of workers as atomized agents working towards goals of self-actualization and self-improvement. Production employees do indeed work on their skills, their bodies, and their presentation. Thai production workers, however, despite the flexible, precarious conditions of their labor, take social considerations seriously in their choice of career and work team

Just as beautiful, flexible service has been glossed as distinctively Thai so too the emotional genre of *sadvertising* has quickly become known as distinctively Thai. The genre, however, remains in the minority of Thai advertisements, and although it is growing in popularity, it represents a significant change from the previous genres of quirky, comedy, slapstick, and music video. Production workers act in ways that strengthen the establishment

politics in public life and may often agree, at least in part, with those establishment politics. While there is a convenient strain of conservativism within the Thai advertising industry, I argue that the emergence of sadvertising still represents a surprising shift from the established genres of Thai entertainment. A combination of coinciding factors, changing technology, conservative political climate, and the everyday moral practices and norms behind the scenes on set in video production provided the creative environment in which this new form of advertising could emerge. During my research, I found examples of people working in advertising production who were reflecting on the genre of advertising style and making their own moral conclusions about the genre's pedagogical social good. As ethical and economic activity for production workers is overwhelmingly motivated by social considerations, the new beautiful, sad, and moral videos they produce offer a particular political and market opportunity more than a great moral upheaval or fermentation. The new attractive pedagogical products foster the growth of new genres of marketing and moral instruction.

The global media industry is quickly restructuring according to the new value chains of online media. The manual labor and social investments of Thai laborers offer a significant form of value that can be increasingly taken up by their *supergod* clients within online media markets, enabling new forms of profit in the rapidly expanding digital advertising industries. The mutuality of being, or substitute kinship, formed in Thai production houses through shared meals, sleeping spaces, physical intimacy, romantic relationships, and friendship is a crucial resource in the Thai advertising industry, which in turn is an invisible resource fueling commercial exchange in many regional and international markets. The invisibility of this labor and the misrecognition about the production process its invisibility produces, I argue, are crucial to maintaining industry and market fantasies about what the communication tool of advertising

represents, where creativity originates, and what it means to be “Thai” within both national politics and the international market.

CHAPTER FOUR: DECEPTION AND DIRT: DIVERSITY AT WORK IN THE MAKING OF STEREOTYPES

Introduction

Advertising is the quintessential medium of stereotypes. The conventions of the genre including short running times, focused messages, lack of subtlety, find in stereotypes a useful, if not indispensable, tool. Delivered through a range of semiotic media, stereotypes operate as a form of shorthand, providing back-story and assumed associations in the viewer's mind. The production process of advertising thus provides a rare opportunity to observe stereotypes in the midst of being manufactured. Drawing on ethnographic material behind the scenes of advertising production, I argue that stereotypes in advertising are a kind of gloss, a distracting mask, that puts forth consumer activities as central to the identity of middle-class Thai consumer-citizens. These stereotypes however are produced by people very different from the shiny shadows they create.

By the term consumer-citizens I refer to the treatment of individuals by political and corporate institutions in terms that blur civic and economic activities once treated as distinct. The term "consumer-citizens" and "consumer-citizenship" has been treated variously in scholarly literature. My use of the term does not sit alongside those approaches that use the term to refer to ethically and environmentally conscious consumers who seek to use informed consumption choices as a citizenship practice (Kosnik 2018). Nor is my approach inspired by those scholars (although we shares some common interests) that view the term as a useful illustration for the semiotic instability of citizenship itself (Newell 2012). Although the term consumer-citizen is an ideological abstraction, it is also, at least for some, an "affectively-imbued compelling flawed social fact[s]" (Mazzarella 2012:299).

My use of the term consumer-citizen is informed by ethnographies of nation-branding that highlight the effects of neoliberalization of markets on the relationship between state and citizen (Ozkan & Foster 2005; Mazzarella 2006, 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Graan 2013). These scholars examine instances of nation-branding where bureaucrats, technocrats and marketers in countries including Turkey, India, Scotland and Macedonia consider how to mold and promote the nation's "brand" to both international and national audiences.

Under a nation-branding framework, states primarily relate to each other via the market. Civic duty and public participation is framed through the yardsticks of market progress. Thus the creation of advertising can be a civic act and an advertisement a political artifact that encourages appropriate consumer-citizenship. The state does not disappear from sight but, rather is reimaged in terms of brand, consumer products, and consumer communities. The public is "represented as the retail or consumer end of the systems-management project of governance" (Mazzarella 2006: 482). Under new bureaucratic techniques of corporate governance, citizen-state relationships are publicly represented through clean aesthetics which prefer efficiency over examination and inspiration over inquisitiveness.

In the previous chapters, I argued that a pervasive class hierarchy and political conservativism operates behind the screens in Bangkok's advertising production, lending impetus to the manufacture of "extra-human" or "more than human" images, propaganda, censorship, and pedagogical advertisements in the form of *sadvertising*. In this chapter, I look at the way the creative experiences, bodily practices, and identities of people behind the scenes differ markedly from the images these people make for the screen. In interrogating these differences, I ask what kinds of social experience and unexpected references are forgotten in the

formulation of stereotypes of class and cultural identity. In this analysis, I draw on anthropological theories of semiotics, stereotypes, and commodities, including Herzfeld's (1995, 2003) work on stereotypes and social poetics and Agha's (2011) analysis of advertising and commodity registers. In his analysis of the role of stereotypes in building nationalist symbols, Herzfeld (1995) argues that visual nationalisms focus on the least arbitrary of signs, suppressing difference and erasing histories of difference and change. Herzfeld's analysis primarily attends to local working-class workers' use and dissembling of national stereotypes, but in my analysis I turn to middle class advertising production teams' contradictory use of cultural stereotypes in the context of borrowing foreign signifiers. I argue that in the creative process of improvising with semiotic forms considered foreign, advertising production workers contribute to a cultural imaginaire in which consumer-citizenship becomes the default public desire of middle-class aspiration.

In this chapter I focus on stereotypes as a mode through which ideologies of cultural and social identity are disseminated in advertising. These ideologies and stereotypes, or advertising's "gloss", are enhanced by the diversity of the people involved in their manufacture, even as the stereotypes they produce dismisses their experience of difference. The diversity of human experience behind the scenes and the deeply social motivations of many production workers fuel the creativity of advertising processes. This creativity, however, is ultimately channeled into the service of service of powerful cultural stereotypes and financial profits for corporate clients.

In the first part of this chapter, I introduce the effect of stereotypes of class and creativity in shaping relationships and attributions of value within the Bangkok production industry. I describe how skilled working-class assistants are largely ignored in the creative process, owing to the stereotype of creativity as middle-class endeavor and I consider some of the strategies

these assistants employ in order to capture or avoid attention as it serves their purposes. I then continue to elaborate on the diversity of people working behind the scenes in Thai production. It is not only working-class assistants who are different to the narrow stereotypes presented on screen. The middle-class production workers are also very different in terms of their physical presentation, gender and class to stereotypes they create. Next, I consider some of the contradictory and unexpected ways that Thai production workers interact with foreign semiotic registers, such as language, body, and gesture. In the last part of the chapter, I draw on an example of the production of videos for an international bank to examine how the melding of national identity, class, and consumer products posit Thai consumer-citizens as debtors within international markets.

Undervalued Labor: Lighting and Camera Assistants

The sound of the runner's sneakers across the ground called out, "patter patter patter patter." In his hands, he carried a large metal frame across which cellophane and plastic was stretched. This screen would be used to cover the large stage lights, and the sheets of plastic called out with a loud ripple, "thwap, thwap, thwap!" The sound and the flourish of a large square of lighting canvas, fluttering across the set like a sail on the harbor, would momentarily draw the attention of everyone in the area. In such moments, it wasn't unusual to see a lighting assistant chuckle quietly at his own performance. For a brief moment, the lighting assistant would invert the performance relationship – the lowly assistant becoming the performer. During the filming process, every second of an advertisement is minutely styled, painstakingly shot, and slowly replayed for consideration. When it came to erect a new light or rig a new camera trolley, the speedy work of the lighting assistants contrasted dramatically to the slow, minute movements

of the other workers on set. In these brief moments, the lighting assistants briefly reminded their audience of their own unspoken skills, often unrecognized and unvalued.

Skilled but silent, the lighting, camera, and equipment assistants were invaluable to effective and creative process of video production in Bangkok. Nevertheless, these workers were rarely treated as an essential part of the creative process. During mid-2015, I spent about six weeks shadowing and filming the work of a Bangkok lighting and camera house. In my first week, I immediately observed that these teams typically slept even fewer hours than the young laborers working on the production crews. Unlike production crews, the camera and production workers didn't have the luxury of office days built into their weekly schedule. The lighting and camera workers worked five to six days a week and were expected to be among the first people to arrive on set. This meant first arriving at the equipment company office early in the morning, often around 3:00 am. We would assemble outside the company storage room - a concrete and metal garage that housed lights, tripods, weights, and other equipment on long metal benches. As the team members arrived, they placed their thumbs on a small scanner outside the storage room, clocking in their precise arrival time and producing a record for company management who arrived later in the day. Next, the lighting and equipment assistants would check the pieces of paper affixed to the outside wall of the storeroom searching for their nickname on a printed team schedule.

Not knowing which team they would be with until the day began, left the men in the dark about their upcoming work each day until they saw where their names were recorded. While I met a few women working as camera assistants and DPs (Directors of Photography, the same term as used in English) in Bangkok, this company's workforce of around 200 workers was entirely male. According to the posted lists, the workers would meet at their allocated van and

load the van with equipment listed for the job. Bags filled with sand that operated as weights, long metal tripods, stands and their assembled arms, large lights, heavy with glass, and long colorful pieces of cellophane that could be clamped over lights to alter the color were loaded into the back of trucks. Some of the men would then stand in the corner of the giant parking lot and share some early morning beers while others would scroll through their phones or nap awkwardly with their feet dangling out of the vans in the dark car park. Once all the small white vans were loaded, one by one, they would roll out of the parking lot like a long white serpent emerging from the darkness. Sometimes, inside the vans, the AC would pulse thick with the distinctive smell of drug stimulants such as *ya ba.* Each morning, I travelled with Bik, a short man who primarily worked as a driver, who had been given the responsibility of acting as my chaperon. Thankful for being granted access, I had nonetheless bristled when the company's manager mentioned that I should not mingle with the employees on my own accord, but that I must stay near Bik in the early mornings. "Bik is a good man and will look after you", the manager had explained, implying it would not be appropriate for a young woman to be wondering around talking to the men in the middle of the night. While I did not enjoy this moral instruction at the time, I soon appreciated Bik's calm smile and warm words of welcome each early morning.

Figure 28: A camera crew assistant looks over the view on the top floor of a Bangkok high-rise building. He wears a walkie-talkie and a small earpiece. Photo by author, June 2017.

Figure 29: Lighting assistants balance a large tripod. Photo by author. June 2017.

Most of the lighting and camera assistants were working-class men from the poorer parts of North-East ("Isaan") Thailand. The men on these teams represented a wider range of ages compared to the production houses that were fueled with the energies of middle-class teenagers and twenty- and thirty-somethings. Some of the men I rode with had been working in the industry for decades. Bik told me about their families, children, and houses they had built in North-East Thailand. Like many other working class Isaan men working in Bangkok, Bik looked forward to retiring and going back home, which he planned to do the following year (Sopranzetti 2017). Bik and his fellow assistants were not involved in creative decisions of the productions they worked on, nor did they have a stake in the prestige building of their own artistic skill or the

reputation of their companies. On almost every set I spent time however, I observed the camera, lighting, and equipment assistants operating with a high degree of skill, silence, and steadiness. Standing close to the set, often within the line of vision to the larger production crew, the assistants' silent, skillful work was frequently on display to others.

I rarely observed the assistants discussing the narratives or video products before them. More often, I met men who were interested in talking with people from the many countries that visited the set. One older man who had been a camera assistant for over twenty years told me he enjoyed meeting customers and actors from Japan, Korea, Russia, America, and Australia. Through discreet techniques, including performing their work with extra speed or dramatic flourish or learning foreign phrases from set visitors, these production assistants questioned the formal knowledge, cultural authority and established "hierarchy of value" asserted by production teams and corporate clients (Herzfeld 2004).

In a space where respect and intimacy were built, in part, through the sacrifice of social life and energy for the purpose of providing smooth service, the lighting and camera assistants performed feats of physical endurance and skill that outsiders sometimes found impressive. In many ways, the assistants made themselves hidden in plain sight. Clients and other visitors sat far away from the set on directors' chairs, plastic stools, or on various pieces of furniture readily available. Distance from the set reflected privilege – space to move, eat, and relax. At the same time, visitors could not be trusted to get in the way of the camera's line of sight or moving equipment. Camera and lighting assistants stood and crouched silently on the edge of the set, close to the action. Leg muscles held their bodies still as statues - an arm sometimes resting on another man's leg or shoulder, locked into place. Visiting production teams and international clients often marveled at the skill and speed of the lighting and production assistants. When I

questioned representatives from advertising and production agencies about the assistants however, the Isaan lighting, camera and equipment assistants were often dismissed as “mere labor.”

On two occasions, when a producer was willing to speak to me about the assistants, it was to criticize their moral character. Once, they “had a bad attitude,” and on another occasion, “they sometimes looked at the female models inappropriately.” If assistants did speak audibly on set, many of the assistants spoke in the Isaan dialect. The Isaan dialect, closely related to Lao, is a form of speech not usually used in mainstream Bangkok television and entertainment, except for when referencing Isaan characters who, as discussed in the previous chapter, are frequently stereotyped by the Bangkok middle class as unintelligent, uneducated, and sometimes morally dangerous. Isaan dialect, musical instruments and forms of popular entertainment from Isaan such as *luk thung* are politicized sounds in the popular Bangkok imaginary, frequently associated with rural Thailand, its cold-war history of communist sympathizers and recent history of support for Thaksin (Tausig 2019).

Undervalued, or ignored as they were, lighting and camera assistants created and asserted their own networks of solidarity on set. Some men would spend most of the day wearing bandanas across their face. While the bandanas could serve to hide a cold or prevent dust from being inhaled, they were also convenient for hiding quiet conversations uttered below the decibels of regular conversation. With or without bandanas, many lighting assistants would be connected to each other through a set of tiny plastic walkie talkers that enabled them to mutter in very soft tones short words of command or encouragement. On set the men rarely spoke, yet they worked together as a complicated ensemble with a fluidity that made many visitors to the set, marvel with astonishment.

When away from the ears of production crew and clients, however, practical and verbal jokes among the lighting and equipment crews created a separate space of affirmation. At the end of a day's work, or during a rare pause from work on set, men who might otherwise be silent often engaged in jokes, delighting their friends with verbal and gestural comedy. One evening, for example, I was filming three young men who were trying to stabilize a large tripod holding a heavy stage light. That evening, the stage light was standing over the graveyard of an old abandoned temple on the outskirts of Bangkok. Before filming began, the assistants were muttering about the riskiness of filming in a graveyard owing to the presence of ghosts who it was unwise to disturb. Not long after filming began, the wind picked up in strength, tossing the leaves in the trees above the tombstones with a high-pitched wail not unlike a female screech. The director called cut, and the lighting assistants took advantage of the moment of unplanned movement of equipment and emergency planning to create their own brief moment of comedy. Chai, one of the older men in the group began to look around him wildly.

> Chai: "This is as much wind as I can stand!"
>
> Nueng retaliated, smiling, "Not scared, are you? Maybe a little?"
>
> Nat joined in shuddering and looking around him, "Oh what. . . *hia* (expletive), talk nice. . . *hia*! I'm scared"[30].

Going on in this vein, the three men made fun of each other, the situation, and myself as the female observer, using humor as a channel in which to voice their collective fear of the situation. Reminding themselves of my presence and the imperative to behave professionally at work through the comical self-command to "talk nice". The three men also mocked themselves through self-deprecating jeers, animated movements of the head, and selective use of high-

[30] I filmed this interaction. Therefore, the speech can be considered a word for word representation, albeit translated from Thai to English.

pitched voices, finding an opportunity to voice their fear while also using humour to excuse their reaction in the eyes of each other and themselves.

Working on TV and film sets generally provided more opportunities for production assistants to demonstrate humor and voicing opinion. In my experience on the advertising sets, such moments were extremely rare. The punishing schedule of advertisement filming, the mentally exhausting repetition of filming minute moments, the social isolation from crew from teams on set, and an alienating suspicion held by many members (although certainly not all) of advertising production crews narrowed the lighting and camera assistants' zones of display.

When I spent time shadowing the lighting and equipment workers, I compared the production processes and social life of TV series or film sets with that of advertising film sets. I observed stark differences regarding the status of lighting and camera assistants and the extent to which they were integrated into creative processes and social relationships during the production process. On film and TV sets, I noticed the names, faces, and personalities of the assistants becoming familiar to the production crew and vice versa. There was some turnover in terms of which lighting and equipment teams were sent by their company to the film set on any particular day. Over time, however, conversations would begin between people across production and lighting teams and teasing became normal. When extras were needed on set for the TV series I shadowed, sometimes lighting assistants or drivers would stand in. At the end of filming a movie or TV series, moreover, lighting and camera teams were sometimes invited to an end-of-filming party.

The schedule, moreover, tended to be more relaxed on the set of the TV series and films compared to the careful accounting of each available minute on the advertising set. Advertising shoots were very rarely filmed over more than one day. Lighting and camera assistants at

advertising shoots almost never spoke to members of the production team during the shoot and appeared almost mute on set. Paid on paper around THB 1000 (around USD $30) for the day, and perhaps receiving less after their company's cut, the assistants were a necessary expense in making the advertising video but not considered a creative asset. On an advertising set, the lighting, camera, and equipment assistants were valued for speed, efficiency, and skill but not part of the social investments out of which artistic accomplishments emerged.

The lighting and equipment assistants I shadowed employed a strategic use of the body in order to reject the stereotype of their work as "mere labor" and assert their own moments and strategies for communication and affirmation. In his theory of social poetics, Herzfeld (1985; 1996, 14), describes a wide-ranging semiotic continuum through which individuals and social groups create and dissemble stereotypes. Modes through which semiotic registers are established include "silence, gesture, music, the built environment, and economic, civic, and social values." The body, in particular, is the "primary site of both privacy and display," where individuals and groups excluded from registers with higher status can use physical skills and modes of communication to evade and transform expectations established in speech (Herzfeld 1996, 20).

On Bangkok's advertising sets, lighting assistants, in particular, stand physically close to the center of action while largely ignored in terms of social or professional recognition from production and advertising professionals. With inscrutable stares and as unmoving statues, these assistants quietly signal their physical strength and importance in the creative process in front of the assembled production teams, clients, and others working on set. In doing so, the men signaled their skill and capability. This signaling is similar to the performances of boredom delivered by Cretan artisans that Herzfeld (2004:123) describes first in artisan apprentices who demonstrate boredom as a subterfuge in order to subtly steal information about work techniques

at hand, and secondly, in fully fledged artisans who can perform their status as "relaxed, professional practitioners of their craft, artificers in every sense". On the Bangkok film set, the steady leg and unblinking eyes of the lighting assistant asserts his mastery of his craft and legitimates his proximity to the center of the creative space.

Other onlookers meanwhile, including visitors to the set, various assistants and production interns, usually look for opportunities to sit, to wriggle their aching feet, or stretch their legs. This desire to move can come across as childlike and undisciplined in contrast to the assistants standing upon strong legs that refuse to bend or disrupt the film process in any way. The lighting and equipment assistants further use their faces and bodies to avoid the gaze, judgements, or commands of anyone on set they might choose not to recognize. When accepting the instructions of others during charged, or difficult situations, the lighting assistants make little comment but provide a single nod and a quick execution of orders. Throughout most of the day, however, although the lighting assistants take their directions from the head lighting team member, and in their lack of speech and their frequent refusal to engage the eyes of others outside their team, they project self-assured authority. This carefully conducted avoidance of others also proved useful for avoiding conflict. In Thailand, the public performance of conflict is considered extremely impolite and likely to cause a loss of reputation and respect (Aulino 2014).

DIRT, SWEAT AND THE BODY IN CREATIVE LABOR

Using the body to challenge stereotypes of skill and authority in the creative process was a skillful use of social poetics also adopted by many middle-class production house workers. As I have described in chapter one, production work, like that of camera and lighting assistants, was not respected by many working in the established Bangkok advertising agencies. Many working

in big Bangkok agencies suggested that ad agencies were the true powerhouse of social inspiration. In their professional view, production workers merely implemented the innovative ideas developed by the creative geniuses working in the city center.

Production teams saw things very differently. In production houses, many workers saw themselves as part of a creative class. In order to increase their creative capabilities, production team workers were continually researching international advertising videos, local and international contemporary art, popular music artists, and new film. Each worker, moreover, had a fairly serious attitude towards their particular practiced skill, whether that be casting, wardrobe, or editing. One female production house producer described the attitude of those working in production in the following way,

> The culture of communication of agency and production is very different. The production house is extremely practical, they work with reality. The agency world has its own politics, its own social world which is complicated. I call production world '*luk thung*', it is practical, you have to sweat to work. . . Agency and production house learn from each other. But sometimes the agency don't understand what creativity is, "it is something that you breathe in and breathe out" - it's like *luk thung* as opposed to *luk grung* (city style)[31].

In his work on the sounds of political protests, Tausig (2019) describes *luk thung* as a genre that romanticizes rural labor and nostalgia within a sound that fuses minor-key Thai instruments with American style big band sounds, Bollywood soundtracks and Japanese ballads. In Bangkok, the genre is often stereotyped by the middle class as loud, energetic, rough, dirty, sweaty, and sexy. During the interview with the producer above, I was surprised to hear her use the term *luk thung*

[31] This statement was given mostly in English, and the interview was conducted mostly in English with some Thai. The interviewee suggested we speak in English, she had studied at the Masters level in the UK and spoke English better than I could speak Thai. I made notes by shorthand during the interview and wrote up the text soon after. Kevin Laddapong, my research assistant, was present for the second half of the interview.

to describe her work, since the music style is often disparaged by Bangkok middle class professionals.

Figure 30: A lighting assistant retrieves extra weights at sunrise in Bangkok. July 2016, Photo by author.

Many people working in production did, acknowledge the manual labor and physical demands of their work. Maintaining a respectable face of middle-class cultural identifiers was common for many directors, producers, production managers, wardrobe managers, and similar professionals. As experts in wardrobe, make-up, casting, directing, and post-production editing, however, their work included significant physical investment. In the example above, the producer referred to Isaan style *luk thung* entertainment to depict the work of her production team as both creative and rough and dirty. In this rare moment, the producer put aside the

hierarchy of creative responsibility, language, appearance, and other semiotic registers that placed production workers firmly above lighting and equipment assistants. Breaking down illusions of scale implied in the money-buttressed Bangkok creative hierarchy, the producer re-centered creativity as a dirty, sweaty, physical skill that required daily, physical practice, "something you breathe in and breathe out," rather than an educated expertise cultivated at famous advertising agencies.

Mainstream western philosophical assumptions about creativity have frequently posited creativity to be the work of individual genius (Kant 1892; Schiller 1966; Fried 1980; Abrams 1989). Many of these mainstream western assumptions "originated millennia ago" but took up renewed authority during the eighteenth century when intellectual movements in romanticism and Christian theology idealized creativity as something new and authentic, the work of original interior inspiration (Abrams 1971, 398). While there are of course many other philosophical and religious traditions of genius and creativity that emerged from the western continents, the ideal of individual and authentic genius is noticeable in the way many advertising industries represent the location of creative action. In Thailand, the individual and authentic model of creativity includes a broad industry esteem for certain famous "creative geniuses" among Ad executives, producers and directors. This ideal of creativity is also reflected in the "fire" of inspiration metaphor used by the AAT (Advertising Association of Thailand) to celebrate their fifty-year anniversary (discussed in chapter one).

The depiction of creativity offered by the production house producer above offers, however, a very different, physical model of creativity. The producer's idea of creativity was of sweaty, dirty work. There is no description of originality or inspiration in this description, but

rather the phrase "breathe in and breathe out" suggests the work of the mind is secondary to the work of the body. The producer's description of physical creativity is also one that suggests a communal kind of work rather than individual genius. *Luk thung* entertainment typically involves large groups of people on stage. Lead singers are backed by bands, dancers, backup singers, and various others. So too, a production set is filled with different people with different skills working in close physical proximity to each other. In her explanation of creativity, the producer created a salient metaphor, borrowing the everyday working-class use of the body as a site of display of creative skill. In doing so, the producer challenged the creative authority of advertising agencies that stand over production companies in terms of reputation, influence and financial profit within the chain of production.

Industry Image and the Bodies Building Lies

Along the long chain of advertising video production, a surprisingly large and diverse group of people occupied the lowest rungs on the income[32]. When visiting the set, I quickly saw that the lighting and equipment assistants were visually and audibly marked as inferior. They wore old clothes, rarely spoke, and ate lunch quickly. Other workers on the lower rungs of status included cooks and drivers. Drivers tended to dress neatly but kept away from the action, spending the day near their vans. Many of the cooks on set also operated on small profit margin and were extremely humble in their deportment. With many smiles but few words, the cooks would bow with a small nod of the head to all those who walked along the buffet to help

[32] This production chain as I conceive it does not account for the processes involved in the making of the equipment, which would be important to include if this study was focused on other outcomes, such as impact on the environment.

themselves to fried fish, bowls of tofu soup, and plastic plates hot under steaming mountains of rice. Junior equipment assistants shifted nervously on their feet, rocking their weight from one foot to another as they learned the trade of standing all day in the sun. The production interns sometimes looked bored and miserable. Unpaid and pouting, they were scolded for their poor attitude and requests to leave set early. Not always visually marked, but also insecure, many of the actors featured in the advertising videos were also seated towards the bottom of the ladder. On some sets, these actors, known as extras[33] (as opposed to the better treated "talent"[34]) were sometimes perhaps the most dispensable people on set.

Some of the wishful extras were Thai teenagers jumping from one film set to another. There were also young Thai university students who volunteered to be faces in the crowd for around THB 300 a day. On one film set, I had lunch with two enthusiastic extras, university students with small roles in an advertising video for a telecom promotion. These two, fairly short, young women had been selected to stand somewhere near the back of a large crowd filmed that day. Students who were short or dark skinned had been moved to the back rows while tall, light skinned students had been moved to the front. For hours, the young men and women were filmed walking on the spot, smiling, and waving. The young actors were filmed in two groups of fifty participants by a camera perched on a crane several meters above their heads. The scene also included a large marching band. On the day of filming, the marching band was sourced from teenagers and children, and many of its members appeared to be beginners to their instruments. The children and teens wore an unflattering costume of skin-tight white polyester that exposed the body's bulges and underwear lines. Filmed from above and inserted into the city landscape,

[33] An English term usually pronounced with the final "s" dropped.

[34] English term for actors and models, where again, the final "t" was often dropped and the syllable "len" pronounced in a rising tone.

however, the children appeared as the distant outlines of adult professionals decked out in bright blurs of white and gold. When the video finally went to air, this group of teenagers and young people would feature in a few seconds of film as tiny, cheering, moving dots across a CGI-enhanced cityscape. It seemed as though most of the extras were superfluous, nothing more than waving dots on the screen.

Other peripheral workers on set came from a surprisingly broad spectrum of life experiences, and I was continually surprised by the stories of people I found on film sites. One such surprising story was recounted to me on a hot afternoon when I took a break from writing fieldnotes and caught an old Bangkok bus to a visit family I knew to share an early evening meal. This family was originally from Pakistan and had been living illegally in Thailand for about four years. I had first met this family when I was doing my internship with a Bangkok production team in 2014. At that time, the Pakistani family and I were neighbors, and I would ride my blue bicycle around the crowded streets of Lad Prao and visit James and Ira and their daughter Sophia. The entire time I had known this family, they had been living in Thailand as failed asylum seekers. Their tourist visa had expired long before I met them, and the family was in continual fear of arrest and detention. Ira and Sophia, often jovial beyond their circumstances, rarely left their one-room apartment. James would, however, venture out to try and find low-wage employment. With a glance over his shoulder for police who made frequent and prominent arrests of illegal brown and black immigrants, James occasionally found odd jobs ranging from ironing to IT work. The hot afternoon I went to visit this family for dinner, we sat on the floor laughing over chapatis as I told them about my experiences on a recent film set. James then shared with me the surprising news that he had also worked on a film set in Thailand. Curious, I asked James to tell me about it. James turned to his computer, opened YouTube, and played a

clip from an Indian movie called “Entertainment Home.” In the clip, the camera hovers over a gleaming mansion on a beautiful blue lake. The film then cuts to the road leading up to the mansion, and as the camera goes inside, a large crowd of men, dressed in white are shown chanting in front of a dead body.

> “There!” James paused the video. “See, that man?” he asked pointing to a face four rows back in the rows of mourners. “That’s me.”
>
> I squinted. Sure enough, there was a younger, leaner, James staring back at me.
>
> “Wow! I see you.” I exclaimed, “I’m curious, was this a good job for you?” I asked.
>
> “Yes, sure,” James replied, “We had to wait around a long time on set, but I didn’t mind and I was paid 800 bhat for the day, and the scout received 200 bhat.”
>
> “Yes, that’s good,” I agreed. I knew in his situation, James would rarely make 800 bhat (about US $23) in one day.
>
> “Do you still do this kind of work?” I asked.
>
> “No,” James replied. “When I did this work I had a card from the UNHCR that said I was an asylum seeker. After our case was rejected, I didn’t feel so secure to go out to do it. But my friend who is an asylum seeker still does this – movies, advertising too. He is the one who told me about it and if I hear of a job outside Bangkok, I think I might do it.”

The representations of human bodies that advertising production crews create for the screen are deliberately manufactured to fit preexisting stereotypes. A marching band, for example, is shot and edited to represent a group of adult professionals, not children and teenagers, of different heights and musical abilities. A crowd of waving young people are positioned and shot so as to emphasize tall individuals with light skin tones and clear skin. A Pakistani man is conveniently Indian, and when casting for African audiences, casting directors told me that any person considered “black” whether from the USA, Botswana, or Ghana is considered suitable. In one example, a Bangkok based production team told me a Japanese news channel asked their production team to create a convincing advertising video for which the byline was “We can go anywhere.” The news channel asked the Bangkok production company to

include a scene of African child soldiers. The production company's director and art director told me that they filmed the requested "African jungle" by casting African American teenagers, giving the young people toy guns to hold, and filming the teens walking around some greenery on the edge of Bangkok.

In the processes of casting, actor training, costume selection, filming and editing images, sounds, and characters created for screen are made to fit within the preexisting stereotypes familiar to both advertising makers and viewers. As Agha (2011, 27) explains in his work on commodity registers, "cultural models of everyday life are already presupposed in marketing efforts as felicity conditions of performative efficacy." That is, the success of an advertisement in terms of its ability to communicate to its audience, is predicated on shared cultural stereotypes. Agha (2011) further suggests that advertisements have a powerful role in linking everyday experiences to recognizable stereotypes and, in doing so, enhancing the status of commodities. By circulating photos, videos, and text, advertisements "make indexical stereotypes widely known.... linking commodities to registers of conduct" (Agha 2011, 22). Using the term "indexical stereotype", Agha draws on the linguistic theoretical tradition of Charles Peirce who divided signs into three kinds, in which the index (the second sign) is used to describe signs that hold a metonymic connection to the thing that they point to. Thus, to choose a well-known example in advertising, Coca Cola has become a metonymic emblem, (that is, an indexical stereotype), for US consumer culture, owing to the many examples of popular culture that have drawn connections between the US consumer culture and Coca Cola. Agha (2011:25) terms the process of semiotic engagement under which a commodity becomes an index for a particular stereotype, a "commodity formulation". In the Bangkok adverting industry therefore, I argue

production workers are thus part of a semiotic process of social compartmentalization and erasure of difference for the purpose of attaching status to the commodities they advertise.

In the processes of erasure and cementation of stereotypes, the goal in the mind of the production team is to fulfill the brief of the client. Concerns regarding accuracy are overwhelmingly focused on the representation of a product's capabilities. Beyond the consumer's interrogation of the product (which is monitored, as detailed in chapter one by Thai consumer and advertising authorities), advertisers rely on the consumer's willingness to believe in the visual and aural fictions presented to them and an inability to understand the level of fabrication involved in production. In this way, advertising production crews are creative masters in what Austin (1975) described as language's performative capacity. On the few occasions that consumer audiences react negatively to the use of fiction in advertising and criticize the "lie" of the image, the advertisement is deemed a failure[35]. Although there are people of dark skin from many different nations working and living in Bangkok, for example, black people are typically stereotyped on Thai screens as generic "African" bodies, erasing the diversity of people's respective backgrounds. Bangkok advertising processes also noticeably draw on pre-existing public imagery in Thailand that present elite personages as "more than human" with features such as bodies that glow and emit light.

Using these existing stereotypes of idealized elite persons, Bangkok advertising videos develop "commodity formulations" that allow the commodities they feature to mediate roles and relationships within everyday social life (Agha 2011, 25). Agha's (2011) theory of commodity

[35] For example, an advertisement made for US audiences for Pepsi Cola featuring the American celebrity Kendal Jenner in 2017 was one such failure. The advertisement, made by a Bangkok production company in conjunction with an American based production group, was pulled because consumers laughed and reacted angrily to the positive relationships between police and protestors it depicted.

registers highlights the recognizable connections that are drawn between modes of action, "registers of conduct," and commodities. Stereotypes circulated in advertising distribute an array of signs through which particular claims about class, politics, and morality are interpreted, expressed, and recognized. As I have described in the Bangkok context, advertisements are influenced by a political and social hierarchy that favor conservative politics. Many commodities circulated by video advertisements offer indexical stereotypes that link commodities such as *ya dom* smelling sticks (chapter three) or an energy company's brand (chapter two) to forms of behavior characterized as patriotic, moralistic and conservative. In other words, the circulated advertisements posit particular commodities and brands as indexical signs for political conservativism. This certainly does not mean that the purchasing of those commodities will be widely read as a sign of conservative politics although, together with other "felicity conditions," this is certainly in the realm of possibility. What I suggest rather is that the circulation of these brands and commodities carry with them a reminder of the patriotic, conservative claims encapsulated in certain stereotypes. As they circulate, brands, commodities, and their advertisements replicate stereotypes that erase difference found in everyday life, even the diversity of laborers working behind the scenes of the advertisements themselves.

Coaching Actors across Cultural Leaps

Around the long table on the second floor, we sat in tightly, elbow to elbow. Not everyone could fit around the table. The thick metal in stretched in crisscrossed formation over each curved, chair awkwardly cut into other chairs on either side. In the small space between the base of table and the wall, a jumble of seats was pushed together. Here, some of the more junior colleagues and interns sat in an awkward squashed, semi-circle. Crammed together, arms over legs, the team looked at a new storyboard for a video that would advertise a car repair service.

The story board was drawn in a light pencil by one of the junior assistant directors and photographed and presented on the large screen television. A senior assistant director explained the style of TV ad using the words, *Saaraa an Josh* (Sara and Josh). This had me confused. I looked around me and saw nods of understanding by the team members around me. Something was going over my head. The casting director went on, clarifying, "*tuk khon ower ower* (every person over, over)." This I understood. The Thai slang for over is derived from the English for "over." "Every person over" was an instruction for each person cast to act in a highly exaggerated way. Using *"ower"* twice, the director was indicating this video would have little room for subtlety. The acting must be highly exaggerated, comically so.

In Thai advertising, facial gestures and sound effects are the primary media through which exaggeration takes place. Other channels for exaggeration can include clothing, accent, tone of voice, color, special effects, location, hand gestures, posture, movement, and content of speech. Usually, many of these different modes of communication would be used in combination to project an arresting visual-audio piece. Exaggeration is a process of communication and categorization but all exaggeration is not the same. Taking one aspect of an object, person, or situation can be used to emphasize pre-existing differences, to obscure complicating similarities, and thereby create categories by which people understand and interact with others.

In his famous essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Clifford Geertz (1973, 6) argued that a highly charged facial gesture, such as a wink, remains charged only as long as a cultural system of interpretation registers the wink in a specific way. Geertz argues that without the necessary background cultural knowledge to understand why a man is winking, an individual will misunderstand the communicative referent and possibly instead assume the winking person has something stuck in his eye. In Thailand, facial gestures

and movements often exceed what tourists and visitors are familiar with. There are, for example, many different kinds of smiles in operation in daily communication (Herzfeld 2009). The Thai tourism office has used the campaign slogan "Thailand: the land of smiles" for many years. This repeated refrain is often accompanied with images of Thai airhostesses, shopkeepers, receptionists, taxi drivers, and various others smiling. The campaign capitalizes on the wide-spread assumption among tourists that they understand what smiles communicate. The smile, however, like Geertz's wink, may mean several things according to the interpretation of the receiver. During my time working in Bangkok production companies, I saw different smiles being used for different meanings in everyday work interactions. Different smiles were also taught to actors in order to communicate different sensibilities. A slow smile with eyelids that rise up and down may mean "I'm considering what you're saying but I don't give it much credence." A large smile with a nod of the head might mean "Sure, I'll do what you say, but I'm getting out of here!"

During the production of the "Sara and Josh" advertisement, I would have the opportunity to train actors unfamiliar with the expressions, tones of voice and gestures that the production team wanted the actors to perform. Despite still being unfamiliar with "Sara and Josh" infomercials, I understood the "over" style performances the production team wanted the actors to portray. The paradox of the training lay clearly in the fact that the employers – the Thai production team – were training foreign actors to perform foreign expressions, gestures, and voices. The foreigners had the white skin and toned muscles that resembled "Sara and Josh" but the actors struggled to recognize, comprehend, and mimic the instructions they were asked to portray. Drawing on my experience in Thai advertising in order to offer the services of an acting coach, I was responsible for translating, motivating, and training international actors to act in a

way desired by their Thai employees. In this work, the distinction of different smiles and gesturers in communicating different themes and moods offered a serious challenge to actors and models unfamiliar with the bodily expressions required. As in learning a new language where a person learns the use of vocal chords to master new sounds, so too, the actors had to try and learn to use their faces to make expressions that were unfamiliar to them.

On the day that the production team sat around the long meeting table and heard the assistant director explain that the TVC needed to be "ower, ower," we, the members of his Bangkok production team, understood the kind of exaggeration he was asking for. We had all worked on previous TVCs that used the "over" style either with regards to one actor or a group. The "over" style referred to cartoon-like expressiveness with rounded eyes, rounded mouths, large smiles, outstretched hands, and fast, strong gestures. The point of such exaggeration would be to indicate an extreme level of surprise and appreciation. The visual aesthetic was reminiscent in my mind of Japanese anime comedy. It used intense energy, strength, and exaggeration to suggest something extra-human. When actors were filmed performing in exaggerated ways that resembled cartoons, the effect was to heighten the fictional, non-human quality of the visual presentation. It suggested a sense of possibility with the energy of child-like enthusiasm. A cartoon-style presentation also heightened the "crisis" that Cavell (1979) describes as particular to the TV medium. In this particular case, the "Sara and Josh" style would suggest the "ower" qualities would also be borrowing from the happy salesmanship aesthetic of American infomercials. Although the style was one familiar and particular to Thai TV, the production team selectively borrowed from international visual and aural referents in order to create a particular comic effect.

Borrowing from foreign referents in this case included an attempt to replicate skin tones and body shape in the selection of the actors. Phrases in English such "Wow" and "oh my God!" were included within the script, which was otherwise in Thai. The particular style of gestures chosen were selected because they were recognized as flirtatious, intimate, sexual, and naïve. The representation of two "Americans" in the TV ad operated as a stereotype in both the creative process and in the final video product that offered a short-hand or conceptual gathering point for the purpose of communicating comedy, satire, and excitement. The Americans were attractive and engaging while also hilarious and ridiculous. To the auditioning models, however, the style of facial expressions, speed of gestures, and pitch of voice, among other elements, were unfamiliar and, in many cases, absurd and confusing. Most of the auditioning models and actors were not from the USA. This was not, however, the reason for their confusion. The style of acting required were, as I understood it, a Thai appropriation of particular gestures, voices, bodies, and words that the Thai crew associated with US television and not a collection of semiotic registers that would have been familiar to most American actors.

Coaching Actors in Thai Advertising Humour

Hug, following hug. Smoldering eyes. Open mouth. Embrace and arch the back. Over the two days of casting, I had stood closely in the arms of scores of men and women. A part of me was conscious of the positive feelings that an embrace can offer- as I hugged each auditioning model, I felt the rush of human connection. Each time the thought flickered across my mind that these models from places such as Ukraine, South Africa, and Russia were living isolated lives in Bangkok, and that perhaps they too were lonely. These young models and aspiring actors played medium sized to small roles in the small-budget advertisements. Never sure of their next work

day, yet invested with youthful hope, these young people had many stories of their journeys from eastern Europe to Asia in search of modelling and acting opportunities.

The Thai production team expressed thanks for my help as an acting coach for the young men and women for *Sara and Josh,* but my skills could not match the casting team's leaders – a casting director and acting coach. That day I was working with two interns and two established casting directors in their late 20s. The leader of our group was Thip, a casting director, who was especially valued for his ability to help both men and women enhance their repertoire of distinctly gendered facial expressions, walks, and gestures. Thip was a *katoey* (transgender) and an expert in dressing and presenting as a woman but also frequently used fashion choices to present as a man. He spent hours in the office perfecting walks, dance moves, and facial expressions. When coaching actors and models, Thip was a brilliant shape-shifter, in one moment coaching a female actress with delicate pouting and dancing fingers and in the next moment coaching her male co-star, walking with a masculine stretch, dancing with wide shoulders shuffling to each side.

One day, I went along with Thip as he headed back to the university campus where he had studied as an undergraduate. We were there to audition potential actors for a video advertisement, and Thip excitedly greeted people, including a professor and a tea seller, he remembered. During the audition process, Thip was as usual, on fire with energy, sound effects, and instructions. For each potential actor, Thip performed a detailed mime. For the female students, Thip performed a mime of opening a tube of lipstick, looking at it directly, looking at the camera, and giving the camera a small knowing smile. In the last smile, Thip slightly lifted his shoulder, narrowed his eyes, and turned the smile into a growling pout. Using distinctive sound effects with his mouth, "bap!" "ffffurp," and "mmmhmm," Thip gave extra emphasis to

each gesture he was asking the students to replicate. The sounds added energy and sexual suggestiveness to the routine and were used to try and provoke and encourage the students into providing a bold performance. Driving home that day from the university, Thip told me, "When I was in high school I knew I wanted to study advertising. I was different, unique, not like the others. My friends wanted to go into news or journalism, I wanted to be. . *over* .. . to be unique."

Thip, like many transgender professionals working in advertising, was greatly valued by his team. His boss sometimes let him leave set early or arrive late. This was a rare privilege and given by his boss in acknowledgement of the great deal of energy Thip expended on set during the day. Officially a casting director, Thip's job included teaching the most exaggerated of gestures, building energy and enthusiasm on set, and rallying the actors if they felt tired or discouraged. In service of this goal, Thip would dance, sing, give massages, wave fans, offer verbal encouragement, and flirt with actors. Thip's skill in breaking down, perfecting, and teaching exaggerated, and especially gendered, gestures, walks, dance, and other physical skills was extremely valuable to the team. This value is, however, almost always directed towards traditional gender, sex, and physical stereotypes. The stereotypes Thip created for the screen did not look anything like him. This discrepancy is the case for the many transgender and other LGBTQ people working in advertising in Bangkok. *Kateoy* and gay men often work in casting, make up, hair, and costume while *Toms* are found in many roles, but especially in camera work and directing.

Over two days, Thip, another casting team member, I, and the three interns auditioned over 80 actors for the *Sara and Josh* advertisement. Searching for one woman and one man, we auditioned around 50 women and 35 men. Most of the models found it difficult to understand our standards of evaluation. With the exception of a man who had been in Thailand eight years and a

rare young woman who quickly understood and gave her enthusiasm to the task, the models were not able to replicate the over-exaggerated, comical, and extra-human effect that we asked them to demonstrate.

My job was to help the models try to understand the kind of performance we were looking for. After the casting team took each model's headshots for reference, I would briefly introduce myself to the aspiring actor,

> Today we're casting for a car commercial. I want you to start in this corner, and walk like this (shoulders back, posture relaxed), and walk to the center of the room. When you get to the center of the room, the casting director will call out "Hi!" and at that moment you need to quickly whip your body around, bend your knees and place your hands outstretched out from each side of your body. Raise your eyebrows and open your eyes as wide as you can. Your face is immediately, *"Bam!"* a face in shock. As soon as you hear the casting director say "Hi," then think "*Bam!"* You turn your whole body, open your face, and gasp in surprise.

I would accompany this description with several gestures and facial expressions to demonstrate the physical result our team was looking for. Then I would demonstrate the entire sequence for the auditioning actor. This included mapping out in the space across the room where the actor should walk, how the actor should use large arm movements, exaggerated facial expressions and fast, quick bends at the knee to demonstrate the moment of shock. At the end of this description and performance, many of the models would stand still as if frozen and overcome by shock. I would then repeat the instructions, looking for the moment the models' surprised faces would rest and relax, suggesting to me that they had some idea of what to do.

Some of the women, looking very nervous, raised their eyes incredulously or would say to me with a soft voice, "I can't do that." Other men and women were more confident but not necessarily more competent. When they froze into the "Oh my God!" position, hands outstretched, mouth ajar, it often appeared entirely underwhelming. The actors bent their knees only a little, opened their mouth without stretching it, and held out their hands without extending their fingers. I would continue to emphasize how over the top the performance should be and demonstrate again, but acting *"over"* was a struggle for the non-Thai models.

The casting and coaching process was noticeably different when we worked with Thai models and actors. In my experiences with hiring Thai actors and showing them an over-the-top, comic style, the models and actors gauged the particular gestures as well as the amount of energy and exaggeration quickly. On review of the audition, the casting team sometimes had to show the model a small gesture to improve or clarify, "Left eyebrow up," "Turn, then point your finger," but the style of acting was familiar. By contrast, for the international actors, the style of acting was difficult to imitate. In their responses to my demonstrations and the demonstrations of my fellow Thai casting members, the models were clearly shocked and confused. In almost every audition, after each actor or actress auditioning attempted their first go at walking into the middle room and freezing in shock, I needed to coach each actor on the same movements again. "Bigger hands, bigger eyes, huge shock," I would suggest. I would demonstrate for them again, walking into the middle of the room and as fast as lightning, jumping into a new position, knees crouched, low to the ground.

Thip was working with me to help demonstrate to the models and actors. Thip's English language skills were limited but he demonstrated the movements- opening the lids of the eyes, opening the mouth wide, holding the mouth in a huge gasp of shock. Thip allowed energy to

ripple through his body from his toes to his eyes like a whip, stretching out his neck and shoulders as though an electric current had struck. The models watched him confused. Very few could match his energy. It was my job to use my own gestures and facility with English to help the actors understand and mimic this exaggerated facial and bodily inspiration. I told the actors they needed to think of it as "over-acting," and "acting over the top." I would tell them, "do the same thing again, just do it fifty times bigger."

The long hours working as an acting coach impressed upon me the importance of the teacher-student relationship. Teachers have greater ability than the student, but teachers direct their energies towards enhancing their students' performance. In those moments when the actress or actor wanted to improve and expressed dependence on my help, I felt like an older sibling. The auditioning actors would express their thanks for my help. "Oh, thank you, I'm so glad you're here!" or, "thanks for all your help, bye!" I would find myself not only teaching, but providing encouragement, and lending the physical intimacy of an older sister. I saw with new clarity the way intimate kinship style relationships lubricated the physical and emotional costs of working in an industry where value was generated in training and beautifying the human body. In this context, the *Phi-Nawng* (older sibling- younger sibling) relationship felt less like a constraint and more like a space to breathe. In the afternoon, the producer visited our casting room, and after exchanging a few words with the Thai casting team said to me quietly in Thai,

"Bon you're better than them, right?" nodding his head towards the models.

"Hmmm, maybe, but they're cuter," I replied, causing the producer and the casting team to chuckle.

Our shared laughter pointed to the common burden of acting coaches across Thailand. Like other acting coaches, I knew how to do the voice, the gestures, the timing. In fact, in many ways, I was

better than the actors we were auditioning. My presence behind the scenes was valuable. I could coach and give elderly sister-like enthusiasm to the women we auditioned, helping them to learn what they would struggle to do without my help. I did not however have the physical characteristics required by the desired actor. The “Sara and Josh” ad required a young woman who had the youthful face, wide mouth, large eyes and generous chest stereotypical of an informercial presenter.

In casting the “Sara and Josh” video, I worked long days to coach the aspiring actors, to show ecstasies of delight, to hold each other's hands near our chins, and to gaze into each other’s eyes with smiles spreading from our lips to our eyes. Standing in as the opposite sex partner of each auditioning model, I demonstrated the fairytale style embrace again and again, another young man’s body enfolding mine. My arms, again, around each young woman. Standing in as the man, standing in as the woman, I hugged everyone. Eventually, the feeling of forced performative affection began to wear me down. Physically, I was tired, but emotionally, inside, with each hug I felt more exhausted. In each performance of false connection, immediate friendship with the actor is faked in order to diffuse the awkwardness of the physical intimacy.

In each performance, I forced warmth and friendship into my voice in order to try and encourage the actor to give me an enthusiastic performance. “Oh great to meet you.” “You’re doing great.” “How do you like Thailand?” I gushed. Looking for release and sympathy, I increasingly sent smiles and wide eyes to my casting team. During the day, Thip, the casting director would give me massages to encourage me. One time, I was sitting in a chair and he massaged my knee. At another time, he massaged my shoulder and tugs at the bra strap through my shirt. Normally, I might be a bit disturbed by this display of intimacy. On this exhausting day of repeated faked intimacy, it felt comforting to be touched by someone I knew. I was aware that

the comforting hand of touch was also all the more valuable a gift owing to its rarity among non-family members in Thailand. In care for the "social body" (Aulino 2014), Thai moral patterns of everyday etiquette attend to others through carefully calculated physical interactions. Touching someone who was not family, and touching anyone in a semi-public space risked loosing face, that is reputation. When encouraging and coaching actors, I rarely saw Thip, despite all his enthusiasm touch anyone other than a very small child. Thip's willingness to encourage me through physical touch, like the unconventional practice of massages among employees in the workplace was a generous display of intimacy. Exhausted from my "body work" (Gimlin 2007; Domosh 2015), that is, work done on one own's body and upon others, and energetic "emotional labor" (Hochschild 1979) I was temporarily sustained through Thip's communication that he saw my exhaustion behind the enthusiastic façade.

In terms of sustaining the creative acting process, the relationship between casting team and actors was important, but even more crucial was the relationship among the casting team members. Over the days of casting, the two casting directors and myself, a team of three, worked closely and intimately together. The Thai casting directors nominated each one of us as one of the three famous models from the Thai TV beauty show "The Face." We used these TV identities to develop unity, laugh at each other's faults, up lift one another's' spirits, and dispel the *buua* (frustration) of the long working day. Inside the tiny, windowless casting room, our days became repetitive cycles of the same auditions, over and over again. Creating our own starring roles behind the scenes as judges from a beauty TV show also elevated our own sense of importance. We used code names, nicknames, and jokes to create momentum within the perpetual, closed-in cycle. Together, we also shared secret facial expressions snatched in stolen moments. One moment the casting director is smiling and joking with a model in a friendly sing-

song voice, “good, good!” Then with fast turn of the head, his face is turned back to us, eyes rolled back in his head, lips limp in disgust. There was almost no place to hide in a small casting room, but we improvised in the tiny space between the door and the backside of one vertical light. Like children playing hide and seek, this was our best but ineffectual hiding place for small, private, softly worded conversations.

When coaching the actors, I looked to the casting team for any additional instructions they wanted to relay. Some of this was translation work, when the casting team provided feedback about the actors’ speed of movement, their animation, or the way the actors gave their lines. But much of my work was not translation based. The more substantive task was explaining and demonstrating to the models the style requested by the casting agents. The casting agents told me that they wanted the models to freeze for longer - I explained that although it felt strange, the model needed to focus and hold a position that they felt unbeautiful and undignified. Yet, they had to act as though their bodies were frozen in shock. The casting team was also concerned that the models would act “more curious,” which, translated, does not mean, as the actors first thought, to look pensive and deep in thought. What “curious” means to the casting directors is a particular set of hand, mouth, and eye movements as might be found in cartoons and comic books. These include leaping eyebrows, elbows high in the air, hands scratching the head, and pursed, scrunched lips, moved to the front and side of the face.

The models’ confusion when given Thai style acting directions was occasionally mirrored by the casting directors’ confusion when observing the actors’ auditions. The casting directors were asking for a very specific kind of performance with the words “Oh my God!” What they wanted was a valley-girl style, infomercial, wheel of fortune, prize-winning ecstasy. “Oh. My. God!” The delivery needed to be breathy, slow, and rising in tone towards a final

crescendo. The line was a device for moving the scene forward, puncturing its rhythm, finishing one scene with a mini climax before moving on to the next scene. It was used as a kind of a sound effect. “Oh my God!” did not fit within the narrative of the piece (such as it was) but rather pierced it with an extreme effect of surprise. While most lines delivered by the international actors would rendered be over with Thai voices, “Oh my God!” would be left intact.

Occasionally, the director would walk in to the casting room and quietly evaluate what was happening. At the end of each visit, the director would tell us that the style should be more funny and less beautiful. The casting team would nod and try to stimulate more comedy from their actors. After a few auditions would pass, however, the tired casting directors would fall into their habit of evaluating each applicant primarily in terms of what they considered sexy and beautiful. Thip and the casting team mimicked to the girls moving chins and pouting lips to help them giggle and gush. For each female actor in the final scene, the women would look suggestively at the camera and ask, “Is there more?” This final question was supposed to be offered a soft, breathy voice while the actress gripped the shoulder of her male partner, her red-lipstick lips dancing near his ear. Even when the casting instructions began as comical, by the time of the final breathy scene the tone was overtly sexual.

While working with and shadowing production teams in Bangkok, the outside world was as close as an extra rack of clothes in the storeroom. When foreign people, locations, speech, or other semiotic references were required for the screen, they would be approximated through careful imitation. The maple leaf on a young Hungarian actor would make him Canadian. A clear stretch of road in northern Bangkok would become a road outside Accra, Ghana. Many of the Bangkok production workers had travelled to Japan and Korea on short holiday trips, and some

had joined production crews filming in places such as Vietnam, Tibet, or Myanmar. They did not consider their lack of familiarity with the language, fashion, gestures, and landscapes of distant places a problem. Distances could be travelled with the help of YouTube videos and an hour or two with Google image search.

When borrowing foreign locations, bodies, and other "indexical stereotypes" (Agha 2011), creative success was achieved through painstaking replication. The selective use of closeups, blurred backgrounds, the distraction of beautiful bodies, and other sexual undertones were also crucial to the recipe of final "gloss," a video that held together as a convincing visual and aural narrative. The production team would lift the images, dances, music and other ambulatory signifiers away from their respective cultural worlds and registers of conduct. The imitations would sometimes be polyester-thin, replicating shape, sound, and color and appropriated while omitting something crucial from the original source or including something out of place. Mistakes were sometimes caught when videos were sent to clients for approval. At the suggestion of clients, scenes were reshot, airbrushed, or cropped. Often, however, this was not necessary. The genius, or the tragedy, of the advertising format with its split-second closeups, its fast scenes, bright cartoon popups, sound effects, and emotional music scores is that the absurdity of the stereotypes, scenes, and stories created are passed over under the effect of the arresting power of the final video product. This collusion of genre, technology, and work practices reflects an institutionalization of digital technologies working with an ideological naturalization of neoliberalism evident in a range of digital communication industries (Boyer 2013). Drawing on foreign signifiers, Bangkok advertising production workers expand the boundaries in which consumption takes place, and the scale within which the status of middle-class consumption is played.

Celebrities, Banks and Quiet Frustration:

In June of 2017, I was invited to the film set for an advertising video series made for the Thailand branch of a large global bank. The intended audience for the advertising videos was upwardly mobile middle-class Thais seeking larger purchasing power. The videos portrayed two shopaholics, played by a male comedian and female comedian, overspending their budgets and taking advantage of a cash loan program provided by the bank. Featuring locations in both Japan and Thailand, the advertisements included storylines of Thai comedians shopping in Thailand and on an overseas holiday. Ordinarily in one day, a Bangkok production team would aim to film only one video. On this occasion, however, the client had only provided the budget for one video but demanded three final video products. Liberal spending was the theme of the advertisement, but the client's budget was apparently small. Thus, owing to budget constraints, the production team had planned to shoot three videos in one day. The production team had created an extremely detailed timeline, which included driving around the outskirts of Bangkok to three different locations. The schedule was ambitious and by mid-afternoon, we would be running late and racing to finish work ahead of the arrival of Bangkok thunderstorms and to beat the clock of late-night exhaustion.

The first location of the day was an ethereal, airy mall decorated with a mixture of plastic flamingos, lanterns, and a nostalgic village aesthetic complete with a river framed by fake grass and small arched bridges. This new "Japanese themed" mall was perched on the edge off a busy main road in Western Bangkok in an area recently developed where new housing developments were rapidly eating away at quiet streets and small rivers. Rather than travelling to Japan to shoot a video set in Japan, the production team would turn this small mall into Japan with the help of camera angles and post-production editing. I had observed the production company shoot

exciting locations on small, basic sets. I had seen a small office become the lush green grounds of an American university and a dark, dusty warehouse in north Bangkok become a beautician's sleek, modern studio. Shallow depth of field, short scenes, greenscreens, CGI (computer generated imagery), Google image searches, and creative post-production editing could create fairly convincing images of places the production team could not afford to access.

Shooting for the bank's three videos was scheduled to start at 6:00 am, which required the production team to be there almost an hour before. This meant arriving at the company office around 3:30 am. When we arrived, the mall was closed, and we had our own quiet playground. The production crew got to work erecting a temporary noodle stall with decorative restaurant awnings. Just off camera, a costume assistant waved a clothes steamer, creating circles of steam that suggested the bowls of noodles were steaming on a cold, Japanese morning. The director spoke quickly with his assistant who ran over to the male comedian and instructed him to *mong mong* (look, look!) towards the camera, *yim laew* (c'mon, smile!). The assistant also demonstrated opening his mouth in comically large bites.

The kitchen crew carried large plastic washing buckets awkwardly up static escalators, frozen in time from when they had been switched off the night before. At the top of the escalators, the production interns set up plastic tables and stools at which a large group were seated. Here was most of the production team, along with the day's freelance hair and make-up artists, camera and lighting crew, clients from the advertising agency, and various actors feasting on a breakfast of fish cakes, spicy North-Eastern *isaan* shrimp, and clear soup flavored with minced pork and soft tofu.

As always on set, there were people sitting around who did not appear to have much to do. Six interns who would be exhausted before the final 4:00 am finish already looked tired at the prospect of a long day of unpaid labor before them. Latte, a young woman recently hired by the production team to be trained as an assistant producer, was perched on a plastic stool, slowly braiding the hair of Mieo, the director's wife. Mieo with a tiny figure wore a stylish off-the shoulder pin striped jumpsuit, large round sunglasses, and a sweet smile under her braids. Like me (the well behaved white-skinned assistant), Mieo did little film work on set, but her presence was useful for impressing clients because she spoke some English and pushed through each day with a sweet, compliant demeanor. Unlike my own casual and comfortable clothing, Mieo's outfits and make-up were a strong visual indicator of the team being stylish and on-trend.

Behind the breakfast tables, sitting on a small plastic table and stool leaning over his computer was the producer and boss of the production team, Joe. Joe was in his fifties, a short, wiry man wearing small round glasses and constantly looked deep in concentration. At this moment, Joe was attended by a masseuse, an older lady of at least seventy, who pressed her muscular thumbs repeatedly into Joe's shoulders. Every few minutes, Joe winced. When he noticed me chatting with some of the young women on his team, Joe called me over. It was towards the end of my time working with and shadowing production companies in Bangkok. By this time, Joe and I had known each other for a few years, and I had seen him grow his company from a small but respected team to an established production house with a modern office building and expanded client list. Joe smiled when he saw me, but his mouth then immediately returned to a thin line, and when I sat down, he shook his head. Turning from his computer, Joe said to me, "How much money do you think we have totaled so far this year?"

> "I don't know P'Joe. . . " I replied, using the address *Phi* for older sibling and wondering about the unusual greeting. It was unusual for P'Joe to be frank with me about his company's profits and I could see something was bothering him.
>
> "Seventy million bhat, and its only mid-year" Joe informed me.
>
> "I see. Are you making more money this year?" I asked.
>
> Joe looked back at me and replied, "No. This year our projects are much bigger. We are not making 30 second TVCs for television, but internet videos which are one minute or much longer. Last year, already 50% of our work was internet film. This year it is 70%. We have brought in 70 million bhat already, but that is before costs. The costs are much higher now."

Internet advertising allows Bangkok production teams new kinds of enhanced creative freedom. In the bank's videos being shot that day, one of the actors uses the swear word*, hia*, a vulgar insult that translates in English to "monitor lizard" but is used to Thai in label a person or situation as loathsome. Using *hia* would not pass the censorship process if it had been screened on television. Videos designed for online distribution can exceed the time limits of television, and censorship is less strict owing to the lack of an established nationalised censorship infrastructure in this more decentralized media venue.

In Thailand, advertising made for TV has to be censored twice before it goes to air. First, the story board is censored, and second, after the video is made, it is censored again before the final post-production. According to the Thai Advertising Association, this double censorship strategy is unique to Thailand. For production teams like P'Joe's, the creative freedom of skipping the censorship process, is a rare silver lining in an otherwise difficult situation. As P'Joe described, video commercials made for the internet are typically more expensive and time-intensive to produce. Budgets, moreover, have not expanded to cover the more expensive production costs. I knew P'Joe's team had looked for ways to cut costs. For example, P'Joe's team did not have their own camera equipment and needed to hire equipment and camera assistants for each shoot. In order to make a small saving, P'Joe's team were now frequently

hiring camera teams who paid their assistants a slightly lower wage. The production company had also increased their steady stream of unpaid interns, of whom there was always a large number of applicants to choose from. Joe was keen to learn English, and we chatted about the day's work ahead in a mixture of English and Thai. A few minutes into the conversation, Joe paused and said to me in English,

> "Bon, I have a very boring story. A boring story."
>
> I paused, confused and asked "A boring story? . . . . *Reuuang beuua?"*
>
> "Right. Yes Bon." He replied.

In Thai, *reuuang* means story or situation or thing, matter and *beuua* is a word most commonly translated in English as "to be bored" but is also used to convey a feeling of annoyance, exasperation and exhaustion. In my first months working with film production crews, I would often feel perplexed and even extremely *beuua* (exasperated), myself with the frequency of this word in everyday work. *Beuua* was used by employees across the production processes to describe their dissatisfaction with long days on set, videos in production, ideas, outfits, or even their lunch. Hearing *beuua* at many points throughout the day was puzzling for me. How necessary was it to have new outfit every week, to eat new kinds of food every few days, and to constantly encounter people and experiences that could shock you? Gradually, however, I learned to understand the mutterings of *beuua* in a new light. The *beuua* complaint that I heard so often was not always a direct accusation of a thing being boring but often an indirect complaint about unreasonable situation or person's behavior that it would not be appropriate to criticize directly.

> I suggested to P'Joe that perhaps "annoying problem" might be a better translation for this *ruang beuua.* He drew his head close to mine and lowered his voice. "We have two celebs [celebrities] here today," he began, ." . . the woman, she is not a very big celeb, but she acts like she is very important. She asked for *ten* assistants."

“Ten!” I exclaimed. “What do ten assistants do?”

“General assistant, hair assistant, make up assistant and costume.” Joe replied, .” . . Then each of these have a second assistant. I have to pay for each one. This morning she [the celeb] said to me, ‘Why is there no private motorvan?’, I replied ‘Why do you need a motorvan? We are in a big area inside.”

On days when the shoot took place outside, I knew that famous celebrities usually expected a large private van in which to relax and get ready with their assistants. Hiring these luxury private vans were a considerable expense. P’Joe went on.

“*Lankham, naa beuua* (I promise you, it is so exasperating). . . The hair stylist is very expensive. For one day, 30 000 bhat.”

“Huh?” I was stunned, 30 000 bhat, or about 1000 USD, shocked me.

“It is a celebrity hair stylist, and they charge very high prices” P’Joe continued. “Yes, 30 000 bhat for one day. If we change the hairstyle, just pull the hair up for example, it is another 10 000 bhat. If we go over the twelve hour day, even just half an hour, we sometimes have to pay an extra 50% or 100%. On a day like today, everything is delayed because the call sheet start time is 6am, but the celeb only arrived at 7am, so we will finish the day late and have to pay more.”

P’Joe explained to me that he had tried to reason with both the celebrity and the clients who had hired her but the client felt *naa gluaa haai*, (afraid [the celebrity] would quit). “Please write this all in your research Bon,” he concluded, “If I ever quit, I will write it in a book.”

Figure 31. A crowded team of camera crew, lighting assistants, directors, and wardrobe assistants film the male comedian eating. 2017. Photo by author.

Figure 32. Assorted production team, equipment teams, and clients try to shelter from the coming rain during the afternoon. Photo by author.

By this point towards the end of my research, I was familiar with production employees being very guarded and indirect in their criticism. In this case, P'Joe was no different from many of his own employees. P'Joe wanted to vent his frustration openly and hoped one day he would write it down in a book but today had to keep his voice to a whisper. For those working in video production, protecting the appearance of smooth, compliant service was of the upmost importance. Affability, obedience and providing favors based on good relationships were crucial to securing contracts from large advertising agencies and corporations. Clients with large budgets to spend often preferred to work with respectable companies that fit the civilized public face that Jackson's (2004) "regime of images" describes. P'Joe had worked hard to cultivate such a public face for his company – hardworking, compliant and politically conservative. Videos that represented the company's upstanding reputation were proudly posted on the company's Facebook page. Other videos, for example, a funny video advertising a penile erection drug, were not posted on any of the company's video or social media pages.

Performances of outrageousness, through dress, voice, and movement were an important part of the creative process yet was policed by senior team members. While negotiating with a client, working on set, or focusing on a busy task, strict standards with regards to comportment and behavior were expected. Drawing on the stereotype of smiling, friendly, and *krengchai* (considerate) Thai culture, many Bangkok production crews successfully met expectations of their clients for complaint, friendly labor using a range of semiotic mediums including silence, deferential gestures, and smiles to win favor. Within the global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld 2004), the yardsticks of international capitalism, efficacy, affordability, and civility demand particular kinds of working bodies, and it would appear in the global advertising market that Thai working bodies have been deemed particularly suitable for the project of making video

advertising. Producers such as P'Joe selectively enhanced the semiotic registers in which their team demonstrated competence, inviting the director's stylish wife to the set and welcoming my presence for my value as a visual indicator of linguistic competence in English.

On many occasions, I had seen production teams work late into the night and early hours of the morning in order to meet the requests made by a client hiring their services. Under such circumstances, the production teams would rarely try to negotiate extra compensation for the extended hours of work. P'Joe had told me he would almost never ask for compensation for this extra work because friendship with the client came first. While accommodating and gracious to the client, P'Joe was, however, strict with many of his team members. Senior directors were largely exempt, but other employees were scolded if P'Joe felt they were demonstrating a poor attitude in posture, attitude, speech, or online behavior. Frequently, I saw P'Joe scold interns for bad behavior, such as sitting on the floor or looking glumly at the ground. Less frequently, I saw P'Joe in a quiet voice and animated face berate the team's casting director for his inappropriate online behavior. On one occasion, for example, a transgender casting member who worked for P'Joe was distracted by the attractiveness of one of the youngest monks who was visiting for the company's annual blessing ceremony. Sitting at the back of the company foyer while the monks meditated in a line against the large windows on the other side of the room, the casting member turned to those of us sitting nearby and muttered "*kii ichaaa* (slang for "I'm feeling horny"). The casting member subtly took a photo of the young monk and posted it on Facebook with a caption, "I'm trying to meditate but he's too handsome!" P'Joe who often encouraged the casting director's larger than life personality and occasional outrageous public performances through strange dress, dance moves, or flirtatious behavior, on this occasion, spoke to the casting director harshly, taking little care to hide the rebuke from other team members who were present. The

casting director walked away stony faced and obeyed his boss's request to remove the social media post.

As I have described in this dissertation, although skill, creativity, and talent were important in the production process, production teams often gave priority to smooth *riiap raawy* presentation and social interactions. Being *riiap raawy* (neat, well presented) was communicated through style, physical appearance, speech, gesture, and manner. While a smooth, humble, and neat appearance was often described to me as the most important quality in employees, however, it was clear that being riap roi and humble placed employees and teams in a frustrating position. Neat, quietly frustrated employees who were *riiap raawy* might not have the opportunities and rewards come to them that they had hoped for. Implied by presenting the self and team as a neat and polite, moreover, was the necessity of accommodating the wishes of a client (or other important figures such celebrities), even if those wishes required extensive sacrifice in terms of money, time, or physical endurance. In the above example, Joe explained to me that he had to sacrifice some of his financial profit in order to accommodate the wishes of a celebrity he did not respect. In this interaction with the small-time "celeb," P'Joe accommodated the wishes of the client, a large international bank with assets of over a trillion dollars. Despite the client's wealth, P'Joe made a range of accommodations on behalf of himself and others in order to meet the requests and limited budget of his wealthy client. On this occasion, these accommodations included spending extra money on assistants and special meals demanded by the celeb, boosting the status of the set through auxiliary people attached to the team, such as Mieo, the director's wife and asking his team to work over 24 consecutive hours under tough conditions.

Under these rigorous standards and requests for self-sacrifice, quiet mutterings of *beuua* operated as an acceptable release of tension and recognition of the difficulty of a day's work,

especially on long hot days and tiring, never ending nights. Working in a well-known production company was a privilege that came with prestige. *Reuuang beuua* expressed frustration at difficulties that felt demeaning or overly demanding. *Reuuang beuua* captured a contradiction between what the celebs and the clients understood to be the status and responsibilities of a production crew and the crew's own self-image as stylish upper middle-class members of the creative class.

Banking on Self-Sacrifice: Cheap Work for Ready Credit

The willingness of the production team to weigh good relationships with their client against the risk of asking for more financial compensation did not necessarily diminish the team's pride in their work. In their study of fashion markets in Bangkok, Arvidson and Niessen (2015, 111) claim that, "the ambiguous relation between creation and commercial success that is intrinsic to Western notions of creativity is replaced by an embrace of markets and commerce as vehicles for self-expression." Commercial and financial success were important to P'Joe and his team, but P'Joe found himself accommodating the financial costs of the trend towards internet advertising. Rather than passing the increased costs of producing longer, more numerous video products onto his clients, P'Joe and his team invested carried the financial burden and aimed to increase the social prestige of their work, cultivating a good relationship with a big-name client.

Following the filming of the bank's three videos and during the editing process, the director added a voiceover to the videos in the style of one of his favourite voiceovers, a deep male Thai voice, for which he typically provided the draft and sometimes the final sample. Into each video, the team inserted short phrases in this deep voice with frequently placed high-pitched sound effects. Together with fast cutting between scenes, the added audio track increased the tempo of the videos, requiring the potential audience to monitor the fast changes in the

advertisement. This in turn focused the potential audience's attention away from details of location or questions about the video's provenance to the different forms of exaggeration – large bites with the mouth, springing "*Boing!"*s of added sound, the extremely deep male voice, and large cartoon computer graphics.

These assorted techniques of exaggeration across different semiotic modalities played neatly into the main stereotypes used in the videos, an overweight hungry Thai man, a shopping-obsessed Thai woman, and flirtatious interactions between men and women. The deep male voice intoned repeatedly across each video, *sing kit! . . . sing bpen!* (What you think . . . Is what is!) The exaggerated comic performances by the two comedians, together with the comedy achieved through the fast editing, sound effects, cartoon popups, and voiceovers delivered three video products that used stereotypes for the purpose of comedy.

This comedy was directed towards dispelling uncomfortable feelings of social and moral concern regarding over-spending and hyper-consumption. In one of the videos, for example, the male comedian complains that he cannot borrow money from his wife, wailing "I'm dead" if he should try to ask her. The female comedian suggests he get a "fast loan," and the ad then cuts to the final information graphic, over which the deep voice over intones, "What you think . . . and what is . . . come together. Fast loans." The graphic on the screen further claims the consumer can,

> "Make payments of 0% for such a long time, 24 months.
>
> Instant cash loans of up to 5 times your monthly income.
>
> Only one day wait."

When the male comedian wails, "I'm dead," the comedy of his performance makes light of his desire to hide his expensive spending from his wife and introduces the possibility of a

considerable financial debt – five times a person's monthly income – as a gateway to raising consumer spending power.

The final information graphic describes the process of applying for a fast loan as straight forward and trouble-free. The sound effects and cartoon popups further make light of the social and moral implications of overspending. The exaggerated, comical stereotype of gendered hyper-consumption practices also works to enshrine the stereotype of middle-class Bangkokians as continuous consumers. The comedians are funny in their exaggerated desire, but their lifestyle as displayed is also designed to be visually seductive. The comedians are decked in cute hats, swing expensive hair-cuts, carry large bags filled with purchases, and stroll with excitement through clean Thai and Japanese shopping districts. Using English with a heavy Thai accent, the comedians are represented on screen as comical stereotypes of middle-class, educated Thais. While the stereotypes are exaggerated, they contribute to "cultural models of everyday life" (Agha 2011) in which Thai consumer-citizenship is idealized as middle-class, stylish, free to travel and spending money without restriction. The videos use self-deprecating humour to make fun of an appetite for consumption familiar to many Thais, while simultaneously using the beauty of the visual images to celebrate middle-class purchasing power.

As Graeber (2011:502) among others has argued, ideologies of consumption represent human life as "not of relations between people but of relations between individuals and phantasms." In representing human life as centered on the relationship between individuals, things, and desires, ideologies of consumption have the power to distract attention from the social activities and relationships among people in which social life occur. In the examples of everyday production processes that I have analyzed here, an ideology of consumption as identity

is created that belies the social and economic reality of the video advertisements creation, let alone the complicated social lives of the people being advertised to.

The production team making these videos were struggling to make a profit from this project's budget. Although many of the team members sported branded products and new purchases that signaled their inclusion within the community of Bangkok middle class consumers, they were also time-poor and physically exhausted. The production team, and the lighting and various assistants that worked with them, worked hard for their banking client, successfully fashioning stylish outfits, discovering visually arresting locations, manufacturing a fake Japanese landscape and producing stereotypes alluding to class, style and satisfaction. This success was achieved, however, by working over 24 consecutive hours, getting wet in thunderstorms and holding weary bones upright into the night. The workers supported each other by providing massages, braiding hair, and giving words of encouragement, all for the purpose of providing affable, flexible labor to their big-name client.

The international bank selling loan products to Thailand's middle class sought talented labor on a budget for the purpose of making three video advertisements. The client, that is, the local arm of the bank, expected the labor they would hire would assume the financial burden of unexpected costs, such as the demand made by the female celeb for an expensive entourage. The structure of this production process is sustainable in Bangkok because many in the production team work for motives that are social before financial. Most of the team members pursue their work because of the "family" ties at work and the status attributed to their work. Some of the production team had emerged from working class roots and had struggled toward achieving their middle-class status. Bow, an assistant producer, for example, was the daughter of a husband and wife team who owned a market chicken stall. Joe, now a wealthy producer, grew up on his

extended family's shrimp farm. The production class workers prioritized good working relationships, middle class respectability and performances of easy purchasing power over petitioning for a fairer distribution of advertising budgets and better work conditions.

Advertising's Gloss and the Bangkok's consumer-citizens

In the *Sara and Josh* and *Readee creadit* videos, new consumer and monetary products are presented as aspirational tools for achieving status, comfort, and satisfaction. In the three videos made for the international bank by P'Joe's production company, the concept of "outside capital" was repackaged as "Ready Credit." Named in English, pronounced in a Thai accent, and advertised in the context of international travel and luxury consumer goods, *readee creadit,* the advertisement series draw on the "felicity conditions" (Agha 2011) of foreign semiotic references such as the Bangkok middle-class admiration for Japanese food.

The comedians in the video series quickly munch up delicious looking morsels in a space that is supposed to be Japan, eating and spending with an unbridled energy that suggests social status, affluence and freedom. The same fast montage, pop ups and sound effects that hide the fact that the comedian's Japanese noodles are merely a plastic bowl near a steam machine, also brush over the provenance the new international banking products. The loan product, *readee creadit*, is given an English name but the question of how it is financed is not interrogated in the advertisements. The gloss created by the array of stereotypes targets the middle-class Thai consumers with a frenzied convocation of signifiers designed to distract attention away from examination or inquisitiveness and toward a message devoid of diversity or complexity. Class aspiration is thus turned away from the cycles of political coup and election and toward the frenetic cycles of credit and debt.

The Sara and Josh and the *Readee Credit* advertisements, selectively borrowed from stylish and humorous referents considered foreign to Thailand. Both the comedians in the banking series, for example, use heavily, deliberately accented short phrases in English while making purchases in Japan. The pedagogical content of this style of advertisement was dissipated compared to the moral lessons of the *sadvertising* genre. Nonetheless, the use of foreign characters and locations aside, these video advertisements presented coherent and bounded Bangkok based gendered and class stereotypes and tied them to well-known class aspirations. These stereotypes are arguably no less political than the lessons of *sadvertising*. Instead of delivering a direct pedagogical message, these advertisements posit class aspiration through practices of consumption that move readily over international borders in global consumer and financial markets.

Maintaining and expanding markets for new lines of credit is necessary to the success of contemporary banking institutions as it is to the perpetuation of contemporary capitalism. While consumer-citizenship posits political life through the aesthetic of an attractive consumer experience, corporations have long borrowed from the symbolic power of the nation state in order to create a collective audience and access new markets. Across the Bay of Bengal in Sri Lanka, Kemper (2001) found marketing firms advertising banks to local consumers using nationalistic aesthetics abundant in chauvinism for the purpose of creating a sense of intimacy and trust. In the 1970s, Gray (1986) documented the way that Bangkok Bank used "merit making politics" including tapping into existing temple networks and sponsoring merit-making events in order to borrow from religious and monarchical symbolism for its own corporate brand. The bank attempted, argued Gray (1986:897), to transfer spiritual merit through the use of symbolism with "parallel literary and visual styles" including . . . "the bank's work of identifying capitalist

development with the flowering lotus of the law". The powerful symbolism of the nation-state, including symbolism connected to religion and kinship, provides a rich repository with which advertising teams create consumer audiences and contribute to "commodity formulations" that present civic identity as an aspiration rather than as a political right.

During the time of my research in Thailand, the images made for the screen by Bangkok's advertising crews were changing. Internet videos were racier, introducing swear words, including sexy dance moves and using revealing shots than the images, words, and sounds aired on television. The shift towards *sadvertising* meanwhile was broadening the setting of advertising videos beyond traditional studios and clean stock backdrops to include old markets, rural villages, poor urban areas, and other locations once considered unusual settings for advertising. The increasing use of overseas locations, languages and other foreign signifiers was further diversifying the images and sounds appearing in advertising videos.

Despite these changes, however, in many respects advertising images, sounds, language, and narrative remained true to longstanding Thai conservative conventions of beauty, gender, morality, and hierarchy. In advertising images, the celebrities are glossy, "extra-human" beings. People outside of the narrow stereotypes of beauty, with dark skin, for example, are considered unattractive. Distinct visual and aural representations of gender are exaggerated through extensive hairstyling, make-up, wardrobe work, voice actors and the coaching of casting directors and acting coaches. Meanwhile the people who work behind the scenes, crafting the meticulously produced advertising images, from the directors to the acting coaches and even the actors themselves were far more diverse in image, gender, and speech than the images and sound they collectively created. Behind the scenes, despite their diversity, the production team members were also careful to cultivate performances that met the expected stereotype of

compliant, flexible labor. In the interest of pleasing clients and developing individual respectability and value, complaints had to be stifled, exhaustion silently massaged away.

Many Thai advertisements reference national stereotypes. The most explicit and nationalistic tend to belong to the *sadvertising* genre, but through their visual representation of beauty and social status, other advertising videos also build and circulate commodity registers. Commodities, styles and aesthetics circulate as daily, tiny reminders of conservative political values. Advertising videos for consumer and banking products, which omit an overt state imaginaire nevertheless provide visual and aural representations of happy Thai consumers. In advertisements such as *Readee Credit,* or *Sara and Josh,* consumers are represented as free to move over national boundaries, unafraid of linguistic barriers and are unfettered by financial limitations. Just as the speed and montage style of the advertising genre distracts the audience from insubstantial replication of foreign stereotypes, so too, the same conventions of the advertising genre create a "gloss" that ignores the political implications of new banking products.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF ATTRACTION:

ADVERTISING AND ANTHROPOLOGY

> "Its's true that politics intervenes, and that there is political control (particularly in the case of hiring for top positions in the radio stations and television channels under direct government control). It is also true that at a time such as today, when great numbers of people are looking for work and there is so little job security in television and radio, there is a greater tendency toward political conformity. Consciously or unconsciously people censor themselves - they don't need to be called into line" (Bourdieu 1996:15)

> "The visible matter upon which the work of empowerment/disenfranchisement is performed often consist of stereotypes and little else but it is people -- social agents – who are doing the performing." (Herzfeld 2016b, 182)

Creativity within a Nest of Conservatism

Bangkok's advertising production workers are in demand by reputation. This reputation is built through skilled navigation of originality and orderliness as well as creativity and conservatism. In careful, frame by frame, production of stereotypes, propaganda, and brand, production workers apply the instruments of human bodies, heavy cameras, colourful costumes, dark editing rooms, and computer software to create short pieces of sound and visuals that stand in sync with politically conservative stereotypes. Videos that provoke hope, tears, and a soaring feeling of inspiration are crafted in order to hook viewers through a message of positive social change. Consumer engagement and positive social change are the new mantras of the global advertising industry, but in Thailand, as elsewhere, powerful political interests and market imperatives guard the nest in which creativity is nurtured.

Advertising production work is meticulous, patient, and careful because the zone of communication is narrow. The short videos made for bored sky train passengers and for sharing on social media must be univocal and explicit. A video must grab viewers' attention within its opening seconds and then work hard to maintain it. When thirty people stand around the

cooking of a single omelet, or the coaching of a fashion model, they are participating in making a visual that leads the viewer to invest in an idealized, extra-human image. Within these creative boundaries, production workers source signifiers from local cultural intimacies and foreign cultural spaces. Whether featuring a local working class community, such as Pom Mahakan, or selecting a sound-track of instrumental music made in Austria, production workers source shirt colors, sound effects, and exaggerated gestures within a politicized set of "felicity conditions" that recall, as discussed in chapters one and three, generations of Thai political-military leaders demanding moral behavior from Thai citizens (Agha 2011, 26, 25).

As part of the hierarchical social relationships that structure employment, prestige, and status within the Thai media industry, Bangkok production workers present their selves, work, and companies with a respectable public face. There are employees and teams who do not support the conservative, respectable face they need to attract client's investment. In these cases, success hangs on providing begrudging but believable performance of submission. By "making the face bullshit," young freelancers and those with critical opinion capitulate to overwhelming alignment of money and *barami* (prestige) that sustains the advertising and media industries in Bangkok.

Wrapped in a web of ethical obligations, processes of creative production in Bangkok are further shaped by worker's endeavors to mitigate the moral costs of creative practices and to perform effective service to beings both human and spiritual. Ethical motivations and expectations create a moral horizon, a sphere in which workers are striving and restraining. Molding the body, speech, posture, and attitude towards the pursuit of personal value behind the scenes, young women, in particular, are constrained by the push for beauty and respectability within the narrow stereotypes of thin, stylishly adorned, orderly physical forms. How beauty is

valued behind the scenes pushes women to become extras on screen, charm clients, and invest in stylish outfits , marketing their own personal value as well as that of their team.

Class contradictions: Anti-Materialism alongside Hyper-Consumption:

The creative genres and processes of production crews change in response to the political and market structures in which they are embedded. *Sadvertising,* a genre powered by nostalgia and moral pedagogy, has roots in feel-good, family-based advertising used for decades in Thailand and around the world. The Thai *sadvertising* genre with its long (over 3 minutes) running times, nostalgic aesthetic and pedagogical message rose from niche to mainstream within intersection of autocratic, conservative politics, a military coup and an international marketing industry trend for social inspiration and "consumer engagement." Together with production crews' ongoing efforts to earn respectability before corporate clients, these political and market conditions fostered the growth of a genre that now has a viral international reputation and is considered emblematic of Thai advertising. Thai adverts, already a convocation of stereotypes, now serve as national stereotypes circulated on the world stage, informing a global audience of Thai people's "emotional nature."

The *sadvertising* genre frequently uses story lines that are anti-materialistic and which encourage their audiences to invest in family relationships rather than work, technological advancement and wealth accumulation. Rather than being anti-consumeristic however, the advertisements depict consumer-citizenship through representations of conservative Buddhist morality and Thai nationalism. Although the moral messages presented in *sadvertising* often condemn greed, they simultaneously promote financial responsibility towards family. Even when the characters in the advertising videos are presented as poor moreover, the visual aesthetic

used in these advertising videos presents a clear, light-filled image that looks expensive. The images produced are clearly professional and inaccessible to most Thai consumers, very different to the images that can be produced with a cheap consumer camera or smart phone. The *sadvertising* aesthetic is thus expensive, even when the characters' lifestyles are not.

The contradictory tension between a disinterest and desire for wealth prevalent in Thai *sadvertising* falls neatly in line with the contradictory representation of wealth and anti-materialism exemplified by the public life of King Bhumibol. The Thai monarchy's extreme accumulation of wealth and simultaneous representation cult of *barami* was facilitated through the use of Buddhist *Jataka* chronicles during the reintroduction of the monarchy, and especially through the resurrection of the concept of the *bodhisatta* King (Jory 2016). Advertising sponsored by invested corporate and bureaucratic actors represented King Bhumibol as anti-materialistic and as an exemplar of extreme generosity owing to his nation-wide development projects. This anti-materialistic façade will be more difficult to replicate for the new King whose personal consumer indulgence, frivolous behavior and disinclination for spending time in Thailand provides a more challenging story to be massaged into an ascetic narrative. The extreme dissonance between King Bhumibol's wealth and his reputation of generosity however, suggest that the engines of advertising, censorship, propaganda and social cult of "extra-human" elites will be more than sufficient for maintaining the new King's relative prestige and prosperity.

The anthropologist's critical voice:

The critical position through which I have approached this dissertation is, I hope, born of the anthropologist's patient refusal to accept explanations at face value. I must grapple with the

fact that my analysis will be disappointing to those familiar with inspirational genres of Thai advertising and who would hope to find a more uplifting story about the emotional journeys and creative triumphs of Thai people producing culturally distinctive genres of film. I do not make excuses for my critical position, but I also know that an opportunity is lost when anthropologists look past the stories people want to hear and when they fail to enter the public conversation on big questions about humanity (Bloch 2004).

When writing about creative texts, the critical approach has the tendency to lose the spark and beauty of the works in question. My approach does not attempt, as other anthropologists such as Pandian (2015) have done, use the complex artistic phenomenon of film production as a form of inspiration to try and imagine new positive relationships between the world and humans.

My personal experience with the expectations for physical beauty and orderly service in the daily work of Thai advertising production were *buuua,* frustrating. No doubt this frustration charged my criticism. It lead me to identify and resonate with other workers' feelings of frustration and to find fault in an industry that works with clients worth millions, even trillions of dollars, and yet ask its production crews to work inhumane hours and to treat its lighting and equipment assistants with implacable disrespect. Perhaps, too, this frustration led me to overlook the stories of triumph, laughter, and creative passion that could have emerged instead of the chapters I have written.

My approach may also be disappointing to those who would hope to read more about the rebels within the ranks, critical political voices working in the Thai advertising and media industries. Certainly, there are creative individuals, companies and channels with progressive political, social and creative agendas who make a business, a life or a living within the predominately conservative Thai media industries. My project however was inspired by a desire

to understand the complacency and cooperation of the Bangkok middles classes with the military government and the concurrent loss of democratic rights in Thailand.

The Stakes in Being Beautifully Human:

The representation of Thai elites including politicians, the monarchy, religious figures and celebrities as "extra-human" shares much regarding the cult of celebrity and idolization of politicians and others found in many other parts of the world. As I have argued in this dissertation however, the particular historical path of visually representing social and political elites in Thailand as "more-than-human" has manifested in local social life with sobering results. Buddhist cosmological origin stories regarding humans in a hierarchy of spiritual merit, has been applied by state and powerful actors in order to circumvent political and human rights. The cosmological representation of human hierarchy has been used to represent some Thai political dissidents as non-humans, undeserving of legal protection (Haberkorn 2019). The aesthetics of human beauty and superiority produced in state propaganda and commercial advertising reinforces the cosmological and social ontology by which spiritual merit allows some people to be ranked as essentially more worthy, or human, than others.

There are many stories clamoring in global media markets for influence in defining and shifting the stakes in being human. The advertising industry has more influence than most. Indeed as corporations increasing take on state-like responsibilities in areas such as security and surveillance and as large sectors of social life occur on social media platforms with corporate governance, spheres of social life once thought of as separate to advertising such as politics, ethnicity, military and religion, are now overtaken by branding strategies (Banet-Weiser 2012; Comaroff & Comaroff 2009; Fattal 2018). Just as the first moving images frightened those who

saw them, the images moving across the world's screens and branding the most public and intimate areas of social life can appear like ungoverned swarms, saturating our homes, work-spaces, public transport, and places of relaxation with stories, styles, and signs with which we cannot keep abreast. At face value, these images may appear to be the creatures of loud consumers. Popular images, advertising videos, and other media are, however, forged by people who, no matter how inventive, are positioned within hegemony and ideologies shaping the ground of communicative and creative practices.

When, for example, bureaucrats view their civic responsibility in terms of corporate style branding and development, the everyday experiences and rights of the public are not always aesthetically compatible. In his ethnographic study of the politics of nation branding in Macedonia, Graan (2013, 175) describes nation branding projects as initiatives in which state actors attempt to order national branding in such a way that attracts international investment, "appealing to outside capital as an economic, political and even ethical necessity." Branding techniques included urban and architectural development and tourist campaigns using a neoclassical stereotype of Macedonian history. These techniques aimed at creating attractive visual spaces that would lure international investment, but were derided by local residents.

Successive Thai state actors' crypto-colonial management of Thai tourism and urban space share similarities with these corporate style nation branding practices. For example, the gentrification of Bangkok slum spaces in advance of the 1991 World Bank IMF meetings in Bangkok prioritized clean backdrops for visiting TV cameras over safeguarding the homes of local residents (Klima 2002). More recently, the Bangkok municipal authority's demolition of the self-managed community of Pom Mahakan was justified in terms of creating a clean and shared public space (Herzfeld 2016). The language of development and displayed posters during

the demolition reimagined the heritage sight using a “beautification aesthetic” that removed homes and small business activity in favor of empty leisure spaces (Herzfeld 2017). These urban renewal projects favored outside investment over local livelihoods and projected the delivery of a beautiful, clean space as a bureaucratic responsibility. Marketing themselves using a clean aesthetic, these states and municipalities took aesthetic cues from advertising images that idealized middle class consumption in clean, empty streets, new shopping malls and light-skinned, smiling actors.

In a branded world, beauty is defined by expensive cameras, the meticulousness of post-production editors and the aesthetic preferences of directors and producers. These images moreover no longer live within televisions and magazines but make their presence known in the most intimate and private spaces of social life. The images of humans that penetrate these spaces do not look like the people who view them, or even the people who make them. In Thailand, this dissonance fuels a powerful social and political hierarchy that makes mockery of democratic institutions. In March 2019, Thailand held its first national election since the 2014 coup. Following a messy, splintered and confusing counting of votes, General Prayuth was reinstated as Prime Minister on the strength of the constitution he had pushed through in the heavily censored referendum campaign in 2016. The new constitution stipulated that the senate should be undemocratically selected by the military, thus allowing Prayuth’s supporters to select him as Prime Minister in 2019 despite his party not winning the largest share of the popular vote.

Prayuth’s own campaign attempts to present the Prime Minister as a more stylish and fashionable icon were generally considered a laughably inauthentic. Performing his political legitimacy through a consumer idiom, Prayuth stood alongside his fellow consumer-citizens as another customer. In this moment, in a baseball cap instead of a military uniform, the absurdity

of his image was clear. Prayuth's campaign to master the aesthetic of extra-human images however illustrates a realization of the influence of visual charisma and beauty to political legitimacy within Thailand. Prayuth in 2014 used the image of himself as a military man and loyal servant of King Bhumibol in order to visually circulate his prestige. Prayuth in 2019 attempted a softer image of a handsome man at leisure. Prayuth as the ideal consumer-citizen, wearing different outfits in clean lines, clear visuals and captured with expensive photography. The images created by Bangkok's advertising production teams typically produce results far more subtle and stylish; images more effective at blurring civic and consumer identity. Selling wealth, beauty and commodities as a formula for social prestige, Bangkok's popular public images offer an enhanced regime of beauty in exchange for political rights.

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