

## **When White Elephants Came to the Capital: Negotiating the Self in the New Consumption Space**

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*Ethnographic fieldwork was employed to explore how a group of female students in the 'White Elephant Programme' exercised symbolic consumption to re-negotiate their identities when they moved from their rural hometowns to study in the capital. The interpretations aimed to achieve an insight of the relationship between place, identity and consumption symbolism.*

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Urban silken  
teenage Thais  
surround HDTV  
entranced by the  
loud mouthings of  
the wrestlers of the  
World Federation  
amidst the rant and wait  
of shoppers sifting jeans  
and compact discs  
enroute to KFC

Sherry 1997, p. 95

Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, is not only an ultimate illustration of the nation's consumer culture as Sherry describes

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in his poem, *Mah Boon Krong*<sup>1</sup>, but also the centre of everything-business, communication, education, entertainment, finance, government and transportation. Consequently, each year there are copious numbers of people coming to Bangkok for jobs and education. Essentially, they need to acculturate to Bangkok's ways of life in order to settle down comfortably. I use the term 'to acculturate', which is generally referred to the act in the general process of movement and adaptation to the cultural environment in one nation by persons from another nation, in order to portray that moving from other provinces to Bangkok may be equated to migrating to another nation. As Bangkok is viewed as a first-world city in a developing nation (i.e., Thailand), the social life in Bangkok is much different from those outside the capital, particularly those in the countryside. Influenced intensively by multi-national capitalism, Bangkok has become a cosmopolitan city bound up with globalisation and mediaisation. While ways of life in many provincial areas are still simple, the social life in Bangkok is paradoxical and complex since the city is loomed large by "postmodern conditions" (Harvey 1990).

To acculturate successfully into the Bangkok social scene, the provincial consumers need to acquire "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984) and skills to urbanise themselves as well as to cope with the threats posed by postmodernity. Hypothetically, the consumers often use consumption to counter some of those threats (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). That is, in postmodernity, where society becomes fragmented, pastiche and hyperreal, the consumers are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options (Giddens 1991). It is vital for the consumers to design identities that are not only profound enough to anchor themselves in the unruly postmodern world but simultaneously flexible enough to handle the

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<sup>1</sup> A shopping centre in Bangkok which accommodates a mixture of various retailing aspects, from contemporary retail design to traditional vendor's booths, from retailers of expensive famous brands to retailers of cheap counterfeit products. It is a popular meeting place for Bangkok teenagers.

multi-facets of the postmodern realities. Deliberately, the consumers employ symbolic consumption to quench their craving for identities (Gabriel and Lang 1995). The consumers make their consumption choices not only from products' utilities but also from the products' symbolic meanings (Dittmar 1992; Douglas 1982). These meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared with others. For example, using recycled envelopes may symbolise 'I care for the environment', going to classical concerts may represent 'I am cultured', supporting gay rights may signify 'I am open-minded', or even buying unbranded detergent may mean 'I am a clever consumer'. Moreover, Belk (1988) suggests that those products acquired by the consumers can also be viewed as parts of their extended selves. Thus, in consumer acculturation processes, consumption choices and possessions are used symbolically by the consumers to assimilate themselves into their new social environment as well as to maintain bonds with their homeland (Mehta and Belk 1991; Penaloza 1994).

Without a doubt, the relationship between space or place and our everyday lives is profoundly intertwined. The term 'place' which I discuss here in this paper does not refer to just a physical area, rather it embraces local ways of life such as customs, values and inevitably consumption practices. Indeed, the notion of place also comprises symbolic meanings that we often incorporate into our identities (McDowell 1999). Thus, changing place (e.g., migration or even moving home) can frustrate and relocate our sense of identity. In order to understand this relationship, I employ an interpretive research via ethnographic fieldwork to examine a group of provincial students who come to study at a university in Bangkok under "the White Elephant Programme<sup>2</sup>." Basically, I explore how

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that in Thai context, the term 'white elephant' holds a very positive meaning. Since a white elephant is a rare phenomenon, it is regarded as a privileged animal of the king. Whenever a white elephant is found, it will be brought out of the forest to be groomed in the palace. Generally, the term is used to equate with an outstanding person in rural areas. The White Elephant Programme is thus established to provide an opportunity for outstanding provincial students to study in the university.