

Balancing the Hybrid Self in the Competing Landscapes of Consumption

Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan, Ph.D., Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

ABSTRACT

The paper explores how a group of provincial women exercise consumption to balance their hybrid identities when they move to study in the capital. Ethnographic fieldwork is employed to achieve an insight of the group's consumer acculturation processes. The interpretations reveal the complexly dynamic and paradoxical selves of these informants. Although they aspire to urbanise themselves in order to assimilate properly into the new consumption space, they still wish to persevere their ties with the provincial roots. Evidently, they seem to emerge in the third space where they can metaphorically be in both side at once through everyday consumption.

INTRODUCTION

As migration fabricates hybridity of cultures and identities (Hall 1990), the self needs consumption practices tailored to the third space (1) (Bhabha 1990) in order to balance the hybrid self. Indeed, the relationship between place, identity and everyday consumption is profoundly intertwined (Penaloza 1994; McDowell 1999). The term 'place' which I discuss here does not refer to just a physical area, rather it embraces local ways of life such as customs, values and certainly consumption practices. The notion of place also comprises symbolic meanings that we often incorporate into our identities. Thus, changing place (e.g. migration or even moving home) can frustrate and relocate our sense of identity. In order to understand this complex relationship, I employ interpretive research via ethnographic fieldwork. Specifically I examined a group of six female students from rural areas who came to study at a university in Bangkok. I explore how these informants employ everyday consumption to re-negotiate and re-settle themselves in a new spatiality, in this case, the cosmopolitan Bangkok. The interpretations aim to convey insightful understandings of the interplay between the self, geographical identity and consumption symbolism that emerged from the fieldwork. The interpretations reveal the complex dynamics and paradoxical selves of these informants. Although they aspire to urbanise these selves in order to assimilate properly into the capital's way of life, they still wish to preserve their ties with their provincial roots. Accordingly, they engage in various symbolic consumptions to create, express, negotiate, and balance their hybridity.

THE FIELDWORK

The primary aim of my fieldwork is to explore the interplay between an attempt to negotiate the sense of self in a new cultural space and everyday consumption practices. Principally, the data collection methods are observations, both non-participant and participant observations, and a series of 'the long interview' (McCracken 1988). Auto-driving like collages as well as diaries are also used as supplementary methods. Deliberately, I employ triangulation across methods not only to enhance the research creditability, but also to generate a multiplicity of perspectives on the behaviour and contexts of the phenomena (Elliott 1999). The research informants were recruited from a friendship group of six female students, Bird, Nat, Da, Auan, Win and Nud (2), all of whom are about twenty years old. Their majors are in business-related fields. All of them are from the rural region, which is approximately two hundreds kilometres away from Bangkok. Before attending university, they never lived in the capital. Altogether the fieldwork was conducted over sixty weeks.

The Competing Landscapes of Consumption: Bangkok Versus Other Provinces

Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, is not only the ultimate example of the nation's consumer culture, but also the national centre of everything. Consequently, each year there are large numbers of people coming to Bangkok for employment and education. Essentially, they need to acculturate Bangkok's ways of life in order to settle down comfortably. I use the term 'to acculturate', which generally refers to the general process of movement and adaptation to the cultural environment in one nation by persons from another nation (Penaloza 1994), in order to portray that moving from other provinces to Bangkok may be relatively equated to migrating to another nation. As Bangkok is viewed as a first-world city in a developing nation (i.e. Thailand), its social life is much different from lifestyle found outside the capital. Influenced intensively by multi-national capitalism, Bangkok becomes a cosmopolitan city bound up with globalisation and mediaisation. While ways of life in many provincial areas are