

## **Balancing the Hybrid Self in the Competing Landscapes of Consumption**

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### **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

still simple, the social life in Bangkok is complex as it is loomed large by postmodern conditions. To acculturate successfully into Bangkok culture, the provincial consumers need to acquire cultural capital and skills not only to urbanise themselves but also to cope with the threats posed by postmodernity.

Being the capital and the centre of almost all activities, Bangkok holds tremendous privilege over other places in the kingdom. While Bangkok is regarded as 'Greater Bangkok,' any area outside Bangkok is referred to as 'other provinces.' Unsurprisingly, people in the provinces often experience a sense of 'otherness' and thus inferiority. Although, in the recent decades, the modernisation of mass media and transportation as well as the development of tourism has diffused Bangkok's urbanised and globalised experience all over the kingdom, the gap between Bangkok and other provinces is still enormous. Because of greatly unequal distribution of development between Bangkok and other provinces, consumers in Bangkok and the provinces inevitably hold different standards of livings and lifestyles. Moreover, culturally and economically, Bangkok's scale of "global sense of place" (Massey 1991) is much more intense than that of the provinces. Consumers in Bangkok have many more opportunities to be exposed to global consciousness via globalised retail milieux (e.g. fast-food restaurants) and media (e.g., cable/satellite television, the Internet, films).

### INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FIELDWORK

The interpretations strongly suggest that in order to assimilate into Bangkok's social life, the informants consciously employ symbolic consumption to urbanise themselves. Vigorously, they look for symbolic resources from both lived and mediated experience to facilitate their acculturation processes. Simultaneously, they resist becoming a Bangkokian. Whenever the informants congregate, they remind each other of their provincial roots. Like those immigrants in Penaloza's study (1994), the informants' acculturation processes seem to paradoxically embrace both the endeavour to integrate into their new social environment and the exertion to withstand the milieu of origin.

#### Social Life and Consumption in the Informants' Home Province

The informants recount that due to their families' economic limitations, their everyday consumption in their home province is simple and economical. They claim that they are not conscious much of what they consume. Primarily, most products they use daily at home such as soap are communally shared among family members. Their main entertainment is watching television with their families. Watching television is clearly a daily ritual that strengthens bonds in the informants' families. It is also the time when family members negotiate their communal consumption choices. Evidently, for the informants, consumption in the province is a collective practice in the family. This socio-spatial consumption appears common in a less developed place where individuals display little sense of self apart from the group (Sack 1992). The informants' simple lifestyles in the provinces are also owed to minimal of peer pressure experienced at school. The informants describe that most students in their schools come from relatively similar socio-economic backgrounds; thus, all their classmates also consume minimally. There is no pressure to buy or use any sumptuous products. Nevertheless, the informants regularly talk about their mundane consumption with their friends, particularly when there are new brands advertised on television. For instance, they recommend each other to try a new brand of soap or a new scent of an established brand of shampoo. In effect, the informants later discuss their friends' recommended brands at home.

#### Coming to Bangkok

After graduating from provincial high schools, the informants are admitted to the university in Bangkok. Just after the first term started, they quickly form a group – a provincial group. Although the informants have been greatly exposed to the Bangkokian lifestyle and values via the media before, they still feel uneasy to mingle with the Bangkokian students. Nat recounts her first experiences at university.

*Nat:* In our first year, the segregation between Bangkokian students and provincial students was very obvious. We, the provincial students, dared not talk to the Bangkokian students. We dared not introduce ourselves to them. Apparently, the Bangkokian students didn't bother to mingle with us either. They hung around together. They went to lunch together. There was not a single provincial student in Bangkokian groups. Concurrently, the provincial students also clustered together. It happened automatically. I don't know why.

*Interviewer:* What made you hesitate to talk to the Bangkokian students?

*Nat:* We did talk to them. They talked to us too. They were friendly. But we felt tense. We dared not talk much. I don't know how to explain. We even dared not initiate a conversation. So, they didn't bother to talk to us. Maybe they thought that we were unfriendly. In fact, we just dared not approach them.

*Interviewer:* Were you afraid of saying something *cheoy* (3)?

*Nat:* No, we weren't afraid of that. We just felt... I don't know how to describe the feeling.

**Interviewer:** Shy?

**Nat:** Not really. It seemed that they enjoyed each other's conversations a lot... they laughed, but we didn't. And we didn't understand why we didn't enjoy those conversations. It was something like that. We were like an extra. Then, we formed our own group, the provincial group. Well, it wasn't that we didn't like the Bangkokian students. We said 'hi' to them. We smiled to them. But we never had lunch or did things together. However, now that we are in our third year, we seem to know them better. We feel more comfortable talking to them. We can even crack jokes with them. I can say that we now become friendly with each other. The separation between provincial students and Bangkokian students seems less. I think maybe it is because we can adjust ourselves to them better. They are what they are. It was our mentality that we felt we were different that distanced us from them.

Evidently, the fact that the informants are familiar with Bangkok's social life through mediated experience does not assure them instant understandings of its culture. Even though some literature suggests that via mass media, "the ability to participate in an urban way of life is largely independent of location and is open to all" (Clark 1996, p. 100), I argue that consumers in the provincial or rural regions may not grasp the urban culture the same way as those who live in the cities do. As the urban and provincial consumers are engaging in different lived experiences as well as holding different values, they may interpret their mediated experience of the urban images portrayed in the mass media differently. Indeed, they might attend to various messages and make sense of the meanings according to their different personal perceptions and social knowledge (Anderson and Meyer 1988). Hence, regardless of their exposure to similar mediated experiences, the provincial informants and their Bangkok colleagues do not seem to share common worldviews.

Moreover, the fact that the informants have experienced the Bangkok social scene through the mass media before does not mean that they can settle down effortlessly in their new social atmosphere. In fact, their mediated knowledge of the capital makes them more aware of the vast difference between their simple provincial living and the lavish Bangkokian lifestyle. Accordingly, as the informants become highly conscious of the differences, they also become less confident to interact with their Bangkokian colleagues. Simultaneously, due to their ignorance of this matter, Bangkokian students also fail to notice their provincial colleagues' apprehension. Thus, they do not make enough effort to welcome the newcomers. Nevertheless, the informants seem to reproach the segregation problem only on their part. They think it is their responsibility to adapt themselves to the cosmopolitan life. The attitude expressed by the phrase "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" looms large in their acculturation processes.

Furthermore, the informants' hesitation to mingle with their Bangkokian colleagues can be interpreted from the perspective of social literacy. The informants feel anxious to carry out conversations with their Bangkokian colleagues because they cannot enjoy the conversations, especially the jokes. Indeed, those conversations seem like a 'foreign' language to them. Frequently, the Bangkokian students talk about luxury foreign brands or their shopping experience that the informant can hardly participate in the conversation. Despite speaking the same language (i.e. Thai), the informants do not share the same 'social literacy' (i.e. the literacy of consumer culture) as their Bangkokian counterparts possess. Additionally, the shift of social space from a simple life in the province to a much more complex life in Bangkok also heightens the informants' anxieties tremendously.

**Nud:** I could hardly mix in with those Bangkokian students. I didn't know what to talk to them. They loved to talk about clubbing, shopping, especially shopping. They talked about foreign brands or new fashion trends. I knew nothing about it. I didn't enjoy such topics at all. I felt lost.

**Win:** I could easily sense my vulnerability when I first came to university [i.e. Bangkok]. Previously, my life was like living in another world... a dream world where I had a warm family and good friends. Everything seemed perfect. I never felt distressed. But here... the society is so vast and varied that I've met various kinds of people. At first, honestly speaking, I could hardly handle it. ... I could not adjust my *jitjai* (4). Superficially [i.e., physically], I might be able to fool the others that I could adjust myself well. I acted normal. But inside, I felt very confused.

Indeed, the informants appear to lose their sense of security. Mulder (1996) comments that, to the Thai, the reliable and trustworthy world is centred on their mothers; thus, the further away one is from the mother (i.e. home), the less secure the world. In this case, the informants not only live away from home but more importantly, live in unruly Bangkok. Accordingly, the informants seek refuge from this social frustration by turning to each other to form a group of their own. Since they share accommodation in Bangkok, the informants spend most of their leisure time together, both at the university and outside the university. Nonetheless, they do not seal themselves in their own social world. They still need to socialise with other students, especially in the academic context (e.g. classrooms or group coursework). They realise that they need to adapt themselves in order to socialise comfortably with their colleagues. Hence, they begin to urbanise their self-projects.

## Learning the Bangkok Way of Life

Endeavouring to integrate into the new social world, the informants actively look for symbolic resources in order to enlarge their cultural capital. This involves consumption of media and observation of Bangkok consumer culture in their everyday lives. Watching advertisements on television and strolling in department stores or shopping centres become the informants' significant missions to obtain symbolic resources for the self-urbanisation project.

## In Search of Symbolic Resources through Mediated Experience

The informants express that previously they only attend the media mainly for news and entertainment. They claim that they have never been conscious of 'looking for symbolic resources' from the media. (I reserve that they do grasp a lot of resources from soap operas or advertising from television as mentioned earlier; but they are not aware of it.) However, when the informants come to Bangkok, they realise that what they experience in the media, especially television advertising, are vital symbolic resources that can facilitate their socialising with their Bangkokian friends. Yet, they do not have a television, thus, it is important to buy one first. Bird talks about when she decides to buy a television.

*Bird:* My favourite things? This TV. I really wanted to have a TV in our flat [in Bangkok]. I thought I must have it. I was on a bus home. When the bus stopped in front of Merry King (5), I spontaneously jumped off and went in the store to buy this TV. These guys [pointing at other group members] were still on the bus. I didn't even wait for them.

*Interviewer:* What made you make such a decision?

*Bird:* We didn't have a TV in our flat. If we wanted to watch a TV, we had to watch it at [a friend's name]'s flat. Actually, we weren't addicted to any programme. But we must have it. We must watch it; otherwise, when we chatted with friends, we could not follow the conversation. We went blank. So, I thought it was high time we buy a TV.

*Interviewer:* What kind of topics on TV did your friends talk about?

*Bird:* Advertising, pop stars, programmes, everything, which I could not follow.

*Interviewer:* Advertising? Tell me more about it.

*Bird:* Like... Have you seen that advert? Like... They talked about the dinosaur in a new PTT (5) advert. It had braces. How cute it was... I didn't see it... I didn't understand.

*Interviewer:* How did you feel?

*Bird:* I felt *cherm* (7) ...I felt *ber*. (8) I thought how could I join in the group [her colleagues in marketing classes] if I didn't understand what they were talking about. I just sat *bur* (9) alone while the others were laughing. So, this TV is an investment.

*Interviewer:* Investment? Is it worth the investment?

*Bird:* Certainly.

*Interviewer:* How?

*Bird:* Now I can participate in the conversation better. I don't feel stressed anymore. I can discuss... I can laugh... I used to feel frustrated when I could not follow the discussion. I was afraid not being able to catch on with colleagues. I was afraid of being a loser.

Similar to the experiences of the teenagers studied by Ritson and Elliott (1999), Bird's experience of being "*cherm, ber and bur*" is a particularly frustrating one that obstructs her capability to socialise with her marketing colleagues (10). Indeed, "experiencing the ad becomes the ticket of entry into a particular part of the group's social exchange, and this experience in turn contributes to the ongoing structure of that group" (Ritson and Elliott 1999, p. 265). Evidently, advertising is employed for various gratifications and uses (O'Donohoe 1994). It is a considerable socialisation agent as it provides resources for enjoyment and knowledge to talk about. During my observation, the informants habitually crack jokes derived from particular advertisements. Yet, they also discuss the images portrayed in other advertisements seriously. Sometimes they mimic the models or play with words or slogans in the advertisements; while other times they argue critically about the storylines.

Interestingly, throughout the fieldwork period, the topic of advertising appears frequently at the centre of the group's interactions, especially in their everyday conversations. Seemingly, their extensive use of advertising, particularly as metaphors for jokes and plays, are not only for socialising purposes (Ritson and Elliott 1999), but also for neutralising or lessening their frustrations of living in Bangkok. For these informants, everyday life in Bangkok is stressful. Not only do they endure Bangkok's chaotic conditions such as traffic jams, overcrowded buses and pollution, but they also struggle with the capital's high cost of living and profound consumerism. Due to their socio-economic circumstances, they feel powerless and marginalised in Bangkok's consumer society. Thus, symbolic creativity through the use of 'free resources' like advertising helps to empower their sense of self (Willis 1990). Indeed, the capability to choose and creatively reapply resources from advertising to other contexts reaffirms their self-esteem. They demonstrate to themselves that even under such circumstances they are still able to maintain and illustrate certain aptitudes.

Advertising also supplies symbolic resources for aspirations and fantasies. More importantly, it offers ideas for the self-creation project (McCracken 1987).

*Auan:* Sometimes I prefer advertising to the programme itself. Many advertisements are very well made. Some are very funny. Some are so romantic that I would like to be in the advert myself. Beautiful scenery... light music... and a gorgeous man. I may look a bit rough, but I'm very sensitive and romantic.

Ostensibly, the informants may not grasp these symbolic resources for present usage; rather they accumulate them into a repertoire of their possible selves. Although the informants aspire to materialise those images portrayed in advertising, they simultaneously realise that it is unlikely for them to achieve. However, this does not depress them. In fact, the informants seem to enjoy the vicarious experience of these advertising fantasies.

### **In Search of Symbolic Resources through Lived Experience**

In addition to the mediated experience, the informants also vigorously look for symbolic resources from their everyday lived experience. They love to stroll in shopping centres to grasp what is 'in' as well as to observe how other people dress. The informants also observe what is fashionable among their fellow students, especially their Bangkokian counterparts.

*Auan:* I mooch about Merry King or Central (11) regularly. They are just across the street from where I live. So, almost every time I get off the bus, I habitually walk into the stores.

*Interviewer:* Shopping?

*Auan:* Not really. Mostly, I just do window-shopping. Just for pleasure... for knowledge as well. I want to know what is new in the market so that I can *mouth* (12) with friends. Otherwise, I feel *cheoy*. Also, I love to watch how other people dress so that I can follow the trend. I want to know what is hip now.

*Interviewer:* Don't you see that in the university?

*Auan:* Of course, we love to watch those trendy folks in the university as well. There is one girl in particular whom we usually observe. She is *dern* (13) everyday. She always wears something *tuen ta tuen jai* (14). She is a trendsetter.

*Interviewer:* Do you follow her then?

*Auan:* No. She is too modern. I dare not dress like her. Nobody in our group does. We just like to look at her style and *mouth* about it. Well, that is not true. Sometime we follow her. Like... the other day the whole group except Bird bought ankle bracelets after her. Usually, we will consider whether it will match us well or not.

The informants also acquire symbolic resources to acculturate themselves to Bangkok lifestyle through lived consumption experience. That is, they learn about the cosmopolitan life through consuming particular products or services. Win recounts her first consumption experience at McDonald's and Pizza Hut. Indeed, eating out at the international fast-food restaurants is an important component of young people's lifestyle in Bangkok.

*Win:* At home, we had a simple lifestyle. My parents didn't even shop in the local department store. If I were still at home, I wouldn't know anything. I learned a lot in my first year at university. It was also the first time I've been to McDonald and Pizza Hut. ... The first time I went to these restaurants. It was bizarre. I didn't know what to do or order. So, I just followed what other people did. I felt coy but I didn't show it. I thought it was peculiar to eat a hamburger or a pizza. It wasn't a normal meal for us. But I'm used to it now. At first, we only went to those restaurants only on a special occasion. Now, we go there when it is hot. It is nice to eat in an air-conditioned place.

Additionally, the informants also obtain symbolic resources or capital from their interactions with other colleagues in the university. Commonly, each shares those resources with the others in the group.

### **Negotiating Meanings: Self and Social Symbolism**

Since the informants form the group in order to take sanctuary in each other, they appear to rely on each other tremendously. They not only support each other emotionally but also share the aspiration to urbanise the self. Whenever any informant has a problem, the others will lend a hand and comfort her. Whenever any informant learns anything new, she will update the others. For instance, when Win hears about next year's 'in' make-up colour tone from her colleague, she eagerly tells other members in the group; or when Nat learns about a new mobile phone from her boyfriend, she shares the knowledge with the group. Generally, when the informants learn about a new product or new fashion, they discuss the matter; and frequently they even go to the stores to check things out. The informants usually shop together and they naturally ask each other for advice. Even when one shops alone and wants to buy something, especially clothes, she does not buy it straight away. Instead, she goes back to ask her friends to come to the store with her so that she can ask for advice on whether she should buy it or not. If her friends think she should buy it, then she will feel confident to buy it. If her friends think the product is not good, she will normally decline the idea of buying it. Trying to harmonise their individual and group identities, the informants constantly validate and negotiate the meanings of their consumption choices between the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism (Elliott 1994) through the processes of "discursive elaboration" (Thompson 1990). This process not only affirms them a sense of belonging to the group, but also grants them a sense of confidence.

Manifestly, the informants are conscious of trying to avoid making the 'wrong choice' or buying the 'bad taste'; they always need their friends to endorse or verify their consumption choices.

*Nud:* We love to go shopping together. It is more fun than doing it alone. More importantly, when we shop together, we can help each other choose stuff. Sometime my friends encourage me to buy what I wouldn't have the confidence to buy if I came alone. Like these *kama* (15) jeans, I wouldn't have bought them, if they had not given me confidence that I looked good in them. I thought the *kama* jeans would make my thighs look fat. But my friends confirmed that they made my hip and thighs look smaller.

*Da:* We always buy similar things. Whenever one of us buys something and likes it, she will recommend the others buy it as well. Let's say when I buy a brand of facial foam and I think it is good; I will encourage my friends to try it. So we end up using the same stuff.

Nonetheless, when an informant really wants to buy a particular product, she will re-negotiate the self-social symbolism through behavioural signification. That is, she buys and uses that product regardless of the group's disputes and checks how her friends respond to her behaviour. If the others do not make any further comments, it means that she may continue using the product. However, if the others keep nagging about it, she may need to give up using it.

*Auan:* I usually follow my friends. However, I don't always listen to their comments. If I really like it, I will buy it anyway. Like this T-shirt, I liked the colour and the design, but my friends thought it was too *kiku* (16). I liked the cartoon on it, so I bought it. When I put it on, they didn't say anything. Actually, Win mentioned that it was cute on me. So, I guess it is okay to wear it then.

Interestingly, as bonds between group members become more robust, the informants seem to be more assertive of their self-symbolism. Presumably, they also develop more self-confidence in their tastes as they have increasingly acculturated the Bangkok lifestyle.

*Win:* Previously, I was really influenced by the group. When they commented that the product is *cheoy*, I didn't have confidence to buy it at all. But, as we know each other better, we realise that our styles may be different. I tend to buy what I like, and they seem to accept my style. Thus, I'm now less influenced by the group. If I think this style suits me well or I feel 'it's me', I will go for it.

### Urbanising the Self

Although the informants feel contented with their group, they still need to socialise comfortably with other university colleagues as well as to assimilate properly into Bangkok's social life. The informants mention that they need to urbanise themselves in order to make their Bangkokian peers accept them socially. However, I argue that the informants' implicit urge to urbanise themselves is to restore their sense of security and self-esteem. It must be demoralising for these informants who formerly had a superior status (e.g. being a classroom leader) in the provinces to feel so marginalised in Bangkok. Their interview excerpts clearly indicate their sense of insecurity and their loss of self-confidence. So long as they do not urbanise themselves, they will still experience a sense of incompleteness. In the symbolic self-completion theory, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) suggest that if individuals feel insecure in social roles then they will attempt to complete their discrepant self-concept by the use of symbols they believe will demonstrate role competence.

Endeavouring to pursue their self-urbanisation project, the informants pursue much symbolic consumption in their everyday lives. First, they need to get rid of their provincial images. Primarily, the informants need to urbanise their looks. Clothes and physical appearance are crucial here. By this, the informants consume various products to groom their looks, especially their faces and skin.

*Bird:* When I visited home last school break, I helped my mum working in the field. Thus, I became darker because of the sun. When I came back to Bangkok, my friends recommended to me to use this UV whitening cream. I've used it for a month. I look much fairer now.

*Interviewer:* So, you prefer fair skin to dark skin?

*Bird:* Dark skin is not bad, but I want to look fairer. Most people here [in Bangkok] look fair. It makes me feel so dark. I don't know how to explain it. But having fair skin certainly looks better than dark skin. At home, I was never aware of my skin. In fact, compared to others at home, I looked relatively fair.

What Bird does not mention explicitly is that dark skin symbolises a 'provincial look' (i.e. farmers who work outdoors), while fair skin indicates an 'urban look'. To look urbanised, Bird also decides to have her teeth braced. The body grooming activities also coincide with the informants' self-transition from a teenage girl into a grown-up woman. They begin to use cosmetics and other accessories like earrings to adorn their bodies. More importantly, since some of them start dating, they become even more aware of their appearance.

To urbanise the self, the informants must also polish up the way they dress. Thus, they pay attention to how young women in Bangkok dress. More importantly, they take notice of how to dress properly in different

social contexts. At home, if they want to go to the market, they may go out in their casual clothes they wear at home. However, they are aware that in Bangkok, there are some implicit dress codes that they should follow.

*Nat:* Sometimes I feel like wearing *kangkeng Le (17)* to the supermarket, but my friends always remark, "This is Bangkok, not home. Dress properly, otherwise they will look down on us." It is a hassle that we need to change our clothes when we go out.

Apart from urbanising the look, the informants also urbanise themselves by consuming products or services that not only help to enhance their cultural capital but also symbolise cultural capital itself. For example, the informants save up money to register for additional English and computer courses outside the university. To them, acquiring English and computer skills seemingly signifies the internationalised and IT aspects of the urbanised self. These skills can also be viewed as educational capital that the informants hope to convert into economic capital (i.e. getting a good job) in the future (Bourdieu 1984).

### **Sustaining a Sense of the Provincial Self**

Although the informants attempt to assimilate into life in Bangkok, paradoxically, they also strive to sustain their provincial selves. The informants visit their homes in the provinces whenever their schedules allow. They constantly remind each other of their provincial roots. They believe that they never want to become a Bangkokian. In their everyday consumption in Bangkok, the informants try to retain some practices which they usually do at home; for example, sharing bathroom toiletries. Indeed, such collective consumption practices provide them a sense of home – a sense of family.

*Da:* We are like family. We not only live together, but also do a lot of things together. We eat together... shop together. We share things too. We even share personal products like soap, shampoo or toothpaste. ... It makes us feel at home.

In order to feel close to home, the informants even ascribe symbolic value to their regular department store – Merry King, as '*Talaad Ban Rao. (18)*' Additionally, they try to resume some practices that they normally do with their families at home; for example, *tak batr (19)*. Ironically, the longer they live in Bangkok, the more they seem to resist becoming Bangkokians and want to reclaim their provincial selves.

*Nat:* Sometime I feel it is ridiculous that we have to follow the Bangkokian. So I do what I normally do at home. I do what I want to do. ...Thailand belongs to us too!

Presumably, these informants exercise resistance to their acculturation processes as a mechanism to sustain a balance between their provincial selves and their newly urbanised ones.

### **Balancing the Hybrid Self**

To pursue their symbolic self-project comfortably under their circumstances, the informants employ several approaches to balance their hybrid selves. In order to reconcile the tension between their economic constraints and the lavish lifestyle surrounding them, the informants valorise symbolic meanings to consumption which is affordable and practical in their everyday lives. This symbolic valorisation is analogous to Bourdieu's (1984) "the taste for necessity" and Thompson's (1990) "practicality" – the strategy in which individuals in subordinate positions ascribe meanings to accessible and inexpensive products.

*Bird:* I'm not against those people who carry expensive handbags like Louise Vuitton (20). Likewise, I don't feel inferior using this 199 baths (21) handbag. I like it. It looks beautiful and it is practical. I can carry it anywhere.

While Bird feels relatively indifferent towards luxury brands being used as symbols of lavish consumption by some fellow students, other group members reject this practice in order to counterbalance their sense of inferiority due to the unequal distribution of wealth in the society. By this, they re-valorise luxury brands with various censorious meanings such as vulgar, profligate, stupid or even Thailand's economic demolition. Some informants go so far as to use the counterfeits to ridicule the authentic ones.

*Da:* This wallet is counterfeit. Everybody would know instantly that it is a counterfeit. How can I afford the genuine one? I have no intention to fool anybody that it is authentic. I think it looks exactly like the authentic. It is *sa jai (22)* that I spent only 159 baht to get the similar-looking wallet for which some people paid several thousand baht.

Moreover, although the informants want to look urbanised, they employ 'the middle path' approach in their consumption practices so that their provincial selves can presumably walk hand in hand with the urbanised ones in harmony.

*Nud:* We always hesitate to follow new trends. Usually, we buy stuff only when almost everybody else has bought it. We try not to be *cheoy*. But at the same time, we also try not to adopt any new style too soon. If we are too fashionable, we may look outrageous at home.

Furthermore, besides shopping at their “*Talaad Ban Rao*” (i.e., Merry King) and other average shopping centres, the informants tend to avoid any extravagant consumption landscape that makes them feel uncomfortable or intimidated.

*Nar:* I went to the Emporium (23) once. I didn't like it at all. Although there were a lot of nice shops there, I felt that it wasn't my kind of place. It is too posh. I cannot afford anything there. ... I even dared not stroll into any stores because I was afraid that the salespeople would look down on me. I won't go there again.

### Counterbalancing the Frustrated Life in Bangkok

Striving to counterbalance their socio-economic constraints, the informants creatively transform their consumption activities into an exciting game. That is, they turn their usual shopping for low-priced products into a shopping game in which the quest is to hunt for the best deal. This involves not only an active search for the cheapest price and ‘on sale’ deals, but also a vigorous bargaining on negotiable merchandise. By this, their economic frustration is neutralised, thus consumption becomes a more rewarding and enjoyable activity.

*Auan:* Every time we go out, we always keep our eyes opened, looking for the best deal. Even if we can find an item cheaper by only one baht, it is an achievement already.

Besides the shopping game, the informants also invent an advertising game in which they literally translate a catchphrase in an advertisement into English, and then memorise it. The first person who can finish the whole phrase perfectly wins the game. This game gives them a good laugh because the literal translation is usually funny, and the act of rephrasing during the race always yields even funnier outcomes. Commonly, the informants also pun and relate implicit dirty jokes. Seemingly, this playful behaviour is also a vital element that counterbalances the informants' frustrated lives in Bangkok.

### The Paradoxical Self

While the informants struggle to harmonise their dynamically multifaceted selves, their self-projects comprise various paradoxical realities and possibilities. For example, while Nat denounces luxury brands, she ironically buys them when they are on sales. Indeed, the symbolic meaning Nat ascribes to luxury brand consumption is not stable and depends on the context. While such consumption generally symbolises profligacy, it becomes prudent under the ‘on sale’ condition. Throughout the fieldwork period, I came across several paradoxes in the informants' self-projects. One noteworthy paradox, which is evidently shared among the informants, is their desires to return home after they graduate. I believe that they sincerely want to resume their lives in the provinces. They evidently yearn to go back to their simple and happy lives at home. However, do they still have the ‘same old life’ to go back to? As the informants steer their self-projects back and forth across socio-spatial boundaries, they somehow emerge in the “third space” (Bhabha 1990) where the self is located vaguely in the intersection between their hometowns and Bangkok. It seems that the informants' images of their tranquil lives in the provinces are only nostalgic views of the utopian lives. In reality, as the informants travel along the spatio-temporal paths of their experience in Bangkok, they continually re-interpret, re-negotiate and re-create their self-identities – which seem to become less identified with their homes, particularly in the sphere of consumption. Although the informants still love their families dearly, they acknowledge that their families hardly have influence on their everyday consumption anymore. Presently, even when they visit home during the university break, they hardly do shopping in the local department stores. Instead, they occasionally come back to Bangkok to do their shopping. Paradoxically, no matter how much the informants aspire to return ‘home’, I presume that, for the hybrid selves who hold contested identities which are not located in one place and cannot be traced back simply to any root (Gilroy 1997), there is no ‘home’ to go back to.

#### NOTES:

1. The imagined spatiality produced by intersection between images of the new place and the previous one.
2. All names are disguised.
3. Out of date or out of place.
4. Heart. In Thai language, the term ‘heart’ embraces both the heart (feeling) and mind (thinking).
5. A department store.
6. A local brand of petroleum stations.
7. Out of date.
8. Stupid.
9. Blank. It is a Thai slang derived from the English word ‘blur’.



10. Bird majors in Marketing. Later she becomes the President of the Marketing Club.
11. A big department store and shopping complex.
12. Slang for chitchat.
13. Slang for modern.
14. Tuen – awake; ta – eyes; jai – heart. The phrase usually refers to response towards novelty or extravagance.
15. A style of jeans that was popular in Thailand during the period of this study.
16. When an adult mimics a child, s/he may not look innocent or cute like a child. Rather s/he may look kiku.
17. Trousers initially worn by fishermen that people now wear casually at home.
18. A market in our home town.
19. Offering food to Buddhist monks in the morning.
20. It is approximately costs 15,000-20,000 bahts in Thailand.
21. US \$ 1 is approximately 39 bahts.
22. A scornfully satisfied feeling
23. A very posh department store and shopping complex in Bangkok.

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