

## **Politics of Representation of Female Flight Attendants' Bodies in the Affective Economy**

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### **Abstract**

The research examines the representation of female flight attendants' bodies under multiple forms of power in the affective economy. The study explores how representation of female flight attendants' bodies relates to national values, cultural discourse, and dominant gender ideology in Thai society. Another question to be scrutinized in the study is how flight attendants create a particular form of affect, and relocate themselves from the dominant powers. The paper applies the notion of the 'circuit of culture' to explain how representations construct meaning in production and consumption process. The image of the flight attendant in Thai costume symbolically portrayed in magazines, television, and on websites is analyzed to disclose the meaning hidden in cultural discourse. In addition, Kopytoff's concept in 'the cultural biography of thing' is employed to understand how women's bodies are more deeply commoditized through culturally specific meaning, and how the fetish is reworked for the benefit of an airline company. I myself worked as a flight attendant, thus my data can be viewed from an insider's and subjective perspective. Therefore, the method used for this research is self-reflexive ethnography to ensure objectivity, by reducing or controlling the impacts of the researcher's actions on the research situation. The study relies on my memoir and in-depth interviews of eight female flight attendants in various categories of age and position. The data are also gathered from participant observation by following short and long-route flights, and engaging with flight attendants' activities. Moreover, narrative analysis is employed to understand how flight attendants construct their subjectivity. The study reveals that female flight attendants' identities are constructed within the framework of a dominant discourse, one which includes gender norms, class distinction and nationalist ideology. Ironically, flight attendants deploy these cultural discourses for their own interests.

**Keywords:** representation, affective economy, flight attendant, subjectivity, capitalism

## Introduction

This article places emphasis on the bodies of female flight attendants<sup>1</sup> who are affective labor. In the airline industry, the economic interaction mostly relates with communicative action of human relations, and these new commodities are more specialized and based on non-mass forms of production (Hart 1999:96). Therefore airlines rely heavily on affective labor who creates a feeling of ease, satisfaction, and passion. This form of affect has been crucial in producing new agency that creates socio-economic value for the airline industry in the post-modern era.

Much research has focused on the representation of women's bodies. It examines the politics of travel and sexuality (Mackie 2000; Pritchard 2001; Urry 2002), and explores how the Asian female body is dressed and re-presented in the social world (Pritchard and Morgan 2005; Veiljola and Valtonen 2007). Some research has worked on the commoditization of flight attendants' bodies in a competitive airline market (Spiess and Waring 2005; Whitelegg 2007), while other studies concentrate on the history of representation and explore how flight attendants' bodies have been mapped by feminism, organization, national identity, and global politic (Barry 2007; Vantoch 2013; Whitelegg 2007). However, the recent work (Baum 2011) shows that the contemporary representation of flight attendants is significantly different from the glamorous perception in the golden era of flight. This change relates with the impact of low cost airlines that undervalue flight attendants' work.

A number of studies have analyzed the representation of women's bodies portrayed materially and symbolically in popular cultural forms such as magazines and airline advertisements; however, the women are seen as passive actors under cultural discourse. Few studies have focused on women's negotiation and production of subjectivity by taking advantage of representation. In this article, I attempt to examine how female flight attendants create the affect to relocate themselves from dominant powers. The study also explores how the representations of female flight attendants' bodies relate with nationalist value, cultural discourse, and gender ideology in Thai society. It is interesting to further investigate how flight attendants employ these dominant discourses for their own benefits.

Based on the concept 'circles of representation' (Hall 1997) and textual analysis of photography and travel brochures from earlier works (Jenkin 2003; Pritchard and Morgan 2005), this study discloses the patriarchal and imperialist discourse of the exotic; the representation in advertisements has sexualized and orientalized woman's bodies. I intend to examine how flight attendants who consume their visual image in advertisements then reproduce the discourse into a circle of representation. I also aim to investigate the visual

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as "flight attendants".

image of advertisements perceived by flight attendants who consume and reproduce the discourse into the circle of representation.

This article contains three sections. First, I will review the commoditization of flight attendants' bodies in airlines' advertisements to reveal marketing strategies that stimulate the emotional expectations of passengers. The advertisements competitively portray young, single, attractive female bodies as their airlines identities. Second, I explain how to gather data using a self-reflexive ethnographical approach. Since I focus on the experiences of flight attendants, I use body narrative analysis to understand how flight attendants construct their identities and subjectivity through narrative.

Third, I deal with the representation of flight attendants under gender norms, nationalist ideology and cultural discourse. Even though flight attendants' bodies are shaped by capitalist discipline and organizational discourse, at the same time they accumulate cultural capital and social network for their own benefit. They make use of femininity representation to accomplish their task.

Finally, the article seeks to illustrate the negotiation of flight attendants with an immoral image. They attempt to sustain their existing image as beautiful and good women. When TV series portray them as immoral women, they distort their moral characteristics. Consequently, flight attendants try to exclude this negative image from circulating discourse to maintain their position in society.

### **Self-reflexive Ethnography and Narrative Analysis**

I employ self-reflexive ethnography as one element of my methodological approach, as it locates the author's own life experiences within a social, political and cultural context. The role of ethnography is to enable authors to focus on culture and use their own experiences in the culture reflexively. It offers researchers the opportunity to understand themselves in deeper ways, and also understand the interaction between the self and others.

Since I worked as a flight attendant for twenty years, my data offers an insider's and subjective perspective. This is an important resource since here as I attempt to deal with the issue of insider views versus outsider perspectives. Thus, the concept of reflexivity is engaged in an attempt to ensure objectivity, by reducing or controlling the impacts of the researcher's actions on the research situation. The issue of reflexivity is particularly important within ethnographic research, as the connection between researcher and research setting is clearly closer, the researcher could make influences on research outcome more or less predictable. Researchers are led to reflect on their own subjectivities and their impact on social research. Participant observation requires the researcher to fulfill a double role, being

both involved and detached. One way of achieving this is by stepping in and out of the studied society, which is exactly the ethnographers' role (Davies 2002:5).

For this paper, the data is drawn from my memoir that is a written text, in-depth interviews and from participation observation. I chose eight female flight attendants of varying ages, positions and backgrounds, and focused on the emotions and body experiences of the attendants, topic areas which are very personal. As a result, I selected the respondents from my group of friends, those who are very close to and trust me. All respondents have work experience on the studied airline: one is retired and the rest are still working. Moreover, I participated in some short- and long-haul flights and engaged with the attendants' activities in order to observe their behaviors. In this way, I was able to observe the cabin crew's activities and their performances on- and off-duty. I had the chance to investigate their actions when faced with problems such as unruly passengers on the aircraft, and how they resolved these problems. This was a great opportunity to observe the social relations among the cabin crews, in-flight managers, flight crews and passengers. I also participated in other activities of the flight attendants, such as shopping and traveling that transcend the working context. This gave me the chance to interview them and observe their interactions with other people in different time and space settings.

In this research paper, I explore the lived body and subjective experiences of female flight attendants. I will attempt to understand the multiple ways in which these women experience their bodies, and explain how their identities and selves are shaped by various forms of power over time. I also focus upon the body narratives I witnessed and stories I heard. These are important, as they impose order on embodied experiences and make sense of events and actions in people's lives. In this regard, individuals tend to construct past events and actions on the basis of personal narratives; they engage in a dynamic process of claiming identities, shaping selves and constructing lives (Sparkes 1999:18).

In addition, I employ a semiotic approach to analyze the representation of female flight attendants in the ads; I aim to reveal the meaning hidden in the photographs. This approach analyses the meaning not by interpreting the content of objects, but by looking at the underlining rules and codes through which such objects or practices produced meaning. The objects can function as signifier in the production of meaning and carry a message or code (Hall 1997:37). In this study, I will decode the meaning behind the picture by linking the women into the broader context that is social ideology - general beliefs and value systems of society.

## **Affective Modulation of Airline Advertisements**

It has been since the 1970s that globalization, deregulation and privatization have created competition in the airline industry. Bilateral treaties between nations and open skies agreements increased the development of airline cooperation and alliances. In the US, the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB)<sup>2</sup> was dissolved and price restrictions were abolished, meaning airlines could set their own routes and prices, and compete with each other on price alone. The airfares are cheaper and make air travel more affordable. The airlines attempt to produce distinctive corporate images, relying not only on flight attendants who convey an image of marvelous service, but also on expensive advertising campaigns. Airline marketing strategies modulate the affects of passion and desire to influence passengers by portraying young, single, attractive female bodies in their corporate personalities.

Airline advertisers have increasingly inserted sexual messages since the 1960s to create the image in passengers' minds that they will be served by young and sexy flight attendants. The obvious sexual slogans like "Fly me" launched by National Airlines in the U.S. and "We really move our tail for you" offered by Continental Airlines took hold as a predominant theme in American airline marketing in the early 1970s (Barry 2007:101). The sexualization of airline marketing invites passengers to consider flight attendants as sex objects of air travel rather than safety workers.

In addition to sexually charged marketing, airlines have hired well-known designers to update and keep flight attendants uniforms modern. The flight attendants' attire has changed from formal and proper ladies' suits to more comfortable and highly sexualized dress such as miniskirts, wet look vinyl, and hot pants (Barry 2007:179). Southwest Airlines changed the uniform style to hot pants, short-sleeved tops and boots in 1972. Braniff International Airways designed a high-fashion 'air strip' to be performed by female flight attendants. This fashion featured multilayered uniforms that cabin crews wore when welcoming passengers, serving meals, and after service. Advertisements portrayed the 'air strip' as a striptease (Ibid 180-184), and featured it in television and print advertising including Braniff's inflight magazine.

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<sup>2</sup> The Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) was formed under the Chicago convention to establish a number of restrictions, providing a framework for emergency assistance as well as business practices, routes, fares, loans and mergers. CAB was a policy making body for the airline industry to eliminate price competition at both the national and international levels (Barry 2007:40).



Figure 1: Flight attendant on Southwest airline in 1972.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, many airlines increasingly created provocative advertisements that sexualize women's bodies. Aeroflot, Russia's national airline, mailed a 2011 calendar to its VIP members in which flight attendants appeared nude. Another Russian airline, Avianova, used bikini clad stewardesses in ads placed in the magazine *Maxim Russia* in 2011.<sup>4</sup> Following a sexy promotional theme, Ireland's Ryanair released another in a series of cabin crew charity calendars in 2011. This provocative calendar is filled with bikini clad Ryanair flight attendants in suggestive poses. They won the popular vote for the most naughty flight attendant award in a travel website.<sup>5</sup>

In the Asia region, 'Singapore Girl' was created by Singapore International Airlines (SIA) in 1972. The advertising campaign aimed to create young Asian women, with their natural grace, warmth, and gentle personalities in '*sarong kebaya*' uniforms into an effective global symbol of the airline. Female cabin crewmembers are still limited to a maximum five-year contract, insuring that passengers always see young beautiful girls in the cabin (Whitelegg 2007:135-138).

The budget airline, Air Asia, competes with Singapore Airlines by releasing an advertisement that states "There's a new girl in town. She is twice the fun and half the price". This sexualized statement combined with visual imagery of smiling and playful female flight attendants presents a meaning that goes beyond cheap tickets (Spiess and Waring 2005:201). Another advertisement with the vague phrase "Careful, they are Hot" pictures a

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/1nsax1/a\\_southwest\\_airlines\\_flight\\_attendant\\_1972/](http://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/1nsax1/a_southwest_airlines_flight_attendant_1972/), accessed on 2 January 2013.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.jaunted.com/story/2011/12/30/9137/8484/travel/The+Naughtiest+Flight+Attendants+of+2011+Are...>, accessed on October 12, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.jaunted.com>

male passenger being served hot food by a group of female flight attendants. This ad campaign depicts not only hot meals and hot deals on tickets, but also hot female flight attendants. When Viet Jet Air launched a new route from Ho Chi Minh to Nha Trang, flight attendants entertained passengers in Hawaiian costumes and in-flight dance.<sup>6</sup> Viet Jet used this campaign to capture the attention and stimulate the libidos of male passengers.



Figure 2: Female flight attendants on Air Asia advertisement.<sup>7</sup>

The Thai budget carrier, Nok air, hires only young flight attendants who are not over the age of 25 on short contracts; it replaces older cabin crew to rejuvenate the brand image and appeal to passengers. In 2013, Nok Air released a sexy calendar featuring models from Maxim magazine. The calendar shows models in different outfits from very short pant to yellow bikinis with aircraft in the background. Nok Air chief executive Patee Sarasin stated that

*“...the airline business has always been seen as sexy globally....most customers love the calendar and definitely want to own one...the calendar is becoming a hard-to-find commodity, and people from all walks of life have*

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vietnamluxurytravel.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Source: <http://getrealphilippines.com/blog/2012/02/airasia-one-ups-bouncycebu-pacific-flight-attendants/>, accessed on January 2, 2013.

*requested for copies.”<sup>8</sup> However, this advertisement was criticized by the Thai Ministry of Culture’s permanent secretary when she observed that the calendar demonstrates the exploitation of women’s bodies as a marketing tool. The permanent secretary said that the company lacks the sense of social and cultural responsibility, and ignores social and cultural repercussions. She noted “this explains why foreigners still have negative attitude towards Thai women in Thai society. It is the airline’s right to do so and the Culture Ministry has no right to punish it. The Ministry will soon host a discussion with related parties, namely the advertising association, PR companies, media, and consumer protection agencies to address the issue, before using female bodies as a marketing tool will become an acceptable norm.”<sup>9</sup>*

On the contrary, Thailand’s national airline has long been portraying flight attendants as beautiful, neat and gentle women. This airline has never employed explicitly sexy campaigns to energize its marketing. Therefore, in airline advertisements, female flight attendants appear in unique Thai costumes putting two hands together in the gesture of ‘wai’ with a Siamese smile. The main themes of this advertising are Thai women, silk, orchids, and Thai mannerism, with the slogan “smooth as silk”. Female flight attendants’ bodies have never been objectified as sexual objects in airline advertising; however, their bodies are commoditized in different ways.

The representation of female flight attendants in the study airline’s advertisements reflect the social values held in Thai society. Douglas asserts that the social situation is replicated in symbolic form by drawing on bodily symbols in every possible dimension (Douglas 1970:vii). The body is viewed as text, as a symbol or signifier of the social world. Here the body is a site of symbolic representation, and has the potential to express core social values (Reischer and Koo 2004:300).

## **Politics of Representation**

In this section, I analyse the representation of female flight attendants’ bodies used in airline advertisements, using semiotic analysis. I also employ narrative analysis to

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<sup>8</sup> <http://travel.cnn.com/thai-airlines-sexy-calendar-too-hot-government-076031>, accessed on October 15, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/national/Nok-Air-calendar-inappropriate30199719.html>, accessed on May 5, 2014.



understand how female flight attendants create a new subjectivity while facing multiple forms of power at work. Moreover, I investigate how female flight attendants construct their identity through a dominant discourse, one which includes gender norms and nationalist ideology.

### **1. Circuit of Beautiful Body**

In order to demonstrate how female flight attendants' bodies reflect social and cultural values, I employed a semiotic approach to analyze the meanings hidden within the photograph shown in Figure 3. This picture shows Thai women's bodies expressing Thai culture and nationalism through gesture of 'Wai', Siamese smile, and Thai costume. In this sense, the bodies reflect not only national culture, but also capitalist discipline that shapes and maintains their beautiful bodies. Female flight attendants' bodies are regulated by airline rules and regulations; they consent to exhibit slim, young, and beautiful bodies.

Figure 4 shows an Asian female flight attendant serving drink to a white male passenger. The binary opposition of woman/man, western/eastern, and master/servant are clearly illuminated. The representation of woman here relates with gender ideologies that assign women to caring and catering jobs. The flight attendant's sitting position also reflects power relationships and hierarchy of gender, race, and class. The airline aims to convey the message to Western passengers that they will be served by pretty and young Asian women; this message reinforces the colonial imagination and orientalizes women's bodies. When Southeast Asia was colonized by France and England in the early nineteenth century and later dominated by America after World War II, the idea of European identity as superior has made Western culture hegemonic to oriental peoples and cultures. Orientalism is a discourse that European culture was able to manage and produce the orient politically, ideologically, and imaginatively (Said 2003:3-7).

These advertisements are not only published in travel magazines, brochures and in-flight magazines; they are also broadcast on television, in video clips and on social networks such as Facebook,<sup>10</sup> Line and Twitter.<sup>11</sup> I researched airline advertisements in the form of video clips broadcast between 1980 and 2013, and in general the advertisements portray female flight attendants wearing Thai silk costumes, focus on the femininity of Thai women, and show them performing in the roles of wife, sister and mother. The videos depict Thai manners and smiles; show ways of life, Thai traditions and culture. Interestingly, all the videos show female flight attendants serving white, male passengers. The study airline orientalizes and subtly sexualizes women bodies through its advertisements.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ThaiAirways>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/ThaiAirways>



Figure 3: The study airline's female flight attendants in an advertisement (1).<sup>12</sup>



Figure 4: The study airline's female flight attendant in an advertisement (2).<sup>13</sup>

The airline's representation of its flight attendants is circulated and distributed on a global level through the power of the media. Furthermore, female flight attendants themselves help depict images of Thai women on a global scale, due to the mobility of their work; the study company flies to more than 70 destinations. The attendants work as cultural

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<sup>12</sup> Source: <http://www.199countries.com/air-hostesses-across-airlines/>, accessed on 2 January 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Source: <http://www.ipattt.com/2012/a380-thaiairways/>, accessed on 2 January 2013.

ambassadors, communicating and exchanging Thai culture with passengers around the world. Flight attendants exhibit the Thai *wai*, the ‘Siamese smile’ and other Thai mannerisms across the world through the use of their bodies, and this representation is extensively produced, reproduced and consumed by media outlets such as the study airline’s website, in videos and on You Tube.<sup>14</sup>

Airline advertisements portray flight attendants’ roles as wives, mothers, and sisters. These bodily symbols are homologous with Thai social norms and values. According to Thai gender norms, women are inferior to man; women are expected to exhibit gentle and submissive personality trait that are suitable for caring and service works. Under this context, the social situation is drawn symbolically on flight attendants’ bodies; this social form and gender ideology is reproduced and replicated through bodily symbols. In addition, these symbolic meanings have cultural messages embedded within them that are transmitted, not only to passengers, but are also circulated within the flight attendant community. Therefore, female flight attendants accept gender norms and express these social values through their bodies. They are willing to show the femininity, and commit to display their beautiful and skinny bodies.

In this regard, flight attendants add another layer of symbolic meaning and draw themselves into a cycle of representation (Hall 1997), which is a continuous process of cultural production. However, flight attendants are not passive actors of these images, rather they are active performers who search out of new meaning for their own benefit. They employ gender roles to fulfill expectations of customers and company, at the same time using femininity to solve the problems of working conditions and to complete their tasks. In this sense, female flight attendants also gain power when they display their bodies as beautiful women.

Most of my interviewees accept that femininity is important for their service job. For example, Mod<sup>15</sup> states that “*khwam-pen-phu-ying*<sup>16</sup> (femininity) is the most necessary, being concerned with emotion in performing the service. The conversation and gestures encourage good or bad moods of passengers. The way of talking reveals your professionalism. We should have a pleasant personality as well as professional performance.”

A junior flight attendant also perceives that femininity is essential for this job. Pailin<sup>17</sup> who has been working for two years notes that the, “image of a flight attendant is a beautiful, elegant and tidy woman. However, we are trained to be humble and polite. It’s a good way to

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ns1bOh71TzI>

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Mod, 45 years old flight attendant.

<sup>16</sup> *Khwam-pen-phu-ying* (ความเป็นผู้หญิง) means femininity.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Pailin, 26 years old flight attendant.

treat passengers.” In the same vein, Nida<sup>18</sup> also agrees with her colleague: “women are soft and pleasant; male passengers tend to compromise and be softhearted with female flight attendants rather than male, especially in a case that we have to apologize to them.”

Interestingly, female flight attendants may employ their gender role to accomplish their tasks. Chompoo<sup>19</sup> demonstrates this case:

*“‘Khvam-pen-phu-ying’ is helpful in solving problems. Males and females have different ways to deal with passengers. In some cases, women talk softly, and passengers would accept their apology when the choice of food has run out. When the entertainment system is out of order, I kneel down and explain to a male passenger politely that the supervisor will solve this problem very soon, and he will calm down. Male passengers would like to be served by female flight attendants, while female passengers like to talk with male flight attendants.”*

In addition, female flight attendants are proud to be Thai, and so are happy to exhibit unique Thai gestures. They claim for authenticity on the belief that women from other countries cannot imitate Thai mannerisms. Thai female flight attendants try to distinguish themselves from other service jobs, by situating their status as hosts on a level with the guests. Sairung<sup>20</sup> made the comment:

*“We sell a smiling face, generosity and empathy through the manners of women. We are the host, which is different from women working in restaurant or pub. As a host, we have honor and rights in our house. However, we are gentle and submissive. I have eye contact with passengers; it means that I listen to and give attention to passengers. This manner does not mean to convey other signals. The company commoditizes Siamese smile, Thai gesture like ‘wai’, and ‘khvam-pen-phu-ying’; all of them are our traits and are different from other cultures. Singapore Airline tries to copy this gesture but it could not be the genuine one. Even Korean or Japanese air hostesses who work with us could not exhibit real Thai manners.”*

Female flight attendants present their femininity, wearing Thai costumes that emphasize the shape of their bodies, but they do not accept that their bodies are

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Nida, 27 year old flight attendant.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Chompoo, 45 year old flight attendant.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Sairung, 47 year old flight attendant.

commoditized. They do think, however, that the study airline commoditizes the image of Thai culture, manners and femininity. Manee<sup>21</sup> expressed her attitude about the image of flight attendants:

*“Airline advertisements present a Thai costume that is tidy with long skirt and narrow collar blouse; it never shows female body. However, the female body manifests itself because the tailor-made Thai dress fits into the shape. Some airhostess is sexy when wearing this Thai dress; it emphasizes the lines of her body. The airline promotes a concept of caring and it is conveyed by the stewardess; we look after passengers as friends, brother-sister, father-mother, and grandfather-grand mom. We treat the old passengers as our senior relatives. The airline commoditizes the image of Thai culture that is composed of sweetness, and an amiable and gentle manner. Advertising focuses on female more than male flight attendants. ‘Khwam-pen-phu-ying’ is used to convey care better than ‘khwam-pen-chai’,<sup>22</sup> and we can see from the picture of a female flight attendant covering a male passenger with a blanket. Flight attendants’ bodies are not to be sold for their sexy character but the sweetness and gentle of femininity.”*

In the study airline’s advertisements, flight attendants are always presented in beautiful, elegant Thai costumes with the gesture of ‘wai’ and smile. Their bodies have never been presented as sexual objects. According to Kopytoff (1986) in "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process ", culture ensures singularity of things; it resists the commoditization of others. Commodities are singularized by being pulled out of their usual commodity sphere (Kopytoff 1986:73-74). Female flight attendants’ bodies embodied with cultural elements have been marked as unique and singular and they are precluded from being commoditized. The airline strategically removes the veil of Marx’s commodity fetish from flight attendants’ bodies, while the airline seeks to generate economic value from relations of production. Here, flight attendants’ bodies are more deeply commodified and commoditized through cultural meaning; the fetish is reworked for the benefit of the airline company.

It is shown that body ideals serve as mechanisms of social power and control. Flight attendants’ beautiful bodies symbolize not only an aesthetic idea but also an internal discipline. They have to shape themselves to be skinny, young, and have a healthy body

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Manee, 32 year old flight attendant.

<sup>22</sup> *Khwam-pen-chai* (ความเป็นชาย) means masculinity.

through regimens of diet, exercise, and other forms of self-improvement. Airlines monitor their weight by using “body mass index” (BMI), seeking to regulate flight attendants’ weight and appearance through scheduling. ‘Overweight<sup>23</sup> flight attendants can fly only on domestic and regional routes that generate less income for the flight attendant. Therefore, they have to keep their perfect bodies in order to maintain their income.

In summary, flight attendants accept gender roles and display their femininity under patriarchal social norms and colonial ideology. In this context, they represent beautiful Asian women who are willing to serve Western passengers. Even though their bodies have been commoditized in airline advertisements, they do not consider that their bodies and femininity are commodified in real life. They focus more on representing Thai culture and manners.

From another perspective, I would explain the link between airline advertisements and affective circulation through the concept of affective economy. Following Sara Ahmed (2004), emotions work as a form of capital; affect does not reside in the sign and commodity but is produced only as an effect of its circulation. Ahmed uses the economic metaphors to suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field. Affect also circulates between objects and signs. Therefore, signs accumulate affective value over time. The more they circulate, the more they become affective, and the more they appear to contain affect (Ahmed 2004:120).

It has been shown that airline advertisements aim to create a particular form of affect to stimulate passengers’ desire. Affective images of female flight attendants distributed in magazines, video clips and television modulate affective flow among passengers and flight attendants on different levels. For the individual level, female flight attendants accept the gender roles as wife and mother; they perform the femininity to create a notable feeling for passengers. Moreover, they re-present beautiful bodies embodied with Thai mannerisms as airline products. These images’ construction also enables flight attendants to circulate this kind of affect among themselves, and it is passed on to the passengers. A female flight attendant draws her appearance into the circuit of affect which makes her image more valuable.

According to Ahmed (2004), ‘affective economies’ describe how emotions align subjects into communities, or binding bodily space with social space. Emotions are not seen as psychological dispositions, but are considered in a concrete way to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between individual and collective through circulation and exchange. Female flight attendants circulate this kind of affect and it binds them together into a collective. Female flight attendants accept gender roles and display their femininity as portrayed in advertisements. Under this context, they all exhibit

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<sup>23</sup> Overweight flight attendants refer to female flight attendants who have a BMI exceeding 25, and males who have a BMI over 27.5.

Thai manners and represent beautiful Asian women who are willing to serve Western passengers.

As I have mentioned above, images of female flight attendants have been distributed through various media at a global level. The advertisements produce form of affect to modulate the emotion of passengers, that is, a notable feeling. This circulating affect could form affective network that links flight attendants and passengers around the globe. Here affect flows across time and space through female flight attendants' bodies. When flight attendants produce an affect for passengers, and passengers are impressed with the images and services provided, they would share this experience with their family and friends. These passengers will return and generate further income for the airline company.

## 2. Consolidation of National Body

It is demonstrated above that body is a locus of symbolic representation that expresses core social values. It is a site of inscription for dominant meaning imposed by a patriarchal idea of airline companies. The body is a vehicle for social, political and economic impositions that are forced onto individuals and groups (Reischer and Koo 2004:308). Women's bodies have participated in the realm of politics, and it produces national identity. In this section, I intend to link representation of women with the representation of Thai nation state.

Women have been one public embodiment of Thai culture and the state made use of women's bodies in different ways. This was illustrated in 1942 by Prime Minister Phibun Sonkhram when he imposed concepts of nationalism and leadership in an attempt to establish a new relation of hegemony, and erode the traditional hegemony of the monarchy. Phibun aimed to construct a new culture and nationalism through the use of art, literature, customs, mind and women. "Thai-ness"<sup>24</sup> concerned women's bodies in terms of their dress, appearance, and behavior. During the Second World War, Thai women were encouraged to dress in European styles to remind Japanese and the Europeans that Thais were like Westerners rather than Japanese. Women had to wear a hat, stockings, *phaasin* (skirt), and stop wearing *chongkraben* (draped pants) (Esterik 2000:100-103). In this regard, women's bodies were regulated through the dress code for the construction of Thai national identity. Phibun's policies aimed to portray Thai women's appearance as modern and Western to foreigners.

In 1960, when Her Majesty the Queen Sirikit accompanied the King on a state visit to Europe and the United States, she noticed that there were no national dresses for Thai

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<sup>24</sup> Phibun Sonkhram imposed 'Thai-ness' on women's bodies to demonstrate the strength and unity of Thai nation, but this version of Thai culture was based on a Western model and created the suppression of local traditions (Esterik 2000:100).

women at that time, and questioned what type of national costume a Thai queen should wear.<sup>25</sup> Thai women had adopted Western clothing which did not indicate Thai characteristics and identity. Therefore, the queen initiated the idea of designing Thai national costumes for Thai people. She restored Thai national costumes for women based on old court styles. The first five designs were given the following names: *Thai Borom Bhiman*,<sup>26</sup> *Thai Chakri*,<sup>27</sup> *Thai Amarin*,<sup>28</sup> *Thai Ruen Ton*,<sup>29</sup> and *Thai Chitralada*<sup>30</sup> (Esterik 2000:103). These designs were launched during the course of the state visits and on subsequent occasions, they are now internationally recognized as Thai national costumes. In this regard, Queen Sirikit has suggested that the Thai national flagship airline use Thai costumes as female flight attendant's uniforms.<sup>31</sup>

The Thai silk costume was introduced in the cabin when the study airline was established in 1960. It had been developed from *Thai Rouen-ton* and *Thai Chitralada* style, and has changed slightly from time to time. Eventually, the airline adopted *Thai Rouen-ton* style as the cabin uniform, which is composed of a round neck, cylinder sleeve blouse, and ankle length skirt. There is a '*sabaï*', a piece of silk cloth, wrapped around the shoulder and body. The color of the blouse could contrast with or be the same color as the long skirt. Flight attendants can choose the color of silk; therefore, passengers can view a variety of colorful Thai silk costumes on board. However, the selection of color, texture, and design of silk cloth provided in silk shops<sup>32</sup> has been determined by the study airline.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.encyclopediathai.org/sunthai/ceremony/thdress1.htm>, accessed on May 12, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> *Thai Borom Bhimarn* is formal evening attire comprised of a long-sleeved blouse which is either buttoned at the front or the back. The blouse is tucked beneath the *phaasin* or skirt with its front organ pleats. An ornate, bejeweled belt around the waist is used in this style.

<sup>27</sup> *Thai Chakri* is formal and very elegant eveningwear comprising gold and silver brocade silk. The *phaasin* is in the same style as the *Borom Bhimarn* costume; with front organ pleats, it is belted at the waist. The top is really a bodice covering one shoulder; the other end is almost floor-length.

<sup>28</sup> *Thai Amarin* style is worn at formal evening functions. The long-sleeved and collared blouse is normally made from brocade silk while the *phaasin* is very simple. Senior ladies often opt for a more simplified blouse version. The bejeweled belts are not to be worn with the *Thai Amarin*.

<sup>29</sup> *Thai Reun Ton* is the most casual style; it comprises a horizontally striped silk *phaasin*, which is folded to one side. The collarless blouse covers the upper hip and the sleeves end about three inches beneath the elbow.

<sup>30</sup> *Thai Chitralada*, in the same style as the *Thai Reun Ton*, is worn with a long-sleeves silk blouse whose front opening is attached with five ornate silver or gold buttons. The collar is slightly raised. This style is worn with brocade silk *phaasin* and there is no need for any jewelry or royal decorations. <http://www.encyclopediathai.org/sunthai/ceremony/thdress1.htm>, accessed on May 12, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> "Special report: welcome 30 years Thai airways" Thai airways International magazine.

<sup>32</sup> The silk shops are selected by the airline company through an auction system.



Most passengers appreciate the Thai silk uniform because of its beauty and colorfulness. The Thai costume is fitted for Thai women since they have small bodies, and they look elegant and sweet in this attire.<sup>33</sup> The Thai inspired uniform not only draws the favorable impressions of passengers, but also brings attention to the wearer as one of the airline's staff. One of reason is the opportunity to wear a graceful and beautiful uniform. Flight attendants are proud of being Thai while presenting service in Thai "traditional" dress, a uniform that also clearly reflects the national flag carrier.

Manee aimed to be a flight attendant because of Thai costume uniform; she loves to wear the Thai dress because it reflects the Thai national flag airline and also Thai-ness. She said:

*"Passengers admire me when I wear Thai dress. I have seen this symbol of the airline since I was young.<sup>34</sup> The Thai costume expresses the national airline as well as the Thai nation. I have to be good looking, behave, and show elegant character in uniform, or even without uniform, I could not do something bad; the display of manner depends on place and time."*

Junior flight attendants also love to wear the Thai uniform, but need time to become familiar with it. The Thai dress helps shape the flight attendants' behaviors, so that they exhibit Thai charm. Nida told me of her attitude when wearing the uniform:

*"I like Thai dress. We could wear this kind of dress only on special occasions. Passengers like the Thai costume and always ask me to take a picture. It represents the Thai nation. Moreover, the uniform shapes my behavior; my actions have to be slow. I could not walk quickly because the skirt is long and narrow."*

The tailor-made Thai costume crafts female flight attendants' bodies to be elegant and beautiful. It is fitted to the body and it is not suitable for working conditions. They have to work quickly since the flight has limitation of time. Junior flight attendants like the Thai costume even though they feel that it is not comfortable. Pailin comments:

*"Thai dress is beautiful but it is not practical in case of emergency. The long skirt is too narrow. When I serve food, my sa-bai drops into the food tray. Thai*

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<sup>33</sup> "Special report: welcome 30 years Thai airways" Thai airways International magazine.

<sup>34</sup> ผู้โดยสารชื่นชมที่ฉันแต่งชุดไทย ฉันเห็นสัญลักษณ์ของสายการบินมาตั้งแต่เด็ก ชุดไทยนี้แหละบ่งบอกว่าเป็นสายการบินแห่งชาติ และความเป็นชาติไทย

*dress should be modified for flexible use. However, passengers admire that it is beautiful and elegant. It is the image of the national airline and the image of the organization. We are representatives of the Thai nation.”*

Thai costume not only encourages flight attendants' proper behavior, but it also preserves the Thai image. It also disciplines their diet since the costumes are tailor made to fit their bodies. In my case, I normally have to maintain my body size, otherwise I could not wear all of Thai dresses in the wardrobe. We receive a voucher for new uniforms<sup>35</sup> each year and we could adjust the uniform size, but I do not want to do so. If I have a larger uniform each year, my body will be fat and I fear I could not control it anymore. The silk shops might complain when I ask them to make my uniforms larger. In this sense, Suntharee<sup>36</sup> gives her opinion:

*“I like Thai dress. It is beautiful, but we should wear it properly, not too tight or too loose. It is necessary to keep body shape. We are the front line of the company and represent the Thai nation. Thai dress is classic; it is charming by itself. Passengers are impressed by our Thai costume.”*

Most flight attendants are proud to represent the Thai nation, but at the same time, they are aware of the discrimination displayed by the passengers, and especially the Westerners. Flight attendants employ nationalist ideology to construct their subjectivity, as confirmed by Chompoo.

*“I have to think about the image given of Thai people, even when I'm not in the uniform. Even though we are Asian people with black hair, we have our own culture; I don't want to be insulted by a Westerner; however, I acknowledge the cultural rules among foreign countries, and have to follow those rules when I stay at a layover station.”*

Nam shares her story related with racial discrimination. She worked with United Airlines before joining the study airline; therefore she compares the differences between the two airlines. She is proud to be Thai when she works with the Thai national flag airline.

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<sup>35</sup> A voucher for Thai costume uniforms provides two sets of Thai A (with *sa-bai*) and two sets of Thai B (without *sa-bai*).

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Suntharee, 57 year old air purser.

*“When I worked with United Airlines, the aircraft was not my home. I could not fight for my rights, since there was no union for Thai crew. I felt like a servant who could not say anything, but had to be submissive to passengers. The big bosses were westerners and they would not protect us (Thai crew). We were discriminated against since we were from an Asian country. When I work with the national flag airline, the aircraft is considered as our land (territory). I work at my home, I represent the Thai nation, and I am a host who displays Thai mannerism. My bosses and colleagues are Thai people, we can help each other.”<sup>37</sup>*

In such circumstances, Thai-ness not only shapes female flight attendants' bodies, but also creates a form of affect that circulates among the flight attendants. This affect binds flight attendants into a community which represents Thai-ness and being proud of their sovereignty, and this helps to distance them from racial discrimination.

Sofia commented on a crucial point in relation to Thai-ness:

*“I’m a flight attendant at my country’s national airline. My performance represents Thai people and I fly with Thai aircraft which signifies the Thai nation. I want to present how nice Thai people are to passengers. Thus I could not give bad service to them even though I am very tired. This is a reputation of Thai people. When I wear Thai costume, it has a ‘winyann’ (spirituality) that enables me to present it beautifully. Queen Sirikit designs Thai costume for us and silk is a symbol of Thai. Thai silk costume reflects grace and elegance. We are the host and not the servant. Passengers can differentiate Thai costume from other Asian attire. I proudly present ‘khvam pen Thai’<sup>38</sup> (Thai-ness). We have a great history. In the past, we managed to survive and could negotiate with European countries.”<sup>39</sup>*

Flight attendants are generally proud to be Thai and be representatives of the Thai nation. They always think about the reputation of the Thai nation. Thai dress has linked being Thai and being a representative of the nation. Flight attendants have to be more considerate in their behavior when they are in uniform. However, they also are cautious even when they do not dress in uniform as during a layover at a line station, particularly in Western countries.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Nam, 46 year old former flight attendant.

<sup>38</sup> ‘*Khvam pen Thai*’ ความเป็นไทย or Thai-ness here means sovereignty as Thai was never formally colonized by European countries.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Sofia, 51 year old former flight attendant.

Here *khwam pen Thai* has disciplined and shaped flight attendants' bodies. At the same time, they are always proud of the uniqueness and persistence of the Thai nation. Flight attendants employ nationalist ideology to construct their subjectivity and distance themselves from racial discrimination.

It is demonstrated that *khwam pen Thai* or Thai-ness refers to Thai culture and mannerism, community and sovereignty of nation. Female flight attendants represent Thai-ness through Thai costume, and exhibit Thai gesture and manners. The articulation of *khwam pen Thai* has not only created the subjectivity, but it also forms collective feeling. This form of affect serves to unite flight attendants together especially when they are among Western people. 'Thainess' has worked as the essence of collective; national ideology is consolidated through affect that circulates between flight attendants' bodies.

### 3. Angel or Airborne Waitress?

The study airline recruits female flight attendants from pools of good looking, educated young women. Then, their bodies and physical disposition are shaped to embody the corporate image and personality. The study airline aims to construct the image of flight attendants as upper-middle class. Flight attendants wear designer uniforms, use cosmetics professionally, and know the latest fashion trends in modern cities like Paris, London, and Rome. An airline job provides them the opportunity to travel the world, mingle with celebrities, and gain prestige. This lifestyle takes them to five star hotels, well-known restaurants, and luxury shopping centers around the world. In light of this, Sofia mentions that:

*"We are considered as upper-middle class. We earn high income and have opportunity to travel the world. I was upset with my close friend saying that I changed to a high-class person and she did not want to associate with me and asked me to leave her alone. It is because I always talk about high-class people who I have contacted with. Actually, it is my working life, it is difficult for me to talk about the grass root."*

Under this circumstance, Chompoo said that the status of flight attendants has changed over the last twenty years, as more people can now afford to fly due to cheaper air tickets. This has meant that the characteristic of the passengers has changed; in the past only wealthy people could travel by air. Flying has become commonplace among people from all walks of life. Chompoo gives an opinion about class differentiation:

*“When I was a new airhostess, I felt that this job was a noble profession. In that time, passengers dressed neatly, and the aircraft was not a place for ordinary people to tread, but for high class and rich people. Passengers never insulted airhostesses, and we always talked with the passengers nicely; we were in high-class society. In this sense, I never met a lousy passenger pointing a finger and condemning me.”*

According to company rules, flight attendants may not receive tips as airlines try to distinguish cabin crew from other service jobs. The position of flight attendant is not to be classed as menial service like a servant or waitress. However, the perception of passengers has changed as many consider flight attendants to be airborne waitresses. The flight attendant's job is not the glamorous, elegant position as it was in the past. Chompoo continues her observation:

*“Now everyone can fly. You just have money and you could get on the plane. They dress improperly with T-shirt, singlet shirt and shorts. Passengers consider our job as lower career, like maid at home. It's very insulting to me. But we are still proud to be cabin attendant, not maid. Now Thai people have a bad attitude with us. One lecturer at famous university posted the message on a website in which he called us airborne servants. People did not see us as lofty as before. There was only one national airline in the past; we are supposed to be cabin crew of the national airline. Now there are many low cost airlines. One member of family could work as flight attendant. It has become an ordinary job.”*

In this regard, flight attendants tend to believe that their job has been devalued because of low cost airlines. Mod agrees that it is now not difficult for women to work as flight attendants.

*“It is social value, people call us ‘angel’ meaning that we are in high status. Most people consider flight attendants as middle class. For me, I'm only employee that's not different from other occupations. We should look at the mind of people. However, low cost airlines reduce flight attendants' value. In the past, cabin crews were selected from high-class family. Now anyone could be cabin crew of many airlines. It is not only national flag airline.”*

Indeed, the attendants' jobs at the study airline offer them the opportunity to climb the social ladder, as they can accumulate economic and cultural capital from the job. However, female flight attendants still have to deal with gender discrimination from male passengers sometimes, as Suntharee, a senior purser, gives an interesting opinion:

*"I don't differentiate this job from others. Even though I did not use academic knowledge for this work, I'm happy with it. I have never looked down on my job. Some people may recognize flight attendants as beautiful, smart, good-looking girls. It is an aspired career. In fact, it's not necessary to be beautiful woman, since we have to deal with diverse people. Flight attendants should be sharp in solving problems, and be confident to face with a mass of people. Since this job is risky, we earn more income compared with other jobs. We could collect a lot of money to buy property and expensive car. We could raise social status as other higher professions; we are accepted and recognized by society."*

*"However, many people consider this work like a waitress in restaurant. They view us with the eye of Thai male that complains about obesity and the age of airhostesses. They should consider about safety and destination that are the main point of air travel, and the service is subsidiary. But passengers have high expectation with the service; when they are disappointed, they always keep complaining."*

Even though female flight attendants are sometimes discriminated against or stereotyped by passengers, they attempt to preserve the image of the company. They display themselves as beautiful, elegant women from the upper middle-class who abide by company regulations and have self-discipline. Sairung describes how to maintain this image:

*"We could not get on the bus, eat street food, or consume alcoholic drinks in uniform.<sup>40</sup> We are disciplined when we are inside and outside work place; we have to be more cautious in uniform. We need to dress properly when presenting ourselves to the public, for instance, having breakfast in five star hotel where we have stayed overnight."*

Chompoo mentions practices that shape her body to the airline standard.

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<sup>40</sup> According to passenger service manual of the study airline.

*“I have to dress and wear make-up properly when I am in uniform to preserve the airline’s image. I take care of my skin, having face treatment to reduce ageing lines. I have a short hairstyle to solve the problem of hair falling. I always look after the beauty of my body. It is true that we were recognized as high-class society people.”*

In summary, social and cultural values have been represented on flight attendants’ bodies. Gender norms, essence of nation, and class distinction are reproduced and replicated through their bodies. Flight attendants accept dominant meaning and exhibit the normative traits of femininity in order to complete their tasks. The representation of Thai nation and Thai culture on flight attendants’ bodies could not be considered as taken for granted. Flight attendants adopt nationalist ideology to construct subjectivity, and relocate themselves from dominant Western culture. Even though flight attendants gain benefit and privileged lives from this career, they are stereotyped by some groups of people such as Thai politicians, government officers, and wealthy person who are superior to them. However, they attempt to maintain social status and preserve their benefits.

### **Negotiation with Representation on *Songkhram Nang Fah*<sup>41</sup> (Angel War)**

It has already been discussed that the airline creates the image of female flight attendants as elegant, beautiful women embodied with Thai culture. Female flight attendants commit to portray the image of glamorous, upper-middle class and good women. They also represent the nation and conform to gender norms under the dominant discourse. However, there is a different image of female flight attendant produced by a television drama producer. The drama depicts female flight attendants as beautiful, sexy, and immoral women that reflect the real life of ordinary women. The interplay between representation under dominant discourses and the real lives will be illustrated in the case of the drama *Songkhram Nang Fah* or “Angel War”.

*Songkhram Nang Fah* is a novel written by “Air Gee”<sup>42</sup>, who is a former flight attendant. Her background is an educated, beautiful woman from a wealthy family. She first posted this story under the title of “Suffering Life: True Story through Computer”<sup>43</sup> on the

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<sup>41</sup> *Songkhram Nang Fah* is literally means ‘Angel War’.

<sup>42</sup> “Air Gee” (แอร์จี) translated in spoonerism means old women.

<sup>43</sup> Title in Thai is ‘ชีวิตรันทต เรื่องจริงผ่านคอม’, the story can be traced through this link <http://topicstock.pantip.com/lumpini/topicstock/2006/12/L4980927/L4980927.html>

Pantip<sup>44</sup> blog, and her name “Air Gee” hit the peak in smart search of the Pantip website in 2006. Two years later the production company Exact asked her permission to produce this story as a series on television, changing the title to “Angel War”. It is a love story about female flight attendants who fight each other for the attention of a pilot. The series often introduces quarrels and physical confrontations between female flight attendants and they reveal their bodies in very short and tight uniforms.

After this series was first broadcast in 2008, the leader of the flight attendant union submitted a letter to the Minister of Culture asking that “Angel War” no longer be broadcast on TV channel 5. The letter stated that the Exact Company, who produced the TV series “Angel War”, destroyed the profession of flight attendants with its ignorant portrayal. The content of the series distorts the characters of flight attendants from reality. The drama showed inappropriate manners of flight attendants that conflict with the ethics and morality of the flight attendants profession. Society, especially youth, will be misled by the inappropriate behavior of flight attendants portrayed on the TV series; young people will look down on this airline profession.”<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the flight attendants union has taken the complaints to AP news that will broadcast this issue around the world. Meanwhile they coordinated with the International Transportation Federation (ITF), the central organization that protects the airline profession, to boycott this program. Eventually, Exact negotiated with the television channel and revised the scripts as well as adjusted the uniform and manner of flight attendants to make them more appropriate.

While the TV series continued, the actors in this story gradually revealed themselves to the public. At first the writer, in a media interview, said that “Angel War” was a true story. Later, the first wife of the pilot, who is a dentist, claimed that most content of the story was a distortion of reality; only some parts of story were true. Air Gee actually was not a good woman as Air Gee pushed her ex-husband (pilot) away. The first wife revealed the truth because all concerned, namely her daughter, her ex-husband, new wife of pilot, and herself, had been impacted by this drama. According to the first wife, Air Gee came into her life, and ruined her family. To make trouble, Air Gee made up a story and portrayed herself as *nang ek* (leading actress) who suffered at the hands of others.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Pantip is a popular Thai-language website and discussion forum. It was one of the top ten websites in Thailand in 2008.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.manager.co.th/Qol/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=951000008886>, January 22, 2008, accessed on December 10, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.manager.co.th/Entertainment/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9510000032139>, March 17 2008, accessed on December 10, 2013.



The TV series has finished, but real life still continues. The new wife of the captain, who is also a flight attendant, prosecuted Air Gee and asked for a fine of 32 million baht because Air Gee destroyed her and her husband's reputation. She believes that Air Gee's slander will cause others to misunderstand and think that she is the bad one. However, Air Gee declares that it is only a novel and is a fun way to depict aspects of marriage life. Air Gee says it is not a true story and she also did not use real names. Finally, the court investigated and decided that Air Gee wrote a story that does not match real life. The title of story is called 'Suffering Life: True Story through Computer', and Air Gee gave an interview to a magazine that made people believe that it is a true story. The statements contained in the series such as disrespect to parents and religion destroyed the reputation of the plaintiff. The court then found Air Gee guilty, but the evidence does not justify a fine of 32 million baht. The fine has been settled at 400,000 Baht.<sup>47</sup>

From the eye of insiders, we perceive that *Songkhram Nang Fah* is a true story. I have flown with the ones who were involved in this case; my colleague also confirmed that the actors' characters in the series were based on real people. In that time, flight attendants kept discussing and gossiping about this drama and prosecution case; it was a popular topic of conversation.

I have illustrated that flight attendants accept the image of beautiful, elegant and good women as their identity; they attempt to sustain this image within society. When TV series "Angel War" is broadcast, the image of flight attendants portrayed in the drama is different from the existing discourse. It shows flight attendants character as immoral women who only fight each other for a man. They are women who could express the emotion of love, hate, and sorrow; they are not different from ordinary people. Moreover, the uniforms in the series emphasize flight attendants' bodies as sexy women. Under this circumstance, flight attendants union could not tolerate with the image of immorality in their profession. The union claims that the content of the series distorts the character of flight attendants; this false image would ruin the image of good women. Therefore, the flight attendants attempt to exclude this different image from existing discourse to maintain their position in society.

## Conclusion

The image of flight attendants portrayed in airline advertisements is constructed under social norms, gender and nationalist ideology. This image is reproduced and replicated through flight attendants' bodies, this representation constructs meaning to recirculate consumption. According to Hall (1997), meanings regulate and organize conduct and

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<sup>47</sup> <http://archive.voicetv.co.th/content/17463>, July 14, 2010, accessed on December 10, 2013.

practices; meaning arises in relation to all the practices in our cultural circuit - in the construction of identity, and the marking of differences within production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct (Hall 1997:4).

Under this context, flight attendants are committed to displaying femininity as sister, wife and mother of passengers as a response to patriarchal and colonial discourse. They represent Thai culture and values. However, flight attendants are not innocent actors under social discourse, but they actively search out their own meaning. Flight attendants make use of femininity to satisfy passengers and company expectations, and for their own benefit.

The case of *Songkhram Nang Fah* or “Angel War” demonstrates that female flight attendants attempt to preserve the existing discourse of good women, and dismiss the image of immoral women. The study highlights that persons seemed to be constituted through social relations and obligations to others. Selves and society could not be separate entities (Kondo 1990:22). According to Goffman (1956), individuals will act in a calculated manner, expressing her/himself in a given way in order to give an impression to others. Individuals sometimes will intentionally and consciously express her/himself in a particular way because tradition or social status requires this kind of expression (Goffman 1956:3). Within consumer culture, individuals are responsible for developing and monitoring their own performance. Appearance, gesture and bodily behavior are taken as expressions of self in everyday interactions. The success of a professional role lies in the projection of a successful image; individuals depend upon their ability to negotiate interactions on the basis of ‘personality’. Therefore impression management, style and bodily representation are increasingly important (Featherstone 1991:189, 191).

The study shows that the boundary of ‘public’ space and ‘private’ space of the attendants is blurred. Flight attendants represent the corporate image at all times; it is not enough to have the capacity to perform within the work place, it becomes necessary to project constantly a ‘perfect image’ off-stage. Flight attendants perform *self* to deliver an impression to others; at the same time and space, they draw upon the discourses as a source of their identity.

Flight attendants accept the role of a feminine professional middle class who are representative of the nation. They express gender norms as beautiful women in order to create identity and make use of it; they gain benefit materially and symbolically when engaged in a celebrity life style and cultivation of cultural capital. Moreover, representing the Thai nation enables them to construct subjectivity as well as relocate themselves from racial discrimination. Here flight attendants are not submissive to dominant discourses but they negotiate with these representations for their interests.

This article illustrates that the nation-state penetrates into the lives of individuals through discipline and nationalist ideology. Female flight attendants display Thai-ness

through Thai costume and mannerisms; they represent the image of gentle and graceful Thai women. The attendants also attempt to preserve this existing discourse and contest the immoral image portrayed by TV series. The state presents Thai flight attendants as elegant, beautiful, and good women from the upper-middle class in order to conceal a bad image of Thai women depicted by sex workers or prostitutes.

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