

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

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

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

Sherry 1997, p. 95

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

these informants employ everyday consumption to re-negotiate and re-settle themselves in a new spatiality, i.e., cosmopolitan Bangkok. The interpretations endeavour to convey insightful understandings of the interplay between the self, geographical identity and consumption symbolism that emerged in the fieldwork. The interpretations reveal the complexly dynamic and paradoxical selves of these informants. Although they aspire to urbanise their selves in order to assimilate properly into the capital's way of life, they still wish to preserve their ties with their provincial roots. By this, they engage in various symbolic consumptions to create, express, negotiate, and harmonise the multi-facets of their identities.

### ***Place, Identity and Consumption Symbolism***

It is not uncommon that we identify ourselves with a particular place, even in the postmodern world where it is assumed to be the end of a sense of geographical attachment (Said 1983). McDowell (1999) argues that despite globalising forces that enhance our movement (e.g., for pleasure, for career, for education, for safety, etc.), our everyday life still largely remains to transpire within particular places. It is also contended that globalisation paradoxically recreates or reaffirms rather than destroys locality or the meaning of place (du Gay 1997; Marcus 1994; McDowell 1999). Challenging the traditional concept of place as a set of coordinates on a map that define and bound a piece of territory, much literature argues that places are contested, fluid and uncertain (Massey 1997; McDowell 1999). Contrary to the concept of absolute geographical space, it is proposed that places may hold manifold and shifting boundaries for they are defined by socio-spatial practices (Massey 1997; McDowell 1999). Accordingly, places may overlap and intersect with each other as they are established and sustained by social relations of power and exclusion (Smith 1993).

From this perspective, places are socially constructed - they are the results of continuing dialectical relationships between physical landscapes and the social processes within them. By this,

socio-spatial practices not only differentiate localities but also bound socio-spatial identities of the locals. Indeed, places embrace social life instilled with politics and ideology (Soja 1989). Sack (1992, p.1) reckons, “space and place are fundamental means through which we make sense of the world and through which we act.” Unsurprisingly, places and identities are closely intertwined (Keith and Pile 1993; McDowell 1999; Zukin 1992). Reading Benjamin’s work (1979) which illustrates the complex relationship between landscapes and the self, Sontag (1979, p.19) remarks, “reminiscences of self are reminiscences of a place, and how he positions himself in it, navigates around it.” Significantly, Benjamin’s work illuminates the relationship between identity and the spaces through which identity is both produced and expressed (Keith and Pile 1993, p. 9).

Central to the socio-spatial practices that distinguish places is consumption practices. While people in a provincial area in Thailand buy fresh food from the fresh market to prepare their meals daily, people in metropolitan Bangkok commonly buy their fresh food from a supermarket weekly. Sack (1992, p.1) notes:

Consumption and [post] modernity, on the one hand, and the relational geographical framework, on the other, are mutually reinforcing. Consumption is basic to living in the [post]modern world. Even though we differ from one another in many respects, it is a fact of modern life that most of us are consumers and that we share the experience of being in places of consumption.

Dialectically, consumption creates and transforms places whereas places are designed to facilitate and enhance consumption (Sack 1992). Inevitably, as landscapes of consumption, places are perpetually contested and reproduced. So do identities. Fundamentally, socio-spatial identity is derived simply from what we consume in a particular landscape (Zukin 1992). In Bell and Valentine’s (1997) book about food, they discuss that our identity is strongly

tied to where we eat. By this, *ùwhere we eatù* may not refer to only a physical space but also a symbol of a certain location (i.e., local food). For instance, while I am abroad, I always feel close to home (i.e., Thailand) whenever I have Thai food. Indeed, by exercising socio-spatial consumption, we are able to hold on to symbolic meanings of tying to such locality. Sack (1992) comments that as we move, we carry with us our sense of place that we have created from the interweaving of our everyday thoughts and actions with those of others in that place. To sustain a sense of specific place, we usually bring along some objects or practices that symbolise the place with us wherever we move. Mehta and Belk (1991) observe that Indian immigrants in the United States possess many objects from India to symbolically affirm bonds with their original homeland. Metaphorically, Indian and American boundaries converge. Embracing cultural hybridity<sup>3</sup> (Hall 1990), the self emerges in the 'third space' (Bhabha 1990; Soja 1996), not India not America; rather it is the imagined spatiality produced by intersection between images of India and America.

As migration fabricates hybridity of cultures and identities (Hall 1990), it produces manifold selves (Woodward 1997) Bhabha (1990, p. 211) comments, "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation." Complexly, hybridity holds contested identities which are not located in one place and cannot be traced back simply to any one root (Gilroy 1997). The self seemingly situates in space between two or more competing worlds. To understand this phenomenon, much literature suggests

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall (1990, p. 235) does not use the term 'hybridity' to reflect inferiority or impurity as he notes, "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity." By this, Hall's term 'hybridity' means that identities and cultural practices are an outcome of intermingling and fusion, an out come of movement (McDowell 1999).



that we avoid dualistic thinking and conventional concept of acculturation (where immigrants conform to host cultures) or syncretism (with an image of two unambiguous cultures overlaid) (Anzaldua 1987; Clifford 1997; Massey 1991; Soja 1996). Certainly, border crossing is not just a movement from one territory to another; and the acculturation process is not an unproblematic adaptation to a new culture. Anzaldua (1987) asserts that in border crossing, one can metaphorically be in both sides at once. Penaloza (1994, p. 32) also affirms that acculturation is not a straightforward process, rather it is a complex dynamic process “that consists of movement, translation, and adaptation processes leading to outcomes of assimilation, maintenance, resistance, and segregation.”

In her study of Mexican immigrants in the United States, Penaloza (1994) discusses that consumer acculturation involves consumption practices tailored to the situational contexts in the particular spaces. She notes that whereas the immigrants’ consumption behaviours entail cultural presentation within a socio-spatial setting supposedly characterised by interdependent and overlapping cultural domains, those immigrants translate cultural identities into consumption at play. They do not surrender to the cultural meanings ascribed to products and services. Indeed, for those immigrants, cultural identities become the unstable points of identification of which meaning can be removed from previous referential cultural domains and reattached to new ones (Hall 1990; Penaloza 1994). By this playful translation, hybrid identity emerges and is continually reproduced through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (Hall 1990). Certainly, “all identities are a fluid amalgam of memories of places and origins, constructed by and through fragments and nuances, journeys and rests, of movement between” (McDowell 1999). Thus, cultural identities may merely be shared through what Anderson (1983) calls ‘imagined communities’ - communities where members share imagined styles, not physical areas, to mark distinction from the others. Of course, these shared styles are exercised symbolically through everyday consumption.

In postmodernity where globalisation and mediaisation appears to seep into almost every locality, places and the selves are influenced by cultural identities that are complex manifestations of “local and global processes in relational, non-teleological way” (Clifford 1997, p. 7). This “global sense of place” dissolves the genuineness of locality and deconstructs it into disjointed socio-spatial scales (Massey 1991). We may sense the ‘authenticity’ of places only through their images constructed from dialectical fusion between our lived experience (e.g., living in the place, interacting with others in the place or visiting the place) and mediated experience (e.g., advertising, novel, travel guide or film).

### ***Negotiating the Provincial Self in Bangkok***

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 province’. 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 system 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 (e.g., In 2001, GDP of Bangkok and vicinities accounted for 47.2% of national GDP<sup>4</sup>). According to greatly unequal distribution of development (e.g., communication, economic, education, healthcare) 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 in the provinces. Consumers in Bangkok have much more opportunities to be exposed to global

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<sup>4</sup> National Income Accounts of Thailand 2001.



consciousness via globalised retail milieux (e.g., fast-food restaurants, retail chain stores, shopping centres) and media (e.g., cable television, the Internet, films).

With such inequality, it is not uncommon to anticipate the disparity between schools in Bangkok and the provinces. Most renowned schools appear to cluster in the capital. Evidently, schools in Bangkok can attract more of both quality teachers and benefactors. Therefore, despite the nationally standardised curriculum, students from prominent schools in Bangkok are potentially more able to pass the entrance examination into the state universities than students in the provinces. To provide opportunities for talented provincial students, several state universities have developed special programmes that offer admission quotas reserved exclusively for provincial students. One of those programmes is “the White Elephant Programme” to which my research informants belong.

### ***The Fieldwork***

The primary aim of my fieldwork was to explore the interplay between an attempt to negotiate and re-negotiate the sense of self in a new cultural space and everyday consumption. Principally, the data collection methods were observations, both non-participant and participant observations, and a series of ‘the long interview’ (McCracken 1988). Group interviews were also conducted to observe the interplay and negotiation process of consumption symbolism among the group members. Auto-driving like collages as well as diaries were also used as supplementary methods. Deliberately, I employed 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<sup>5</sup>, all of whom were about twenty years old. Their majors

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<sup>5</sup> All names are disguised.

are in business-related fields. All of them were from underprivileged families in the same rural region, which is approximately two hundreds kilometres away from Bangkok. Before attending university, they had never lived in the capital. Altogether the fieldwork was conducted over sixty weeks.

### ***Interpretations of the Fieldwork***

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

### ***White Elephants from the Provinces***

The fact that the informants had been accepted into "the White Elephant Programme" suggested that they hold outstanding backgrounds in both their academic records and extra-curriculum activities. Since their early school age, the informants at all times had performed well academically. They had been frequently appointed heads of their classrooms, which had simultaneously provided them opportunities to exercise their leadership in other extra-curriculum activities such as Girl Guides. Accordingly, the informants had been frequently granted scholarship and awards. Even in the informal settings, the informants' leadership had also been well regarded by peers who had depended on their 'academic support'.

**Bird:** Academically, I was in the top 10% of my class. I also

liked to participate in extra-curriculum activities. My proudest activity was when I worked for the Girl Guides. In my senior year, I was appointed to be the president of the school's Girl Guides, which allowed me to participate in the decision-making process with the teachers. I was in charge of planning all activities for the batch of more than a hundred Girl Guides.

**Win:** Since I performed well at school, my parents hardly needed to pay for my school fees.

**Nud:** Although I wasn't really studious, I did very well in class. I was mischievous but the teachers liked me. My friends liked me too since I often let them copy my exam answers, especially the mathematics exam. Hence, I became kind of a gang leader. We were quite a big gang; there were ten of us. I was always the one who suggested activities, like let's see a film this weekend or let's have ice cream after school.

With their excellent performance at school, the informants had appeared to be their parents' hopes and pride. Despite the economic constraint, their parents had been willing to spend on almost anything they had believed had aided the informants' academic performance.

**Bird:** I'm the only one in the family who has a chance to study in a university... the only one who has lived in Bangkok. At home, we don't need to spend much. We can eat things from our farm. I'm the biggest spender in the family. I feel guilty sometimes for my mum always favours me.

**Interviewer:** Because you are the youngest child?

**Bird:** Not really. I think because I've done well at school. I'm her hope. She tries her best to support my studies. For example, when I was in junior high school, I wanted to have a typewriter, but I didn't have enough savings to buy it. It cost around 4,500 baht, but I had only 1,500 baht. First, my brother agreed to share it with me, but he also had only 1,500 baht. So, we decided to ask mum to contribute the rest. Guess who asked mum? Me. Because we knew that mum would favour me for it. Since my academic records were better than those of my siblings, she tended to give me more educational-related stuff. Luckily, my siblings are very understanding. They are very supportive as well.

Indeed, even though Bird's mother had wanted to treat her children equally, with her financial constraint, it had seemed more sensible for her to invest on a more promising child. Like Bird, other informants had appeared to be their parents' hope for the betterment of their families in the future. That is, a well-educated child was likely to have a better opportunity to establish a good career; thus, expectedly she would be able to support the rest of the family in the future. Unsurprisingly, the informants' major spending in their childhood had revolved around their educations. Despite the economic justification, to obtain educational capital was also a significant means to improve social status. Indeed, Thai society, though flexible, is operated in hierarchical modes. Thus, the more the informants were educated, the better chance for them to gain social superiority. Undoubtedly, as an extension of the informants' selves, their families then could vicariously enjoy such status too (Belk 1988).

The informants recounted that due to their families' economic limitations, their everyday consumption in their home provinces had been simple and economical. They claimed that they had not been conscious much of what they had consumed. Primarily, most products they had used daily at home such as soap or shampoo are communally shared among family members. Their main entertain-

ment had been watching television with their families. Watching television had clearly been a daily ritual to strengthen bonds in the informants' families. It had also been the time when family members had been negotiating their communal consumption choices.

**Win:** I didn't pay much attention at what I used. I used whatever my mum bought. The whole family used the same stuff. For example, we shared a bar of soap... toothpaste... not a toothbrush though [laugh]. ... We used widespread brands like Colgate toothpaste, Lux soap or Sunsilk shampoo. However, if I wanted to try some other brands, I told my mum and she bought them for me. I meant, for the whole family to use. Let's say, when I saw an advert of a new shampoo, I would persuade my mum to buy it next time.

**Da:** There wasn't much to do in the province. Occasionally, I saw a film with my friends. Otherwise, I watched TV at home with my family. We usually watched news, [Thai] soap operas and Chinese series. Sometimes we mimicked the acting. It was good fun. We cracked a lot of jokes together.

Evidently, for the informants, consumption in the province had been 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). Moreover, culturally, the Thais, especially in the provinces, still value their families, especially parents highly (Komin 1990). As the informants claimed that they had warm and happy families, they naturally identified themselves with the families. For example, in Auan's collage of the self, she put her parents as an important constituent of her identities. The significance of family also arised frequently in other informants' interviews.

**Auan:** Family is everything to me. Whenever I feel troubled,

sad, exhausted or disheartened, I think of home... of my family. Going back home will make me feel better. We have a warm family. We love each other dearly. If I have a problem, I can easily seek advice at home, especially from my mum. I'm so close to my mum that I can talk to her about everything.

**Nat:** My parents are the most important people in my life. I don't want to live far away from them after I graduate. I don't want to work in Bangkok. I want to find a job in my hometown. ... Especially, I'm the only child. I feel that I should take care of them when they get old. Without them, we wouldn't have today, would we? I mean they are gods who not only give us life but also take care of us, eh? They save up their income to give me the best they can. So, when I want to buy something unnecessary, I think of them, think of how hard they work to earn the money, I then can forget about it [the thing that Nat wants to buy].

Nat's notion that her parents were compared to gods was not uncommon in Thai culture. This is particular so for the mother, Mulder (1996, p. 91-92) notes, "She is not a person any longer, but the symbol of virtue and sacrifice, of goodness and forgiveness. ... Obviously, the mother image is inviolably sacred." Indeed, this cultural meaning was incorporated into the informants' selves, and certainly influenced their consumption practises. Interestingly, Nat's favourite T-shirt had an image of a rabbit, which apparently denoted her mother's nickname (i.e., Taai).

The informants' simple lifestyles in the provinces were also owed the minimal peer pressure experienced at school. The informants described that most students in their schools came from relatively similar socio-economic backgrounds; thus, all their classmates also consumed minimally. There was no pressure to buy or use any sumptuous products. Nevertheless, the informants



regularly talked about their mundane consumption with their friends, particularly when there were new brands advertised on television. For instance, they recommended each other to try a new brand of soap or a new scent of an established brand of shampoo. In effect, the informants later discussed their friends' recommended brands at home.

## **The First Encounter with Bangkok Social Life**

After having graduated from provincial high schools, the informants were admitted to the university under "the White Elephant Programme." Just after the first term started, they instantly formed a group - a provincial group. Although the informants had been greatly exposed to the Bangkokian attitudes, lifestyles and values via the mass media before they came to Bangkok, they still felt uneasy to mingle with the Bangkokian students in their early years. Nat recounted her first experiences at the 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 hang around together. They went to lunch together. There was no 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 conversa-

tion. 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<sup>6</sup>?

**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 to each other. The separation between provincial students and Bangkokian students seems lesser. 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 were familiar with Bangkok social life through mediated experience did not assure them instant understandings of such culture. Even though some literature

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<sup>6</sup>Out of date or out of place.

suggests that via the modern 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 comprehend 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 different certain messages and make sense of the meanings according to their difference 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 did not seem to fairly share the common worldview.

Moreover, the fact that the informants had experienced the Bangkok social scene through the mass media before did not mean that they could settle down effortlessly in their new social atmosphere. In fact, their mediated knowledge of the capital made them more aware of the vast difference between their provincial simple living and the Bangkokian lavish lifestyles. Accordingly, as the informants became highly conscious of the differences, they appeared to be less confident to interact with their Bangkokian colleagues. Simultaneously, Bangkokian students also failed to notice their provincial colleagues’ apprehension due to their ignorance of this matter. Thus, they did not make enough effort to welcome the new comers. Nevertheless, the informants seemed to reproach the segregation problem only on their parts. They thought it was their responsibilities to adapt themselves to the cosmopolitan life. The attitude ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’ loomed large in their acculturation processes.

Furthermore, the informants’ hesitation to mingle with their Bangkokian colleagues could be interpreted from a perspective of social literacy. The informants felt anxious to carry out conversations with their Bangkokian colleagues because they could not enjoy

the conversations, especially the jokes. Indeed, those conversations seemed like a ‘foreign’ language to them. Frequently, the Bangkokian students talked about some luxury foreign brands or their shopping experience which the informant could hardly participate in the conversation. Despite speaking literally similar language (i.e., Thai), the informants did not share the ‘social literacy’ (i.e., the literacy of consumer culture) with their Bangkokian counterparts. Additionally, the shift of social space from a simple life in the province to a much more complex life in the Bangkok propelled 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 trend. 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 the 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<sup>7</sup>. 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.

**Auan:** At the beginning, I really missed home, especially my mum. I felt as if I had to fight in this big world alone. I wondered whether I would survive.

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<sup>7</sup> Heart. In Thai language, the term ‘heart’ embraces both the heart (feeling) and mind (thinking).

Indeed, the informants appeared to lose sense of security. Mulder (1996) comments that, to the Thai, the reliable and trustworthy world is centred on their mothers; thus, the further away from the mothers (i.e., home), the less secured the world. In this case, the informants not only lived away from home but more importantly, lived in the unruly Bangkok. Accordingly, the informants sought refuge from this social frustration by turning to each other to form a group of their own. Since they shared the accommodation in Bangkok, the group spent most of their leisure time together, both at the university and outside the university. Nonetheless, they did not seal themselves in their own social world. They still needed to socialise with other students, especially in the academic context (e.g., classrooms or group coursework). They realised that they needed to adapt themselves in order to socialise comfortably with their colleagues. Hence, they began to urbanise their identities.

### **In Search of Symbolic Resources**

Endeavouring to integrate into the new social world, the informants actively looked for symbolic resources in order to enlarge their cultural capital for urbanising themselves. This involved 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 became the informants' significant missions to obtain symbolic resources for the self-urbanisation project.

### ***Mediated Experience***

The informants expressed that previously they had only attended the media mainly for news and entertainment. They claimed that they were never conscious of 'looking for symbolic resources' from the media. (I reserve that they did grasp a lot of resources from soap operas or advertising from television as mentioned earlier; but they were not aware of it.) However, when the informants came to

Bangkok, they realised that what they have experienced in the media could be vital symbolic resources to facilitate them in socialising with their Bangkokian friends, especially resources from television advertising. Yet, they did not have a television, thus, it is important to buy one first. Bird talked about her experience when she had decided 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 the department store opposite our flat, 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 blanked. So, I thought it was high time we buy a TV.

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

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

**Interviewer:** How did you feel?



**Bird:** I felt *cherm*<sup>8</sup>...I felt *ber*<sup>9</sup> I thought how I could join in the group [her colleagues in marketing classes] if I didn't understand what they were talking about. I just sat *bur*<sup>10</sup> alone while the others were laughing. So, this TV is an investment.

**Interviewer:** Investment? Does 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 to be a loser.

Similar to those sixth formers studied by Ritson and Elliott (1999), Bird's experience of being "*cherm, ber and bur*" was a particularly frustrating one that obstructed her capability to socialise with her marketing colleagues<sup>11</sup>. 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 of enjoyment and knowledge to talk about. From my observations, the informants habitually cracked jokes having been derived from particular advertisements. Yet, they also discussed the images portrayed in other advertisements seriously. Sometimes

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<sup>8</sup> Out of date.

<sup>9</sup> Stupid.

<sup>10</sup> Blanked. It is a Thai slang derived from the English word 'blur'.

<sup>11</sup> Bird majors in Marketing. Later she becomes the President of the Marketing Club.

they mimicked the advertising models or play with words or slogans in the advertisements; while some other time they argued critically about the storylines.

Interestingly, throughout the fieldwork period of this group, advertising appeared to be a significant ingredient of the group's interactions, especially in their everyday conversations. Seemingly, their extensive uses of advertizing, particularly as metaphors for jokes and plays, were not only for socialising purposes (Ritson and Elliott 1999), but also for neutralising or lessening their frustrations of living in the unruly Bangkok. For these informants, everyday life in Bangkok has been stressful. Not only they had to endure Bangkok's conditions like traffic jams, overcrowded buses or pollutions, but they also struggled with the capital's high cost of living and profound consumer culture. According to their socio-economic circumstance, they somehow felt powerless and marginalised in Bangkok's consumer society. Thus, symbolic creativity through the uses of 'free resource' like advertising helped to restore their sense of vital capacities, therefore empowered their sense of self (Willis 1990). Indeed, the capability to choose and reapply resources from advertising in other contexts creatively reaffirmed their self-esteem that even under such circumstance they were still able to maintain and illustrate their aptitudes.

Advertising also supplied symbolic resources for aspirations and fantasies. More importantly, it offered 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.

**Da:** Definitely, I want to be a workingwoman. Nobody wants

to be just a housewife. It is boring. Even in detergent advertisements, every woman seems to be working now.

**Interviewer:** If a woman works, who will take care of her baby then?

**Da:** Well, I will demand my husband to take care of the baby. [Laugh] Like in Care<sup>12</sup> advert, a father gives his baby a bath.

**Win:** I dream to have a warm happy family of my own in the future. Have you seen Dumex<sup>13</sup> ad? ... Or Aletta NF ad... I could not remember the brand exactly. There are daddy, mummy and a little girl. I want to have a family like that.

**Bird:** Of course, I often dream to own a house like that one day. But for now I know it is impossible. But it is nice to dream of it anyway.

Ostensibly, the informants might not grasp these symbolic resources for the present usage; rather they have accumulated them in the repertoire of their possible selves. Although the informants sometimes aspired to materialise those images portrayed in advertising, they simultaneously realised that it was unlikely for them to achieve. However, this did not depress them. In fact, the informants seemed to enjoy vicarious experience through those advertising fantasies.

### ***Lived Experience***

Besides the mediated experience, the informants also vigorously looked for symbolic resources from their everyday lived experience. They loved to stroll in shopping centres to grasp what

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<sup>12</sup> A brand of baby toiletries.

<sup>13</sup> A brand of instant milk for toddlers.

was ‘in’ as well as to observe how other people dressed. The informants also observed what was fashionable among their fellow students, especially their Bangkokian counterparts.

**Auan:** I mooch about Merry King and Central<sup>14</sup> 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<sup>15</sup> 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 it 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<sup>16</sup> everyday. She always wears something tuen ta tuen jai<sup>17</sup>. 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

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<sup>14</sup> Central is a big shopping complex positioning for middle-class customers. Merry King is a lower-range department store, which towards the end of this research project has been closed down.

<sup>15</sup> Slang for chitchat.

<sup>16</sup> A slang for modern.

<sup>17</sup> Tuen - awake; ta - eyes; jai - heart. The phrase usually refers to response towards novelty or extravagance.

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

**Win:** At home, we had simple lifestyles. My parents didn't even shop in the local department store. If I were still at home, I wouldn't know anything. I learnt a lot in the first year of the university. It was also the first time I went to McDonald and Pizza Hut. ... The first time I went to these restaurants 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. Presently, we go there when it is hot. It is nice to eat in an air-conditioned place.

Additionally, the informants also obtained symbolic resources or capitals in the fields of interactions with other colleagues in the university. Commonly, they shared those resources with each other in the group.

## Negotiating Meanings: Self and Social Symbolism

Since the informants formed the group in order to take sanctuary in each other, they appeared to rely on each other tremendously. They not only supported each other emotionally but also shared the aspiration to urbanise the self. Whenever any informant had a problem, the others would lend a hand and comfort them. Whenever the informants learnt anything new, they would update the others. For instance, when Win had heard about the next year's 'in' make-up colour tone from her colleague, she eagerly told other members in the group; or when Nat had learnt about a new mobile phone from her boyfriend, she shared the knowledge with the group. Generally, when the informants learnt about a new product or new fashion, they discussed the matter; and frequently they even went to the stores to check things out. The informants usually did shopping together and they naturally asked each other for advice. Even when they went shopping alone, when they wanted to buy something, especially clothes, they did not buy it straight away. Instead, they went back to ask their friends to come to the store with them so that they could ask for advice whether they should buy it or not. If their friends considered they should buy it, then they felt confident to buy it. If their friends thought the product was not good, they would normally decline the idea of buying it. Trying to harmonise their individual and group identities, the informants constantly validated and negotiated 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). These processes not only affirmed them a sense of belonging to the group, but also provided them a sense of self-confidence. Manifestly, the informants were conscious of trying to avoid making the 'wrong choice' or buying 'bad taste'; they always needed 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. Sometimes my friends encourage me to buy what I wouldn't have confidence to buy if I came alone. Like these kama<sup>18</sup> jeans, I wouldn't have bought them, if they had not given 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 hips and thighs look smaller.

**Da:** We always buy similar things. Whenever any of us buys something and like it, we will recommend the others to buy 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.

**Win:** If we don't go shopping together, we always show what we buy to the others. Then, everybody will try it on; and we make comments. It is fun. If we like it, we will go buy it.

Nonetheless, when the informants really wanted to buy a particular product, they would re-negotiate the self-social symbolism through behavioural signification. That is, they bought and used that product regardless of the group's disputes, and checked how their friends responded to their behaviour. If the others did not make any comments further, it meant that they could continue using the product. However, if the others kept nagging about it, they would need to give up using it.

**Auan:** I usually follow my friends. However, it is not always that I 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,

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<sup>18</sup> A style of jeans that was popular in Thailand during the period of this study.

but my friends thought it was too kiku<sup>19</sup>. 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 became more robust, the informants seemed to be more assertive of their self-symbolism. Presumably, they also developed more sense of self-confidence in their tastes as they have acculturated Bangkok lifestyles.

**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 felt contented with their group, they still needed to socialise comfortably with other university colleagues as well as to assimilate properly into Bangkok social life. The informants mentioned that they needed to urbanise themselves in order to make their Bangkokian peers accepted them socially. However, I deemed that the informants' implicit urge to urbanise themselves was to restore their sense of security and self-esteem. It must have been demoralising for these informants who were used to have a superior status (e.g., being a classroom leader) in their rural homelands to feel so marginalised in Bangkok. Their interview

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<sup>19</sup> When an adult mimics a child, s/he may not look innocent or cute like a child. Rather s/he may look kiku.

excerpts in earlier sections indicated their sense of insecurity and their loss of self-confidence clearly. So long as they did not urbanise themselves, they would 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 employed much symbolic consumption in their everyday lives. First, they needed to get rid of their provincial images. Primarily, the informants needed to urbanise their looks. Clothes and physical appearance were crucial here. By this, the informants consumed various products to groom their looks, especially their faces and skins.

**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 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. But having fair skin certainly looks better than dark skin. At home, I was never aware of my skin. In fact, compared to the others at home, I looked relatively fair.

What Bird did not mention explicitly was that dark skin symbolised a 'provincial look' (i.e., farmers or those people who work under the sun), while fair skin indicated an 'urban look'. To look urbanised, Bird also decided to have her teeth braced. The body

grooming activities also coincided with the informants' self-transition from a teenage girl into a grown-up young woman. They began to use cosmetics and other accessories like earrings or ankle bracelets to adorn their bodies. More importantly, since some of them started dating, they became even more aware of their appearances.

To urbanise the self, the informants also polished up the way they dress. By this, they paid attention to how young women in Bangkok dressed. More importantly, they took notice on how to dress properly in different social contexts. At home, if they wanted to go to the market, they might go out in their home clothes. However, they were aware that in Bangkok, there were some implicit dress codes that they should follow.

**Nat:** Sometimes I feel like wearing kangkeng Le<sup>20</sup> to the supermarket, but my friends always remark, "This is Bangkok, not our home. Dress properly, otherwise they will look down on us." It is such a hassle that we need to change our clothes when we go out.

Apart from urbanising the look, the informants also urbanised themselves by consuming products or services that not only helped to enhance their cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) but also symbolised cultural capital itself. For example, the informants saved up money to register for additional English and computer courses outside the university. To them, acquiring English and computer skills seemingly signified the internationalised and IT aspects of the urbanised self. These skills could also be viewed as educational capitals that the informants hoped to convert into economic capitals (i.e., getting a good job) in the future (Bourdieu 1984). As Bangkok social life has been influenced by information technologies, to the informants, possessing an IT product also symbolised the urbanised self.

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<sup>20</sup> A pair of trousers initially worn by a fisherman. Usually, people wear them at casual (e.g., at home).

**Nud:** I've just bought this pager. Now that I'm a committee member of the Marketing Club, I need to be easy to reach. It would be better if I had a mobile phone. Unfortunately, I cannot afford it.

Interestingly, from the above excerpt, Nud attempted to neutralise the 'guilt' of buying an expensive (and probably unnecessary) product by justifying that a pager was essential for her extra-curriculum activity. This behaviour was common among the group members. Since the informants' economic resources were limited, they tended to ascribe symbolic values to products that were practical in designs and purposes. Thus, they always tried to rationalise their consumption choices, even after the purchase.

**Win:** This is my favourite bag. It is very useful. I can put everything in it. I mean, a wallet, a comb, a calculation and etc.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about your buying experience of this bag.

**Win:** Actually, I didn't plan to buy it. I just wanted to go window-shopping. But when I saw it, I felt yes! The design was just 'in'. It was really 'hit my heart'<sup>21</sup>. So I bought it without hesitation.

**Interviewer:** So, it was an impulsive buying, wasn't it?

**Win:** Yes [Laugh]. But...I've used it for almost two years now.

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<sup>21</sup> Translated from a Thai word which is used when we really like something.

## Sustaining a Sense of the Provincial Self

Although the informants attempted to assimilate into Bangkok life, paradoxically, they also strived to sustain their sense of the provincial selves. The informants visited their homes in the provinces whenever their schedules allowed. They constantly reminded each other of their provincial roots. They believed that they never wanted to become a Bangkokian. In their everyday consumption in Bangkok, the informants tried to retain some practices which they had done at home; for example, sharing bathroom toiletries. Indeed, such collective consumption practice provided them a sense of home - a sense of family.

**Da:** We are like a 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 ascribed symbolic value to their frequent department store - Merry King, as their '*Talaad Ban Rao*.<sup>22</sup>' Additionally, they tried to resume some practices that they normally do with their families at home; for example, *tak batr*<sup>23</sup>.

**Auan:** We prefer shopping at Merry King to shopping at Central. Although Central is posher than Merry King. We feel more relaxed to walk about in Merry King. It is more like our home department store. Sometime we go shopping there in shorts and T-shirts. We refer to it as '*Talaad Ban Rao*' (our home market).

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<sup>22</sup> A market in our home town.

<sup>23</sup> Offering food to Buddhist monks in the morning.



**Bird:** As a Buddhist, I try to tak batr once a week. It is what we usually do at home. My mum tak batr every morning.

Ironically, the longer they lived in Bangkok, the more they seemed to resist becoming a Bangkokian and wanted to reclaim their provincial selves.

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

Presumably, these informants exercised resistance in their acculturation processes as a mechanism to maintain a balance between their provincial selves and the newly urbanised ones.

### **Balancing the Multi-faceted Self**

To pursue their symbolic self-project comfortably, the informants employed several approaches to balance their multifaceted selves under their life conditions. In order to reconcile the tension between their economic constraints and Bangkok lavish lifestyles, the informants valorised symbolic meanings to consumption which was affordable and practical in their everyday lives. This symbolic valorisation is analogous to and Bourdieu's (1984) "the taste for necessity" and Thompson's (1990, p. 158) "practicality" - the strategy that individuals in subordinate positions in society employ to ascribe meanings to, accessible and inexpensive products.

**Bird:** I'm not against those people who carry expensive handbags like Louise Vitton<sup>24</sup>. Likewise, I don't feel inferior to use this 199 baht<sup>25</sup> handbag. I like it. It looks

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<sup>24</sup> It is approximately costs 15,000-20,000 bahts in Thailand.

<sup>25</sup> £1 is approximately 68 baht.

beautiful and it is practical. I can carry it anywhere.

While Bird felt relatively indifferent towards luxury brands being used as a lavish symbolic form by some colleagues<sup>26</sup> in the university, other group members rejected its lavish meaning in order to counterbalance their sense of inferiority due to the unequal distribution of wealth in society. By this, they re-valorised luxury brands with various censorious meanings such as vulgar, profligate, stupid or even Thailand's economic demolition<sup>27</sup>. Some informants went so far to use 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*<sup>28</sup> that I spent only 159 baht to get the similar-looking wallet for which some people paid several thousands bahts.

Moreover, although the informants wanted to look urbanised, they employed 'the middle path' approach in their consumption practices so that their provincial selves could presumably walk hand in hand with the urbanised one in harmony.

**Nud:** We always hesitate to follow new fashion. Usually, we buy stuff when almost everybody 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" and

<sup>26</sup> For example, the *nouveaux riche* group.

<sup>27</sup> During economic crisis in Thailand, luxury brand consumption is blamed as a source of the kingdom's deficit trade balance.

<sup>28</sup> A scornfully satisfied feeling

other average shopping centres, the informants tended to avoid any extravagant consumption landscape that made them feel uncomfortable or intimidated.

**Nat:** I went to the Emporium<sup>29</sup> 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 transformed their consumption activities into an exciting game. That is, they turned their usual shopping for low-priced products into the shopping game of which its quest was to hunt for the best deal. This involved not only an active search for the cheapest price and *non sales* occasion, but also vigorous bargaining on negotiable merchandises. By this, their economic frustration was neutralised, thus consumption became a more rewarding and enjoyable activity.

**Auan:** Every time we go out, we always keep our eyes open, looking for the best deal. Even though we can find only 1 baht cheaper, it is an achievement already.

**Win:** We are proud to be able to buy stuff at discounted prices, especially if it is the price we bargain for.

Besides the shopping game, the informants also invented an advertising game of which they literally translated a catchphrase

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<sup>29</sup> A very posh department store and shopping complex in Bangkok.

in an advertisement into English, and then memorised it. The first person who could finish the whole phrase perfectly won the game. This game gave them a good laugh because the literal translation was usually funny, and the act of rephrasing it in a race always yielded even funnier outcomes. Commonly, the informants also punned and related implicit dirty jokes<sup>30</sup>. Seemingly, this playful behaviour was also a vital element that counterbalanced the informants' frustrated lives in Bangkok.

### **The Paradoxical Self**

While the informants struggled to harmonise their dynamically multifaceted selves, their self-creation comprised various paradoxical realities and possibilities. For example, while Nat denounced luxury brands, she ironically bought it when it was on sale. Indeed, the symbolic meaning Nat ascribed in luxury brand consumption was not stable, depending on the context. While such consumption generally symbolised profligacy, it became prudence under 'on sale' conditions. Similarly, Bird who was always enthusiastic to engage in extra-curriculum activities contradictorily maintained that she liked to lead a quiet life. While she exerted herself to become the President of the Marketing Club, she claimed that she in fact did not want to bear leadership.

**Bird:** I feel very exhausted to be a leader. I want to be a follower.

**Interviewer:** What makes you apply for the position then?

**Bird:** Other people want me to; they believe that I can lead the club. I don't want to disappoint them. I don't understand why I have to live up to other people's expectations.

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<sup>30</sup> In my opinion, the jokes are not disgusting. In fact, they are quite funny.

Ironically, Bird has already been a follower who allows the others to guide her self-project. Indeed, her self-creation project was unsurprisingly complex and paradoxical. Interestingly, Auan even declared that her life was full of contradictions - it was often fallen into a “grey area”<sup>31</sup> which she could not conclude what she wanted in her life. Accordingly, she employed the attitude ‘let it be’, that was, she let the situation resolve her contradictory self.

Throughout the fieldwork period, I came across several paradoxes in the informants’ self-projects. One noteworthy paradox, which was evidently shared among the informants, was their desires to return home after graduation. I believe that they sincerely wanted to resume their lives in the provinces. They evidently yearned to go back to their simple and happy lives at home. However, I wonder whether they still have the ‘same old life’ to go back to. As the informants steered their self-projects across socio-spatial boundaries back and forth, they somehow emerged in the “third space” (Bhabha 1990; Soja 1996) where the self was located vaguely in the intersection between their rural hometowns and Bangkok. It seemed that the informants’ images of their tranquil lives in the provinces were only their nostalgic visions of the utopian lives. In reality, as the informants travelled along the spatio-temporal paths of their experience in Bangkok, they continually reinterpreted, renegotiated and recreated their self-projects - which seemed to become less identified with their homes, particularly in the sphere of consumption. Although the informants loved their families dearly, they acknowledged that their families hardly influenced their everyday consumption anymore. Presently, even when they visited home during the university break, they barely did shopping in the local department stores. Instead, they occasionally came back to Bangkok to do their shopping. Paradoxically, no matter how much

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<sup>31</sup> Auan’s own words from the interview script

the informants aspired to return 'home', I presume that there was no 'home' to go back to.

## Conclusion

This study illuminates the dynamic and paradox of the self and consumption symbolism. The interpretations demonstrate how the provincial young women, who came to study in cosmopolitan Bangkok, employed symbolic consumption in their acculturation processes. Endeavouring to settle down in Bangkok, the informants derived symbolic resources from both mediated and lived experience to urbanise themselves. Simultaneously, they recontextualised some consumption practices to sustain their ties with their provincial roots. The informants also used consumption symbolically to harmonise the multifaceted selves, and counterbalance their frustrating lives in Bangkok.

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