

Conference Proceedings – Thinking Gender – the NEXT Generation

UK Postgraduate Conference in Gender Studies

21-22 June 2006, University of Leeds, UK

e-paper no.13

Flower of the Nation: Gendered Representations of Thailand beyond the Borders

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Abstract:

This paper will explore the relationship between gender and national identities in Thailand through the construction of Thai national self-representation that reflects in female images. The issues of representations of women have concerned Thailand's leaders who historically and today want to promote a 'civilised' image of Thailand. This has significant consequences for women whose identities, as the public embodiment of Thai culture, become symbolically related to the concepts of national order and progress. My analysis thus centres on a process of national imagining, whereby the ideal feminine image was essential in the service of the nation in that it created positive images of the country.

Keywords: Women, Nation, National Identities, Representations



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INTERDISCIPLINARY
GENDER STUDIES



The conference and the proceedings are supported by the

feminist review | TRUST

Introduction

Representations of gender and national identities in modern Thailand are the main theme of this paper. Following the work of Benedict Anderson (1991), *Imagined Community*, I argue that nations and national identities are socially and culturally constructed and they are imagined. As abstract concepts, they need to be embodied by a certain form of representation. For instance, national identities can be seen in the way they are experienced and transmitted through objects such as maps or flags, or through the organisation of collective spectacle such as team sports and popular culture. In my research, national identities are imagined through the construction of Thai national self-representation that reflected in women's images.

If we take a look into the historical background of gender relations in Thailand, it will show that gender was always a part of international relations. The issues of representations of women have concerned Thailand's leaders who historically and today want to promote a 'civilised' image of Thailand. As a consequence, women's identities became the public embodiment of Thai culture and are symbolically related to the concepts of national order and progress. According to Van Esterik (1996), in her studies on the politics of beauty in Thailand, the attributes of gentleness and virtue are intertwined with grace, and beauty to produce a model of ideal Thai femininity. The Thai state is still very much involved in the maintenance of this model and has been making use of it as part of its nation building project since the 1930s (Van Esterik, 1996, p.203).

Flower of the Nation: metaphor of femininity

Gender ideology in the establishment of national identities was conceptualised into the ideology of "Flower of the Nation" in Thailand's Nation-Building period, which is the nationalistic years surrounding the Second World War in Thailand, 1939-1944. Back then Thailand was under the dictatorship government of Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram. This period was called the 'Nation-Building' period according to the nation-building policy he worked in an attempt to build a 'new nation'. The ultimate aim of this mission is to maintain the country's independence throughout the threat of Western colonisation, and to make Thailand part of the international society of modern nations. What makes this 'Nation-Building' period important to my study is that it was the period in which the issues of women and the construction of ideal femininity was clearly one of the government's major preoccupations in the 'nation-building' mission. It can be

said that, under the reign of Phibulsongkhram, the motive behind the ideology of “Flower of the Nation” was built upon the ideal of femininity which appealed to the sense of nationalism and patriotism, in part through the manipulation of gender identities and the disciplining of women’s appearance and sexual behaviour.

“To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.”

(Scott, 1988, p.46)¹

It was in reference to the appropriate role for the feminine in the political order that Burke (1892) wrote the above line. Following Burke’s quotation, I aim to examine representations of the gendered body as a metaphor for national identity. Scott (1988) also comments that gender is a way of denoting “cultural construction”, that is the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men (Scott, 1988, p. 32). Here I shall explain the meaning of the ideology of ‘Flower of the Nation’. In Thailand’s Nation-Building period, the idea behind the ideology of “Flower of the Nation” was to impose ideal feminine identities on Thai women. At that time, the notion of masculinity largely depended on a chauvinistic and militaristic nationalism. So, the ideal of manliness was expressed in the metaphor of “Fence of the Nation”, which mean men got to perform their roles in military struggles to defend their homeland and the sovereignty of the nation. Alongside the idealisation of masculinity, a feminine ideal is also put forward. Women became part of the flower symbolic in that they are so dear to the people of the nation, because the word “flower” has always traditionally been associated with women in Thailand in terms of beauty, grace and freshness. Therefore, it was not surprising that this concept was used to metaphorically represent the images of women in this period. Van Esterik (1996, p.203) comments that representations of women as part of Thai cultural identity focus mainly on their appearance. In order to live up to the ideology of “Flower of the Nation”, women had to make themselves beautiful so as to make men happy and perform their duty as the “Fence of the Nation” well, as commented in a contemporary periodical, *Nikorn* (1942):

¹ quoting Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1892; reprint ed., New York, 1909), pp.208-9

“Women are the flowers, the sacred gift from heaven... the best incentive that encourages the bravery in men’s heart.”

(Quoted in Suksan 1995, p. 59)

That is the background of my work. I am currently working on the way the construction of modern women in Thailand is linked with the formation of a modern nation. I propose that in the age of globalisation, the process of disintegration of traditional political boundaries seems to give rise to an increasing importance of culturally constructed mental border. What I am interested in finding out is the idea of the gendered representation of borders in this respect. How are Thai national identities conceptualised in terms of gender? And how this conceptualisation is linked to constructions of gender and national identities in a globalised world? This is what I set to explore further.

Discourses of national imagery: Thai image consciousness

Van Esterik (2000, p.96) states that, ‘Concern with a civilised face and image has been a particularly prominent part of Thai national identity formation after contact with European colonizers active on their eastern, western and southern borders’. For me, it is interesting to compare the national desire to be seen as ‘civilised’ with what Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram may have had in mind in the Nation-Building period. Surely there is an echo from the past. But this time there are no longer the ultimate aims to maintain the country’s independence from the Western colonial threat like in the early 20th century, but perhaps a desire ‘to site Thainess beyond the border of the nation-state’ (Reynolds, 1999, p.261). Also according to Reynolds (2002, p.311), one significant feature of Thailand’s self-representation since the ‘90s is the promotion of Thailand as a ‘brand name’. Images and representations play a great role in this process. For instance, the way Thai culture managers and tourism promotion officials play upon the association of the attractiveness of Thailand as tourist destination and the attractiveness of its people. In contemporary Thailand, both the official and popular Thai discourses have put several attempts in constructing Thai person and the nation as ‘attractive’ to the world. And feminine beauty feature in the formal and informal export of images of Thailand to attract tourists and investment and to engender a favourable opinion of the country in the perceptions of foreigners.

However, Thailand has got its dark side, which can be seen as a sexualised national imagery. As often heard of, Thailand got an undeletable imprint on the popular imagination of the West as home to a widespread sex industry. As a result, in addition to its common tourist brochure appellation as ‘the Land of Smiles’, Thailand has become less flatteringly known as ‘the Brothel of Asia’, its capital Bangkok earning the definition in the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture in 1992 as ‘a place where there are a lot of PROSTITUTES’. This caused a public denunciation of Longman for creating a poor image of the country (Harrison, 2001, p.138). This is truly unfortunate because not only does it portray a narrow segment of life in Thailand, but it pushes beyond and tarnishes an otherwise wonderful image of a country and of its people.

Other Asian countries or, say, any countries in the world, offered these same sexual enticements, so why did so many men come to Thailand for this? For me, that is simply because they knew the cost of living was low, the exchange rate was good, and the people were friendly. Thailand is still the most visited country in Southeast Asia, but it is not due to its level of prostitution. Each year, more than eight million foreigners visit Thailand, and who come because they are interested in its history, culture and seeing its remarkable beauty. Sadly, the conduct of a relative few has adversely affected the reputation of Thai women, in general. For example, in March 1999, a problem arose between Thailand and Hong Kong about Thai female travellers. Hong Kong custom officials attempted to assure the Thai Foreign Ministry that clearances of Thai women required longer periods of time than normal, because of the need to make thorough checks for fake passports, illegal immigration and occupation (i.e., prostitutes). The women, however, accused custom officials of undue and unjustified harassment. Despite a Thai Foreign Ministry request asking Hong Kong authorities to be more considerate of Thai women travellers, Hong Kong immigration officers were ordered to detain all Thai women below forty years of age. Nowadays, Thai women are still being treated likewise sometimes when applying for the visa to countries like Japan or Korea.

In an effort to diminish this image in the popular perception of Thai women in the eyes of the world, Thai nationalist sentiment and image consciousness has focused on promoting the image of the morally, and sexually ‘good’ women. Most Thai would prefer that international visitors

recall the beautiful, graceful, polite, and neatly-dressed women as depicted in the tourist industry promotion. That is the image of womanhood that is deeply embedded in Thai cultural tradition. What I am going to do next in my thesis is about this struggle over the power of representation and the discourse of Thai collective desire to dispel this tarnished image and restore the good one, in the context of Thai popular media concerning the images of Thai women, especially in the eyes of the foreigners.

Thai people are obviously aware of this tarnished image and how the world perceives them. They look somewhat suspicious or disapproved when they see a foreign man in the company of a Thai woman. This is particularly true when the man is in his sixties, and the woman is quite young. A Thai automatically perceives the young woman to be a prostitute --- and, of course, she may be or may be not. However, this perception is generally extended to all Thai women who are accompanied by foreign men, which is most unfortunate. Not only is this unfair to Thai women, but it is unfair to foreign men as well. It can be said that Thailand's need for a clean international image derives from a strong cultural tendency to bring only the morally acceptable into the public domain. The images endorsed by the Thai mass media also seek to create a set of acceptable behaviour. When I was in Thailand doing my data collection earlier this year, I came across one of the day-time television programmes for ladies. The presenters, one of them is a famous female superstar in her forties; another one is a gay, well-known scholar, who is happened to be famous because of the open attitude of his sexuality, talked about the image of Thai women in the eyes of the Western. They came to agree on the warning point to Thai women that: if they have '*farang*' (informal Thai words for foreigners) as boyfriends or husbands, it is their responsibility to take good care of their appearance and behaviour, so that they would not be seen or understood as prostitutes.

Ideology of good women: embodiment of female virtue

George Mosse (1985) in *Nationalism and Sexuality* contends that the intense interest of modern society in respectability—'decent and correct' manners and morals, as well as with a proper attitude towards sexuality— were intimately connected with the development of modern nationalism. He examines how female symbols of the nation, such as Marianne and Germania, demonstrate explicitly how the nation (or the state) uses sexuality for its own promotion and

preservation. As Mosse points out (regarding the German state), “Nationalism-and the society that identified with it- used the example of the chaste and modest woman to demonstrate its own virtuous aims” (Mosse, 1985, p.90). In other words, female propriety, chastity and fidelity, along with monogamy, all became key tropes of civilised or virtuous nationhood. (Landes, 2001, p.5)

The extensive literature on gender and nation/ nationalism (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Nagel, 1998; Cusack, 2002; Valerius, 2002) shares a similar viewpoint in that argue that while women may be subordinated politically in nationalist movements and politics women are taken to represent tradition and are required to carry ‘the burden of representation’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.45) as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively. They are thought by traditionalists to embody family and national honour, as Valerius (2002) puts it “Women in their moral chastity and ‘societal motherhood’ were the guardians of collective national honour” (Valerius, 2002, p. 49).

Women, in their ‘proper’ behaviour, their ‘proper’ clothing, embody the line which signifies the collectivity’s boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.46). This embodiment of female virtue reflects in the legal justification for women in many societies being tortured or murdered (‘honour killing’) by their relatives because of adultery, flight from home, and other cultural breaches of conduct which are perceived as bringing dishonour and shame on their male relatives and community. Nationalists, therefore, as Landes (2001) argues, often have a special interest in the sexuality and sexual behaviour of their women (Landes, 2001, pp.99-101). For Landes, women’s good behaviour is not just a private matter; private morality was intimately tied to public virtue and state interest.

In Thailand, women’s identity and proper behaviour were in many ways linked to women’s role in the maintenance of national identity and tradition. Even currently, little has changed in the areas of society’s expectation and recognition of female identity. Female identity in contemporary Thailand still remains closely bound up with the maintenance of virtue. There is certain clarity of division in Thai society between the image of ‘good’ woman and the ‘bad’ one. Last year, when a very popular reality TV show, *Big Brother* was introduced for the first time on

Thai television, it provoked contradictions and cultural uproars. For many Thai people, men and women spending days and nights together with lots of physical contacts is seen as scandalous. And when a teenage girl shared a bed with her new-found love who is one of the housemates, it is unacceptable for many viewers. Considering the girl's background, it turned out that she came from a very well-to-do family, and had spent her teen in Europe. The argument went on to as to what kind of behaviour is acceptable for Thai women and the consequence when it is influenced by Western points of views. In Thai tradition, although the sexual mobility of young, urban Thai women appears to have increased in recent years, this remains a subject for the private rather than the public domain. Harrison (2001) comments that 'Local media depicts the 'modern' Thai woman as youthful, outgoing, gregarious, fun-loving, and often rather 'girlishly' cute, yet avoids any suggestion of her sexual agency or availability' (p.139). Underlying this construction of 'modern' Thai womanhood is a much older tradition of the feminine, with its emphasis on grace, beauty, neatness and good manners; and it is these traditional features that nationalist sentiment accentuates in its presentation of the image of the Thai women, both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

I propose that because of women's reproductive role, the regulation of women's bodies and behaviours is an integral part of inscribing national identities. As reproducers of the race, women and the control of their sexuality are keys to the nationalist project. It is women's symbolic role as mothers and biological and cultural reproducers that is central to the discourses of national identity. The material effect of these roles is the control of women's sexuality, which is seen as central to maintaining national identity. Women's sexuality, therefore, can mark the very borders of the nation-state- that is- its purity, the purity of the nation; its impurity, the impurity of the nation. In the age of globalisation, the desire to site Thailand beyond the borders can be seen in the way Thai national collectivity is experienced and transmitted by transnational flows of commerce, capital, tourism, and mass media, In this process, women come to represent the nation culturally in that they come to represent the attractiveness and virtue of the people.

Even nowadays, little has changed in the areas of society's expectation and recognition of female identity. Gendered social value and ideal femininity are still problematic. Barmé (2002) points out the case of female identity in contemporary Thailand that it 'remains closely bound

up with the maintenance of virtue, not to mention the cultivation of physical beauty, an obsession that is endlessly reaffirmed through the beauty contests' (Barmé, 2002, p.254). In contemporary Thailand the construction of images of female beauty (gentleness, demureness, grace and composure) has occurred by means of beauty pageants, supported by the highest levels of the bureaucracy as well as the entertainment, advertising, and tourism industries. Thailand's international self-representations influence and are influenced by global process such as tourism, nationalism, and mass media (Van Esterik, 1996, p.203) and feminine beauty feature in the formal and informal export of images of Thailand to attract tourists and investment and to engender a favourable opinion of the country in the perceptions of foreigners (Reynolds, 1999, p.270). Some more questions left for further study should be related as to why it is women who are to carry such a significant symbolic load (Van Esterik, 2000, pp.108-109). If women are transmitters of culture and signifiers of Thai culture, how to interpret "Thailand" as a sign and what is its signified?

Interestingly, some contemporary women activists use the metaphor of the flowers of the nation as a point of resistance (Van Esterik, 2000,p.105) Chiranan Pitrpreecha, an acclaimed feminist poet wrote in her well-known poem '*Assertion of the Flowers*' (1989) that not only flowers are beautiful, but they also have thorns:

*The flower has sharp thorns
It must not bloom to await praises from others
Rather, it blooms to accumulate
Great fertility for the Earth*

(Translated by Wajuppa Tossa 1992)²

Behind the myth of "Flower of the Nation", it is questionable whether this flower lives up to the dignified image of representing the nation with pride, or whether it just "blooms to await praises from others."

² quoted in Van Esterik, 2000, p. 105

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