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# The Duty to Transform: Properly Refining the Body and (Re)defining Oneself in Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Current analyses of Asian cosmetic surgery and other beautification practices assess their use for economic gain (e.g., increasing chances of gaining employment when photos are required with applications) or improving one's luck (e.g., removing features that are likely to make one's life more difficult). However, my research in Thailand details broader concerns about being *riap-roi* (neat, orderly, completed and properly groomed). That is, rather than being merely "cosmetic", these transformations address broad moral concerns about face, expressing appropriate social status, and the management of social interactions. Additionally, these body practices are also increasingly keyed to Korean and Japanese beauty ideals. The desire to look "white Asian" seeks to mould the self and the Thai nation in the context of a newly regionalised and racialised developed East Asia.

## KEYWORDS

Beauty; cosmetic surgery; social status; face; gay men; Thailand; inter-Asia

## Introduction

The spectrum of beauty and body modification practices in Thailand is quite diverse, with various regional, religious and subcultural norms. Thailand is perhaps most famous in the international literature for its high-quality and relatively low-cost gender confirmation or sexual reassignment surgery (Aizura, 2009; 2010; Enteen, 2014), which, like the medical system in general, has "world class" hospital services targeting medical tourists from developed countries (Wilson, 2011) and local elites, and a wide network of public and private hospitals. It also offers legally licensed shophouse clinics for the general Thai populace (as well as medical tourists from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Asia and Africa), and a relatively underground and unregulated system of clinics, salons and folk practitioners catering to low-income Thais.

Current analyses of Asian cosmetic surgery and other beautification practices assess their use for economic gain such as increasing chances of gaining employment when photos are required with applications (Wen, 2013)<sup>1</sup> or improving features that are likely to make one's life more difficult, for example removing moles that are thought to negatively predict life opportunities and outcomes. While agentive, postcolonial critics often decry Asian "ethnic" practices such as skin lightening as unnatural and exemplary of racial false consciousness (Chaipraditkul, 2013). At the same time, Caucasian tanning,

or skin darkening, is generally immune to racial analyses even though it shares an underlying cultural logic of class distinction through consumption, leisure and beautification activities. What is different is the socio-cultural context in which whiteness and darkness are evaluated (Ashikari, 2005; Bashkow, 2006; Chen et al., 2017).

Thais are increasingly using body modification practices to look “white” but not Caucasian, or what Kang (2017) refers to as “white Asian” or light-skinned Asian from developed countries. This newly racialised “white Asian” is modelled on idealised notions of Northeast Asian aesthetics in contradistinction to Caucasianness. Miller (2006; 2020), Elfving-Hwang (2013; 2020) and Lee (2016) emphasise that Japanese and Korean cosmetic surgery is not a simple mimicry of Caucasian whiteness but an improvement on what are considered desirable ethno-national characteristics. Thai transformations to look white Asian are about desires for the self and Thai nation to be appropriately evaluated as middle class and to continue development along a Northeast Asian economic trajectory. In this article, I situate contemporary Thai beauty practices within local concepts of the self, appropriate social behaviour, and increasing Asian regionalisation and racialisation. The article is based on three years of long-term fieldwork (2009–2011); more than 300 interviews with gay men, trans women (*kathoey*), sex workers, and their Thai and foreign partners, friends and family; and discourse analysis of mass and new media (2006 to the present). It argues that bodily enhancements are not optional practices, but social responsibilities linked to the appropriate cultivation and presentation of the self that demonstrates actual and aspirational class status.<sup>2</sup>

### Inter-Asian Beauty Matters

Beauty is a key indicator of Thai cultural and embodied capital (Bourdieu, 1986). While my interactions were primarily focussed on gay men and *kathoey*, I assert that the patterns I describe are applicable to a broader metropolitan Thai public, especially of middle-class women. However, gay men and *kathoey* provide a sharper lens to examine beauty practices as they relate to broader social concerns around status and morality (van Esterik, 2000). Gender nonconforming individuals are often socially stained and develop double consciousness, or continual self-monitoring, which amplifies the desire for positive self-presentation. The pioneering gay activist Natee Teerarojjanapongs coined the expression “*kunla-gay*” in the 1990s to describe gay men who earn acceptance of their sexuality by upholding and fulfilling the values and obligations of their social position in family and society (see Jackson, 1995; 2016). Compared to ciswomen, *kathoey* have a reputation for their beauty being *woe* (extreme or incomparable; slang loanword from “over”; see Nguyen, 2018), as their femininity is often more self-consciously fashioned and performative. Both gay men and trans women place high significance on their self-transformation and its socio-moral expression.

I contextualise my analysis through extensive interactions with broad swaths of local and foreign individuals in Thailand. Here, I focus on a gay man who represents a “typical” set of beauty practices and another gay man who represents a relatively extreme case that illustrates the desire and extent to which self-presentation motivates body modification and behaviour. In the latter case, many individuals wanted comparable procedures, but the costs were out of financial reach. Importantly, these are both cases that I witnessed while in the field rather than being simply related to me in

conversations or interviews. While I use “Thai” in my descriptions, my observations are primarily limited to Bangkok and relatively developed areas with large tourist populations such as Chiang Mai, Pattaya, Phuket and Samui. My observations are often from red light districts, shopping malls, gay bars and beauty salons, locations that purvey or heighten the need for attractiveness. Furthermore, Bangkok has become the most internationally visited city in the world. Bangkok acts as a physical and cultural hub between Northeast and Southeast Asia. The city is diverse in terms of class, gender, nationality and other factors. Numerous interactions with foreigners complicate the gazes of public life and create spaces that prime an appealingly made-up face for the world.

Moreover, Thailand is being “Asianised” through an increasing influx of tourists and media from Northeast Asia (Jackson, 2011). Like the Vietnamese women Hoang (2015) studied, Thais are seeking to capitalise on “the rise of Asia” by following beauty ideals from Korea that are attractive to Asians. Kang (2017) draws on two contemporary Thai idioms *khon echia* (“Asian person”) and *khon khao* (“white person”), both of which refer to the same individuals, to conceptualise “white Asians” as light-skinned Asians who represent high “civilisational status”: national economic achievement and a beauty standard fashioned by the popularity of Korean and Japanese popular culture. Notably, *khon khao* does not refer to Caucasians, who are referred to as *farang*. Rather it refers to people, typically with Chinese, Korean or Japanese ancestry, who have light skin. The neologism *khon khao* became controversial because of a 2010–2011 Oishi Amino Plus Brightenn marketing campaign. In the advertisements, the ideal skin colour portrayed is “white with a touch of pink”. However, one set of promotions reading “Seats reserved for white people” (*khon khao*) placed over BTS Skytrain seats offended patrons who felt the signs were colourist (for an image of these advertisements, see Chaipraditkul, 2013).

Emerging about a decade earlier, *khon echia* (or *khon esia*) denotes a new racial grouping of East and Southeast Asians. The term “Asian” in the Thai context is an English loan word with a relatively short history as the Thai language only labelled racial groups that were not East or Southeast Asian. Thais have historically referred to their Asian neighbours in terms of ethno-national groups: e.g., Chinese, Cambodian, Burmese. South Asians and Middle Easterners as well as Muslims more broadly constitute the racial category of *khaek* (“visitor”). The use of “Asian” represents a new racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1986) that assumes Northeast and Southeast Asians constitute a single group with similar features. This follows on from the increasingly robust geopolitical category ASEAN (*asian*), the Association of South East Asian Nations. The integration of ASEAN states in its permutation of ASEAN +3 (China, Korea, Japan) roughly defines the geography of Asia as conceptualised by Thais. Jillana Enteen (2010) notes that in the early to mid-2000s Thai gay men started using the term “Asian” in reference to gay websites and tourists. Asian tourists are labelled “Asian” because that is what they are called by Western tourists. “Asian”, referring to people, only has very recent precedents.

When I officially began fieldwork in 2009, I asked a general open-ended question relating to romantic partner preferences in conversational social settings such as malls or bars: “What kind of person do you like?” (*khun chop khon baep nai*). Sex workers often first stated “good-hearted” (*jai di*), often referring to being “generous”. A common initial reply among middle-class gay men and heterosexual women, especially in multicultural settings, would go: “I like Asian people” (*chop khon echia*).<sup>3</sup> This was used as a statement of middle-class and cosmopolitan distinction, differentiating one from Thais who only

interacted with other Thais or *farang*, especially sex workers. However, the perception of who counted and was positively valued as Asian followed the economic development of nation states. If I followed up with a question such as, “So you like Burmese?” the answer would almost invariably be “no”. Thailand’s underdeveloped neighbours figured lowly in this new concept of Asia, as did the “uncivilised” hill tribe minorities within Thailand and the increasing flow of refugees from Myanmar. Hill tribes are “barbaric” in that they have not even developed their own nation states, at least in modern history. Thailand’s three northern neighbours, Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia, on the other hand, represent ethnic groups that were formerly glorious but have been unable to keep up with the times. These groups are relegated to the past, not the future. In this sense, “Asian” refers to the broader East Asian region but “white Asian” specifically delimits the racialised category of contemporary developed Asian nations (Northeast Asia) and their corresponding ethnic groups as a privileged subcategory.

I use “Korpanese” as shorthand for the hybridisation of Korea and Japan as an idealised Asian developmental trajectory. These two countries are often conflated and combined in Thai discourse and practice. For example, Korean music is ubiquitous in Japanese restaurants, the hosts may wear a combination of *kimono* and *hanbok*, the brand ambassadors are typically K-pop stars, and the menus incorporate Korean food and elements so that, for example, sushi comes with a side of kimchi. There is also the recent tendency to categorise and describe Japanese things as Korean, as the Korean Wave has dominated imported media so much that Japanese fairs held in Bangkok predominantly play K-pop music rather than J-pop or traditional Japanese music. The exception to this is pornography, where Japanese videos remain dominant, as porn is illegal in Korea (as it is in Thailand). Japanese popular culture practices such as *yaoi*, fictional stories of young men in love with other men, are also interpreted through a Korean lens. For example, in Thai K-pop *yaoi*, K-pop boy band members are made to look like they are in romantic relationships with each other. Within Thai contexts, queerness, racialisation and middle-class modernity are coming together in the construction of a new queer Asian “taste-continent”, or distinctively regional cultural identities and consumer tastes based on shared values and aesthetics derived from media and other cultural productions (Lim, 2008).

Having briefly described the contemporary regionalisation and racialisation of Asianness in Thailand, I will now describe Thai ideas around taking care of the self and especially being “finished” (*riap-roi*), in the dual senses of “perfect”, both completed and highly refined. I argue that body work is not merely a “cosmetic” matter, but an ongoing moral endeavour of proper presentation of the social self that allows for smooth social interaction as well as self-cultivation that improves social status. I develop a framework of Thai aesthetic expression, examine body modification cases, and conclude by relating them back to contemporary processes of Asian regionalism and racialisation that idealise Korpanese aesthetics.

### **“Taking Care” and “Being Finished”**

Thai society is based on the presentation of positive images of the self. Producing and maintaining a pleasing image in hierarchically sensitive public spaces (e.g., school, work, market) is of the utmost importance. The combination of the hierarchical nature of Thai

society and the high value placed on harmonious social interactions requires people to assess each other's relative status to provide the appropriate level of respect due (Mulder, 1996). These assessments of status can be contradictory – for example, having a younger boss – but in situations such as school, the ranking is relatively clear. However, without an institutional framework to structure relations, such as in commercial and leisure venues, social standing must be evaluated based on other status markers such as relative age and wealth. Westerners are often surprised and offended when, in small talk introductions, they are asked “personal” details such as their age and income. Ascertaining age, in particular, is essential to showing proper respect, socially and linguistically. In a purportedly ethnically homogenous nation, class is a key indicator of prestige. Higher status buys one respect, but comes with obligations, such as generosity towards those of lower status. Thais readily identify with class status, especially the impoverished (*khon-jon*) and the wealthy (*hai-so*). The labels for the poor and rich are terms of self-identity in everyday use, whereas the term for middle-class individuals (*chon-chan-klang*) is more academic. However, many people simply refer to themselves as ordinary or normal (*thammada*), implying that they are typical rather than extreme.

Appearances are critical to Thai notions of moral propriety (Mulder, 1997). Penny van Esterik (2000) thus suggests that social interactions are based on surfaces, appearance, face, mask and disguise. This personal expression acts as the object of interpersonal encounters. One's social position, regardless of its “actual” value, is thus interpreted through dress, language, manner and other factors that point to the presentation of what might as well be true. The judgement of appropriate action is not based on abstract notions of equality (i.e., everyone should be treated the same) or morality (e.g., good and evil), but rather on contextually specific circumstances and expectations (Jackson, 1995). This situation places a great deal of emphasis on the appealing presentation of self. Indeed, “beauty can override family connections, money or class, as well as other ascribed and achieved attributes of women, and to a lesser degree, men” (van Esterik, 2000, p. 129). Thus, the presentation of self materialises one's position in the status hierarchy and has real social effects.

At this point, I introduce a Thai idiom key to understanding social appearances and responsibilities: *du-lae*, meaning “to care for”. The term combines two words that both mean “to watch” or “examine closely”. Caring for is always relational. The practice of *du-lae* is epitomised by the mother–child relationship, in which a mother nurtures her children. It also extends to other older family members, teachers, spouses or other romantic partners, and friends. In a more indirect way, it can be used to refer to protecting society or the physical environment. Caring for requires ongoing work and, in some cases, reciprocal obligations – for example, taking care of friends and elderly parents who have taken care of you. Additionally, one is often reminded to take care of oneself and especially one's health as in the oft repeated entreaties *du-lae tua-eng duai na khrap* (take care of yourself) and *du-lae sukkhaphap kha* (take care of your health). This can also be rendered as a farewell greeting borrowed from English: “take care” (*thek khae*).

In Thai there is an implicit relationship between looking at or watching something (*du, lae*) and nurturing it (*du-lae*). Within the context of interpersonal relationships, caring for cultivates loving warmth (*khwam-op-un*), closeness and intimacy. It is also essential to the development of proper affects and manners (*marayat*). *Du-lae* also relates



to the idea of looking good (*du-di*), both in terms of being attractive and in dressing appropriately for the situation. These relationships between examination, care and propriety all converge on notions of face. They are manifested in being *riap-roi* (complete, in order; proper, polite, neat), which has a dual sense of being finished (e.g., having completed a transaction or signed a contract, having finished cleaning) and being well-mannered (e.g., children sitting still and being quiet in class, girls acting shy and prudish).<sup>4</sup> In the context of body practices, being *riap-roi* can index both having completed a procedure, like plastic surgery, or more typically, being polished in everyday routines of grooming. A respectable person would not leave the home without being *riap-roi*: for example, with unfinished make-up. A Thai woman does not apply cosmetics in public view. This is something reserved for private quarters.

Thais freely comment on others' bodies. Changes in skin colour, skin complexion, weight, grooming and style are public topics, particularly among women and femininely identified people. Every time I became slightly darker, my neighbour's mother would ask: "Where did you come back from? You are so black [*dam*]" . Women, trans women and gay men would also comment on the texture of my skin, especially to praise its increased clarity (*sai kheun*). Clear skin involves a number of qualities, including lack of blemishes or spots, small pores, smoothness, and a plump or moist texture associated with "dewy" Korean skin. By contrast, Caucasian skin is considered more marked, pocked, hairy and dry. I was constantly reminded about my weight, especially when there was concern: "You lost weight". This could be followed up by a question like: "Have you been ill?" or "Have you been taking ice [an illegal amphetamine popular with gay men and trans women]?" If the reply was negative, then praise often followed.

Beyond commenting, among intimates, there is an understanding that the body itself can be manipulated by others. The most obvious example of this is a mother primping her child. However, even among friends, this was a common practice, although the person doing the caring, in my experience, was either assigned female at birth (female-bodied) or feminine in demeanour.<sup>5</sup> One of my best friends, Wan, a trans woman, would routinely chastise me for not being *riap-roi*. I thought it better to be on time than perfectly groomed. She thought otherwise. For example, one day she had come over to my home before we were to go to a party together. When I stated that I was ready to go, she said that we had to wait. "Why," I asked? "Your hair is still wet," she replied. I did not own a hair dryer, but she insisted that my hair had to be dry before we left the house. I wondered if this was a health concern, as Thais often fear getting their heads wet as a precursor to illness. "No," she replied, "you are not ready yet, you are not *riap-roi*", meaning that I was not yet finished; I was not yet socially presentable.

Once out in public, it was common for others to manipulate my body. Among more femininely identified gay men, this was often a simple statement and fix: "your hair is not *riap-roi*" and then someone would move my hair into place. When the person intervening was a woman or a trans woman, there was typically an "excuse me" before my body was touched, for example, to straighten a collar. But the intervention was often more intimate. As someone not used to the heat and humidity of Bangkok, I often used prickly heat powder on my body from my neck to my waist. I simply applied it after showering and before putting on my shirt. As I typically do not button my shirts to the top, there was often a triangular area of skin covered in white powder that was exposed. I was surprised at how often one of my friends in approximately the same age cohort would say



“excuse me” and then use their hands or a handkerchief to blend the powder in. When I asked what the matter was, the reply was typically: “you are not *riap-roi* yet” (*yang mai riap-roi*). The use of such powders was quite common, though most of my friends preferred “modern” baby powder in plastic containers to the Snake brand in tins I was fond of. Regardless, I was repeatedly told that powder should not show. When I did see visible powder on others, they were generally either rural Thais or Burmese migrants, who sometimes also used *thanakha*, a yellowish paste made by pulverising wood with water applied to the face and dried to a powdery finish. Although none of my friends made the explicit connection, I came to believe that being *riap-roi* entailed not looking like these foils of urban middle-class modernity: Thai farmers and Burmese migrant workers. Their actions pointed to my duty to be *riap-roi*, to be well-groomed and polished in public, to express my appropriate status.

### **Moral Standards, Social Standing and Bodily Transformations**

The duty to be *riap-roi* is a moral obligation based on one’s status and position. This is a conditional state tied to context and what is expected to be the appropriate evaluation of one’s sense of social standing. No respectable mother would allow her children to go to school in a dirty or wrinkled uniform. Indeed, expenses such as transportation and uniform washing and pressing are often higher than the cost of food and supplies. Inability to afford these costs can end educational careers. Anyone who has the financial means to transform is expected to engage in the labour of self-care, to improve oneself. Transformation is not simply a choice but an expectation, like proper daily grooming before presenting oneself in public. This could entail a simple behaviour such as ironing one’s clothes. At the other end of the spectrum, it could be as complicated as changing one’s sex. The latter was perhaps more common than expected. One day when I went to the Pratumam Polyclinic, a clinic famous for gender confirmation surgery, to support Wan getting new breast implants, I encountered another friend undergoing the same procedure on the same day. For both of my friends, bigger breasts were not an option, but an obligation to exemplify their femininity. Having breasts mattered, both as a self-expression of womanhood and as a social expression of femininity performed for others. Trans women were repeatedly encouraged by their peers to engage in gender and cosmetic surgeries, especially breast implants. Breasts are the definitive public manifestation of visual femaleness, while bottom surgery (vaginoplasty) is a personal matter, considered not a topic of polite public conversation, but of gossip. Routine discussion of surgeries among peers develops a sense of need to have them.

As a foreigner, I was given more leeway than Thais in regard to social norms. For example, when teaching at Mahidol University, I was told that male professors were not allowed to wear earrings, which I did, but that no one would challenge me as a foreigner. But I was not immune to the peer pressure to enhance and modify my body. Thais often questioned my Koreanness, assuming all Koreans have work done to have a “Gangnam”-shape face and perfect skin. Koreanness was not an essentially privileged category that was satisfactory on its own; it also required cultivation to “look Korean”. Over time, I dyed my hair and modified my dress to meet Thai expectations of a “real” Korean, which were based on pop music and television drama imagery. The greatest imperative, however, was to improve my skin, by lightening and clarifying it, as in many other parts of the world (Glenn, 2008; Leong, 2006; Rondilla &

Spickard, 2007). I was repeatedly chastised for using bar soap on my face (as opposed to a liquid or foam facial cleanser) and not using enough sunscreen or Korean BB cream. Friends routinely diagnosed me as having splotchy skin. I countered that I had freckles. That did not matter. Numerous friends reiterated the same drill: “You know you can take care of that? Why don’t you take care of that? You have the money. I don’t understand why you don’t just take care of that”. Not following through was akin to laziness or misbehaviour. Beauty is an expected labour of self-care for those who can afford it.

I was confronted with this obligation so often that I became self-conscious. I went to several clinics to investigate the process and cost of removing the dark spots from my face. In summary, the procedure would take approximately three months and \$1,000 to \$1,200 at an established, reputable clinic, and would involve three laser treatments to remove any facial discoloration, spaced a month apart with intermittent conditioning treatments to ensure proper healing and enhance the skin quality. A low-cost procedure at a beauty stall in a mall could remove each spot for approximately \$1.50, with no follow up, by cauterising it.<sup>6</sup> I decided against the laser procedures but did pay for a micro-Botox treatment to reduce the size of my pores and reduce acne. Rather than an injection of Botox in specific locations, the needle is scraped against the skin in parallel lines to cover the entire face (I could not see the difference). I also paid for a professional assessment of my skin health, including a laser scan that displayed my dermis on a monitor for the dermatologist to examine. According to the dermatologist, who pointed to blockages, I needed professional treatment to improve my capillary blood flow. I declined. Thais can be quite obsessive about skin, as it is an indicator of both physical health and social status.

I did modify my behaviour in other ways. I became a habitual shadow walker. Basically, I followed Thais, who avoided the sun. When walking in the *sois* (alleyways), I walked on the same shaded side as most women. I followed the contours of shadows provided by buildings, trucks and large trees on the street. I learned to wait for street-lights by standing behind utility poles that provided cover. Sometimes, a long line would form there. I sat on the darker side of the bus. I sometimes held up papers and books to block my face from the sun. These were considered appropriate measures to prevent UV exposure. Other practices were less common. I only saw old women and female Japanese expats using umbrellas. Large-rimmed hats and non-Muslim head coverings were worn mostly by rural Thais and mainland Chinese tourists, but these disparaged practices point to low-class standing in Bangkok.

Class differences were articulated along lines of obvious artificiality. Many Thais used a heavy foundation or powder several tones lighter than their skin, which looked like a mask, especially when the colour was visible at the neckline and the product cast a glow in interior lighting and camera flashes. This was a common but contested practice. Thais often commented on others’ ostentatious use of such make-up, which came off as unrefined compared to blending BB cream down the neck for a more naturalistic style. Wan showed me her technique. She used a Korean BB cream, blended in with a sponge. Then she tapped the sponge into white talcum powder and blended that on top. This made her face whiter but provided a matte finish that did not stand out. At the same time, practices such as the wearing of fake braces with neon rubber bands display flamboyant artifice, which at least demonstrates effort in beautification.

Ostentatious practices have parallels elsewhere. Taiwanese bridal photography, for instance, openly celebrates artifice and rejects claims to natural beauty (Adrian, 2003). Adrian notes that the construction of beauty (dress, hair, make-up etc.) for the photo shoot is itself a lived experience that is meaningful. What is important is the labour and hardship involved in producing glamour rather than an accurate representation of the self. Indeed, the photographs are extensively retouched to create a flawless image. Adrian also argues that rather than instilling a sense of inadequacy among ordinary women, the photo session provides a means of agency through artifice: its obvious artificiality makes clear to viewers that beauty requires extensive resources of time and money that are not routine or relevant to everyday life. Bridal photos memorialise a singular achievement of beauty and remind women of its spectacular illusoriness. There is agency in artifice as an achievement, even if it is not typical of everyday practices. The effort shows care.

Most feminine gay men and nearly all the trans women I knew who could afford it seemed to have a dermatologist, a stereotypically gay profession. Besides dealing with problem skin such as acne or pock marks, practices to lighten and even skin tone and reduce pore size were popular. One day, while having lunch with a dermatologist who worked at a public hospital rather than a private clinic, I asked what moisturiser he recommended I use to prevent wrinkles. He replied:

This is Thailand. It's a tropical country. You don't need to use a moisturiser. The air is humid enough. But you should always use sunscreen. You need to use sunscreen to stay white even when you are indoors, because the UV still gets inside and reflects off surfaces.

The directive was clear – I needed to be diligent about maintaining my fairness even more than my youthfulness. This was an imperative of disciplinary self-care linked to upright social standing and ongoing self-improvement: an open-ended programme to appropriately monitor and transform the self as a moral endeavour (Foucault, 1988; Leem, 2016).

### **Discipline through Commentary**

Thais generally do not consider it appropriate to publicly express negative inner states such as disappointment or unhappiness, and this prohibition increases with feminine gender and class standing such that “well-mannered” women are least likely to openly express negative emotions. The many meanings of Thai smiles are perhaps an exemplar of this affect management. At the same time, wealthy women are the most likely to describe and comment upon the physical manifestations of others, especially those with whom they are intimate. Statements about skin colour darkening (negative, but possibly showing signs of positive leisure such as going to the beach) and weight loss (attempts at body modification – positive, vs illness – negative) are particularly common. Yet anything visible in public, such as a pimple or a cheap-looking imitation Louis Vuitton bag, is open to critique. Like the stare (see Garland-Thomson, 2009), this commentary disciplines those who are subjects of the observation when it is heard, but more directly models ideals to the other spectators and interlocuters. Here, I describe a case that points to the importance of appropriate transformations and questions the legitimacy of the provider and one's class position. This demonstrates how the moral endeavour of being *riap-roi* is about not just action, but correct class action.

## Case: Oat

My partner Jackie was visiting me in Bangkok and wanted to get away to the beach. I did not have much time, so we went with two Thai friends, Mark and Dew, to a relatively close island popular with gay men, Koh Samet. On the island, which is mostly a national park and thus relatively pristine, the Tub Tim beach caters to gay men, with nightlife centred around the bar at the Silver Sands hotel. On our first night there, we walked with our friends along the beach, which is strewn with seafood restaurants on the sand that shrink in size as the tide rises. Within minutes of starting our walk, we ran into another Thai friend of mine from Bangkok, Oat, who had come for the weekend with his new Thai boyfriend, having broken up with his older Caucasian Australian boyfriend. We all went to a restaurant together, sitting around a low table on big cushions in the sand.

During the dinner, Oat, a hair stylist, mentioned that there were many changes in his life. He had a new boyfriend. He had moved up from a salon catering to *farang* where he was working in the popular, low-end mall, MBK, to a Japanese salon at the notably grander Central World mall. Oat then asked me if I noticed anything different about him. I replied that he looked thinner and that his nose looked smaller. Oat giggled with glee. “Yes!,” he shrieked. “I’ve lost seven kilos and I did my nose”. He whipped out his phone and showed me a series of photos of how he had looked when I had seen him last. “Fat, fat, fat,” he decried. Then he held the pictures of his face up to his new nose so that we could make a comparison – “big, big, big”. He was obviously proud of himself, his recent changes. “Do I look better?,” he asked. We all nodded and agreed.

Jackie immediately asked: “How did you lose the weight? Have you been going to the gym?” Oat replied that he was simply eating less. Then Dew asked: “Where did you get your nose done?” Oat replied that he had got a really good deal at a small clinic. “I only paid 5,000 Baht [approximately \$160]!” Dew sarcastically asked: “Was that a real doctor? You might have problems later”. Oat did not reply and excused himself to go to the restroom. A minute later, his boyfriend got a call from Oat. Saying that Oat was not feeling well, he gave us some money for their part of the bill and excused himself as well. Then Oat called me a few minutes later: “Big brother Dech, I’m so sorry, but I had to leave. Your friend, he is so rude. I felt so ashamed. I had to leave”. I told Oat not to worry, it didn’t matter. Dew had a reputation for being catty and acting *hai-so* (high society).

The tension in this interaction contrasted Oat’s pride in improving himself with the status devaluation he suffered from Dew’s snide remark, which dismissed the quality of that transformation. By questioning the credentials of the person who had performed the rhinoplasty, Dew was also questioning the outcome of the operation and the possibility of later problems that were not immediately visible. Dew’s remark also challenged Oat’s class standing. This was a blow to Oat’s social presentation of self. At the same time, Oat had lost weight on his own, and felt this was significant in contributing to his new attractiveness.

Within the year, Oat broke up with his Thai boyfriend and began to simultaneously long-distance date a Japanese man and a Taiwanese man. The Japanese boyfriend paid for another rhinoplasty, from a more reputable clinic. Oat’s nose became even thinner. When I met him at a club in Bangkok the next summer, he introduced me and Jackie to his Taiwanese boyfriend. Oat asked: “He’s cute like a Korean, isn’t he?” I replied: “He looks more Korean than me”. My partner agreed. Oat’s Taiwanese boyfriend looked like

a K-pop star. His mid-length hair perfectly swooshed around his head and his tight black jeans and jacket looked svelte. Oat was trying to achieve that look through weight loss, cosmetic surgery, and hair and clothing choices.

When his Taiwanese boyfriend had gone to the restroom, Oat pulled out a credit card given to him by his Japanese boyfriend to show me. He then said he had stopped working in the Japanese salon, as he was receiving enough support from his new companions. When I initially met Oat, four years prior, he showed me the ATM card he had been given by his then white Australian boyfriend, who provided Oat with a monthly allowance that covered his rent in a small condominium unit. But from Oat's perspective, he had moved up in the world. This was most evident in the attractiveness of his partners and himself as well as his consumerism. Oat proudly showed his before-and-after photos on his phone. He no longer had to work and regularly purchased luxury goods such as Louis Vuitton bags and SK-II cosmetics, with every new acquisition posted on Facebook. There was pride in the transformations: both physical in terms of his body and face, and metaphorical in his new relationships with his Asian patrons. For Thais like Oat, having "white Asian" partners is a signifier of status; at the same time, it does not attract the untoward attention Caucasian partners could (Kang, 2017). Both his physical transformation and his Asian partners signified Oat's success at self-improvement and increased social standing. Regardless of his actual income or professional status, his beautification and consumption practices were deployed to situate him as an upright, middle-class urbanite.

### Case: Kei

Kei's case more clearly links bodily modifications and consumption practices to class distinction. Kei was the best friend of one of my neighbours, Korn, who ran a shake shop around the corner from my apartment. Korn's sister operated a nearby boat noodle shop, where Kei would sometimes hang out. At the time, Kei was a 22-year-old college student. He lived with his mother, grandmother and sister in a four-storey townhouse. The first floor operated as a shop selling cosmetics and beauty pharmaceuticals, staffed primarily by his grandmother, though Kei sometimes helped.

Kei's sister was a cosmetic surgeon and operated her own clinic. This gave him free access to products and procedures beyond the means of a typical middle-class individual. Kei had had a nose job, a relatively common procedure among middle-class gay men his age. The procedure reduced the size of his nostrils and raised the tip of his nose. Kei had also had the much less common chin shave, which removes bone from the jaws to produce a more "V" shape to the face. This is a highly desired procedure among femininely identified people who follow Korean beauty aesthetics. The procedure is both relatively expensive (approximately \$10,000 in Korea) and dangerous.

Every few months, Kei had Botox injections that lifted and shaped his eyebrows into a more defined arch. He also wore "big eye" contact lenses, coloured contacts with large irises that make the pupils appear larger. The combined effect is supposed to "brighten" his appearance, making his eyes look more alert and youthful, not to make him look Caucasian. Indeed, Kei had considered making his eyes smaller (*ta-lek*), like Northeast Asian eyes, as he believed that Thais already have large eyes (*ta-to*) like Caucasians. But he did not know if this surgery was possible (it is). This is in direct contrast with Asian

American motivations for blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery) in the US, which has been interpreted as a medicalisation and assimilation of racial difference to approximate Caucasian beauty standards founded on wide eyes and folded eyelids (Kaw, 1993). Here, like skin whitening and tanning, opposing eye alterations have the same desired effect – enhancing status within the cultural context.

Kei's skin was also very pale. Kei whitened his appearance through glutathione and vitamin C injections. His sister injected one glutathione ampule for him every week. Glutathione is an amino acid that acts as a melanin inhibitor, which lightens the skin by preventing the formation of melanin, or dark pigmentation, in the skin. It is also the active ingredient in skin lightening beverages, soaps and pill supplements that are readily available in Thailand. Vitamin C is simultaneously injected to improve the results. Thais who use glutathione typically inject one ampule a month, costing 1,000 Baht (about \$33) at cosmetic surgery and dermatology clinics or 300 Baht (about \$10) in beauty salons and during home visits from paraprofessionals. However, Kei had increased the dosage to enhance the results. He showed me earlier photos of himself on his cell phone and childhood photos from a photo album to point out his transformations: dark to light skin, fat to thin body, masculine to feminine features.

The most important changes for Kei were going from “tan” to “white” and the weight loss from “fat” to “normal”. Kei appeared to be of average weight, although the skin around his abdomen had a loose quality to it, as if there was too much of it in comparison to his body, having lost 30 kilograms. He had tried various supplement pills that were designed for weight loss but attributed his achievement to simple discipline. He said he only ate one meal a day – lunch. For that meal, Kei ate whatever he wanted, so he did not feel deprived. He also bought snacks, although he did not necessarily consume them. Once, when we were walking around the neighbourhood, he bought three pieces of sushi. The *nigiri* (typically a thin slice of raw seafood on moulded vinegar rice) was placed in a clear plastic box about the size of two decks of cards, and then placed in a proportionally small clear plastic bag. The bright orange of the salmon and fish eggs, and the pink of the shrimp, were eye-catching. I asked Kei what his favourites were. He replied that he did not like sushi, but had bought it to carry around, more like an accessory (at outdoor street stalls, a piece sells for approximately 5 to 10 Baht, or between 15 and 30 US cents). For many middle-class Thais, Japanese food, and especially sushi (Japan is colloquially referred to as “sushi-land”), represents contemporary cosmopolitan tastes. Indeed, in large shopping malls, Japanese restaurants owned and operated by Thai companies outnumber all other national cuisines combined, including Thai restaurants (not counting food stalls). While we walked around, Kei never ate the sushi; he just carried it in his right hand, and eventually threw it away.

Another time, when I met Kei at the upscale Paragon mall in central Bangkok, he bought a cup of Starbucks coffee and carried it in his right hand while we walked around.<sup>7</sup> I noticed that he was not drinking the coffee and asked how it was. Kei stated: “I don't like the taste of coffee, too bitter. But when you are strolling at the mall, you should have coffee in your hand”. Kei tilted his hand to show me how he was holding the cup. “And you should carry it so that the Starbucks logo shows in front.” Starbucks, of course, is relatively expensive and also has high brand recognition compared to Thai establishments. This reminded me of Thai gay bar etiquette.<sup>8</sup> I often ran into Kei and Korn together at bars in the Ortorkor (the poshest traditional market for Thai agricultural



products) and Silom Soi 2 (the financial district) areas. In these spaces, one should always have a glass in hand, and in Thai-style bars such as those at Ortorkor, what one is drinking is displayed via table bottle service, typically of whisky. The label on the bottle (usually 100 Pipers or Johnny Walker Red or Black) is thus an important object of display. Green bottles of Heineken beer, clear Smirnoff mixers, and other individual drinks are considered *déclassé* and associated with *farang* tourists. The performance of social standing via consumption and beautification were of utmost importance to Kei.

Over his several years in college, Kei had transformed his appearance. He had gone from medium to light complexion, from over to average weight, and had refined his facial features. Overall, the changes produced both a more feminine and a higher-class appearance. For Kei, what was important was that he looked better to himself and thought that others found him more attractive as well. He had improved himself and continued working to maintain the changes. Kei also did not feel that his transformations were unusual. He noted that his best friend Korn used to dress as a girl. But after transferring to a high school that did not allow cross-dressing, Korn reverted to being a boy and has since lived as a gay man. Kei believed his bodily alterations were less drastic in comparison. But in both cases, social pressures moulded the direction of modification.

Beauty is a consumption practice that demonstrates class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Kei, for instance, was quite proud of his transformation, and openly discussed the subject. There is no shame in altering one's body. There is no dishonour in having a cosmetic procedure, unless it is botched and makes one look worse. Indeed, rather than superficiality, beautification demonstrates diligent effort at self-cultivation. That is, modification both points to one's wealth in the ability to afford beauty and demonstrates a morally upright commitment to ongoing self-improvement. The cosmopolitan characteristics Kei idealised are increasingly distant from the foil of the Thai farmer and rural Isan (Northeastern Thailand, the poorest region of the country) aesthetics, especially in terms of dark skin and rugged masculinity. Kei presented himself holding a bag of sushi rather than one of fried mealworms, crickets or water bugs.

In this vein, beauty work is not hidden from view, but rather highlighted (see Gimlin, 2002; Miller, 2006). It is quite common for Thais to show others "before-and-after" photos of themselves. The most dramatic pics posted on social media sites are of transgender transformations, from male to female, and less commonly, from female to male. Unlike the historical American model of prior sex disavowal (e.g., misgendering, "dead naming"), Thais generally display no humiliation in revealing photos of themselves as another gender.<sup>9</sup> While dramatic photos are sometimes juxtaposed to contrast amazing transformations or create a timeline of changes, most commonly women and gay men post selfies of routine beauty practices for friends and followers on social media sites. The most common of these photos are of spa skin treatments or Korean masks, although photos of rhinoplasty (bandages) and other procedures also feature.<sup>10</sup> Friends and followers respond by commenting on the luxuriousness of the practice or praising the outcomes. Other forms of routine body modification, such as muscle development from a gym regimen, are also diligently posted. These also reference class standing, as they locate the poster in well-appointed private gyms and locker rooms, sometimes with their attractive personal trainers, rather than in places such as public parks or "local" exercise spaces. Beauty practices thus have a dual role of representing one's status during social interactions and increasing the level of class distinction necessary to demonstrate



ongoing self-care and cultivation. As Terence Turner (1980) emphasises, body adornment not only functions to distinguish a boundary between an individual and others, but also serves to classify the status of the individual within social hierarchies. I now turn to new style hierarchies as they have been influenced by Asian regionalism and the growing Asianisation of Thailand (see Jackson, 2011).

### Local, International and Asian Tattoo Hierarchies

Thais do not see themselves as “behind” the rest of the world, but do use belatedness as a tactic of discipline and shaming – for example, not being up to date (*than-samai*) in fashion. As in other parts of the world, Western brands, media and commodities are ubiquitous and constitute a new norm of global style. Though creolised through a distinctly Thai aesthetics, “international” style is recognisable to the West as a version of it. In this system of commodities, going beyond normal often means investing in goods from the top European luxury brands such as Dolce & Gabbana and Prada, or participating in subcultural styles. Indeed, Thailand is known for its prolific subcultural tribes or stylistic trends among young adults (see Cornwel-Smith, 2020). Everything from the *dek-waen* (motorcycle racers), “indie” rocker, or cholo (Mexican-American gang) style, to *sao-wai* and *ting* (girls obsessed with *yaoi* and K-pop groupies) can be seen. But since the 1990s, increasing emphasis has been placed on following Japanese trends such as *anime*, cosplay and *kawaii* (cuteness). Since the 2000s, the frame of reference has shifted to Korea so that cultural products often originating in Japan become repackaged as “K-” through the Korean Wave. Now, looking beyond ordinary often specifically references Korpanese aesthetics. A new style hierarchy has emerged in which “local” or “Thai” styles are deemed behind the times, “inter” (international or Western) styles are considered common, and “Asian” styles have become *au courant* (see also Sinnott, 2012).

Among Thai gay men, it is almost expected that one has a tattoo, and the kind of tattoo makes a class statement. Thai *sak-yan* (religious or magical tattoos), although currently undergoing a revival in Thailand, are generally considered *déclassé*, associated with older and rural men. This is especially true when the body is literally covered in symbolic figures such as tigers, monkeys, temple motifs, cosmological designs and religious text. I complimented a friend on his *prang-kaoyot* (nine stupa pinnacles) tattoo, which went across the top of his back and onto the back of his neck, with a small portion of peaks that was visible when he wore a t-shirt but invisible if he wore a collared shirt. In a sad tone, he replied that his friends teased him about it because it was *choei* (outdated). The exception to this is the “modern” *ha-thaeo* (five lines), or a tattoo on the shoulder blade of five small and tightly composed lines of ancient Khmer text, a Buddhist Pali incantation that functions as a protective amulet. This tattoo was popularised by Angelina Jolie after she adopted her Cambodian son Maddox and received the *ha-thaeo* from Ajarn Noo, the most famous practitioner of *sak-yan*. Outside Buddhist orthodoxy, these tattoos are commonly sought as a talisman for protection from harm in exchange for a behavioural sacrifice such as refraining from eating beef or lying. Thus, *sak-yan* is associated with a superstitious (and hence unmodern) working class in urban Bangkok. These tattoos are considered backward, their bearers either undesirable or desirable precisely for those who eroticise a rugged working-class masculinity.

More common among middle-class gay men is a “tribal” tattoo, typically derived from Polynesian designs or simple, monochromatic patterns. These tattoos, which have been popular in the West and among gay men in East Asia following Euro-American trends, have become the globalised norm. What has become “hot” are so-called “Japanese” tattoos. As in the US, “Japanese” tattoos are a locally imagined form that takes inspiration from the vivid colours and orientalist motifs of dragons, carp, cherry blossoms and other Japanese symbols (Honma, 2011). Ironically, while Japanese tattoos have become popular among middle-class gay men in Thailand, they continue to have strong associations with criminality and degeneracy in Japan and to a lesser extent Korea. Thus, the practice of “Japanese” tattooing in Thailand is associated with Japanese stylistic forms that do not actually exist or have a drastically different symbolic association in Japan. Tattoos are especially popular among muscular men, and the designs often highlight the musculature of their chest and arms. Among middle-class Thai men, Japanese-style tattoos are currently considered the most fashionable; indeed, they are more desirable than the now-commonplace Polynesian tattoos.

Male sex workers in gay bar venues, whether they themselves are gay or not, also fit within this classed schema of tattooing. “Bad boy” types are more likely to be thin “a go-go” dancers and “coyote boys” sporting *sak-yan* (the spiritual tattoos mentioned above) and spiky “Korean” hairstyles that actually look more like the hairstyles of Dragon Ball *manga* characters. Higher-end “models” are almost always light skinned and muscular, and have tribal or Japanese style tattoos and short hair. That is, class interests in distinction making shape the styles of both gay men and male sex workers through practices of body modification, tattooing and grooming. In contemporary Thailand, going beyond the everyday norm means adopting new styles associated with Northeast Asia.

## Conclusion

Beauty is a locally evaluated achievement within regional and global contexts. The technical sophistication of cosmetic and medical procedures, at a relatively low price, has made Thailand a centre for medical tourism (Wilson, 2011). Trans women from wealthy countries often feel that they will be more feminine and beautiful if they have gender confirmation surgery in Thailand (Aizura, 2009; 2018). Koreans can achieve a Gangnam face at Yanhee Hospital cost. Yet contemporary Thai beauty ideals often point elsewhere, strongly keyed to newly imagined Korean and Japanese ideals that are racially similar but distinctive because of their high economic standing in the world.

Thai concerns about being *riap-roi* (neat, orderly, completed, and in reference to appearance, properly groomed) currently align with “white Asian” aesthetics (Kang, 2017). Academics have often simplistically misinterpreted skin lightening and other cosmetic procedures in non-Caucasian peoples as a desire to alter race (Chaipraditkul, 2013) rather than to enhance youthfulness, class status and social mobility (Miller, 2006; Wen, 2013). Miller (2006; 2020), Elfving-Hwang (2013; 2020) and Lee (2016) emphasise that Japanese and Korean cosmetic surgery is not simply Caucasian mimicry but an enhancement of desirable “national” characteristics. Contemporary Thai aspiration, however, has expanded beyond normalisation and

conformity to Sino–Thai and *luk-khreung* (biracial) ethno-national ideals toward Korpanese aesthetics. When Thais post YouTube tutorials about the use of Korean cosmetics, they literally recreate Thai faces as Korean ones. The yearning is to be noticeable without standing out too much, to lighten and brighten without changing race. These features point to a desire for the self and Thai nation to develop along a Northeast Asian developmental trajectory.

Beauty work is affective labour that improves one’s social standing and life chances by moulding social interactions to one’s benefit. Intersectional analyses, which simultaneously account for nation, class, race, gender and sexuality, highlight the aspiration to embody white Asianness and intimately tie local social interactions with salient political, economic and cultural regionalist movements. The duty to transform encompasses everyday practices of grooming, bodybuilding and hormone use; intermittent practices of chemical peels, glutathione injections or Botox treatments; occasional procedures such as tattooing or laser treatments; and typically one-time procedures such as rhinoplasty, breast implants and the spectacular transformations in gender reassignment surgery for which Thailand is renowned internationally. Middle-class Thais use body modifications to reduce class anxiety and shore up status in an ongoing project of self-making and social positioning. These bodily transformations address broader moral concerns about face, harmonious social interaction, distinction-making, and expressing beauty appropriate to one’s social status. Thus, bodily enhancements are not merely “cosmetic”, but a social responsibility tied to the ongoing cultivation and appropriate presentation of the self as a cosmopolitan subject.

## Notes

1. Attractiveness has also been shown to be related to employment outcomes in the US (Hosoda et al., 2003), as have other factors such as race and gender.
2. The author is a Korean queer male educated in the US.
3. Heterosexual men were less direct about ethnicity, but often stated that they thought Korean women were the most beautiful. Trans women and lesbians (*tom-dee*) were less likely to refer to ethnic differences, although the former preferred foreigners while the latter assumed their partners would be local Thais.
4. A related slang word is *fin*, from the English “finished”. The term can be used in many contexts – for example, when trans women have vaginoplasty and consider themselves “complete” women.
5. Sinnott (2004) describes *toms*, masculine women attracted to gender-normative women, as having to take care of their partners financially, emotionally and sexually. Sinnott likens this to “service”, or the care work generally expected of women.
6. There are many parallels here to Korean practices. I was familiar with the mole cauterisation equipment as my parents had bought a device in Seoul. I once watched my father remove spots from his cheek. The smell of burning flesh did not entice me to participate. My father also applies extra-strength Hydrocortisone, which is *yak* (“medicine”) not *hwajangpum* (“cosmetic”), to lighten the skin on his face. My mother only uses the “fair” (lightest) colour of foundation and wears wide-brimmed hats. My sister invests in high-end lightening cosmetics. Korean friends often have laser treatments with annual touch-ups to remove skin discoloration. However, Thais seemed more obsessive about whiteness.

7. This mall is likely named after Paragon on Orchard Road, Singapore's most famous shopping street.
8. Gay bars are a distinctly middle-class phenomenon. Poor LGBT+ people go to Thai bars. High-end bars tend to be mixed.
9. Buddhists will often say that every individual has already been every gender in a past life.
10. Skin lightening procedures are often difficult to represent online, as the lightening of photos is common and apps that "enhance" or "beautify" face pics tend to automatically lighten the skin.

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