

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick**

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/151127>

**Copyright and reuse:**

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it.

Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)

Performing Happiness in Neoliberal Thailand:  
Performances of happiness in everyday life in Bangkok

By

Rubkwan Thammaboosadee

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre Studies

University of Warwick, School of Theatre & Performance Studies and  
Cultural & Media Policy Studies

August 2019

## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Table of Contents .....  | 2   |
| List of Figures .....  | 3   |
| Acknowledgments.....   | 5   |
| Declaration .....  | 6   |
| Abstract.....  | 7   |
| Chapter One: Introduction .....  | 9   |
| The Place of Research.....   | 22  |
| Research Methods.....  | 26  |
| Organisation of the Thesis .....   | 34  |
| Chapter Two: Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Thailand.....                                  | 37  |
| Neoliberalism: History, Ideology, and Practice.....                                      | 40  |
| Neoliberalism in Thailand .....  | 50  |
| Welfare Benefits in Neoliberal Thailand.....   | 52  |
| Buddhism and Neoliberalism in Thailand.....  | 59  |
| Sufficiency Economy and Neoliberal Thailand.....   | 67  |
| Chapter Three: Neoliberal Happiness and Performing Happiness in Neoliberal Thailand..... | 76  |
| Happiness and Neoliberal Happiness.....  | 79  |
| Performance of Happiness in Neoliberal Thailand .....                                    | 89  |
| The Land of Smiles.....  | 91  |
| ‘Our Ways of Unique Happiness’: Happiness Promoted in Tourism Campaigns.....             | 96  |
| Political Campaigns ‘Returning Happiness to Thailand’.....                               | 105 |
| Chapter Four: Performing Happiness during Bangkok Working Days .....                     | 128 |
| Neoliberal Bangkok: The City of Angels.....  | 137 |
| A Happy Day, a Happy Life: Routes to Happiness Promoted on a Commuter Train.....         | 141 |
| Happy Hours in Ari’s Lunch Break.....  | 154 |
| Chapter Five: Performing Happiness in Bangkok Shopping Malls.....                        | 173 |
| Consumption as an Escape and Reward.....   | 179 |
| Consumption and Performing Happiness.....  | 182 |
| Bangkok Shopping Malls: A Heart of Entrepreneurial Life.....                             | 184 |
| Happy Friday at Siam Square.....   | 193 |
| Buying Happiness in a Beauty Store.....  | 212 |
| Happy Meals: Eating is a Big Deal, Problems are Trivial .....                            | 220 |
| Chapter Six: Performing Happiness on Social Media.....                                   | 230 |
| Social Media and the Neoliberal Context.....   | 234 |
| Social Media and Neoliberal Thailand.....  | 238 |
| Taking Photos Before a Meal = Grace Before Meals .....                                   | 244 |
| Conclusion.....  | 258 |
| Bibliography.....  | 263 |

## List of Figures

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Figure 1. ‘When We Don’t Have Enough We Give’ (2014).....  | 100 |
| Figure 2. ‘The More Tired We Get, The Louder We Sing 1’ (2014).....                              | 100 |
| Figure 3. ‘The More Tired We Get, The Louder We Sing 2’ (2014).....                              | 101 |
| Figure 4. ‘When We Are Shy We Smile’ (2014).....   | 101 |
| Figure 5. The Redshirts Protestors before the Protest Clampdown (2010).....                      | 111 |
| Figure 6. The Big Cleaning Day Event after the Protest Clampdown (2010).....                     | 111 |
| Figure 7. Government Supporters & the Bangkok Governor (2010).....                               | 112 |
| Figure 8. The main PDRC leader gave flowers to one of the military leaders (2014).....           | 116 |
| Figure 9.1. Soldiers dancing as a part of the Returning Happiness event (2014).....              | 117 |
| Figure 9.2. Military Supporters at the Returning Happiness Event (2014).....                     | 117 |
| Figure 10. Celebrities singing the song Wish Happiness is Returned (2010).....                   | 121 |
| Figure 11. A Soldier in the Music Video ‘Happiness Returns to Thailand’ (2014).....              | 123 |
| Figure 12. The PM on ‘Returning Happiness to the People in the Nation’ (2014).....               | 125 |
| Figure 13. A shot from Citizen Dog (2004).....   | 128 |
| Figure 14. Bangkok Skytrain Map: Arrowed at Bang Wa and Ari Station (2017).....                  | 144 |
| Figure 15. Passengers at Bang Wa Station (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....                  | 145 |
| Figure 16. The Main Road in Ari Alleys (Taken by the author, 03/05/17).....                      | 157 |
| Figure 17. The Walking Route in Ari from the Red to Green Spot.....                              | 158 |
| Figure 18. Pavements in Ari Alley Filled with Food Stalls (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)..... | 159 |
| Figure 19. Packed Market During Lunchtime (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....                 | 160 |
| Figure 20.1 - 20.2. Damaged Pavements in Ari Alleys (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....       | 161 |
| Figure 21.1. Seating at a Foot Stall (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....                      | 163 |
| Figure 21.2. The Meal at The Food Stall (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....                   | 163 |
| Figure 22. Street Food Stalls in Silom Area (Taken by the author, 04/05/2017).....               | 164 |
| Figure 23.1 - 23.2. Workers Shopping and Dining in Ari (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....    | 166 |
| Figure 24.1. An Outdoor Market in Ari District (left) (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....     | 168 |
| Figure 24.2. An Outdoor Market in Silom District (right) (Taken by the author, 04/05/2017).....  | 168 |
| Figure 25. Iced Green Tea Latte in a Cafe in Ari (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017).....          | 171 |
| Figure 26. Siam Paragon, Bangkok (Taken by -Z-Penguin, 28/12/2010).....                          | 173 |
| Figure 27.1 - 27.2. Beauty Zone in Central Plaza Pinklao (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....  | 188 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Figure 28.1 - 28.2. Education Zone in Central Plaza Pinklao (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....        | 188 |
| Figure 29.1 - 29.3. Seating Areas in Central Plaza Pinklao (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....         | 190 |
| Figure 30. Siam Square Map and the Taken Route From the Green to Red Spot.....                            | 194 |
| Figure 31. Fountain Garden in front of Siam Paragon (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                | 199 |
| Figure 32. The Photo Booth of King Vajiralongkorn (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                  | 200 |
| Figure 33. Siam Square’s Outdoor Walk (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                              | 202 |
| Figure 34.1 - 34.2. The Bridge Linking Siam Square & MBK Center (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....    | 202 |
| Figure 35. The Giant Cat Statue in front of MBK Center (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....             | 204 |
| Figure 36. Shopping Zone in Siam Paragon (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                           | 207 |
| Figure 37. The Indoor Walking Bridge in Siam Centre (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                | 210 |
| Figure 38.1. Eve and Boy The Underground, Siam Square One (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....          | 213 |
| Figure 38.2. Water Spray Presented in front of the Store (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....           | 213 |
| Figure 38.3. People Queuing to Pay in the Store (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                    | 213 |
| Figure 39.1 - 39.3. People Queuing to Dine out on the Friday Night (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)..... | 221 |
| Figure 40.1 - 40.2. After You Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                                 | 223 |
| Figure 41. A Popular Dessert at After You Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                     | 226 |
| Figure 42. A Scene of the ‘Lowering Head Society’ (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                  | 240 |
| Figure 43. Mo and Moshi Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                                       | 246 |
| Figure 44. A Menu at Mo and Moshi Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017).....                             | 246 |
| Figure 45.1 - 45.3. Coffeestand & Design Cafes at The Bloc (Taken by the author, 10/05/2017).....         | 248 |

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Prof. Nadine Holdsworth, my supervisor, for having faith in me, and dedicating her time to engaging with my work in great detail since the first day of my study. Her warm personality and supportive words have made my PhD journey one of passion. She is not only an excellent supervisor but a great academic, with a perfect balance of compassion and intellect.

I would like to thank Prof. Andy Lavender who gave useful guidance on my work, even if only for a short period, which enabled me to see my research from a broader perspective. I would like to thank the members of staff and postgraduates of the Theatre and Performance Studies Department who inspired me during my PhD journey with their intellectual perception and endless encouragement.

This study would not have been possible without funding from Bangkok University. I am grateful to all the staff there who made this happen. I also thank my friends and ex-colleagues in Thailand who facilitated my fieldwork in Bangkok. Thanks go especially to Pahn, as without her enormous support my fieldwork would have been much more difficult.

As a participant in a PhD workshop held by Asian Dynamics Initiative, University of Copenhagen, I would like to thank that institution, its scholars and other PhD fellows who profoundly engaged with my work, offered useful feedback, and helped my confidence during the final part of the study. This chance enabled me to see my work in a sharper light. During my writing-up process, I also thank Trixie and Nick who made the toughest time go more efficiently.

My personal life in the UK would have been more difficult without my lovely friends who have shared joy and fun outside study time. Thanks to Tawfun, who has remained caring from across the world. Special thanks to Marius, for being a solid source of encouragement, inspiration and a peaceful home for heart and mind.

Most importantly, I thank my family, especially my mother who is never short of care, trust and love. She is the ultimate model of a human being, always empathic and selfless, reminding me what is essential in life. I also thank my two brothers and their caring partners. I was motivated by Sotarar who never doubted in my ability and prompted me to become a passionate academic, and Sustarum who inspired the seeds of thoughts and is my all-time companion in standing for social equity. Lastly, with my whole heart, I thank my father who passed away during my PhD journey; his spirit and love have always nurtured me through every step of my study, and my whole life.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this PhD thesis is composed by myself and submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre Studies. It contains no material that has been submitted previously for the award of any other academic degree or diploma.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores performances of happiness in Thailand amid advanced neoliberalism, using Bangkok as a case study. The primary focus is on how happiness is organised, performed and displayed in order to enable neoliberal subjects to deal with their precarious socio-economic reality. This thesis introduces a new discussion of happiness as a mode of cultural performance and establishes it as a way to comprehend, reveal and criticise neoliberal governance. The focal period of the study is during the military regime from May 2014 to March 2019, but the analysis is not isolated from previous socio-cultural contexts.

This thesis is interdisciplinary and employs mixed research methods. Insights on neoliberalism and happiness are derived from disciplines such as political economy, psychology, and cultural studies. Published materials on such issues as national policies and the media also inform the analysis. To uncover the performance of everyday practices, ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken for a month in Bangkok employing methods such as auto-ethnography, participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

This thesis focuses on cultural and everyday performances of happiness organised and delivered by Thai administrations and citizens in multiple dimensions of space and time. Chapters One to Three set the scenes of the Thai neoliberal context and investigate performances of happiness organised by Thai administrations through history, culture, and political agendas during different national conflicts. Chapters Four and Five explore performances manifest by the market and people in everyday urban settings focusing specifically on the morning commute and lunch break on working days, and leisure time at shopping malls. Chapter Six investigates happiness performed on social media, linking it to neoliberal consumption and ritual performances. In summary, this thesis argues that performances of happiness – in these interrelating spaces and times – represent cultural practices that insidiously yield to the neoliberal rationale to survive and progress in Thai society.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Bangkok is my hometown, where I was born and raised in a middle-class family. My father was the primary income earner, and when he retired in 1999 I was ten years old. The family income dropped instantly and his state pension could not support all five members of the family. My mother was a full-time mother doing a few part-time jobs in order to raise all three kids, hoping that they would have access to the best opportunities for advancement. During my undergraduate life from 2008 to 2012, although I was in a public university, the tuition fees increased rapidly as a result of a university privatisation scheme during the 2000s. I had to apply for hardship grants allocated by the faculty; and in order to qualify I had to take photos of the most impoverished corner of my house as part of the evidence I had to present in person to five committees. Although I received a tuition waiver for the full four years, I had to go through this demeaning application process every year.

My world was small. Like most of my friends, the map of Bangkok in my head went no further than my schools, university, shopping centres and home. I did not leave home until 2012, when I was twenty-three years old and flew to the United Kingdom to pursue a Master's degree in Performance, Culture and Context as a path to promotion and a higher salary. This study gave me valuable eye-opening experiences and knowledge, as well as a large financial debt to repay. In 2013, I returned to Bangkok and worked as a full-time lecturer by virtue of the degree in which my family and I had invested. I worked on a temporary contract and had two part-time jobs as an independent screenwriter and a private tutor for high-school students. Owing to my master's degree, I earned much more than my friends at the time. I lived in my parents' house, I had jobs, a car and a monthly income, and I was not starving, yet I still felt socio-economically insecure.

More than half of my salary went to pay debts for my apartment, which was under-construction, a car, loans for my master's degree, and financial support for my parents. Despite feeling economically insecure, like most middle-class workers in

Bangkok, to fill my little leisure time I usually went to shopping malls and searched for trendy cafés to visit. I wanted to spend the money I earned to buy back pleasurable experiences that I traded for my energy during work time. I did not find these acts of mass consumption problematic until I began to notice my habits on social media. One day I scrolled down my Instagram profile, which consisted of more than a thousand posts. Apart from photos of empty blue skies, congested traffic jams and packed building-blocks in Bangkok, like many of my friends, most posts were photos of stylish presentations of food, expensive coffee and fashionable cafés I had visited. I also spent my free time scrolling through my profile pages on social media to investigate how well my persona and lifestyle were presented as impressive, competent and happy through my selections of posts, interests, photos, locations and numbers of Likes. I found myself questioning my presentation of self via my social media presence. I started to question my habit of reporting every happy moment on social media. I wondered why my friends and I were doing the same thing, even though many, including myself, were living in precarious socio-economic conditions. I noticed that our lives were driven by a series of individual investments, loans and debts that perpetuated a norm.

I started to consider my living conditions as a member of Thai society. My parents had invested in me so that I could be an efficient member of the labour force. I had invested in my higher education to earn sufficient income. Paradoxically, despite feeling economically insecure, I still had to invest in commodities to make me feel a worthwhile member of society. My friends, who had come from similar family backgrounds, were stuck in jobs that they did not like but paid enough, since quitting a job would be very costly. Social support such as unemployment benefit and pensions were meagre. At the time, due to national minimum wages, a salary of those with a bachelor's degree is regulated to start at 15,000 THB (£400) a month, but most people in the country had no university degree and had to rely on the minimum wage of 300 THB (£8) a day.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> £1 is approximately equal to 37.5 THB (last updated on the exchange rate: 8 August 2019).

In addition to its economic precarity, political circumstances in Thailand have been volatile for many years. Since 2006, there have been a series of protests by both the urban middle class and the rural working class. In 2010, almost a hundred pro-democracy protestors were killed in a government clampdown on protests in Bangkok, and there have been more coups by military juntas than general elections. The event that caused me the worst personal frustration happened during 2013-2014, when a group of urban middle class people staged a protest over the corrupt government, but denied the necessity for a general election and instead called for a military coup. As a result, a military junta conducted a coup in 2014 and was in dictatorial power for over four years, jeopardizing human rights and the national economy. Nevertheless, amid this political oppression and economic precarity, the word ‘happiness’ was promoted extensively by the state.<sup>2</sup> Despite individuals’ economic vulnerability, leading tycoons continued to establish gigantic luxury shopping malls. These incidents vividly exposed the incoherence of the society in which I was living in which undemocratic political circumstances governed and mobilised socio-economic turbulence, insecurity and inequality in our everyday reality.

Despite recognising the incoherence of my society, it was challenging for me to step back and analyse the origins of my unease. Before starting to interrogate this situation, I was too exhausted from commuting, doing three jobs and feeling sleep-deprived. Hence, going to trendy cafés to post happy versions of myself on social media was often preferable, and could energise me to continue my duties the next day. For this reason, the research for this thesis was initially conceived in order to allow me to distance myself from, explore and interrogate the scene of ‘performing happiness’ in Bangkok and Thailand, which not only permeated my personal habits and lifestyle, but was also increasingly emergent in Thai society. Undertaking research in a foreign country gave me a chance to retrace the society in which I was an inhabitant for twenty-six years. In order to pursue this PhD, I obtained funding on

---

<sup>2</sup> The word ‘ความสุข’ (Kwaam Sùk) in Thai is directly translated to ‘happiness’ in English. <https://www.thai2english.com/dictionary/1282817.html> [Accessed 20 March 2019].

a long-term contract with a fixed salary, which crucially liberated me temporarily from the financial trap and distanced me physically from Thailand's dictatorial oppression. However, owing to the funding contract, I am committed to return to Thailand after the degree's completion and work at my former workplace for at least ten years, as payback.

This thesis explores the performance of happiness in Thailand amid the gaining pace of global neoliberalism, using Bangkok as a case study. In focusing on three main pillars – neoliberalism, happiness and performance studies – this thesis is an interdisciplinary study that explores the relationship between the performance of happiness and hegemonic neoliberalism. The disciplines on which it draws include political economy, history, economics, cultural studies, and theatre and performance studies, as elaborated later in this chapter. In particular, performance studies frameworks have been illuminating for this research owing to their interdisciplinary viewpoints and unbounded approaches. Unlike other scholarly fields, the performance studies discipline aims to investigate social and cultural processes using a mix of research methods with a hypertextual, visual, fluid, live and interactive approach (Schechner 2002: 25). It seeks to explore and explain issues in terms of circumstances, rather than fixed assumptions and conclusions. Therefore, the strategies of performance studies enabled me to contemplate the performance of happiness under Thai neoliberal governance by paying attention to spectacles, sounds, rhythms, signs and symbolic meanings that potentially engender individual feelings, emotions and consciousness. These performative aspects suggest a fruitful dialogue between structural socio-economic power and living citizens. This thesis thus potentially fills a gap in research on how the neoliberal process not only operates through structural policies and constitutional regulations, but is also manifest, retained and advanced through a series of performative practices in everyday life.

By situating the glocal impact (the integration of global and local forces) of neoliberalism in the Thai context, this thesis illustrates that the neoliberal agenda has

been advanced in Thai society not only through state regulations, but also through socio-cultural practices such as Buddhism and the Sufficiency Economy scheme. Regarding the performance of happiness, I investigate at a national level how the concept of happiness has been narrated, organised and performed by Thai administrations through cultural and social initiatives such as the culture of smiles, tourism and political campaigns. At the everyday level, this thesis demonstrates the performance of happiness in daily urban scenes of neoliberal Bangkok, such as commuting, lunchtimes in the office districts, and leisure times at shopping malls. Furthermore, amid the rapid technological advance of the twenty-first century, this thesis explores the use of social media such as Facebook and Instagram as a stage for a performance of happiness that engenders uncertain and fearful neoliberal subjects in Thailand. My conviction is that, owing to the precarious socio-economic reality and political upheavals in Thailand, the concept of ‘performing happiness’ arguably plays a crucial role in masking cracks in the socio-economic incoherency by projecting positive displays and emotions, and navigating an individual’s negative moods such as anger, depression and fears, ultimately in order to retain them within the neoliberal flow.

In relation to the three broad contexts of neoliberalism, happiness and performance, in this thesis I position neoliberalism as the primary hegemonic theme, which governs the others. Neoliberalism has been extensively studied across disciplines since the late twentieth century, especially in the social sciences and humanities, in order to comprehend and tackle the global socio-economic transition from the collective welfare state to individualism and free markets in Western countries. In this thesis, neoliberalism is located as a socio-economic force through which various domains in people’s lives, such as jobs and financial stability, public welfare and democracy, have been increasingly compromised by affirmative cooperation between the state and the market (Harvey 2005; Howard & King 2008; Crouch 2011; Brown 2015). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s 1979 lecture on ‘The Birth of Biopolitics’, Thomas Lemke elaborates on the concept of ‘human capital’

embedded in neoliberalism, as an approach in which individual welfare is calculated by the state through market-based rationality fostered by individualisation and entrepreneurialism (Lemke 2001). Thailand has, without exception, been governed under this neoliberal logic coupled with the authority of a dictatorship. This situation has resulted in socio-economic vulnerabilities in various spheres of people's lives, with precarious jobs, financial burdens and anxiety.

Research on neoliberalism in Thailand is relatively new but growing, especially in social science disciplines. A notable body of work focuses on the social impacts of neoliberal policies. In terms of political-economic history, Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, the Thai political-economy theorist, posits neoliberalism as an essential element emerging in the Thai political economy amid globalisation since the 1970s (2008). In relation to its impact on workers, Sustarum Thammaboosadee reviews recent critiques of neoliberal governance, arguing that it has become a dominant instrument in compromising public welfare, causing increasing labour precarity for Thai workers and immigrants (2015). In the realm of education, Vong-on Phuaphansawat explores the impact of neoliberal governmentality in Thai education reforms and finds deeper social inequalities and reduced lifetime chances for Thai citizens (2017). These works examine neoliberal impacts on Thai citizens' lives based on governmental policies. Nevertheless, very little research has been conducted on how neoliberal rationality has been maintained and advanced in Thai society through the lens of cultural practices in everyday contexts. There is also a lack of research on the cultural impact of neoliberalism in Thai society under the dominant military government regime from May 2014 - March 2019. This thesis is thus the first study to explore the cultural and socio-political process through which the notion of happiness has been organised and performed in the neoliberal context of Thailand, and especially Bangkok, which has been closely associated with the global stream of neoliberalism.

Happiness, associated with quality of life and positive emotions, is the second key element considered in this thesis in relation to neoliberal influences. A

substantial body of literature addresses the relationship between neoliberalism and human happiness (Bauman 2007b; Standing 2011; Radcliff 2013). Of particular interest to this research is Ted Schrecker and Clare Bamba's writings in which they coined the term 'neoliberal epidemics' to depict how neoliberal policies in the United States insidiously compromise people's well-being by creating illnesses at many levels, such as mental illnesses arising from stress and economic insecurity, and physical illnesses resulting from the need to rely on cheap but unhealthy food (Schrecker & Bamba 2015). Their work acutely informs this thesis, pinpointing how neoliberal logics clearly dismantle individual well-being in everyday practice. It provokes me to ask central questions as a point of departure for the thesis: How are these insidious neoliberal policies, practices, and consequences socially and culturally accepted, advanced, and proceeded? How do neoliberal subjects manage to live with the chaos? To answer these questions, the primary emphasis of the exploration of happiness in this thesis is not on how neoliberal logic undermines human happiness, but on how happiness is organised, performed and displayed in order to enable neoliberal subjects to deal with their vulnerable neoliberal reality. In other words, this thesis aims to observe the use of happiness as a prop by neoliberal authorities, including the state and the market, to console and distract people from socio-economic uncertainty. I also consider happiness as it is performed by citizens themselves, in order to negotiate socio-economic struggles.

In the context of viewing happiness as a tool as much as a consequence, this thesis is informed by valuable views from cultural studies, especially the work produced by Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant. Ahmed's cultural critique in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) comprehends happiness as a socially-valued passport to a good life. She argues that the agency of happiness is insidiously and increasingly labelled as an essential tool for use not only as an individual, but as a member of society: if people are happy, those around them will be happy too. She asserts that the concept of happiness works as a promise, directing and shaping individuals toward how their lives should be, and potentially distracting them from social

oppression. In perceiving happiness as a necessity for a good life and challenging oppression as unhappiness, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) also makes a significant contribution to elaborating how optimism functions as a drama of adjustment to neoliberal precarity and the unachievable fantasy of the good life or happiness. In Berlant's view, the imperative of individual optimism denotes a scene of negotiation between neoliberal subjects and governance, making crisis seem ordinary.

Whereas Ahmed and Berlant shed light on how happiness and optimism may work to either misdirect, shape or console individuals amid the incoherence of life, a gap remains regarding how happiness is projected and played out by people and administrations. I argue that performances of happiness may function as another mode of Ahmed's promise of happiness, helping to restore the broken good-life fantasy. Nevertheless, rather than encouraging people to achieve this by challenging the status quo, I argue that neoliberal individualism and entrepreneurialism encourage individuals to reinvent themselves and display happiness through personal activities such as consumption, positive psychology, self-promotion, entertainment, and other temporary and instant 'pleasurable' experiences. To elaborate on these domains of happiness in the context of Thailand, I discuss cases such as tourism campaigns, celebratory public events, intensive consumer society and the use of social media. However, it is clear that these realms of happiness are unsustainable and cannot compensate for the lack of a social-welfare safety net. Therefore, from the viewpoint of performance studies, this thesis aims to insert a new narrative of happiness into the neoliberal stream, regarding not only how happiness works to organise people's lives and manage uncertainties, but also how it is organised, displayed and performed by the people and authority.

In positing the use of performance studies to read the performance of happiness under neoliberalism, Jen Harvie's *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (2013) offers a useful foundation for this thesis in framing two key concepts of performance analysis: space and participants. In considering space as 'the terrain on and in which contests over social equality and inequality are being

worked out' (112), Harvie observes that the space of art and performance practices, as sites of social relations, have the potential to not only challenge but also highlight neoliberal unfairness and inequality in wealth and opportunity. While the art space can be perceived as a scene of confrontation, it often exhibits conformity with urban cultural and development policy. This view has informed this thesis in comprehending the space of performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand and Bangkok, to an extent, as a site of pleasure and enjoyment facilitated by the state, and a sign of a challenge to the social oppression exercised through the micro individual freedom and pleasure of the self-governed agency. However, to a deeper extent, I argue that such space actively provokes social inequality and unfairness through the intertwined relations between state regulations, cultural manifestations, and the practice of its citizens. Approaching space in this manner not only discloses uneven social opportunity, but also marks the effort of individuals to secure the illusion of meritocracy — the superiority of the individual who holds more resources and skills.

Regarding the idea of participants, Harvie delineates the role of a precarious labourer in art and performance practice (2013: 35). Amid intensive competition in the neoliberal job market, Harvie contends that many artists become flexible labourers who have to conform to the market requirement to face exploitation and precarity in patterns of labour. Also, audiences in participatory art and performance insidiously become precarious labourers who are conscripted to not only contribute their labour to the piece of the artwork but also be prepared for any unexpected tasks to be given by strangers. In a similar vein, I extend the view to position Thai neoliberal subjects as the participants in the performance of happiness who are precarious labourers, both performers and audiences, being exploited by the neoliberal script of increasing privatisation and inequality. Importantly, their lifetime, especially their leisure, is infused with labour requiring various skills such as time and financial management, mentality adjustment, social and cultural capital investment, and a selection and promotion of saleable versions of self — in order to portray the performance of happiness navigating through socio-economic struggles.

While Harvie pays particular attention to the neoliberal labour pattern of art and performance practice in the British cultural context with the visible persistence of the UK welfare state, I anticipate that labour in the art and performance industry in Thailand will continue to have the disadvantage of precarity with very minimal art funding from the state and welfare provisions, and the absence of labour unions. Having been constantly exploited as a performance practitioner myself, I suggest that, linked to the neoliberal consequences, labour patterns in art and performance practice in the Thai context markedly occupy a double layer of exploitation — for ultimately having to be an entrepreneur as both a cultural worker and Thai citizen.

This recalls an article written by Kengkij Kitirianglarp, the Thai Marxist thinker in *Sociology and Anthropology*, titled ‘Everyone is an Artist: Immaterial Study of Labour’ (2014). The article observes that, amid the burgeoning of neoliberalism, ‘artists are among the first generation of immaterial labour whereas most of the labour in cognitive capitalism nowadays work like an artist’ (130). Kitirianglarp suggests that, similarly to artists, neoliberal workers become self-interested entrepreneurs who have to work and invest in themselves in order to make a living under uncertain employment conditions and a lack of welfare benefits. For this reason, in the intensive neoliberal context in Thailand, instead of focusing on the site of art and performance practice, I employ the nation, city and everyday practice as focal stages in order to untangle the social tensions in the ordinary scene of the neoliberal struggles of most citizens.

Hence, this thesis focuses not on performance in the sense of theatrical performances, but on cultural performances in everyday settings. This takes a cue from Richard Schechner’s concept of ‘restored behaviour’, in which everyday acts are considered as performances involving routinised repetition and rehearsal processes instilled by previous personal experiences and social circumstances (Schechner 2002: 29). Schechner is influenced by Erving Goffman’s seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which sheds light on interpreting social roles in everyday life through theatrical modes such as audiences, performers, props, and front- and back-stage operations. These views on performing in everyday life are also highlighted by Marvin Carlson, who suggests:

The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behaviour raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as ‘performance’, or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself (1996: 4).

Although a few cases adopted in this thesis involve performances during particular national crises – for example, a public campaign called ‘Returning Happiness’ was organised following a military coup and in the aftermath of a protest – I consider these as part of an ongoing performance rather than as isolated cases. I argue that the various modalities in which performed happiness is central are never newly invented, but are part of an ongoing narrative that has been persistently recalled and restaged in changing contexts.

Victor Turner’s classic theory of social drama is useful for orienting the direction of the performance of happiness governed by neoliberal reasoning. For Turner, social drama occurring in a public setting consists of four main phases: breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration or schism (1974: 37-41). Breach emerges when conflict occurs in a public setting, leading to a stage of crisis when more public tensions ultimately accumulate. A redressive action is when an institutional intervention is made to heal the breach and resolve the crisis. If the redress is successful, it will lead to reintegration, through which the original conflict is solved. Otherwise, a schism occurs if the resolution fails. In Turner’s terms, I consider the impact of neoliberalism on individuals as a breach, resulting in personal anxieties and depression arising from the socio-economic burdens of overwork, debt and excessive expenses. These personal tensions gather and eventually become a public crisis, reflecting neoliberal societal impacts such as economic uncertainty and social inequality. In this regard, I propose that the performance of happiness, manifested by the state and its citizens, features as a redressive process, aiming to mask the breach, ease the crisis and reintegrate neoliberal subjects into the system by distracting them from social conflicts through alternative forms of happiness.

In dealing with the complex scenes of neoliberal operations as an ongoing social drama, the concepts of space and time under neoliberal conditions

significantly shape how the analysis is constructed in this thesis. This thesis approaches space and time in multiple ways with non-static boundaries. I consider neoliberal time under the rubrics such as neoliberal ‘industrial time’, a particular moment in time in the staging of the nation, and the multiple temporalities of daily life that sequence days in terms of time for commuting, working, and leisure.

In terms of neoliberal space, taking a broad view, this thesis accords with David Harvey’s stance in *Spaces of Hope* (2000), perceiving neoliberalism as a geography of the exercise of social inequality and class power. I position the national and cultural performance of happiness played out by both the neoliberal authorities and people on the neoliberal stage, which allows me to read between the lines of the neoliberal hierarchies from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Doreen Massey’s reading of how the politics of space is a multiple, non-static and globally interconnected production is also useful in underlining how the central goal of the neoliberal process in Thailand is manifest within the global context but differently cultivated, scripted, and performed (Massey 1993: 2005). The space of focus in this thesis is not limited to the physical site of the country and the city. In investigating a national performance of happiness, this thesis is influenced by Homi Bhabha in regards to the nation as a space of writing the nation — scripted not only by the state but also by national subjects (1990). In the same way that the site of the nation is written amid an ambivalent tension and relation between the state and the people, I posit that the space of the city is a site of debate between urban dwellers and their surroundings. As Nicolas Whybrow observes, ‘the city’s practices install constitutive effects and behaviours in the body of its citizenry that implicitly render some ways of being in the city “off-limits” or “inconceivable” as much as conceivable’ (2010: 8). Therefore, the space explored in this thesis includes the prescribed national culture, state propaganda, urban landscape, everyday practice, and city dwellers that foster the performance of happiness in the city and the country as a whole. I examine the performance of happiness in intangible spaces, such as history, nation, and culture. For physical spaces, I investigate public events, public transport, and in

particular office districts and shopping malls. Moreover, I investigate the performance of happiness in virtual spaces, such as in the media and online platforms. This allows me to observe the performance of happiness as a part of an ongoing socio-cultural process from different spatial and temporal perspectives which are not isolated from each other.

Regarding time and neoliberalism, Karl Marx's influential argument about the idea of labour-time sheds light on how capital robs personal time from workers. Marx asserts that, 'in capitalist society, free time is produced for one class by the conversion of the whole lifetime of the masses into labour-time' (1867: 667). E.P. Thompson's seminal work, *Time, Work, and Industrial Capitalism* (1967), points out how authorities such as the government, the military and capitalists dominate the citizens' time by trading it for monetary incentives. Although these views were conceived to confront capitalist industrialisation, the control over time held by states and markets through neoliberalism, despite the greater extent of office desks and the liberation of intensive industries, does not disappear but is rather transformed and involves the idea of 'time-management'. I interrogate in this thesis how the concept of time-management plays a significant role in masking, and distracting from, neoliberal difficulties.

This thesis observes performances staged at times of both heightened national crisis and ordinary day-to-day living. In the big picture, I locate the performance manifested by the Thai neoliberal state in the way it manages difficult national times through historical and cultural processes, utilising various displays of national happiness. For example, Chapter Three discusses the historical development of the culture of Thai smiles, a tradition invented by the state in order to negotiate with the various agencies of national social power and their tensions.

At an everyday scale, I suggest that time in a neoliberal formula is a significant source of capital, which neoliberal subjects are required to manage, adjust, organise, and invest in, in order to make it worth spending productively amid the non-stop neoliberal tempo. Chapters Four to Six investigate various times, in an

everyday context, including workdays and leisure time, which illustrate how neoliberal subjects in Bangkok manage their labour-time through the daily performance of happiness. For instance, I interrogate how office workers seek to reclaim happiness during a lunch break in a workday. I also indicate that the line between work time and leisure in the neoliberal culture has been blurred. For example, technologies such as entertainment gadgets or smartphones liberate users from the physical space, and non-work activities are conducted during work time. However, given the socio-economic burdens that a neoliberal subject has to carry, I also ask whether playtime during leisure could arguably be read as a task rather than a liberation — a task to be playful and happy, to deal with socio-economic depression in order to demonstrate belonging to society.

### **The Place of Research**

Bangkok, my hometown and the capital city of Thailand, is employed as a case study site for the fieldwork of this study. I focus on Bangkok not only because I already have first-hand experience of the city, which was advantageous to my ethnographic fieldwork, but also because Bangkok exhibits intense economic disparities (Kramer 2006; Endō 2014). It has a large population, with the wealthiest residences and the largest slums in the country. It is a site of dispossession, to which millions of workers have migrated from the countryside. However, they are barely able to live secure lives, and are unable to return to their hometowns owing to their socio-economic struggles. Bangkok is a vivid example of consumer society with commodified public services such as education, healthcare, parks and libraries, as is also evident from the shopping malls located in every district of the city (Wongweerasert 2012). Hence, concentrating on Bangkok as a site for the performance of happiness allows me to reveal it as a multi-class, financially centralised and concentrated scene of neoliberal capitalism.

In relation to performance and cities, debate over performance embedded in cities has developed in performance studies in recent years. In *Theatre & the City*

(2009), Harvie highlights the ways in which the unlimited agencies of performative analysis enable a discussion of theatre and performance as part of the complex socio-economic condition and urban experience. In viewing cities as a site of performance, Mike Pearson's writing about the city of Cardiff in *Marking Time* (2013) navigates a walk in a city as a work of assembling scattered cultural and historical traces in various sites in the city, which are overlapping, multilayered, and nourished through time and sociocultural processes. This thesis focuses on cultural performances in an everyday urban context, and *Performing Cities* (2014) edited by Whybrow suggests numerous approaches to comprehending living bodies in urban space as having an equally important role in choreographing and defining the city as the constructed environment. Of particular significance to the neoliberal context, a series of writings in *Performance and The Global City* has profoundly influenced this thesis, revealing the advantage of performance studies as a tool to interrogate the neoliberal hegemony emerging in daily practices in global cities by 'revealing the abstract forces of globalism on the individual urban citizens' (Hopkins & Solga 2013: 9).

Informed by texts mentioned above, this thesis employs the lens of performance studies as a mode to reveal the abstract global neoliberal force incubated in the city of Bangkok. However, it does not interrogate how Bangkok or Thailand themselves perform; rather, the analysis focuses on happiness performed in the city and the country under neoliberal governance.

In relation to performance and happiness, many performance studies texts examine cultural performances occurring in rituals, protests, events, celebrations, and national or everyday life. These usually concern the agency of performance as a played-out ideology and identity, such as performing democracy, nation, city, culture, gender, citizenship, or race. However, happiness remains neglected in performance studies research, with a few notable exceptions. For instance, Silvija Jestrović's chapter 'Performing Belgrade' profoundly expresses how Belgrade 'performs its better self' through attractive architecture and trendy café interiors in a shopping building in the centre of Belgrade to mask the scars of war and conceal class

struggles (Jestrović 2014: 199-217). Susan Bennett also explores how the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 performed ‘the better city, better life’ amid a global economic transition in which ‘the better life’ is denoted as a consumer-product-based ideal ascribed to ‘better cities’ (Bennett 2013: 91-109).

On the one hand, the concept of ‘performing happiness’ demonstrated in this thesis circulates around the idea of ‘the better’ by engaging with various positive agencies, such as optimism, hopes and fantasies, and compares them with ‘the worse’ under exacerbating neoliberal inequalities. On the other hand, the performance of happiness is cast not only under the rubric of ‘the better’, but also through numerous shades and spheres from both national and personal angles. For instance, the performance of happiness organised by the Thai state is framed by the need to assert political stability, a peaceful political climate and national unity. Happiness performed by individuals entails activities such as temporary pleasurable experiences sought from shopping, socialising and consuming food and beverages, and the senses of micro individual freedom and self-empowerment gained through a configuration of appearances, superior cultural capital and a presentation of a happy version of self on social media.

While the concept of happiness may often appear to predominantly be used to define a positive mood such as pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment, or hopefulness, this thesis highlights that when happiness is used as a tool by the state to implement neoliberal practices there are other emotions involved. For example, the performance of happiness conducted by the military dictatorship entails the production of fear, holding pro-democracy people under brutal totalitarian authority. The performance of happiness by the market via consumption is infused by feelings such as exhaustion and boredom, caused by labour exploitation. In other words, although this thesis addresses the performance of happiness, the existence of unhappiness and other moods cannot be disregarded. I locate the performance of happiness in dialogue, and bound up with various moods both implemented directly by the state and generated gradually by neoliberal consequences. These moods may include fear,

anxiety, anger, stress, and the loneliness arising from, for example, political oppression, exhausting commutes, overwork, job alienation, or financial burdens. For this reason, this thesis introduces a new discussion of happiness as a mode of cultural performance, and establishes an alternative but essential way of comprehending, revealing and confronting neoliberal governance at an everyday level.

In dealing with the performance of happiness, and engaging with the interrelating moods and practices of both state and people, the thesis is constituted in two related places, Thailand and Bangkok, as appeared in the title of the thesis. Although the urban context of Bangkok is the concentrated focus of neoliberal practices, this cannot be isolated from the national administration. This thesis suggests that the operation, at the national level, has subtly generated a significant set of norms which, on one hand, maintain neoliberal logic and, on the other, reduce the chances for alternatives or resistance. For instance, because of the neoliberal economic policies of Thailand, people have to work very hard in order to survive, so they lack resources such as time and energy for initiating confrontation. Particularly under the military government, Thai neoliberal subjects refrain from staging any resistance because of the aggressive martial law. The neoliberal operation at the national scale includes not only laws and public policies but also cultural practices. For example, the practice of Buddhism and the Sufficiency Economy have been adopted by the state as though they constitute the notion of happiness, in, arguably, a far from equal or fair society. Therefore, the exploration of the national operation of happiness is equally crucial as the exploration of the urban practice.

The performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand and Bangkok may suggest a scene of negotiation between the authority and people. However, I propose that, given the rigid authority of the government which is firmly coordinated with the market, such negotiation is limited to the realm of individual adjustment and micro freedoms. In other words, the performance of happiness operated by both the state and people in neoliberal Thailand can be read as a scene of unfair negotiation,

wherein neoliberal subjects are convinced, or manage themselves to think, they are, or are going to be, winners in the endless competition in which they hardly ever, or never, secure victory. Above all, this thesis does not aim to offer fixed assumptions or absolute answers to dealing with socio-economic struggles. On the contrary, since it is based on performance studies, I instead aim to seek evidence and suggest alternative strategies to comprehend social tensions between the neoliberal logic and human welfare through cultural practices. The clearer our understanding of what subtly, yet effectively, directs and contours our daily lives, attitudes, social relations and emotions, the more hope there is of a better society for the many, not the few.

## **Research Methods**

As an interdisciplinary study, this thesis employs a mix of research methods to investigate the performance of happiness. In terms of theoretical frameworks, it draws on perspectives from political sciences, economics, political economy, political philosophy and history to shape insights on neoliberalism and Thailand. Views on happiness from philosophy, psychology, economics and political economy are used to highlight relationships with the neoliberal logic of individualisation and entrepreneurialism. I also draw on cultural critiques from various studies of nation and nationalism, optimism and happiness, consumption, urban leisure, gender and the politics of appearance, as well as the cultural practices of everydayness, to uncover intertwined cultural processes hidden beneath neoliberal reasoning. Above all, views from performance studies are utilised to connect the dots between the neoliberal social structure and its cultural impact on citizens.

In order to explore the performance of happiness on a national scale, investigation of published documents and material was a primary research method employed in this study. In the first part of the thesis, I examine the register of neoliberalism in Thailand by drawing on published documents, such as state policies on labour and welfare, education and economic schemes, to reveal the existence of neoliberal regulation in Thailand. To show how Thai administrations have performed

happiness, I draw on an abundance of published media, including interviews and news reports, photographs, political campaigns, TV commercials, online advertisements, songs, music videos, articles, TV programmes, online posts and social media. These materials were accumulated through online platforms that are globally accessible through the internet, and therefore also play a crucial role in representing the nation's performance of happiness to the world.

Alongside analysis of secondary data, ethnographic methods were used during the fieldwork in order to gain first-hand insights into ongoing circumstances. This ethnographic fieldwork, undertaken for a month in Bangkok in May 2017, sought to investigate happiness as it is performed in everyday contexts. The one-month fieldwork undertaken in Bangkok provided me with a sense of displacement, as I sought to re-immense myself in the familiar scene while observing and reflecting on relations between myself and society. With no significant festivals or long holidays, May potentially represented a typical working month. Before the fieldwork, I organised a flexible plan regarding the settings I would explore, my interviewees and the research methods I would employ. However, I also aimed to allow myself to flow along with situations that I had not planned in advance.

In relation to the embodiment of the researcher and doing the fieldwork, this thesis was inspired by Sarah Pink's *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009). According with Amanda Coffey's ideas on the ethnographic self in fieldwork (1999), Pink suggests that the concept of embodied experiences of ethnography is instilled by the relationship between 'bodies, minds, and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment' (Pink 2009: 25). Sensory ethnography guided me to be fully open to sensory reception through aspects such as smells, visual cues, pace, rhythms, sounds, noises, temperature and density, which affectively stimulated my feelings, memories, experiences and thoughts. As crucial as opening up sensory reception, Pink suggests that it is essential for ethnographic researchers to communicate meanings between the relatedness of self-reflection and rational explanations. I therefore adopted three

primary ethnographic methods: autoethnography, participant observation and interviews.

Regarding autoethnography, throughout this thesis I explicitly locate myself as part of everyday processes in neoliberal Bangkok. In a collection of writings on *Doing Autoethnography* edited by Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway, Tony E. Adams, et al., Robin Boylorn posits that ‘auto-ethnographic methods are powerful opportunities to story lived experiences and capture cultural phenomena’ (2017: 16). Although autoethnographic methods may be challenged for their self-centric perspective, which may undermine other subjects and social circumstances, some autoethnographers insist that these methods inevitably form connections between oneself and others, as Kathryn Thompson suggests:

Autoethnography provides us the most critical traction, a concrete means of scaffolding between the local and the global, the micro to the meso to the macro, of reconciling personal, embodied, private experiences with the broadest and most public of structures and ideas. It is precisely this work of tying personal experience to larger social structures that might provide a way out of this neoliberal morass of identity and difference... (2017: 35)

For this reason, I project my subjectivity, in terms of personal memories, habits, experiences, emotions and feelings, as a useful tool to search for connections with people around me and with society. This method has also been illuminated by Deirdre Heddon’s term ‘autopography’, as an application that ‘brings into view the “self” that plots place and that plots self in place, admitting (and indeed actively embracing) the subjectivity and inevitable partiality or bias of that process’ (Heddon 2008: 92). Rather than attempting to control my subjectivity in the data-collection journey, I thus allowed my body, thoughts and sensations to flow along in what I was experiencing.

In presenting narratives in which the significance of the self cannot be detached from the writing, the data from my fieldwork is somewhat indicative of the performance of self. Mike Pearson suggests that ‘each individual, significantly, has a

particular set of possibilities in presenting an account of their own landscape: stories' (2006: 12). This accords with Whybrow's observation that writings produced from autoethnographic methods entail fresh and distinctive urban data, which may feature as a mode of performance in how the authors perform their own versions of the selected city (2014: 12). In a sense, the data presented in this thesis is a mode of autobiographical performance in which I perform versions of my country, city, people and myself under the umbrella of the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand. However, this research does not simply take the form of autobiography, I also utilise participant observations and interviews as essential methods to explore the surroundings and circumstances in greater depth.

Participant observation crucially allowed me to immerse myself in the people and the city in various manners. A collection of writings from *Performance and the Contemporary City* notably allowed me to see many ways of participating in and encountering a city through the embodied experience of the urban, such as walking, drifting, hearing, smelling and visioning (Whybrow 2010). Walking was one of the central methods I used to mobilise my body through spaces. As a research practice in social science, walking 'highlights a range of possibilities for enfolding sound, smell, emotion, movement and memory into our accounts, illustrating the sensuousness and the skill of walking as research practice' (Bates & Rhys-Taylor 2017: 2). In linking walking with performance research, a collection of writings in *Walking, Writing, and Performance* (Heddon et al. 2009) inspired much of the material in this thesis by framing the data in two layers. First, it is a construction of personal narratives presenting a dialogue between my present self and my memories from walking. Second, it is a reflective dialogue of personal reflections and societal surroundings during the process of writing.

Using walking to investigate a city is often viewed as a technique to liberate a practitioner from the rapid pace of technological modernity, including the excessive speed of motorised transport, self-centring gadgets like smartphones and headphones, and spectacles on moving billboards and in commercials (Virilio 1986;

Debord 1994). Although I agree that walking synchronises with human movements in observing one's surroundings in detail, I do not regard it as a superior way to disengage my body from urban technology and the dominant consumer culture. On the contrary, I embrace these distractions as a crucial factor that highlights the contemporary production of everydayness. For instance, during my walk in a shopping district I observed a long line of advertisements and billboards as a meaningful instrument with which to read and decode the performance of happiness within the neoliberal consumer society. This view intersects in meaningful ways with how Carl Lavery observes pedestrian performance as a walk that enables practitioners to become more sensitive to the rhythmic dialogue between bodies and landscapes, which aims to overcome technological separation. In Lavery's view, technology 'has the potential to re-enchant the world by encouraging the pedestrian performer to discover alternative relationships with landscape based on memory and imagination' (Heddon et al. 2009: 49). Rather than drawing on the slowness of walking as a technique against the swift motions of the city, I simply adopted walking as a way to allow my body to mobilise and encounter the surrounding environment in the same way as other city dwellers through mutual time and space. Equally importantly, I also moved in various ways to participate in different ordinary settings in Bangkok. For instance, I travelled by public transport amid hundreds of passengers during morning rush hours. Like hundreds of office workers, I strolled around office districts and had lunch during busy lunch breaks. I drove home and got stuck in heavy Friday-night traffic with other motorists in the city centre. Like other city goers, I met with friends, took photos of food, shopped around, and dined out in shopping malls during weekends.

By focusing on immersing myself as part of the city, rather than isolating myself from it, Henri Lefebvre's framework in *Rhythmanalysis* (2004) shed useful light on conducting and reading my fieldwork. It prompted me to see important ways in which rhythm in the everyday urban scene is conducted and paced by social structures. Rhythmanalysis allowed me to participate in and observe the city beyond

space and images, through time and moods (Lefebvre 2004: 87). In other words, it saturated the role of the fieldwork as a participatory socio-cultural performance, rather than viewing it as a stand alone visual artwork. In this thesis, I seek to comprehend the rhythms and dynamics of happiness organised through micro-performances of interrelated spatial and temporal dimensions. For example, I explore the performance of happiness in the transition from a dull morning commute to an energetic lunch break on a working day. I also compare a lunch break at a street-food vendor in the polluted city with a trendy restaurant in a shopping mall at the weekend, and how these relate to performance on social media. Overall, I articulate how the series of performances in these everyday settings does not feature only as a performative entity but can also be seen as a cycle of a cultural rehearsal, which enables national performances to be staged by the state during national upheavals.

To document and reflect my experiences of participant observation, I utilised methods such as live note-taking, photographs, video and voice memo recording. Taking photographs was an essential method that enabled me to select and capture moments I found worth recording and presenting. These photos also later allowed me to distance myself and take a more objective view. The photographs shown from the fieldwork were taken on my smartphone, not on a digital camera. One advantage of using a mobile phone to take photos was that it enabled me to immerse my body and motions in the urban movements. It also eased the complication of snapping quick-moving shots while avoiding attention from other inhabitants. It is commonplace to see people in Bangkok holding mobile phones and taking photos, as selfies or portraits, or of food or landscapes. Therefore, the way in which I documented my experiences using a mobile phone captured fresh data from the same angle as the city dwellers, which provided fruitful first-hand experience as a citygoer, rather than appearing visibly as a researcher.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted during the fieldwork to gather personal views from inhabitants. I interviewed seven people, who did not want their real identities to be revealed. All were workers in Bangkok in various

sectors, including salaried workers, academic staff, freelancers and entrepreneurs. They were a mixture of males and females, and ranged in age between twenty-seven and thirty-four years old, indicating that they had been in the labour market for at least five to ten years. Their job areas included administration work, creative industries, international manufacturers, academia and public services. Some had one job, while others had two to five. These various work backgrounds helped me to articulate the differing but perhaps similar tendency for neoliberal precarity in their lives. The questions asked were open-ended, involving personal opinions on life, such as career stability, financial burden, happiness and satisfaction, leisure, hopes and fears.<sup>3</sup>

I aimed to gather in-depth information not only from their verbal responses, but also from their feelings and emotions on given issues. For this reason, I approached these interviewees through my personal circle of friends during March and April 2017. These interviewees were my friends, ex-colleagues and acquaintances, so none was a stranger to me. Interviewing these familiar people through informal conversations offered me an abundance of in-depth information and expressions. Most of the interviews took forty-five to sixty minutes, organised in person through Bangkok's familiar middle-class leisure activity – over a cup of coffee and dessert in a trendy café – and only one was carried out by telephone. Using the familiar urban leisure scene effectively eased tensions during the interviews, stimulating a flow of conversation and generating many fascinating points that I had not planned. In this thesis, I do not analyse the interviews separately, but occasionally insert extracts to exemplify and vivify presentation of the data analysis.

Regarding the limitations of this research, it should be noted that the research demography is situated in a particular context of perspective, geography, culture, political circumstance, and timeframe. Firstly, I am acutely aware that the cases

---

<sup>3</sup> All interviews were conducted in Thai and words quoted in the thesis are translated into English by the author. The number given to identify each interviewee is assigned according to the interview dates.

selected for this thesis, whether relating to events, campaigns, transport, urban settings, interviewees, or especially the presentation and narration of my personal experiences and feelings as part of the auto-ethnographic method, cannot, and do not attempt to, generalise, summarise, or encompass the whole picture of neoliberal Thailand and Bangkok. I am aware that the data presented in this thesis, whether it is the selection of cases for the fieldwork or the written analysis, are presented through the lens of myself, a young urban adult middle class woman, who sees herself as a Thai neoliberal subject. While I consider these cases worth presenting and tackling, it cannot be assumed that other Thais would perceive them in a similar manner. For instance, the stylish cafe and popular beauty shop in Bangkok discussed in Chapter Five may be outside the area of interest for many Thais from other regions, generations, genders, or social classes.

Secondly, owing to Thailand's unstable political circumstances, I am aware of the shifting political landscape during the period over which the research was undertaken (2015–2019). For instance, after the military coup in May 2014, the hegemonic King Bhumibol Adulyadej passed away in October 2016, causing tremendous national mourning. A general election was scheduled for March 2019 amid massive political controversies and conspiracies. Hence, it should be noted that most of the discussion in this thesis is presented against the background of the period when the military junta government was in power, May 2014 to March 2019. While this period may offer a vivid picture of social tension in a country with both neoliberal governance and an authoritarian dictatorship, I am aware that the tendency for the performance of happiness could be organised differently in other neoliberal settings with different socio-political and cultural contexts.

Above all, although I posit this thesis within a specific demography, I suggest that the performance of happiness discussed in this research is not entirely isolated from the global neoliberal context. I consider the specific scope of the study to be part of the neoliberal continuum around the world in which people's quality of life is exacerbated by neoliberal logic, resulting in inequality and precarity. The particular

scope of this research enables me to profoundly explore the matters covered, and present vital evidence of the performance of happiness undertaken as part of everyday living under neoliberal logic, in the country and the city, and by the authority and the people.

## **Organisation of the Thesis**

The issues in this thesis are presented in three main related parts. The first part explores the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand. In Chapter Two, I ask how the neoliberal rationale has been socially and culturally embedded in Thai society. To answer this question, I investigate socio-economic precarity in Thailand and present how Buddhism and an economic scheme called the ‘Sufficiency Economy’ have resonated with neoliberal reasoning in underlining individualism and disengaging citizens from challenging socio-economic structures. Following this, Chapter Three asks how the notion of happiness has been narrated and staged by Thai administrations in the neoliberal context. To elaborate on this, I first interrogate relationships between happiness and neoliberalism from across disciplines, and demonstrate how the agency of happiness is employed to cooperate with the neoliberal rationale, such as through positive psychology and a culture of optimism. I then discuss the performance of happiness organised by Thai administrations through three key examples: the culture of Thai smiles promoted as a national identity, happiness promoted in national tourism campaigns, and a political campaign called ‘Returning Happiness’. In so doing, I offer understandings and establish the foundation for the performance of happiness in Thailand from a national perspective.

The second part shifts to exploring the performance of happiness in ordinary routines in Bangkok. This is demonstrated through data gathered from my ethnographic fieldwork. I ask how happiness is performed in neoliberal Bangkok in different everyday settings. Chapter Four explores happiness performed on work-day scenarios, including morning commutes and lunchtimes in Bangkok’s office districts to shine a spotlight on the dialogue between the neoliberal rationale and the people,

and the routinised spaces and rhythms. This connects with Chapter Five, in which I move on to explore leisure spaces after work and at weekends. The major question asked in Chapter Five is how neoliberal consumer culture and entrepreneurialism play a role in the performance of happiness. In answering this, I illustrate how consumer society plays a hegemonic role in Bangkok's leisure time, as evident in the shopping malls. I describe a walk in the most popular shopping district on a Friday evening. I discuss cases such as the massive popularity of a cosmetic shop and expensive dining-out experiences. The argument of this chapter focuses on the idea of a landscape of fantasy, and how consumption stimulates instant but temporary happiness, whilst masking neoliberal anxiety and uncertainty.

In the final part, I return to a topic that initially encouraged me to conduct this research by investigating the performance of happiness on social media in Thailand. Linking to the previous chapters, Chapter Six elaborates how one's online self is commodified through the use of technology, resonating with neoliberal consumer society. In this chapter, I ask how the performance of happiness on social media potentially enhances users' self-actualisation amid neoliberal uncertainty. I present how Facebook and Instagram feature as dreamlike stages on which users can stage their selective performances — a happy version of personas. To do so, I focus on the phenomenon of taking photos of food to upload on social media and read this practice from the view of ritual performance which entails a certain collective pattern and selective performance that potentially reinforces the users with a sense of self-worth, reminding them that they are active players in a neoliberal consumer society, if not a civic or democratic one. I also readdress Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in a neoliberal consumer context. I ask how these virtual platforms correlate resonantly with neoliberal entrepreneurialism, where consumers become investors and presenters simultaneously.

In summary, this thesis argues that the performance of happiness – in cultural and political manifestations, in public spaces, in everyday urban settings, and on social media – is not only infused, circulated and extended in neoliberal Thailand,

but also insidiously yields to the neoliberal rationale to survive and progress in Thai society.

## **Chapter Two: Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Thailand**

Neoliberalism is becoming increasingly hegemonic globally as governments in liberal democratic countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada are cutting public spending, privatising public goods and services by shifting socioeconomic responsibility to their citizens. Since Thailand is a focal site of this thesis, I aim to explore in this chapter how neoliberalism gains ground in Thailand, which is a developing country with an unstable democracy. I argue that neoliberalism in Thailand is accomplished through state regulation and, more importantly, is culturally embedded in citizens' everyday lives through the workings of national agencies such as religion and the monarchy. The main question asked in this chapter is how the neoliberal rationale in Thailand internalises the ideas of marketisation, privatisation and individualisation in Thais' everyday lives, which further drives the conviction that well-being and happiness are individual responsibilities, distant from the state.

Although the core focus of this chapter is on neoliberalism in the Thai context, I begin by presenting a brief history of neoliberalism, paying attention to how the concept has developed as an idea and practice. Since this thesis aims to explore the impact of neoliberalism on the performance of everyday life, an emphasis is placed on the ideas of entrepreneurial life, the precariat, uncertainty and fear, to explore how every sphere of neoliberal subjects' lives is increasingly governed by a market-based rationality. The central aim is to elaborate on how the performance of happiness is crucial in masking individual fears and uncertainty amid vulnerability in a neoliberal regime.

After this general exploration, I move on to investigate the emergence of neoliberalism in Thailand. I first illustrate the history of neoliberalism in Thailand from the political-economy point of view, in order to underline the idea that the rise of neoliberalism in Thailand is intimately associated with global neoliberal agendas, which flourished in the Western world. While it was evident during the 1980s that

the Thai government made a clear attempt to deregulate the economy, facilitating private firms seeking maximum profits both domestically and internationally, the shift in socio-economic cushioning from the welfare state to individual responsibility was not as explicit as it had been in the Western world. The idea of implementing full welfare provision in Thailand is still often avoided by authorities. To elaborate on this, I demonstrate the neoliberal rationale through Thailand's uncertain socio-economic conditions by presenting existing regulations on welfare benefits for all ages, revealing the intensive need for self-investment and the prevailing socio-economic uncertainty.

After presenting information regarding state benefits, I move on to discuss two particular cases that acutely exemplify neoliberal implications through socio-cultural practices. I investigate the modern practice of Buddhism in Thailand and the Sufficiency Economy (SE), an economic plan manifest by the state via the hegemonic monarchy. I select these two examples because the notion of Buddhism and the monarchy are held to be the two main pillars of the Thai nation and are culturally rooted in Thai citizens' lives and therefore they represent how the neoliberal rationale is implemented by the state not only through laws but also socio-cultural practices.<sup>4</sup>

In my consideration of Buddhism, I explore the belief in Karma, the belief in the predetermined power, and the expectation of acts of donating to religion that are believed to be a route to improve one's social and financial status and perhaps happiness for many Thais. I ask how Buddhism in neoliberal, contemporary Thailand has been increasingly commodified and serves to convince citizens to invest in religion and distract them from challenging the status quo. This is one of the distinct characteristics of how neoliberalism has been manifest in Thai society. I suggest that some people may be ignorant of or accept inequality since Buddhism shifts the

---

<sup>4</sup> The Thai national flag has three colours signifying three national pillars. Two small red stripes on the rims signal the nation and blood of the military who fought to save the country from enemies maintaining independence. Two small white stripes mean the virtue of Buddhism. The one single big blue stripe in the middle symbolises the monarchy which is the heart of the nation.

source of problems to individuals and solutions are to be found via a belief in the supernatural, which I suggest perpetuates socio-economic disparities.

Regarding the SE programme, which is a national economic plan promoted mainly under the dictatorship regime that had been in place in 2006 and later propagated again in 2014 when the military dictatorship returned to power. The scheme was pioneered across the country under the hegemonic role of King Bhumibol, late King of Thailand, and is also associated with Buddhist teaching. This section discusses the practices and ideologies of SE, disseminated in a series of media campaigns that romanticises the simplicity of life amid personal financial crisis. I ask how the programme persuades people that true happiness may come ultimately from controlling material desires and encourages them to be satisfied with the resources they already have, which could be seen as an opposite stance to the neoliberal emphasis on consumption. However, I argue that the military state deliberately exploited SE as an institutional tool to underline the fact that individuals are responsible for their own socio-economic burdens. Intensive consumption is still heavily promoted in everyday practice, therefore, I propose that the logic of SE can be used to blame individuals that it was their financial recklessness solely when they become indebted or facing financial difficulties. In light of this, I argue that the role of military government resonates with neoliberal rationality in integrating non-state organisational power into a national economic scheme, thereby perpetuating people's vulnerable socio-economic conditions under the logic of self-reliance.

Above all, I argue that neoliberalism in Thailand may not develop along the direct path of dismantling the welfare state and excluding the role of the state from the market. Instead, neoliberalism is conceived gradually, with a prominent role of the state in restructuring its position from central bureaucratic governance to a decentralised state by collaborating with the market and turning itself into a corporation through state regulation, policies and cultural practices that retain and reinforce socio-economic inequality. Ultimately, I argue, this process insidiously renders the concept of people's well-being and happiness an individual

responsibility, which sets a crucial script for the performance of happiness projected by the state in other spheres of society.

### **Neoliberalism: History, Ideology, and Practice**

The notion of neoliberalism and its ideology have evolved from classical liberalism in the Western world. In *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (2011), Colin Crouch draws comparisons between classical liberalism and neoliberalism. He indicates that the idea of 'liberalism' was originally established during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a movement to confront and eliminate the absolute authority of elites such as monarchs, aristocrats and popes. As a result of the liberal agenda, individuals' rights and freedom to pursue liberty were expressed through various aspects, including culture, gender and politics, as well as economics. In other words, the liberal movement at that time sought to enhance equality, crucially paving the way for democratisation in the Western world.

In the nineteenth century, the classical notion of liberty re-appeared in classical liberal, neo-classical, or 'laissez-faire' economics. However, the emphasis on freedom and liberty shifted from the humanitarian realm to the economic sphere of the free market and free trade. Laissez-faire economics allowed the operation of natural market mechanisms based on individuals' abilities in market exchanges, maximising market efficiency and minimising state intervention in the form of state regulations, state ownership and taxation (Howard & King 2008). With the rise of the bourgeoisie and unregulated factories from the late nineteenth century, capitalism dominated labour and economic activities. Capitalists aimed to invest as little as possible to gain the greatest profits. While some industrialists saw that well-treated workers could enhance the profit, due to the lack of state regulation, many workers' welfare was compromised as evidenced in low wages and a low standard of workplace safety. In the absence of a state role in safeguarding the economy, coupled with economic crises during and after World War I, this economic scheme arguably led to the global economic downturn of the 1930s (Harvey 2005; Klein 2007; Crouch

2011). As Naomi Klein suggests in relation to the Great Depression in the United States, ‘the market crash of 1929 had created an overwhelming consensus that laissez-faire had failed and that governments needed to intervene in the economy to redistribute wealth and regulate corporations’ (2007: 17). There was a deflation crisis as market prices plunged rapidly, leading to wage cuts and massive unemployment.

To tackle the economic crisis, British economist, John Maynard Keynes introduced a new outlook on economics (Crouch 2011; Brown 2015; Schrecker & Bamba 2015). He suggested that the state should intervene in markets to ensure full employment and secure economic stability through market regulation and welfare provisions. Keynesian economics were primarily employed and developed in Scandinavia, the UK, Australia and the US, where the emergence of what became known as the welfare state guaranteed minimum wages, regulated working hours, pensions, healthcare and education. However, Ted Schrecker and Clare Bamba identify that welfare state policies varied between countries (2015). For example, state provisions in liberal countries such as Australia, Canada, the US and UK were fairly minimal, with strict criteria, and those who relied on welfare were mainly the poor working class. On the other hand, social democratic countries such as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway were comparatively generous in promoting the highest standards for everyone through active state intervention.

Keynesian economics and the popularity of the welfare state in the Western world were critically challenged in the 1970s. There was high inflation in Western countries, including the UK and the US. Keynesian principles allowed high inflation to occur as a state reduced its expenditure or increased taxes to calm inflationary pressure. However, it also required cuts in public spending, which governments often implemented too little and too late (Crouch 2011). Consequently, liberal economic advocates such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman took this flaw as a cue to fight for a reformed model of the earlier laissez-faire economics, which eventually led to the dawn of ‘neoliberalism’ (Harvey 2005).

Neoliberalism is an economic and political practice that gained significance around the world in the 1980s, including in Latin America, Australia and, significantly, both the US and the UK (Harvey 2005). Led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in a Cold War context in which the idea of capitalism was used to counter socialism, the ideology of neoliberalism refers to a state policy of allowing the market to seek profit with minimum state regulation. Neoliberal advocates insist that economic freedom and private ownership, the underpinning of market-based competition and entrepreneurship with the minimum involvement from the state, will enable not only the economy to flourish but also the well-being of all individuals (Hayek 2001).

While the idea of neoliberalism is driven and propagated through the notion of economic freedom, the paradox is that it has been conducted under the rubric of a competitive market, which is by nature impossibly difficult to use to secure victory for all. Beneath the tagline of ‘minimum state intervention’, David Harvey contends that neoliberalism, on the contrary, requires not just the collaboration of the state but a rigid authority guarding the market to ensure maximum profit. The role of a neoliberal state could emerge in the form of state deregulation of markets, support for the rise of neo-conservatives, nationalism, or opposition to a collective labour movement, which could threaten the free market (Harvey 2005: 69). Thus, the premise of neoliberalism is an evolution of laissez-faire economics but with the active alliance of the state. In other words, unlike laissez-faire economics, in which government is practically excluded from economic activities, a neoliberal government turns itself legally into a marketplace, placing profit ahead of the quality of people’s lives. Margaret Thatcher’s quote: ‘There is no such thing as a society’, suggests the ultimate core of a neoliberal state is that social ideas such as equality, democracy and collective community are undermined by neoliberal government priorities.<sup>5</sup> The ‘liberalism’ aspect in neoliberalism’s name and ideology stresses only

---

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Thatcher quoted in Douglas Keay, ‘Aids, Education and the Year 2000!’ [interview with Margaret Thatcher], *Woman’s Own*, 31 October 1987, 8-10. A transcript of the interview is available on the Margaret Thatcher Foundation website. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> [Accessed 19 July 2019].

the freedom of a small number of capitalists to seek maximum profits, reinforcing the authority of the elite and dismantling social equality and democracy (Brown 2015).

In practice, a neoliberal state plays a vital role in applying a market-based rationality to public services such as education, healthcare, transportation and housing by maximising market competition, mainly through government marketisation and privatisation schemes. For example, in the 1970s, the public school system in Chile was taken over by charter schools for which vouchers were provided, while the free healthcare service was also commodified (Klein 2007: 84). Similarly, in the UK, the free milk provided for schools was terminated and the number of social housing schemes was reduced during Margaret Thatcher's regime.<sup>6</sup> In the US, the intensive neoliberal landscape can be seen in the realm of healthcare services, which are not universal, and people have to rely heavily on private insurance companies or not at all (Schrecker & Bamba 2015: 107).

Since this thesis deals with neoliberalism in Thailand as a developing country, it is important to note that the rise of neoliberalism is interrelated with the global economy rather than just being a domestic process. Harvey describes neoliberal internationalisation as dominating people by means of 'accumulation by dispossession' in the form of international financial support from financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World Bank.<sup>7</sup> For example Chile's economic reform in the 1970s was driven by a military state cooperating with domestic business elites and neoliberal economists, backed by US corporations and the IMF, which heavily privatised public assets (Harvey 2005: 7-8). Hence, the right of foreign companies to gain profits from their Chilean operations was guaranteed (Klein 2007). Similarly, in Thailand during the economic crisis of

---

<sup>6</sup> Beckett, A. (2015). The Right to Buy: The Housing Crisis that Thatcher Built. *The Guardian*, 26 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/26/right-to-buy-margaret-thatcher-david-cameron-housing-crisis> [Accessed 4 December 2019].

<sup>7</sup> 'Internationally, the core neoliberal states gave the IMF and the World Bank full authority in 1982 to negotiate debt relief, which meant in effect to protect the world's main financial institutions from the threat of default' (Harvey 2005: 73).

the 1990s, the IMF offered to rescue the country from its debt with an attached treaty in which the government would deregulate public ownership, facilitating international investment. Schrecker and Bambra conclude that, through the process of neoliberal internationalisation, ‘the World Bank and IMF promoted multiple, more or less coordinated domestic policies of neoliberalising national economies while integrating national economies into the global marketplace’ (2015: 14). Subsequently, many developing countries became sites of dispossession while wealthy countries collected the benefits of low-wage labour and low-cost production to maximise profits.

Neoliberalism is not only a governmental process that deals with state policies and regulations, both nationally and internationally. It also steers and constructs a certain kind of human life through a set of political logics. As a system of political governance that increasingly shifts the socio-economic burden to individuals, the neoliberal agenda affects many social domains, including public policy, law, education, health, work, leisure, relationships and mentality, or, it might be argued, every area of people’s lives (Bauman 2007a; Berlant 2011; Standing 2011; Brown 2015; Schrecker & Bambra 2015; Elias et al. 2017). Since this thesis deals with the performance of happiness as an everyday social drama, the core micro neoliberal impacts I use to shape the analysis are rooted in the idea of neoliberal individualism and entrepreneurial life — which I see as a bold script that contours the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand.

### **Neoliberal Individualism and Entrepreneurial Life**

As a consequence of the state’s marketisation, neoliberal subjects must take responsibility for every stage of their own lives by investing money in themselves throughout their lifetimes. In this light, Michel Foucault argued in 1979 that individuals are characterised as enterprises: ‘the individual’s life itself – with his [sic] relationships to private property ... with his family, household, insurance, and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise’ (Foucault 2008: 241). The American theorist Wendy Brown profoundly

develops the concept of entrepreneurialism and self-investment from Foucault's human capital, and shows how life in neoliberal society has been privatised and commodified through intensive 'homo oeconomicus' (2015). She suggests that it is insufficient to view neoliberalism as a self-investment project only seeking benefits and interests, as Foucault perceived it; rather, she argues contemporary neoliberal subjects have no choice but to be governed by neoliberal state policies and to be self-interested agents in order to survive. Brown asserts that 'every subject is rendered as entrepreneurial, no matter how small, impoverished, or without resources, and every aspect of human existence is produced as an entrepreneurial one' (2015: 49). For example, to survive under a neoliberal regime, individuals must invest money in private life insurance, skills development and even their appearance, not only to ensure that they will be able to sell the best version of themselves in the market, but also to survive in the labour market.

It is possible to see the ramifications of this neoliberal rationality in the workings of family life and parenting, for example. In societies in which neoliberal practices are increasingly intensive, there is evidence that parents are planning and investing in their children's lives. Steffen Mau suggests that European middle-class parents are tending to send their children to private tutoring schools to maximise their school grades, and are sending them on courses to acquire specialist skills such as foreign languages and educational hobbies to enhance their superiority and security compared with competitors in the market, and ensure that they will not be left behind:

Individual returns on human capital are similarly predicated heavily on relative margins, that is one's position within a field of competitors. Hence the inherent escalation tendency in competitive educational markets: those who stand still or relax run the risk of losing their position in the field. (Mau 2015: 81)

I suggest that when education becomes increasingly commodified, it has transformed not only the value of the labour market but also social relations and lifestyles of neoliberal subjects from a very early stage of life. I exemplify this argument in

Chapter Five when I explore the place of education as a commodified resource in Bangkok's local shopping centres.

The neoliberal process not only shapes one's socio-economic activities, but it is also gradually embodied in one's physical appearance. For instance, Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff address the notion of 'aesthetic entrepreneurship', identifying how investing in one's appearance becomes dominant under a neoliberal regime:

Like the neoliberal subject more broadly, the aesthetic entrepreneur is autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices. Preoccupations with appearance, beauty and the body are turned into yet another project to be planned, managed and regulated in a way that is calculative and seemingly self-directed. (Elias et al. 2017: 39)

Regarding the neoliberal aesthetic entrepreneurship, I discuss the issue by investigating the performance of happiness that emerged in a famous beauty shop in a city-centre shopping district in Bangkok in Chapter Five. From the above discussions, it can be seen that the neoliberal agendas of many developed countries are running a project of replacing civic and collective society, which has consequences for enhancing competition between individuals. Not only are neoliberal subjects impelled to work hard on their life projects as entrepreneurs hoping to remain efficient members of society, but they also encounter the socio-economic risk and uncertainty owing to neoliberal marketisation. When the market is ruled under the reason of maximising profits and local institutions no longer provide sufficient socio-economic security for citizens, job instabilities consequentially escalate including overseas exploitation as companies seek the cheapest labour. Local disposable labour is evident in zero-hours contracts and there is a need to work long-hours or to work a second and third job to safeguard financial stability. As a result, citizens are eventually living amid an unstable and unpredictable socio-economic status, which they have no control over, which leads to a state of uncertainty, anxiety and fear.

Discussing fear in neoliberal society, Zygmunt Bauman underlines in *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2007b) that when social welfare is diminished, a citizen's life becomes unpredictable and unstable and they have to adjust themselves to fit to the uncertain socio-economic conditions. He also suggests that 'negative globalisation' has dissolved the bounded collective society replacing it with individual fearfulness.

The solitary life of such individuals may be joyous and is likely to be busy - but it is bound to be risky and fearful as well. In such a world there are not many rocks left on which struggling individuals can build their hopes of rescue and on which they can rely in case of personal failure. Human bonds are comfortably loose, but for that same reason frightfully unreliable, and solidarity is as difficult to practise as its benefits, and even more its moral virtues, are difficult to comprehend. (2007b: 27)

Extending these arguments, Guy Standing, the British scholar, introduces a social class called the 'precariat', which is insidiously trapped in an unfair system as a result of progressive neoliberal policies (2011). Members of the precariat lack socio-economic certainty and security in their lives, and therefore bear great responsibility for their own social risks. Standing points out that the precariat are not identified by their level of income or social status, but by their minimal level of socio-economic protection. He explains that:

They [the precariat] are more vulnerable than many with lower incomes who retain traditional forms of community support and are more vulnerable than salaried employees who have similar money incomes but have access to an array of enterprise and state benefits. (2011: 12)

The precariat consists of various groups of people. Those who have graduated with excellent degrees might be considered as members of the precariat if they have insecure jobs and are unable to access public services. Standing insists that the precariat accords closely with socio-economic uncertainty, where neoliberal workers face pressure to be efficient in competitive markets since failures such as joblessness and illness result in greater personal financial burdens. For instance, once unemployment benefits become insufficient for survival, the precariat must put

themselves back into the labour market as soon as possible, accepting any job for which they will at least be paid, even under a zero-hours contract. In neoliberal Thailand, I demonstrate later in this chapter that due to the inadequate welfare state, the majority of the people are considered as the precariat.

Socio-economic uncertainty and risk lead to fear for neoliberal subjects. When a market-based rationality is applied and life is perceived as an investment, without many choices, I argue that people must adjust to these conditions in order to remain within the system. To give an illustration, children's choices of what to study are framed by what their parents or they see that the market requires. When these children grow up and become workers in the market, they must find ways to gain secure jobs instead of a job that they would be happy to do. In a society where public services such as education, healthcare, public transportation, housing and utilities are increasingly privatised, the price of public services then potentially becomes expensive, so individuals have to do more jobs to increase their incomes. These uncertainties insidiously affect the precariat's behaviour and well-being. Schrecker and Bambra similarly show how neoliberalism has affected people's stress levels due to the lack of control over working life and hours and give an example of a New Jersey woman who accidentally died from breathing in gasoline fumes in a car in which she was sleeping while shuttling between three low-wage jobs (2015: 42).

These examples testify, the neoliberal agenda can be seen to significantly compromise people's quality of life at a micro level. Mau observes that when neoliberal inequality is seen as problematic, rather than viewing it as a collective fate and fear, it is increasingly perceived as an individual problem that can be cured by individual effort. Neoliberal subjects not only attempt to work hard, but their perception of society is arguably narrowed to only an individual concern to protect the maximum benefits for themselves. In order to survive amongst socio-economic uncertainties, Standing points out that people thus tend to adjust their attitudes, either by trying to be satisfied or by finding alternative sources of happiness to enhance

their self value and confidence. Anisha Datta and Indranil Chakraborty pinpoint this situation that:

Neoliberal policies which have gradually eroded the collectivist principles of the post-war social democratic welfare state in advanced capitalist countries, have subjected people to new forms of economic insecurity and social uncertainty. These socio-economic conditions have shaped the meaning of the everyday reality for people, who are now required to refashion their self to cope and survive. (2018: 459)

This raises the key question of how neoliberal subjects manage to negotiate with the troubling consequences of neoliberal rationality. This question will illuminate the discussion of the performance of happiness addressed in this thesis including aspects such as the drama of adjustment, self-reinventing, promotion of self, and temporary pleasure that can be bought. For instance, positive thinking schemes conducted in workplaces and on private courses offered by motivational coaches play a crucial role in convincing people to embrace their lives and be grateful for them (Standing, 2011; Bennett, 2015; Datta & Chakraborty 2017). A culture of optimism and fantasies of a good life are also crafted and reproduced by the media to reassure powerless people that there is always light hidden, not necessarily at the end, but somewhere in the tunnel (Baudrillard 1994; Hannigan 1998; Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011). More importantly, neoliberal rationality also increasingly commodifies the meaning of happiness in the realm of consumer society through various domains such as leisure, self-care services, luxury experiences, enabling individuals to temporarily escape from the pressures and uncertainties of neoliberal life (Featherstone 1991; Urry 1995; Bauman 2007b; Datta & Chakraborty 2017). These topics are further elaborated in Chapters Three to Six. In order to understand the cultural and socio-economic context of Thai neoliberal society, the next section presents how neoliberal ideologies are manifest within the particular political, economic and cultural context in neoliberal Thai society.

## **Neoliberalism in Thailand**

Although neoliberalism has become a global epidemic since the late twentieth century, the neoliberal agenda is manifested differently in different contexts. As mentioned, in the European and Western democratic context, neoliberalism is considered mainly as a process of transformation from generous state provision to an individual, market-based approach, but it is a different story in Thailand. Harvey points out that the way neoliberalism is conceived in developing countries is different from developed countries, since a developmental government is situated within a centralised state. The state's main responsibility is to invest in infrastructure while the concepts of welfare benefits, liberty and economic freedom are rarely a focus. However, this does not mean that neoliberal agendas would be put aside. On the contrary, 'neo-liberalisation opens up possibilities for developmental states to enhance their position in international competition by developing new structures of state intervention' (Harvey 2005: 72).

As mentioned, the dawn of neoliberalism in Thailand engaged with the global economy and became manifest after the economic crisis of 1997 with the IMF's financial support. However, it is important to note that Thailand is a developmental state in which constitutional reform for democracy was introduced in 1932 by a prominent group of aristocrats; it was not a grassroots movement. The position of the monarchy, military and aristocracy in the country has long been a dominant and interrelated authority in which political power shifts from time to time, underlining the rigid central role of the Thai state. Nevertheless, as Harvey suggests, for a developmental state, top-down policies eventually reveal class divisions and attempts to liberate the economy from state dependence (2005: 72). This happened in Thailand during the late 1970s with the emergence of non-profit organisations (NGOs) on behalf of grassroots movements. A group of educated social thinkers promoted the value of 'community', stressing that developmental policies could not neglect cultural roots or communities. Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead contended that the emergence of NGOs potentially played a role in resisting the state in

implementing neoliberal policies (2008). This community-based idea may contradict the mainstream neoliberal process in which community and society are replaced by individualism. However, I suggest later in this chapter that the value of community was a crucial marker that distinguished that neoliberalism had been firmly established in Thailand.

A remarkable sign of neoliberal economic policies first became apparent during Anand Panyarachun's government, in 1991-1992. Panyarachun was known as an aristocrat and his government was seen as an attempt to overcome military governance by replacing the country's centralised military state outlook with a vision of global-competitiveness, aiming to turn the country into a regional financial hub for Asia. (Mead 2008). Many policies were launched to help international investors, private firms and entrepreneurs, such as tax cuts on imports and exports and looser stock market regulations to facilitate capital mobilisation (Ibid.). During the economic crisis in 1997, the community-based idea introduced by those NGO thinkers in the 1970s visibly returned but not to decentralise the state as suggested in its original manifesto. On the contrary, it aligned closely with the role of the neoliberal state. In the name of community, the idea of King Bhumibol's Sufficiency Economy and Buddhist notions of self-reliance were drawn on by social thinkers, especially Prawase Wasi, to introduce the discourse of the self-relying community (1999). More importantly, the idea was later propagated by the military government from 2006. Vong-on Phuaphansawat observes that: 'Indeed, the notion of self-relying community had much in common with the neoliberal rationale of responsible communities' (2017: 81). I investigate this issue later in this chapter.

From the above overview, it is evident that the neoliberal process in Thailand has been governed from the top down while social welfare was not the main focus. At present, with inadequate welfare provision, the majority of Thai people inevitably struggle to make a living. As a result of Thai culture and its commitment to family values every aspect of an individual's and indeed their family's lives is shaped by their economic standing. Social mobility is arguably impossible unless one is born

with superior financial capital and social status. More importantly, democracy in Thailand has been unstable over the past decade: between 2006 and 2018, two military coups attempted to intervene in democracy. Mead affirms that a dictatorship state does not undermine neoliberal progress but rather facilitates it in terms of limiting political movement that would endanger the central neoliberal goal of a free market, as happened in Chile in the 1970s and in China in the 1980s (2013: 34). Therefore, even though Thailand is a developing country and its democracy is frequently unstable, the following discussions affirm that neoliberal agendas have been inserted in the lives of citizens through both state regulation and socio-cultural processes for two decades at least. More importantly, neoliberal governance has proceeded intensively during the dictatorship regime in place since May 2014, reducing any chance of challenging the status quo that is reducing Thai people to socio-economic submission as they live anxious lives over which they have none control.

To demonstrate the neoliberal conditions that govern Thai workers at present, I begin with a brief description of Thai workers' conditions in terms of existing social benefits, minimum wage provision and financial risks. I then demonstrate how the neoliberal agenda is culturally manifest in Thai society by discussing Buddhism and the Sufficiency Economy.

### **Welfare Benefits in Neoliberal Thailand**

Although Thailand has better welfare provisions than its neighbours, such as Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar, the current benefits system is very minimal and very limited (Ungpakorn 2010). Moreover, welfare is only provided to registered workers. Workers who are self-employed or unregistered, accounting for around 61% of all private workers, are not covered by the national Social Security scheme such as unemployment benefits and old-age pensions (Del Carpio et al. 2014). Therefore, the information presented below reflects how essential aspects of an individual's life such as healthcare, education, work, and pension of the majority of

Thai people's lives is commodified, which leads to enhanced socio-economic inequality and vulnerability.

The first universal healthcare service began in Thailand in 2001. Heavily subsidised by the government then run by elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra — similar to the UK's National Health Service — this service made all Thai citizens, regardless of their social status, eligible to receive free medical services covering significant treatments, consultations, in-patient admissions and medication at public and some private facilities. Although the current service is criticised by the upper-middle class and the rich in the country owing to its poor management and inadequate medical staff and services, this universal healthcare scheme has arguably become the country's most well-developed welfare benefit (Paek et al. 2016). Studies show that the programme has resulted in a massive reduction in household medical expenditure, and infant mortality observed between 2000 and 2002 has dropped by 30 % (Gruber et al. 2014). Nevertheless, regardless of its successful public-health revolution in the country, since 2014 the dictatorship authority and neoliberal privatisation have critically challenged universal healthcare provision.

With respect to its sub-standard services, rather than improving the quality of universal healthcare services for all, in order to compete with private hospitals, most public hospitals are increasingly launching 'special services' for which patients can make additional payments to receive faster treatment. As a result, private life insurance companies that partially cover private hospital fees have prospered, attracting the middle-classes who do not wish to join long queues at public hospitals. Also, from 2014 to 2018, Prayuth Chan-O Cha's military dictatorship government suggested that it would compromise this programme by reducing the comprehensive benefits to cover only people who earn less than £2,000 a year. The government has adopted the neoliberal logic of individualisation, suggesting that its enormous budgetary investment in the universal healthcare programme has reduced the quality of service, so the government contended that it should be the citizens' responsibility

to pay for it.<sup>8</sup> The prime minister even made the bold statement that offering free universal healthcare was making people reckless about looking after their health since it was too convenient for them to obtain free treatment.<sup>9</sup> However, as a result of great objections by people and public organisations, the plan to compromise the comprehensive healthcare provision has been very controversial and difficult for the state to impose.

Whereas healthcare benefits are arguably the most progressive and protected scheme in the country, other welfare provisions in Thailand are very restricted. There are few childcare benefits with only 600 THB (£15) monthly allowance and maternity benefits, which allow only ninety days for maternity leave. Although free and mandatory education, including tuition fees, textbooks, and uniforms, is provided in public schools for a maximum of fifteen years, the reality is that many children in Thailand have to leave school to provide free labour for their families' informal businesses, for example as farmers, waiters and waitresses, and grocery sellers. According to the National Statistical Office (NSO) of Thailand (2015b), 25.2% of children aged five to seventeen years have to both study and work without receiving payment.<sup>10</sup> Whereas children in low-income families in Thailand have to become workers at an early age to stabilise their families' financial status, children from middle-class families receive enormous investment from their parents to improve their skills, ensuring that they will be best able to compete in the labour market. In Thailand, many private schools charge exceptionally high tuition fees to wealthy families; they are not only offering children better educational facilities, but are also recruiting colleagues and parents of higher social status. In other words, parents that can afford to are investing money to secure better social capital for their

---

<sup>8</sup> Hongdilokkul, N. (2018). *Thailand's universal health coverage under the coup d'état: Is a coinsurance raise good?* Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia, Kyoto University, Japan. <https://kyotoreview.org/yav/thailands-universal-health-coverage-under-the-coup-detat-is-a-coinsurance-raise-good/> [Accessed 12 September 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Khaosod News (2018) PM complaint the universal healthcare makes people reckless with their health. 10 September. [https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news\\_1553306](https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_1553306) [Accessed 3 December 2019].

<sup>10</sup> NSO (2015b). *Summary of Survey on Child Labour in Thailand in 2015*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office. <http://www.nso.go.th/sites/2014en> [Accessed 20 January 2016].

children (Phuaphansawat 2017). This situation is similar to that reflected in Mau's discussion of middle-class European parents, the difference being that the business of private tutoring to improve children's performance in school and hobby-based skills development is enormously popular and successful in Thailand, with classrooms located in every local shopping centre. Hence, the perpetuation of inequalities in accessing good education has been conceived within the society as a norm based on neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

With regard to higher education, the state offers substantial loans for students in need. In the 2000s, most leading public universities were privatised, leading to exceptionally high tuition fees. For instance, the public university where I studied doubled the annual tuition fee from 15,000 to 30,000 THB (£400 to £800) within four years in which the fee could be equivalent to the value of four-months national minimum wages for a registered worker. Since the bachelor's degree guarantees a doubling of the minimum wage, higher education in Thailand forms part of the essential life project of entrepreneurial citizens. On one hand, while investing in private health insurance may be viewed as an option for better risk protection for most middle-class workers, the universal healthcare service still ultimately safeguards their health. On the other hand, I argue that investing in children's education in Thailand is viewed as a mandatory investment for future protection. Investing in education has become essential for parents from all classes in society to ensure better positions for their children in the job market and in turn their security as there is an expectation that children will look after their parents in later life.

Better education is believed to be a ticket to a better chance in a career. However, the regulations on workers in Thailand create a trap of indebtedness for most workers, despite their qualifications. In 2013, Thai labour regulations raised the minimum wage from 215 THB (£6) to 300 THB (£8) per day, and from 8,700 THB (£160) to 15,000 THB (£300) per month for workers holding a bachelor's degree but it is insufficient.<sup>11</sup> Although the poverty line in Thailand in 2017 is quoted as 2,667

---

<sup>11</sup> MSDHS (2013). Social security. Ministry of Social Development and Human Security [website]. [http://www.m-society.go.th/more\\_news.php?cid=48](http://www.m-society.go.th/more_news.php?cid=48) [Accessed 20 January 2016].

THB, this is calculated from the minimum standard of living, which Bank Ngamarunchot et al. (2015) argue does not suggest an acceptable standard of living. An ‘adequate income’ or ‘living wage’ for a Thai worker to live honourably would be 8,857 THB, on average across the whole country, and 12,509 THB for someone in Bangkok. However, these figures do not account for people who have to support their children and parents due to the small childcare benefit and elderly pension, as I explain in what follows. The study concludes that the current national minimum wage is thus inadequate for the majority.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding working conditions in practice, not only are wages and benefits inadequate, but Thai workers are working hard just to survive. The minimum annual holiday offered to employees is only six days per year. With respect to unemployment benefits, a maximum of 30% of a registered worker’s monthly wage is provided for during a period of unemployment lasting not more than ninety days. However, the benefits shall not exceed 6,000 THB (£150) per month. According to the NSO, 50.1% of regular employees work forty to forty-nine hours a week, and 22.1% work more than fifty hours a week and these figures do not include workers who have second and third jobs in the informal sector.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, statistics indicate that the average household income hardly covers living expenses. Owing to the insufficient income and socio-economic burdens for which individuals must take responsibility, statistics from 2017 showed that most Thai citizens are trapped in a debt economy in which the highest source of average household debt (39%) arises from daily consumption that includes groceries and transportation.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, trades and labour unions in Thailand appear to be ineffective and, combined with the insufficient benefits previously mentioned, workers are forced to focus on their wages and invest in savings plans and private insurance. Therefore, I argue, the

---

<sup>12</sup> Thai News Agency (2018) *Poverty Line in Thailand*. Thai News Agency, 9 January. <https://tna.mcot.net/view/5a54b1d0e3f8e420a74349e0>. [Accessed 3 December 2019].

<sup>13</sup> NSO (2015a). *The Informal Employment Survey 2015*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

<sup>14</sup> NSO (2018) *Household Socio-Economic Survey 2017*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

majority of Thai people are the precariat, in Standing's explanation, disconnected from collective society and are living more individualistically amidst socio-economic vulnerability.

Whereas Thai citizens are compelled to work hard to safeguard their lives, their income only allows them to live on a day-to-day and month-to-month basis. The hard work hardly protects their future elderly lives. Living as a senior in Thailand is highly challenging if one does not have large savings or wealthy children who could offer financial support. The highest pension payable if one has paid regularly into the national social insurance system for thirty-five years is 7,500 THB (£160) a month, which is insufficient to meet the cost of living. Furthermore, for all citizens over sixty, the universal old-age allowance is 600-900 THB (£12-18) per month according to age, which is only around 10% of the minimum wage. While most retired officials who worked in the public sector from the 1970s to the early 2000s are eligible for generous benefits, such as pensions double the minimum wage and healthcare benefits that also cover their spouse and children (zero to twenty years old), these policies have been gradually changed. The new generation of state officials increasingly work under temporary contracts and fall into the same inadequate national social insurance scheme as private-sector workers.

On account of the insufficient benefits for elderly and retired citizens, a culture of being grateful to parents in Thailand is fostered that serves to transport citizens' rights into the realm of morality and family values. Thai children are taught in school that being grateful to their parents and providing them with financial support is a moral deed, and not to do so is considered a sin. At the same time, most Thai parents have to treat their children as long-term investments, expecting that their children will be productive and earn sufficient income to take care of them in the future. Accordingly, accompanying the neoliberal logic, I contend that family love and relationships in Thai society are turned into a cycle of life investment between parents and children. However, in reality, young people are increasingly living and working amid socio-economic uncertainty, so it is intensely burdensome

for the younger generations in Thailand to be responsible not only for their own uncertain lives but also for their elderly parents. Meanwhile, many private firms have launched retirement savings plans. A report from 2016 predicts that within ten years, in view of living wages, income and benefits, it will be impossible for most Thai seniors to live by themselves.<sup>15</sup> In light of this, private life and health insurance commercials in Thailand often portray love and relationships – between young parents and children as well as young adults and elderly parents – as a life investment, resonating with a neoliberal logic.<sup>16</sup>

To conclude this section, it can be seen that the Thai state's policies on citizens' basic welfare are minimal. Every aspect of individuals' lives, from youth to old age, is commodified, so freedom of choice must be traded for massive investments of money and time to survive in the system. In light of the minimal social provisions by the state, the values of family, working hard and being satisfied with one's existing financial means are fostered under neoliberal individualisation in Thailand. The right to access basic needs has become a business activity secured through investments and insurance policies. Harvey suggests that, to keep people within an uncertain and insecure society, apart from implementing laws, the state requires the support of other cultural domains to internalise the socio-economic struggle until it becomes ordinary or 'common sense' for its citizens. As he puts it, 'common sense is constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialisation often rooted deep in regional or national traditions' (2005: 39). Neoliberalism thus requires a subtle yet powerful approach to naturalise its conditions so that people take them for granted rather than challenging them. The media and other institutions, such as universities and religious and professional organisations, often play an important role in this process. Benjamin Radcliff states that people are trapped in deprivation by 'ignorance (i.e., lack of schooling or training), government

---

<sup>15</sup> See a full report (in Thai) Kasetsart University and Chulalongkorn University (2016). The Minimum Savings for Retirement with a Secured Standard of Living Thailand. [https://www.set.or.th/dat/vdoArticle/attachFile/AttachFile\\_1497341573867.pdf](https://www.set.or.th/dat/vdoArticle/attachFile/AttachFile_1497341573867.pdf) [Accessed 18 July 2019].

<sup>16</sup> See an example of life insurance commercial: *Mother Knows Best* (2018). Thai Life Insurance. Thai Life Channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVi9ooExLiQ> [Accessed 3 December 2019].

oppression, lack of financial resources, or, for want of a better phrase, a false consciousness that limits the individual's ambitions or belief in their ability to succeed' (2013: 87). As a consequence of the false consciousness, people believe that they have a certain place in society and that they need to be content with that.

In the case of Thailand, various institutions vociferously insinuate and internalise the neoliberal rationality into people's lives until it becomes a norm or 'common sense' in Harvey's formulation. For example, the country's entertainment industry continuously reproduces and romanticises the norm of working hard and investing in private life insurance companies, and promotes an intensive consumer culture, as discussed later in Chapters Four and Five. However, in order to characterise neoliberal Thailand, it is insufficient to look only at its socio-economic conditions; essential cultural aspects must also be integrated into the analysis. The next sections discuss Buddhism and the Sufficiency Economy, as the means whereby a sense of self-reliance, a religious belief in an impersonal power and an idea of limiting one's material desires and being satisfied with any existing resources have been culturally insinuated into society. Although these concepts seem to contrast with the neoliberal core of fostering competition in the free market, I argue that the government has used them to drive neoliberal policies by creating a common sense that individuals are personally responsible for any socio-economic burdens they may encounter. This common sense also progressively prevents individuals from challenging the state in order to improve citizens' quality of life.

### **Buddhism and Neoliberalism in Thailand**

With regard to how a religious sector plays a vital role in socio-economic oppression in the neoliberal era, it is worth mentioning Karl Marx's famous statement in the nineteenth-century context when he argued:

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the

oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (1844: 244)

Marx points out that when the existing social reality does not offer a good quality of living to the people, they thus turn to religion, which provides them with illusory happiness. At present, in the twenty-first century when global economics and technology have been progressively advanced, the role of religion may seem less influential than in the previous century. However, I argue in this section that Buddhism in contemporary Thailand has been utilised synchronically with neoliberal logics as a tool used by the state to retain socio-economic inequalities. While Marx's view is concerned with how religious expression is a sign of social cracks protesting against oppressive reality, I contend that in Thailand, when a government harmonises with religion, the religious and spiritual reliance is then simply evidence of a double oppression by the state. In this section, I present how contemporary Buddhism in Thai society has been exhibited within neoliberal projects through the concepts of individual self-reliance and financial investment in a religious sector in order to improve an individual's social and economic status. The following analysis has three parts. I begin with a brief discussion of the relationship between Buddhism and Thai society to give a picture of how Buddhism is rooted in the nation. Two crucial concepts in Thai Buddhism are then discussed: Karma and making merit. I propose that Buddhist teachings in the contemporary context are misinterpreted and commodified in order to contribute to keeping the Thai people socio-economically submissive.

Although citizens can freely choose their religion in Thailand, Buddhism is fundamentally rooted in Thai culture and society. Buddhism encourages people to pursue overall happiness by following Dharma, which means Buddha's teachings (Elliot 2014). In the nineteenth century, Buddhism was socially dominant in Thailand and Buddhist temples were significant public spaces wherein people gathered for social activities such as festive entertainment and ceremonies. More importantly, at that time, Buddhist temples predominantly featured as public schools for Thai boys.

Since the early twentieth century, when public facilities and business sectors such as schools, hospitals, and entertainment centres were established, the role of Buddhism in Thailand has shifted from public space for socialisation and education to a more restricted focus on religious practice and ceremonies. Buddhism is still firmly embedded in Thai people's everyday lives and religious activities such as offering food to monks, meditation and donating money to temples are still commonly practiced by Buddhists of all social classes.<sup>17</sup> In Thai education, students are required to study and practice Buddhist principles from the age of six. In public schools, prayer and meditation are conducted every morning before the first lesson. When Thai men turn twenty, they are traditionally encouraged to become monks for a short period.

To comprehend how Buddhism in Thailand is an essential tool that supports neoliberalism in Thai society, it is vital to underline that Buddhism is not only practiced as a religion and philosophy, but is also involved in other institutional contexts. Although monastic rules do not allow monks to be involved in politics, Duncan McCargo observes that Thai monks often have strong relationships with politicians, the monarchy and the military (2009).<sup>18</sup> This argument is also voiced by Poowin Bunyavejchewin who observes that:

Buddhist monks have played important roles as moral arbiters for the power holders. It should be mentioned that some famous Thai monks, who have high social capital, have a similar status to singers or movie stars. Whether intentionally or not, these “Buddhist stars” can give moral support to the established structure of legitimacy. (2011:53)

For example, during the brutal protest repression in 2010 Wor Vajiramedhi, a famous Buddhist monk who was a prominent popular figure among the Thai middle class,

---

<sup>17</sup> NSO (2014). The 2014 Survey on Conditions of Society, Culture and Mental Health. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

<sup>18</sup> A student massacre in 1976 was precipitated by the return of the former military leader, Thanom Kittikarjorn, who had been exiled from the country after a suppression of protest in 1974. Kittikarjorn legally returned to the country by ordaining as a monk at a royal temple, Wat Boworniwet, where he was later visited by the King and the Queen for support. Moreover, during the massacre of 1976, a Buddhist monk, Kittwhuto, published a statement that killing Communists was not sinful.

openly supported the government to repress the protest. Furthermore, some Buddhist principles have also been adapted to propagate King Bhumibol's economic campaign in Thailand since 2006, as discussed later in this chapter. This intertwined relationship between state, religion and monarchy affirms the role of the neoliberal developmental state by seeking to restructure its power not only through policies and regulation but also national sentiment and cultural practice. In the next section, I discuss Karma, a Buddhist belief that plays a vital role in supporting neoliberalism by providing a rationale for reducing citizens' reliance on the state.

### **Karma and the Predetermined Life of Struggle**

As mentioned earlier, the neoliberal agenda aims to isolate people's lives from state policies by shifting the socio-economic burden to individuals. In Thailand, this has become overlaid with the idea of Karma, which stresses that if any hardship such as poverty and illness occurs in life, this situation is out of the individual's control; it is a result of Karma. In this section, I argue that adopting Karma as a life principle in the contemporary context, which suggests that people's lives are predetermined, not only limits people's ability to improve their quality of life, but also shifts the cause of socio-economic problems to a supernatural source rather than being tied to structural inequalities.

According to Marta Elliott, the original idea of Karma entails a belief that everything that happens is a consequence of previous actions. These previous actions are also influenced by actions conducted in previous lives; therefore, it is impossible to change anything that has been done. Oliver Bennett comments that 'in both Hinduism and Buddhism karma is represented as an impersonal force that operates throughout the universe, much like gravity' (2015: 131). Nevertheless, according to Buddhist teachings, in Thai culture, it is believed that Karma status can be improved in the present by practicing Dharma and what is called 'making merit'. Despite the rapid industrialisation and economic reform in Thailand since the early twentieth century, Nancy Eberhardt points out that Karma still plays a crucial role in shaping Buddhist belief amongst people in rural Thailand:

Another important causal force in the adult worldview is karma (*Shan Kam*), the idea that all volitional actions have material consequences of some sort. Good or meritorious actions are said to generate 'merit' (*Kuso*) that will eventually, in this life or in one's future lives, result in some good consequence. (2014: 397)

According to Elliott, Thai Buddhists who have a poor quality of life are not eligible to access public goods; they have low incomes and low levels of education, and tend to depend heavily on the Karma principle. While Buddhism may lessen suffering and bring happiness to poor Thai Buddhists, it does not encourage people to challenge their destiny and the status quo. For example, no matter how hard poor people work, or how much they follow Buddha's teachings, if they are still poor and become unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives, the idea of predetermined Karma is employed to rationalise the austerity they are encountering. To solve this, they need to 'make merit' by participating in religious activities to achieve a better quality of life.

Although the belief in Karma tends to be adopted by people living in poverty, it is arguably still a common belief in society that the social hierarchy and social inequality are somewhat a predetermined destiny. Nattavud Pimpa expresses this argument in his study on an organisational culture in the Thai public sector:

Thais tend to believe in Karma and its effect on presence. This is related to their position in family, workplace and society. They are destined to be in the position to accept those who were born in the rich and powerful family. That is destiny, and they simply cannot change it. Their position is fixed by their familial and social status. The boss represents people at the top of an organisation or social hierarchy. This is their position, and you tend to accept them because of their position, not what they did for the organisation. (2012: 37)

Therefore, it is possible even for a neoliberal subject who is in the educated urban middle class to believe that it is their destiny, rather than how society is structured, to live with socio-economic uncertainty. In relation to neoliberal logic, I propose that the reproduction of Karma appears to support the idea of neoliberal individualistic

self-dependency; but to a greater extent, if individuals are unable to find solutions by themselves, then impersonal forces are used to explain the cause of their problems. Since this belief works in tandem with restricted welfare provisions and socio-economic burdens that are deemed to be personal responsibilities, I argue that it is problematic that Thai people are culturally shaped by the concept of Karma to be socially submissive and increasingly deterred from challenging the government. Instead, they might turn to religion and a belief in the supernatural, leading to the idea of making merit and donating as a solution to improve Karma.

### **Making Merit: Investing in Religion to Improve Quality of Life**

In principle, the philosophy of making merit in Buddhism is conceived as part of giving and sharing, which benefits not only society but also the givers as it diminishes their selfishness. For example, offering food to poor people who have insufficient money will make the giver happy because the giving diminishes the person's desire for the material, while the poor people are happy that they are not starving. Kan Arkkhawanno explains that Buddhist giving originally means offering not only material objects, but also non-physical objects such as knowledge, wisdom, education and forgiveness (2011). The common Buddhist belief of giving as an act of making merit is that, as a result of good deeds, one will have a better life in the present, in the future and also in the next life.

Nevertheless, Arkkhawanno and Emma Tomalin share a concern that in contemporary Thailand, rather than giving to other people, Thai Buddhists instead prefer to give material objects such as food and money to particularly favoured monks and temples rather than giving to the poor and needy in the community as an act of 'making merit' (Tomalin 2007). Elliot states that 'there is a strong emphasis in Thai Buddhism on performing meritorious acts such as donating money to the temple such that the financial upkeep of Buddhism in Thailand is largely borne by Thai citizens' (2014: 923). This act of giving, I argue, suggests a form of self-investment practiced in order to improve self-value as much as a hope to be released from socio-economic struggles. Recent research shows that many poor people in

rural areas of Thailand offer food to monks and become involved in religious activities in the belief that they will have better lives as a result (Elliot 2014). When deprived people rely on the religious sector, they are disconnected from the state — which is an ultimate goal of a neoliberal logic in transferring socio-economic responsibilities to individuals.

In contrast to the original idea whereby givers become selfless, I argue that in the neoliberal context it appears that giving in Thailand enhances givers' self-value by marking their importance in society. According to Marcel Mauss's sociological notion of 'the gift', giving forms part of the obligations that connect individuals socially. He argues that when people give gifts, they tend to present their generosity, gain respect from receivers, and expect the same in return. Giving thus also enhances the giver's self-recognition. As Mauss puts it:

If one gives things and returns them, it is because one is giving and returning 'respects' – we still say 'courtesies'. Yet it is also because by giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one 'owes' *oneself* – one's person and one's goods – to others. (1954: 59)

Mauss' statement underlines the way in which the material goods offered integrate with the idea of 'self', which is significant in the neoliberal context amidst inequality, uncertainty and anxiety. Middle-class Thai workers, who may not be seen as poor, are becoming more vulnerable as they live with uncertainty and anxiety, potentially losing their sense of self-worth, so I suggest that the act of showing merit makes them feel significant as a member of society. Extending this argument, the idea of showing merit in Thai Buddhism relates to the concept of donating. When socio-economic responsibilities are a burden for individuals, Thais tend not to seek help from the government but rely on donations. This explains the concept of the 'self-relying community' introduced previously, in which the Thai neoliberal state does not aim to promote the values of individualism to each individual as a single subject, but rather appoints a community, making people feel that there is a certain collective place for them. This, however, still resonates firmly with neoliberal goals.

Examples of how the idea of religious act of donations is attached to neoliberal individualism can be seen in many public campaigns. A donation campaign launched by The Mirror Foundation, a non-profit organisation aiming to develop society, encouraged people to donate unwanted clothes to raise funds to support further community improvement activities. The campaign's slogan was 'clearing out the house is equal to making merit'. The term 'making merit' is stressed as a means of religious acts to enhance individuals' merit levels rather than as a way of improving society and helping other people in the community.<sup>19</sup> Another case in 2017 profoundly demonstrates how public services rely on donations with support from the government. A Thai celebrity rock star, Toon Artiwara Kongmalai ran from the far south to the far north of the country to raise donations for eleven public hospitals. He stated that 'although I want to help all hospitals I cannot do it for seventy-seven provinces, so the donations will go to eleven provinces that are the centres in their areas, reducing the number of patients who travel far to Bangkok'.<sup>20</sup> Explicitly supported by the military state and the media, he was praised as a hero in society, and people ran after him to take selfies with him. He was able to raise more than US \$33.6 million from middle- and upper-class people, and his actions were also made into a documentary film called *2215* in 2018.<sup>21</sup>

I agree that donations and charitable giving are often a sign of generosity and sharing in society and are not entirely problematic. However, in the contemporary Thai context, donations are not only connected with the religious sector as happened in the earlier century but, with support from the state as most public services such as health and education and basic needs like clothes and food also rely on donations. The emergence of cooperation between the state and religious donations resonates

---

<sup>19</sup> The Mirror Foundation. (2016). Clear house = merit. The Mirror Foundation, 5 April. <https://www.facebook.com/mirrorf/photos/a.10150850788245009.405292.135097415008/10153415309560009/?type=3&theater> [Accessed 10 April 2016].

<sup>20</sup> Bangkok Post (2017). Toon Body Slam to run 2,191km for 11 hospitals. *Bangkok Post*, 4 October. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/nostalgia/1336456/toon-body-slam-to-run-2-191km-for-11-hospitals> [Accessed 20 September 2018].

<sup>21</sup> Boonprakob, N. (Director) (2018). *2215*. GDH 559 (Producer). 90 mins. Thailand. *2215* refers to the 2,215-kilometre journey that the singer undertook at the end of 2017.

with the neoliberal rationale in which the market and the state are harmonised. From the above discussions, it can be seen that the agency of Buddhism in Thailand is not merely viewed as a religious life philosophy but has played a role in fostering neoliberal self-investment through a religion and highlighting community-reliance through charities and donations. I argue that those who invest money in religious sectors may not necessarily hope to improve their quality of life but it could at least console them that they are at least a moral individual, if not a citizen who could live economically securely. Although the necessity of spending on religion is certainly less significant than investing in other life essentials such as education, health and housing, it is crucially evident that Buddhism in Thailand is a subtle cultural process that retains people in neoliberal society by distracting them from social inequalities. I argue that relying on an impersonal force or investing in religion or charity not only makes people ignorant and isolated from governance, but also keeps them content within the system, as a notion of limiting and adjusting one's life satisfaction to the given circumstances has become implanted in society. The next section moves on to discuss the Sufficiency Economy programme.

### **Sufficiency Economy and Neoliberal Thailand**

King Bhumibol, the late King of Thailand, introduced the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy (SE) in a birthday speech in 1974. At that time, in attempting to protect rural farmers from global market instabilities, SE emphasised self-reliance through the concept of Buddhism's Middle Way. The idea of the Middle Way asserted in SE focused on notions of being 'sufficient' and having 'enough' in terms of production and consumption. The Middle Way, in this sense, suggests being satisfied with what one already has, pushing the desire for material wealth into the realm of greed, which leads to unhappiness (Arinjayo 2004). The idea of SE was given further substance in 1992, when King Bhumibol introduced his 'New Theory', which suggested methods through which Thai farmers should manage natural resources. The theory was only a recommendation and was not widely recognised until the 1997 economic crisis when

it was adopted as official state guidance to encourage Thai people to be disciplined in their expenditure to prevent further financial risk. During Thaksin Shinawatra's government from 2001-2005, the scheme was put aside because the government not only managed the country's recovery from the economic crisis in 2001 but also restructured national economic policies by escalating budgets for small enterprises. Thus, SE's ideological stress on financial austerity was not in the spotlight at this time. From this point the government chose to stimulate the market by implementing state provisions such as the universal healthcare programme and increasing the minimum wage as well as escalating production and consumption in the Thai economy, for instance by offering financial funding for rural villages to create local products to sell in markets. In the meantime, public universities were heavily privatised during Thaksin's regime and there were many attempts to privatise other public infrastructure such as electricity, natural gas, and telecommunications (Mead 2008). I suggest that Thaksin's policies, to a certain extent, created the distinct character of a developmental neoliberal state in which boosting the economy and building infrastructure were central roles of the state, acting as a business. In fact, Thaksin clearly stated that he was the CEO of the country.<sup>22</sup>

Five years later, in 2006, Thaksin was exiled due to his hegemonic role in politics and the military junta seized power. SE was heavily promoted once again, not just as a life philosophy as happened in 1997 but as a significant national economic plan (Noy 2011). According to Amelia Rossi, in 2006, the idea of SE was employed as a political tool by the conservative authorities to cut back on Thaksin's investment policies (2012). King Bhumibol was also promoted through these campaigns as a great role model for SE, focusing on his humble, moderate, and sufficient lifestyle despite his royal wealth. Although SE was somewhat less popular in 2011 when the elected government returned to power, the ideology has still been embedded in many campaigns. In 2014, SE again became the official policy of the

---

<sup>22</sup> Crispin, S. W. (2003). Thailand: Prime Minister Mixes Business and Politics. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 December. <https://corpwatch.org/article/thailand-prime-minister-mixes-business-and-politics> [Accessed 22 July 2019].

junta government when dictatorship prime minister, Prayuth Chan-O-Cha declared that SE would be employed as the primary strategy to solve the current economic crisis in Thailand.<sup>23</sup>

SE has been propagated in various platforms such as textbooks, websites, short films, and TV dramas and commercials (Walker 2010). In 2008, the Ministry of Education (2008) implemented the new Basic Education Core Curriculum, which was an amended version of the 2001 curriculum. While the former had stated the importance of democracy, creativity, self-value and international knowledge, the latter emphasised nationalism, religion and the King, and SE was notably included in the curriculum.

As an ideology applying Buddhist teachings, SE suggests three main approaches to follow: ‘moderation’, ‘reasonableness’, and ‘self-immunity’. First, moderation promotes staying in the middle – not too much, not too little. For instance, production and consumption should not be excessive as this may lead to economic insecurity. Second, to be reasonable, the scheme proposes that a person should always be mindful when conducting any financial activity as it may cause risk. Prior to conducting any economic activities, people should be aware of the impact on themselves and the community. Third, the self-immunity approach means that someone should be personally prepared for any economic uncertainty that may occur. People should thus build personal protection against economic crises by saving and buying insurance without depending on government support (Wanasilp & Tangvitoontha 2015).

Although SE's approach claims to adopt the Buddhist Middle Way as a principle guideline, its ultimate idea in a sense aligns with the belief in Karma in terms of restricting class mobilisation. This argument is delivered by Bunyavejchewin who observes the linkage of SE and the Buddhist belief in Karma,

---

<sup>23</sup> Royal Thai Government (2015). Opening Keynote Speech by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Prime Minister of Thailand at the 47th Wharton Global Forum: Asia in a Borderless World, Shangrila Hotel, Bangkok, 13 March. <http://www.thaigov.go.th/index.php/th/government-en1/item/90591-90591.html> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

as an instrumental doctrine used by political power holders 'to justify limiting the governed in advancing their socioeconomic status. And it has also been used to support the king's economic concepts' (2011: 53). Moreover, the firm connection between SE and two national sectors, monarchy and Buddhism, was underpinned in the media. For instance, in 2007 a corporate social responsibility (CSR) commercial launched by a telecommunications company, DTAC, presents Bhutan as a country in which SE is actually a national economic scheme. This commercial promotes the genuine happiness of people, acquired from a simple way of living with nature, regardless of money and technology.<sup>24</sup> The commercial depicts the Bhutanese people farming happily and engaging with religion and temples, with the ultimate goal that individuals should be satisfied with their lives. Although it is unusual for Buddhist monks to be presented in commercials, the presenter is a Thai monk, who stresses that the true meaning of being sufficient should start by limiting material desires. The ending encourages people to be satisfied with what they already have and empowers the agenda by praising the King of Thailand as a role model for the scheme.

In practice, various SE projects are conducted by the state and applied mainly to rural residents. As a tool to deter people from seeking class mobility or challenging their circumstances, most projects focus on developing natural resources in northern and north-eastern parts of Thailand, which are not only major agricultural areas but also impoverished.<sup>25</sup> However, the outcome was problematic. Although some villagers suggested that SE seemed to have good intentions, it has been impractical to relieve their poverty or sustainably improve their living conditions, which are limited by economic circumstances. Research shows that while farmers in the north-east who followed SE became satisfied with their lives, they did not want their children to be like them. Rather, these people wanted education, better incomes,

---

<sup>24</sup> DTAC (2007). *Bhutan* [video]. [http://www.adintrend.com/show\\_ad.php?id=1546](http://www.adintrend.com/show_ad.php?id=1546) [Accessed 5 January 2016].

<sup>25</sup> In each project, state officers conduct fieldwork to provide people in the area with knowledge on how to develop existing natural resources to consume and produce them in the most efficient way (Rossi 2012).

a better quality of life and release from poverty (Seubsman et.al. 2013). This affirms how SE resonates with neoliberal logic, transferring socio-economic burdens to individuals and communities. Nonetheless, since this thesis focuses on neoliberal impacts in the urban context of Bangkok, if SE in practice is largely applied to rural villagers, it is important to elaborate on how the SE ideology came to be inserted into Bangkok people's lives. In what follows, I discuss the use of the media in order to pinpoint the promotion of SE in the urban context by discussing three TV commercials, which were launched by the government and aired nationwide.

In the first example, a commercial was launched by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) in 2006 using the slogan 'poverty will be just the past if we conduct SE'. This commercial presents people living in rural areas peacefully fishing and farming. It stresses three solutions to Thai people's poverty: 'cut expenses', 'have a frugal life' and 'work hard'. The commercial concludes that the right way of living is the way of sufficiency.<sup>26</sup> The second example, a commercial by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration broadcast in 2006, focuses not only on rural farmers, but suggests three guidelines for urban people to live, eat and spend. For living it shows an overflowing glass of water, for eating it shows a full dish of rice, and for spending it depicts a lady holding many shopping bags. In the second part of the commercial, the word 'Por', or 'sufficient' in English, is added to each part. For 'sufficient living' the glass is only a quarter full of water, for 'sufficient eating' the dish of rice is half full, and for 'sufficient spending' only one bag is left in the lady's hand. The narrator says that if people lived moderately and were not greedy, they would be happy. Finally, it states that the people of Bangkok and Thailand should respectfully employ SE as a goal of living, as recommended by the late King.<sup>27</sup> The third case presents the idea that 'money cannot buy happiness'. A commercial by TMB Bank, a national military bank, launched in 2007 presents a story of a middle-class office worker in Bangkok

---

<sup>26</sup> MoI (2006). *Sufficiency Economy* [video]. Bangkok, Thailand: Ministry of the Interior. [http://www.adintrend.com/show\\_ad.php?id=1304](http://www.adintrend.com/show_ad.php?id=1304) [Accessed 5 April 2016].

<sup>27</sup> Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (2006). *Chee Wit Phor Dee* [video]. [http://www.adintrend.com/show\\_ad.php?id=850](http://www.adintrend.com/show_ad.php?id=850) [Accessed 3 April 2016].

who has been laid off and now runs his own small street food-vending business. It conveys that the man is rich: not rich in financial status, but rich in happiness due to his simple way of living. It shows that the man can now see the beauty of life, and suggests that he has his own ‘company car’, which is actually a small, dilapidated vending cart. The end of the commercial again employs King Bhumibol as a role model.<sup>28</sup>

These three examples of public TV commercials promoting SE illustrate that the agendas profoundly reflect the logic of neoliberal self-dependence. As demonstrated previously, poor villagers came to realise that SE had hardly improved their quality of life. The first TV commercial stressed the simple rural life, thus, I argue, targeting urban middle-class audiences by demonstrating a remote peaceful scene to justify the scheme. The picture of a simple but happy life is a fantasy that romanticises the socio-economic difficulties faced by poor people, especially in rural areas, in order to reassure the urban middle class — whose spatial memories are isolated from the countryside — that they can conform to the neoliberal track since there are still people economically below them. Moreover, I contend that the reproduction of this sort of fantasy potentially creates a class barrier between the rural poor and the urban middle class by producing the myth that socio-economic inequality is solely determined by an individual’s ability, not a collective social movement, which again plays along with neoliberal reasoning.

While the first commercial implicitly creates a romantic landscape of SE, the second and third commercial shine a direct spotlight on the middle-class audiences in Bangkok. These people may already be able to access all basic needs, but the commercial suggests that it is also their personal responsibility to manage their desires in order to remain in their social position. The Bangkok office worker who becomes an entrepreneurial food vendor in the third example exhibits Wendy Brown’s concept of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, not because of his new career path

---

<sup>28</sup> TMB Bank (2007). *Chee Wit Por Piang* [video].<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXaDMlrrMfk> [Accessed 5 April 2016].

but because of the lack of sufficient social security to support his state of joblessness. The only safety net available is for people to borrow more money to invest in their lives and adjust and reinvent themselves.

In addition, SE's call to restrict expenditure is becoming a desirable common sense ethos applied to all aspects of society. This is shown by the case of an urban man who posted on a popular online forum describing how he could survive for a month with a budget of only 800 THB (£20), which is only 11% of the minimum monthly wage. His case was widely praised as a model for urban people, and in 2014 his story was produced as a short film called *A Simple Plan*, presenting how happiness can be secured from minimal resources.<sup>29</sup> With regard to the relationship between SE and neoliberalism in the urban context, in terms of ideology, public promotion and actual methods, I argue that the SE ideology may positively support the neoliberal agenda by distracting people from socio-economic inequality and make them content with minimal resources. Thai people are encouraged by the state to be self-sufficient when in fact they are still living in vulnerable socio-economic circumstances. Achieving a good quality of life or basic needs is stressed as an entrepreneurial project, through self-reliance and self-management. Having access to a secure income and public services such as education and healthcare is evidently irrelevant to the SE campaign. Although, in practice, it appears that SE has not offered what it promises, Darren Noy argues that it is still viewed with respect and rarely criticised owing to the late King's hegemonic influence coupled with the dominant dictatorship government (2011). Though some people may disagree with the principles, they have no choice but to adjust themselves to fit into society. Due to the limited state support in Thailand, I argue that, in practice, the majority of Thai workers are, ironically, those who know best how to practice SE in real life, regardless of SE lessons, otherwise they could easily become bankrupt.

---

<sup>29</sup> BugabooTV (2014). *Simple Plan: Chee Wit Pad Roy [800 Baht Life]* [video].[https://www.bugaboo.tv/lifeactually/simpleplan#collapse\\_460](https://www.bugaboo.tv/lifeactually/simpleplan#collapse_460) [Accessed 5 January 2019].

In relation to Buddhism and SE under Thai socioeconomic conditions, I propose that these cultural acknowledgements not only appear to be problematic in Thai society, where most people are still living with socio-economic uncertainty, but more importantly are also employed as a tool to rationalise neoliberal progress. While the discourse of simplicity, being content, satisfied and sufficient with what one already has arguably oppresses people in submissive conditions, in practice, the neoliberal circumstances of Thai society crucially merge into the intensive consumer society and unfettered material consumption. Similarly to other intensive consumerist contexts such as the US or Japan, the fantasised spaces of consumption still play a significant role in people's everyday lives in Thailand. In the light of this paradox, I ultimately argue that the concepts of Buddhist teachings and SE in Thailand as part of the contemporary neoliberal operation are simply an excuse to protect the government when individuals fall into debt or face economic failure by blaming their own reckless financial management. In other words, these ideologies are the state's projection of how an individual's life should be, but they are unworkable. In reality, the state and monopoly businesses in the country are treating people as commodities and encouraging them to act like commodities through intensive consumption, which I elaborate on in the following chapters.

More importantly, the use of Buddhism and SE is not simply a socio-cultural manifestation of neoliberal logic but also a necessary departure point to comprehend how the notion of happiness is culturally rehearsed and performed in neoliberal Thailand. In both Buddhism and SE, happiness can be achieved by an individual adjusting to surrounding contexts, rather than challenging them. The concepts of happiness and well-being are clearly located under the rubrics of individual mindfulness and self-investment to enhance self-worth, self-management, and self-responsibility. These aspects are the foundations of the performance of happiness in the neoliberal context and are discussed later in this thesis. In the next chapter, I discuss the concept of neoliberal happiness and the performance of happiness in Thailand. I explore how the tendencies towards happiness performed by Thai

authorities circulate around the central purposes of Buddhism and SE but clearly manifest themselves in other social spheres such as the culture of Thai smiles, tourism campaigns and political events. I suggest that the performance of happiness is conceived to mask neoliberal uncertainty and fear in order to convince Thai neoliberal subjects that they still belong to society.

## **Chapter Three: Neoliberal Happiness and Performing Happiness in Neoliberal Thailand**

The study of happiness has preoccupied philosophers for decades, as they have attempted to explicate humans' ability to live fulfilling lives. Recently, research on happiness has become more prominent in a range of disciplines, including psychology, economics, political sciences and cultural studies. The central aim of this chapter is not to attempt to define happiness nor to suggest methods to achieve or measure happiness. Its primary focus is on demonstrating how the notion of happiness is conceived, explained and used as a non-static tool by different disciplines to define human emotions within the neoliberal context. In Chapter Two, I investigated how neoliberal rationality has fostered entrepreneurial individualisation, turning every domain of an individual's life into a market, and stimulating socio-economic uncertainty and individual fear. In this chapter, I argue that performing happiness amid neoliberal contexts designates a scene of negotiation between fearful neoliberal subjects and socio-economic instability. I also propose that in neoliberal reality, happiness is increasingly commodified and individuals must invest in it in order to use it as a prop to equip themselves to survive within neoliberal settings. Ultimately, I suggest that the performance of happiness organised by the neoliberal state may consequentially mask and play a role in perpetuating neoliberal inequality in the face of socio-economic uncertainty.

In order to develop my argument, I divide this chapter into two main parts. The first part examines happiness and neoliberal happiness, and the second explores the performance of happiness manifested by Thai governments. In the first part I review the happiness literature from various disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, economics and political economy. I selected these different fields because each of them contributes to articulating the notion of happiness from dynamic perspectives that serve different purposes such as viewing happiness as an ideology, a form of personal management and governmental policies. I then draw on

these findings to ask questions about how these different views on happiness serve as entities to insidiously negotiate with neoliberal conditions. I also interrogate how the shift to individualisation under neoliberalism has contributed to a tendency to view happiness to a greater extent as an individual life project. Neoliberal happiness, I suggest, is crucially partnered with a rhetoric of positive attitudes and self-care for which citizens must take responsibility. On the other hand, happiness in relation to a decent quality of life and socio-economic security, which is enhanced by the collective society and state-provided public services, is arguably disregarded.

In this chapter I place an emphasis on happiness as derived from optimism. I draw on ideas articulated in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) as a fundamental framework in comprehending how optimism is utilised as a prop of adjustment for neoliberal actors to comply with the incoherence of neoliberal life under the rubric of precarity. In order to underscore this argument, I begin with Lionel Tiger's classic explanation on optimism as an individual trait constituted as hopes. Moving from the personal level, I draw on Oliver Bennett's discussion from *Cultures of Optimism: The Institutional Promotion of Hope* (2015) to investigate how optimism is insinuated into everyday life. Furthermore, to exemplify how cultures of optimism are directed from an organisational scale, I discuss the field of positive psychology, which aims to make neoliberal life endurable by driving individuals to adapt and reinvent themselves to be positive, contented and happy with their present conditions. It is important to note here that though this thesis also views consumption as allied to happiness in a neoliberal regime, this aspect is later articulated in detail in Chapters Four to Six.

The second part of this chapter moves on to demonstrate the multiple ways that performances of happiness are manifest in neoliberal Thailand and to examine how this has been orchestrated by successive Thai administrations. I argue that the term happiness has been staged, restaged and recycled repetitively by Thai states on different occasions as the symbolic means to promote the image of a happy nation to national and international audiences. I propose that the term happiness, particularly

during moments of national crisis, has been repetitively devised as an essential prop by the state to recuperate the conflicts as discussed in Turner's concept of social drama in the introduction. I have selected three case studies to investigate how happiness has been performed in this sense: the culture of smiles, tourism campaigns and political campaigns. My aim in assembling these examples is to reveal the tendency toward an outward projection of performed happiness through different agencies in culture, media, and public spaces governed by Thai authorities.

The reason for drawing on the culture of smiles is that it has been rooted in Thai culture through the slogan 'The Land of Smiles' which has been repetitively promoted in tourism campaigns since the 1970s. In this section, I track how the culture of smiles is invented and narrated as part of national identity while the main question focuses on how the concept and practice of smiles has been employed by the authorities to emphasise the country as a happy nation. I interrogate how the culture of smiles manifested by the Thai state serve as a mask shielding submission, oppression, fear and ignorance which is echoed in positive psychology in promoting individual adjustment as a tool to negotiate with neoliberal struggles.

Regarding contemporary tourism campaigns, I chose this domain because the term happiness has regularly been utilised as a keyword in tourism campaigns in Thailand to attract international tourists through online media and TV platforms. In my discussion I ask how the notion of happiness mediated in Thai tourism campaigns resonates strongly with neoliberal rationality. I contemplate how Thai governments since the 2000s have implanted the idea of happiness in their tourism campaigns. I point out that the notion of happiness of Thai people presented by Thai governments has been restaged in the form of optimism, consumption, entertainment, cheerfulness and being content with existing resources serving neoliberal logics.

The last section discusses how happiness was promoted and performed by the state during a period of political turmoil in the country, through a campaign called 'Returning Happiness'. The reason for examining this case is that this campaign was

used twice during the political conflicts in the country by two different governments, first after the suppression of protests in 2010 and again after the military coup in 2014, to conceal the political upheavals that had occurred. In this section, influenced by Marvin Carlson's ideas of ghostliness in *The Haunted Stage* (2001), I explore how those governments reconfigured the notion of happiness and recycled the reconciliation campaign by drawing on cultural memory - particularly national sentiments - such as royalism and nationalism, to underscore their power and distract citizens from injustice. Observing the protest site as a stage, I ask how the undemocratic authorities have rewritten public space to perform a version of happiness that serves to mask the unhappiness that occurred during these moments of political conflict in Thailand. In addition to the use of public space, I also address how happiness has been mediated through songs, and a national TV programme. Ultimately, I observe in this section that, under a dominant dictatorial authority, neoliberalism is accommodated to a greater extent by the Thai state, while the notion of happiness is performed and constantly recalled under the rubrics of self-adjustment, optimism, consumption, entertainment, political stability, and national unity as a tool to mask socio-political inequality.

### **Happiness and Neoliberal Happiness**

Happiness has been the subject of study in many disciplines in the last decade. According to Paul Dolan, a professor of behavioural science, happiness has been broadly defined as a pleasurable state of mind with a sense of purpose (2014). In recent happiness research in philosophy, both hedonism and eudemonia have been used as frameworks to comprehend, measure and explicate human happiness. Hedonism was first introduced by Epicurus as the mental achievement of maximising the pleasure of an experience. Hedonistic happiness is time-limited, and is achieved by satisfying an individual through a specific activity (Capuccino 2013). Dusana Dorjee points out that, nowadays, hedonistic happiness relies heavily on people's desires for material possessions, which do not last long (2014). Hence,

hedonistic happiness to a certain extent intersects with consumer culture, whereby pleasure can be achieved by instant investment in either material or experiential forms. While hedonistic happiness stresses a certain pleasurable state of mind, eudemonia refers to Aristotle's claim that the ability to achieve tasks also makes human life worthwhile (Capuccino 2013). In this regard, Roy Jackson notes that external elements, including circumstances, environment and social status, and internal pleasure may contribute to an individual's happiness. Eudemonia includes social processes such as positive relationships with others, including family and friends, personal growth such as career success and skills development, and an overall purpose or meaning in life. Jackson suggests that, in stressing life fulfilment, eudemonia plays an important role in the concepts of 'self-sufficiency' and 'self-actualisation' (2007: 2-3).

Happiness research in economics is one of the most obvious fields that has attempted to measure human happiness and draw connections with public policies (Graham 2009; Blanchflower & Oswald 2011; Hämäläinen & Michaelson 2014). Economists define happiness as subjective well-being, drawing on ideas of both hedonism and eudemonia to study human happiness shaped by socio-economic circumstances. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines and measures happiness in terms of life evaluation, affect and eudemonia (O'Donnell et al. 2014). In this case, happiness measurements are based primarily on self-reported responses to questions in categories such as income, career, health and marital status. If people say they are happy, it is assumed that they are happy. This infers that the happiest people make the happiest society, even though the definition of happiness is predetermined. I argue that the deficiency in this approach is that it to an extent relies on self-reports on life-satisfaction, yet people may be satisfied with their lives even under conditions of socio-economic uncertainty. In fact, Carol Graham suggests that some people in countries with greater economic inequality are more satisfied than those in more affluent countries because they adapt to existing conditions:

In the same way that individuals adapt to the benefits (and also to the negative externalities) of overall rising income trends, they also adapt to the costs of rising crime and corruption trends. In the same way that income increases across time may not result in commensurate increases in well-being, increasing crime and corruption may not result in commensurate decreases in well-being as societies adapt to these phenomena. (Graham 2009: 212)

Moreover, I suggest that relying on the self-reporting method to measure happiness may undermine the specific cultural context. An obvious example is neoliberal Thailand where, as depicted in Chapter Two, Buddhism and the notion of Sufficiency Economy meant that Thai people have adapted to worsening conditions. They are reported to be content with their lives, especially in rural areas, even though the quality of their education, health and food has deteriorated (Guillen-Royo et al. 2013).

While economists have sought to measure how people's happiness enhances society, the recently developed field of positive psychology aims to offer methods for individuals to achieve happiness individually. According to Martin Seligman, positive thinking is the crucial path to happiness; hence, individuals who are able to adopt more positive attitudes will be more happy with their lives (2006). Whereas eudemonia in philosophy focuses on the concepts of self-fulfilment and life achievement, positive psychology reconfigured these concepts by suggesting that life achievement is attained if one has a positive mindset despite challenging external conditions. Therefore, positive psychology involves functions of optimism, which Seligman aims to insert not only at a personal level but also at an organisational level. This field of happiness research is, in my view, critically problematic due to how it can implicitly support neoliberal conditions. Not only does it view happiness as an outcome or a life-goal as economists suggest, but it also stresses that the quality of being happy is an essential tool for survival within an unfair and unequal society. To elaborate how positive psychology aligns sharply with neoliberal reasoning, I return to discuss this point later in this chapter.

Changing the focus to the lens of political economy, Benjamin Radcliff supports a 'bottom-up' model of happiness by perceiving it as a consequence of social structures (2013: 77-88). While a top-down model would suggest that human happiness is partly genetic and is not easily affected by external conditions, the bottom-up model engages with John Locke's idea that the mind is formed by experiences and feelings that are objectively reflected by the external world (Feist et al. 1995). Bottom-up theories argue that universal human needs play a key role in happiness. Happiness in this view is largely determined by events and situations both social and physical indicators, such as gender, race, education, income, employment, social connections, health, religion, and cognitive and emotional disposition. These factors are similar to the approach adopted by economists, but rather than relying on self-reporting and self-evaluation methods, people's basic social needs are a key. A principal theory supporting this idea is Ruut Veenhoven's 'livability theory' (1999). Since quality of life and happiness are intertwined, Veenhoven stresses that, in order to enhance people's happiness, improving livability is crucial. This improvement might be organised by society designing means to enhance quality of life for all by fulfilling people's social needs and reducing social inequalities through things such as social security, liberty and secure incomes. I suggest that this point of view accords with the idea of the welfare state in which human happiness, in terms of quality of living, is maximised by the state's resource management.

The idea of livability, as a tool for a state to enhance people's happiness intersects with Abraham Maslow's renowned five basic needs and how they relate to neoliberal conditions. These five needs are physiological needs, safety and security, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. Physiological needs are those required for survival, such as food, clothing and shelter. When these needs are satisfied, people then need safety and security, including physical security such as health and low crime rates, financial and job security, and social justice. Love and belonging refer not only to sexual and romantic relationships, but also to a sense of belonging in society, connections with others and a lack of isolation or loneliness.

Following social connections, esteem is another vital basic need, as human beings need to be respected by others. Satisfaction of these basic needs will lead to self-actualisation, where people are confident about living in society (1943: 370-396)

In a neoliberal society, I propose that an absence of basic needs does not necessarily indicate that an individual lacks shelter, food or a job. Instead, there is a sense in which basic needs become compromised under persistent socio-economic uncertainty. For instance, reliance on charity and donations is becoming increasingly necessary as the structure of society does not allow people to rise beyond poverty, as I have shown in the previous chapter on donation schemes in Thailand. Similarly, a report from April 2019 shows that the number of people who rely on the UK's biggest food bank increased drastically over three years, causing them to feel embarrassed and ashamed.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, satisfaction of physiological needs has also come to mean reliance on cheap, unhealthy, high-fat foods to gain sufficient energy to work as appeared in the US (Schrecker & Bamba 2015: 23-40). Absence of shelter might instead be seen as sharing a tiny flat because the rent is too high for one person to afford, or it might be seen as being burdened with the debt of a large mortgage throughout one's life. With regard to safety and security, I have already discussed how neoliberal subjects in Thailand live with uncertain socio-economic status and insufficient support from the state to safeguard their lives when they fall off the competitive track. More importantly, neoliberal individualisation, which increasingly isolates people from collective society to focus only on their personal benefits, is thus incompatible with Maslow's concept of love and belonging. Consequently, when these five basic needs are not gratified, neoliberal subjects lose their self-confidence and sense of self-actualisation.

Drawing on these perspectives on happiness, I insist that human happiness is somewhat subjective and perhaps not a thing to be given a concrete definition. However, I see it as problematic when institutional agencies anticipate human happiness and use it as a tool to steer individuals and society without considering

---

<sup>30</sup> Coughlan, S. (2019). Food bank supplies help record numbers. *BBC*, 25 April. <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-48037122> [Accessed 24 July 2019].

social needs, because this could engender neoliberal logic in fostering individualism and isolating people from social engagements.

In light of this, I propose that the performance of happiness in the neoliberal context deals, to a great extent, with notions of happiness determined solely by individual emotional, physical, and social responsibilities. This sort of happiness is intimately connected with the positive psychology of adapting and adjusting oneself to be happy in order to be able to carry out other tasks in one's life. To pinpoint the relation to neoliberal logic, being happy goes beyond being a prospective trait and becomes an essential life project, as a tool to achieve other things in life. As Ahmed proposes:

Not only does happiness become an individual responsibility, a redescription of life as a project, but it also becomes an instrument, as a means to an end, as well as an end. We make ourselves happy, as an acquisition of capital that allows us to be or to do this or that, or even to get this or that. (2010: 10)

To clarify this argument, in the next section I discuss the idea of neoliberal happiness in relation to optimism which is crucial to the performance of happiness in neoliberal society in terms of how optimism may feature as a crucial tool to enhance a person's happiness by encouraging individual adjustments in order to fit in with neoliberal conditions.

### **Neoliberalism and Optimism**

Lionel Tiger defines the concept of optimism in *Optimism: the biology of hope* (1979) as an individual's positive mood and attitude toward the future. Tiger characterises optimism in terms of big optimism and little optimism. While big optimism is associated with large-scale hopes for society, such as overcoming political and economic struggles, little optimism relates to the personal scale, such as hopes of securing a job or recovering from illness. On both large and small scales, the tendency for optimism is centrally located within subjective viewpoints instead of external circumstances. However, I suggest that, under the neoliberal regime,

optimism should not be perceived as a merely individual trait. By involving the practice of positive thinking, optimism is used as a tool for enabling vulnerable individuals to survive difficult times by adjusting their attitudes and projecting positive energy.

In *Cruel Optimism* Berlant has made a significant contribution to thinking through the role of optimism within neoliberalism. According to Berlant, the promise of a traditional sense of the good-life fantasy such as job security, social mobility, socio-economic equality and durable intimacy has been broken under the rubric of neoliberal precarity. In this light, Berlant is concerned that the entity of optimism is transformed into the aesthetic of adjustment. Instead of holding expectations about a future happy life, vulnerable individuals adjust themselves to be optimistic about the incoherency of life such as overworking in order to compensate for debts and unstable incomes. In her analysis of the film *Rosetta*, Berlant points out that socio-economic striving has been normalised. For instance, working hard and having a low-paid job are narrated as an ordinary situation. Nonetheless, as optimism gains ground, Berlant notes that it should not be seen merely as a delusion that distracts neoliberal subjects from a difficult reality, but rather as a mode of living (2011: 8). Hence, optimism goes beyond being a personal trait and attitude, as coined by Tiger, but becomes an essential instrument to be able to efficiently survive. For example, being not only hard-working, but also optimistic in the workplace, improves one's prospects of being hired and promoted, and ultimately remaining in the job market. Winners are depicted as happy individuals with positive attitudes to life, whereas losers are obsessed with stress and depression. Optimism in this sense thus deals with the affective present in which people have to adjust their mindset that 'everything is going to be okay'. In this vein, Berlant coined the term 'precarious bodies' as she explains:

Precairous bodies, in other words, are not merely demonstrating a shift in the social contract, but in ordinary affective states. This instability requires, if not psychoanalytic training in contingency management, embarking on an intensified and stressed out learning

curve about how to maintain footing, bearings, a way of being, and new modes of composure amid unraveling institutions and social relations of reciprocity. (2011: 197)

In relation to the performance of happiness, I find that Berlant's observation on optimism illuminates this thesis in comprehending how individuals are required to adjust themselves to be optimistic and capable of managing their own life project under neoliberalism. To put it in another way, being happy is not as essential as believing that he or she is happy, and being optimistic is a fundamental script that enables neoliberal actors to generate, encourage, and perform happiness all by themselves in any number of disordered settings such as precariousness in employment and financial burdens. More often than not, the quality of optimism thus facilitates the performance of happiness in neoliberal contexts to be more efficient as a scene of negotiation that sustains neoliberal life. Berlant notes that:

Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism's negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently. (2011: 14)

Having discussed Berlant's work that explores optimism as a sense of negotiation conceived under neoliberal settings, what is clear is that various social institutions play a crucial role in appointing, normalising, and underlining the advantages of being optimistic. Bennett argues that cultures of optimism are promoted by various institutions, such as the workplace, democratic politics, the family, religions, and in everyday life, all directing individuals to hold hopes and adjust themselves and be positive about their lives. For instance, Bennett suggests that religion often plays a vital role in promoting optimism, as he writes, 'religions offer optimism and hope, albeit only to some people under certain conditions, in the face of the most intractable problems of human existence' (2015: 119). This relates to the discussion in the previous chapter on how Buddhist belief in Thai culture has been interpreted as a means to convince people to be contented with what they already have and that

Karma promises a better time in the next life. One of the essential examples of how optimism is institutionally promoted can be seen in a field called ‘positive psychology’.

Positive psychology is a developing field that arguably blurs the lines between happiness and optimism. Seligman observes that optimism is a trait that enables a person to achieve happiness: happy people are more optimistic as they see troubles as being controllable, and in turn being optimistic makes them happier. According to Anisha Datta and Indranil Chakraborty, in the US, positive psychology and the happiness industry have flourished amid the rise of neoliberal capitalism since the 1990s. The positive psychology agenda aims to offer a route to happiness, assuming that this can be achieved through individual psychological adjustments. Positive psychology focuses on functioning well by following specific guidelines derived from personal actions. In other words, positive psychology focuses only on an individual’s state of mind through personal experiences and mind management, triggering their ability to be happy, while external adverse circumstances such as socio-economic conditions are irrelevant. In focusing selectively on positivity, positive psychology is thus closely associated with the idea of optimism.

Positive psychology plays a vital role in neoliberal reality, as it is being developed and adapted as an organisational tool to enhance employees’ performance by making them feel happy with their career positions (Bennett 2015: 58-89). I argue that this institutional manifestation of optimism is closely associated with Berlant’s concept of ‘cruel optimism’ and the neoliberal turn in instilling the process of individualisation and attitudes toward self-care, convincing people to adapt and adjust to uncertain and vulnerable circumstances. In order to retain labour under uncertain and insecure economic conditions, workplaces require methods and techniques to make workers feel optimistic and hopeful about what they are doing.

To exemplify this matter in Thailand, it is worth drawing on a case from an interview I conducted during my fieldwork with an interviewee who used theatrical

methods within life-coaching.<sup>31</sup> He suggested that, at present, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a psychological approach launched in the 1970s in the United States, has been playing a significant role in organisations in Thailand. The method was initially employed in psychotherapy, which claimed it was a tool to organise people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours through the use of language. Although the approach has been criticised for its hypnotising methods, 'NLP training courses abound and NLP now seems to be most influential in management training, lifestyle coaching, and so on' (Heap 2008: 7). According to the interviewee, NLP has been widely orchestrated by many major organisations in Thailand that claim to produce the highest performance among employees through the discourse of happiness and optimism. My interviewee gave me an example from one of the training sessions conducted in a well-known corporation in Thailand. The training encouraged employees to recall every single good thing that had happened in their lives. Employees were asked to repeatedly say 'thank you' for those happinesses that had occurred, stay optimistic, and neglect any problems at work. Most importantly, a trainer would keep telling employees throughout the session that, in his words, 'we could never challenge the employers, if there was a problem, it's always our own task to manage'.

I contend that this process does not shift an individual's attention away from the conditions under which they are struggling, but it reinterprets the conditions as a banal ordinary, which cannot be changed, but can be managed. This phenomenon occurs not only in organisations but also in other subtle forms such as self-help books and life-coaching programmes that provide guidance on being positive with life. In this light, I argue that under neoliberalism, the optimistic hopes and fantasies of a good and happy life are no longer about a long-term aspect of a social and individual life, but increasingly focus on adjusting personal attitudes in order to live, work, consume and survive happily from one moment to the next. In other words, returning to Tiger's definition of optimism, neoliberal optimism is arguably less

---

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee Two Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 9 May 2017

involved with the large social scale, such as political democracy and socio-economic equality and security. Rather, the light of optimism shines on the personal scale of surviving in the neoliberal market. Overall, to underpin the purpose of this section I suggest that the notion of happiness which will be elaborated under the rubric of performance in this thesis is viewed as a non-static instrument that circulates around the idea of self-adjustment as much as self-reinvention, temporary pleasurable experiences, and positive emotions through optimism in order to mask, negotiate, and compensate for, neoliberal struggles.

### **Performance of Happiness in Neoliberal Thailand**

In this section, I investigate the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand to demonstrate how successive state administrations have culturally and officially embedded the prominence of happiness for national citizens and external audiences. I discuss three different but related cases: the culture of smiling, happiness performed in tourist campaigns, and a political campaign called ‘Returning Happiness’. Throughout the analysis, I consider the performance of happiness as a national production scripted and staged for different times and socio-political contexts. In the light of nation and performances, Nadine Holdsworth posits that:

[F]or many, a ‘national’ play or performance is embedded in the national fabric and part and parcel of a nation’s cultural memory— the cultural DNA that contributes to a sense of national consciousness. But importantly this is not a static process; a national culture—and this includes individual national texts—are organic, and their meanings shift and morph to account for changing times, preoccupations and levels of national confidence. (2014: 7)

In relation to my following analysis, although the cases I draw on are social performances that occur in public space or via the media rather than traditional theatrical performance, I found that they share similar national manifestations. In Thailand the process of performing happiness has been significantly repeated, reconfigured and retold through changing contexts until the quality of being happy

has become part of national identity. This process is informed by Homi Bhabha's proposition in terms of national narratives in modern societies. Bhabha remarks that the ambivalent relation between the authority and the people — in which the people are not merely the national objects but also subjects of a process of national signification and identification — enables the nation to become the site of 'writing the nation' within changing contexts. Bhabha insists that:

The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. (1990: 297)

In the same way Bhabha and Holdsworth observe that the nation is often reproduced and narrated in performative forms during national crises or at a particular moment, I also contemplate the selected cases of social performances of happiness conducted by Thai states as a means to aesthetically produce and stage the happy image of the country during heightened moments of political and socio-economic conflict. For instance, happiness has been intensively promoted in tourism campaigns amid socio-economic inequality; or political campaigns promoting happiness were also recycled to promote an image of national happiness after political turmoil and military coups.

In the following discussion, I articulate the ways in which the process of performing happiness in Thailand, as conducted by the Thai authorities during different periods, significantly involve a sense of recalling national consciousness and culture together with celebratory events highlighting joyful moments to conceal the national disruptions. Carlson's ideas around ghostliness anticipate the ways in which memory is produced and reproduced in theatre productions as ghosts reappearing through audience reception. Similarly, I argue that the term happiness has been narrated, recalled, and performed repeatedly by Thai administrations during socio-political transitions as ghosts to unify and reconfigure the nation that serves to mask inequity in the society. At the same time, people, as both audiences and

performers, are invited to adjust and participate in the performance of happiness that has been restaged in changing contexts.

## **The Land of Smiles**

Thailand is widely known within the tourism industry as the 'land of smiles'. A smile is a facial expression understood to appear when people are amused or in a state of enjoyment. However, smiles do not always indicate happiness, but may be a sign of politeness or embarrassment (Ochs et al. 2012: 1). In Thailand, kindness and happiness are concepts commonly used to explain the meaning of the slogan 'land of smiles' (Pongpaiboon et al. 2015). I argue in the following discussion that the smiling embedded in Thai culture, and used to promote tourism, is fostered as a mask of being modest, defensive, hospitable and polite, and is ultimately related to the notion of happiness in terms of positive emotions and optimism through self-adjustment. However, happiness performed through the culture of smiles in Thailand does not relate to people's quality of living.

There are various opinions regarding the cultural origin of 'the land of smiles'. Historian and National Artist in Literature, Sujit Wongtedj explains that the idea of 'the land of smiles' initially related to Thailand's historically agricultural culture. Thailand, formerly called 'Siam', was part of the Suvarnabhumi region in the Southeast Asian Peninsula (2008). Wongtedj explains that in 6 BE, Siamese people living from agricultural activities that relied on rain and sun to grow their crops conducted rituals and ceremonies begging nature for water. Smiles formed part of the actions of those ceremonies, expressing modesty and a surrender to nature. Wongtedj further poses the significance of surrendering and moderate culture in Thai society in the seventeenth century, when foreigners started to trade with Siam and an absolute monarchy governed the country.<sup>32</sup> According to Simon De la Loubère,

---

<sup>32</sup> The Office of the National Culture Commission of Thailand annually confers the title 'National Artist' on Thai artists in various disciplines who have produced artworks that preserve and extend Thai culture and arts.

politeness was a core identity for the Siamese.<sup>33</sup> Since these foreigners were privileged traders, people avoided talking to them, as they were aware that if any arguments occurred, they would be defeated in court, which would lead to severe punishment (1687, cited in Pongpaiboon et al. 2015). Siamese people thus taught their children, who worked as state officers, to keep quiet and smile, suggesting politeness and subservience to foreigners. Owing to the culture of surrendering, obeying and not speaking that was rooted in Thailand during the era of the absolute monarchy, Wongtedj suggests that in Thai culture at that time, the smile was a form of a mask that shielded genuine expressions and fears.

Wongtedj further observes that the idea of Thais smiling became more evident among Thai residents after World War II, when more Western countries began to trade with the country and sought to establish military bases there, which were strongly supported by the Thai military government. Thai citizens' smiling was widely seen as a way of welcoming Westerners at that time, hence smiles started to relate to hospitality. Nevertheless, under military administrations that forced people to be polite hosts, similar to the tradition of shielding feelings during the absolute monarchy era, the concept of Thai smiles was again instilled with a sense of surrendering and avoiding disagreement.

The point when the concept of Thai smiles began to become a consciously performed part of national identity is associated with national tourism campaigns. A narrative about the smile was firstly scripted and staged domestically in Thailand in a tourism slogan in the 1960s. The slogan 'the land of smiles' was initiated and became explicit throughout the nation's tourism campaigns. Between 1960 and 1980, the tourism industry in Thailand gradually grew to become the third largest source of national income following rubber and rice exports. In 1987, the song *The Land of Smiles* was introduced, voiced by the iconic queen of Thai country music,

---

<sup>33</sup> Simon de la Loubère, a French embassy leader, recorded a precise description of his travels in Siam in *Du Royaume de Siam* (1967).

Phumpuang Duangchan.<sup>34</sup> The song was popular, and in 1987 was employed by Chatchai Choonhawan's government to promote the country through public radio. I argue that the narration of 'the land of smiles' was mobilised to energise national economics at that time as Chatchai's government sought to launch the country into an international market.<sup>35</sup> By easing the borders between Thailand and Cambodia to initiate a free market for both countries, the government fostered the nationalist agenda to not only prevent foreign traders and visitors from taking benefits from the nation but also to instil collective emotions among Thais via popular music. The lyrics are as follows:

Be proud to be Thai.  
We have never been colonised  
And we are kind.  
The world calls us 'The Land of Smiles'.  
We should be proud of our dignity.  
Thais are calm and honest.  
We always welcome deprived immigrants.  
You can be safe in our land.  
We always smile to welcome you as you like it.  
We are well known as kind people.  
We just want to warn you, visitors,  
Do not harm Thais.  
We have a tradition:  
Once we offer you some food,  
Do not forget our kindness, do not be ungrateful.  
Thais respect the nation and religion.  
We truly admire the King who is filled with the field of merit.  
If you respect Thais, you will be staying for a long time.  
We are kind, and we always smile.

---

<sup>34</sup> Burirat, L (Writer). (1989). *Siam Mueang Yim* [Song]. Phumpuang Duangchan (Singer), Vol.4. [Translated by the author]

<sup>35</sup> Tangsutthiçhit, C. (2010). Siam Muang Yim. *Thai Poet and Writer Network*. <http://www.thai poet.net/index.php?lay=show&ac=article&Id=538706066> [Accessed 12 March 2016].

While the first part of the song emphasises that Thai people should be proud of their qualities, the second part delineates the importance of three national institutions: nation, religion and monarchy. It is evident that the national culture of smiling promoted by the state in the song is not a performance of happiness in terms of positive emotions, or well-being. Instead, smiling is presented in the light of national identity, hospitality, calmness, kindness, and a form of national defence in the sense of protecting national traditions and institutional authorities. Owing to its massive promotion by the government, the title of the song ‘the land of smiles’ or *sà-yāam meuang yím* was made famous and familiar to Thai people. However, the song was only composed in the Thai language, and the lyrics apparently represented a nationalist agenda rather than attracting international visitors. The meaning of smiles projected in the song correlates resonantly with Eric Hobsbawm’s arguments that the state plays a dominant role in inventing tradition which is ‘essentially a process of formalisation and ritualisation, characterised by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition’ (1983: 2). Extending this argument, the institutional use of national narrations of smiles in order to stage a national agenda was later refined by the religious sector during the 2010s such that the concept of happiness was added to the package of the land of smiles.

Prayudh Payutto, a well-known Thai scholar and monk who plays a key role in modern Thai Buddhism, suggests that the notion of the ‘land of smiles’ was actually devised by foreigners as a result of Buddhism, which is embedded in Thai people’s personality (2013). In practicing Buddha’s teachings, Payutto describes, Thai Buddhists are kind, cheerful, friendly, flexible, welcoming, and overall happy. Payutto was unable to give a clear timeline for this development of the notion of the smile he suggested, and I would argue that the description was invented later to explicate the term ‘the land of smiles’ after the national tourism campaign had adopted the slogan. Since the early 2000s, amidst political turmoil in the country, the narration of Thai smiles has evidently been extended to the sphere of pleasure, positive emotions, and happiness. The discussion of smiles here sets a departure

point, marking the ways in which institutional power in Thailand uses cultural practice to engage with individual emotions and expressions. This resonates with Bhabha's observation that a nation is a stage for devising not only what the nation is, but also guiding how the nation should be (1990: 4). By connecting with Thai identity, the act of smiling was later recalled as a crucial token of happiness promoted in modern international tourism campaigns.

In terms of the cultural practice of smiles in the contemporary neoliberal context in Thailand, I anticipate that the notion of smiles will be further insinuated into contemporary neoliberal logic at a subtle level. A Thai phrase 'Yîm s̄u', which means 'fighting with a smile' originally introduced by King Bhumibol in 1952, is still well known in the modern context.<sup>36</sup> By implying that a smile is a tool to overcome troubles, the phrase is usually employed by a person who is facing obstacles physically, socially, or financially, to encourage him or herself to get through problems with a smile. Moreover, a display of smiles as a sign of fighting against struggles gains ground with the rise of technology and taking selfies in Thailand. For example, searching the phrase with a hashtag on Instagram or Twitter returns a flood of selfie-smile photos indicating people showing smiles to get over their problems.<sup>37</sup>

The projection of a smile in this context may not be directly interpreted as happiness but, I suggest, it is a tool to enable happiness to be later performed. The notion of 'fighting with a smile' has many references in the previous national narrations promoted by the state as a mask, an act of shielding emotions and defending against problems. However, while smiles are defined as a form of defence against foreign immigrants, visitors, and investors in the song *The Land of Smiles*, focused on protecting national identity, the defensive smile in the recent context has

---

<sup>36</sup> The song was originally a pop song composed by King Bhumibol in 1952 . Its lyrics have an encouraging content to motivate blinded people to smile in order to deal with struggles. The song has been remixed and promoted again by pop singers in 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJGM\\_ScVgr8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJGM_ScVgr8) [Accessed 7 August 2019].

<sup>37</sup> See posts on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/%E0%B8%A2%E0%B8%B4%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%B9%E0%B9%89/> [Accessed 12 June 2019].

shifted to guarding an individual's negative emotions from unemployment, indebtedness or illness. In the neoliberal context, the idea of fighting with smiles is re-invented and reproduced by the authorities and practiced by individuals as a tool to adjust their attitude and carry through their emotional expression — which accords with Berlant's notion of cruel optimism and the procedure of positive psychology. The next section explores how Thai governments use the culture of smiling as an attractive prop, along with other cultural ways of performing happiness, in tourism campaigns.

### **'Our Ways of Unique Happiness': Happiness Promoted in Tourism Campaigns**

The performance of happiness in Thai culture is crucially evident in modern tourism campaigns. The following discussion depicts the development of tourism campaigns and advertisements that rely heavily on the term 'happiness' under both elected and post-coup governments. I propose that the happiness performed in the authorities' campaigns can be read in relation to the neoliberal notion of happiness discussed earlier.

Between 2004 and 2006, a tourism campaign called 'Happiness on Earth', was promoted under the government of elected Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. The happiness portrayed in the campaign was promoted under the slogan '365 days happiness you can take home'. What distinguished this campaign from previous campaigns, which stressed nationalism, was that the government cooperated with neighbouring countries, including Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, to ease travel across national borders. In this campaign, nationalist rhetoric was reduced, while the value of visitors experiencing happiness through various consumption activities became dominant. In 2004, Jutamas Siriwan, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) stated that 'we will be placing emphasis on the happiness visitors can experience from Thailand's friendly people, cultural

attractions, fun festivals, natural landscapes, spas, and convenient transportation network'.<sup>38</sup>

Arguably, the concept of happiness promoted in the 'Happiness On Earth' campaign at that time reflected the international free-trade schemes and the modern approach of Thaksin's neoliberal government. The term 'happiness' stressed the happiness of tourists, who could enjoy their time in Thailand through consumption activities. Happiness from temporary pleasures in the domain of consumption was highlighted to encourage tourists to travel to the country. In other words, the term 'happiness' plotted during this period related to a set of commodities that visitors could buy and invest in such as Thai spas, adventures in nature, and festive events and celebrations. In relation to the neoliberal turn, Thaksin's government was a manifestation of neoliberal-run governance focusing on transforming the entire country into business via the logic of marketisation. His economic strategy clearly stood against the austerity logic promoted in the SE approach, as discussed in the previous chapter. I argue that correlating happiness with the sphere of consumption reveals the rise of a neoliberal logic in Thai democratic society at that time, shifting from traditional nationalist sentiments to the promotion of liberty and freedom in a consumer society.

However, nationalist ideas, similar to those seen in the song *The Land of Smiles* promoted in 1996, returned under the recent dictatorship regime in a parallel path with SE, but this time attached to a tourism campaign also encompassing the term 'happiness'. After decades of political turmoil in Thailand, in 2014, General Prayuth Chan O-Chaha conducted a military coup, and launched a new tourism campaign that employed the brand 'Amazing Thailand' under the slogan 'Discover Thainess'. According to the new strategy for 2015-2017 published by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, the most valuable asset thought to attract tourists was the Thai people's identity, which was employed under the campaign 'It Begins with the

---

<sup>38</sup> Studebaker, J. (2004). Thailand launches Happiness on Earth. *TTG Daily News*, 8 November. [http://www.ttgindia.travel/article.php?article\\_id=10208](http://www.ttgindia.travel/article.php?article_id=10208) [Accessed 30 March 2016].

People, Amazing Thailand'. The aim in creating the brand 'Thainess' is explained by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT):

Thai people are remarkably resilient in their way of life under the 'sanook' (fun) and 'mai pen rai' (don't worry about it) attitudes to not get stressed out and to be kind and hospitable towards others. This characteristic makes Thai culture, the Thai way of life and Thai experience very unique, and sets Thailand apart from all other countries.<sup>39</sup>

As discussed, while the song *The Land of Smiles* was launched to perform national sentiment in which the concept of happiness for the Thai people was arguably irrelevant, I propose that the campaign launched by the dictatorship government in 2014 was not only designed to reinforce national identity, but significantly related this identity to the register of happiness in order to unify the nation and perform it to international audiences as a signal of 'business as usual' amidst the political turmoil. Closer examination of the tourism campaign launched in 2014 supports this argument. Three television commercials were run under the campaign: 'The Way We Live', 'The Way We Create' and 'The Way We See the World'. While all these commercials focused on a unique aspect of Thai living, the most noteworthy commercial was the last, which talked about 'Our Ways of Unique Happiness'. It stressed how amazing Thai people are, and why they are so happy with their lives. The commercial was heavily promoted on online platforms, especially on Youtube.com, with an English voiceover aiming to draw international audiences' attention. According to the commercial:

Thai people see the world differently

*[Picture of Thai scenery of nature upside down viewed by a woman doing yoga]*

When we are shy we smile.

*[Picture of Thai people in traditional costumes with smiles]*

When we are bored we kick.

---

<sup>39</sup> MOTS (2015). *Thai Tourism Strategy 2015-2017*. Bangkok: Ministry of Tourism and Sport, para. 2.

*[Picture of Thai boxers, football players and elephants kicking]*

When we are stressed we meditate.

*[Picture of a temple and a woman meditating amidst nature]*

And when we don't have enough we give.

*[Picture of a woman praying in a temple and a rural woman with a boy offering rice to a monk]*

Eating is a big deal, problems are trivial.

*[Picture of people cooking traditional Thai food]*

The more tired we get, the louder we sing.

*[Picture of a farmer working in a field, then rural people dancing and singing in a traditional ceremony]*

The more we feel sad, the more playful we get.

The way of Thai.

Our way of unique happiness.

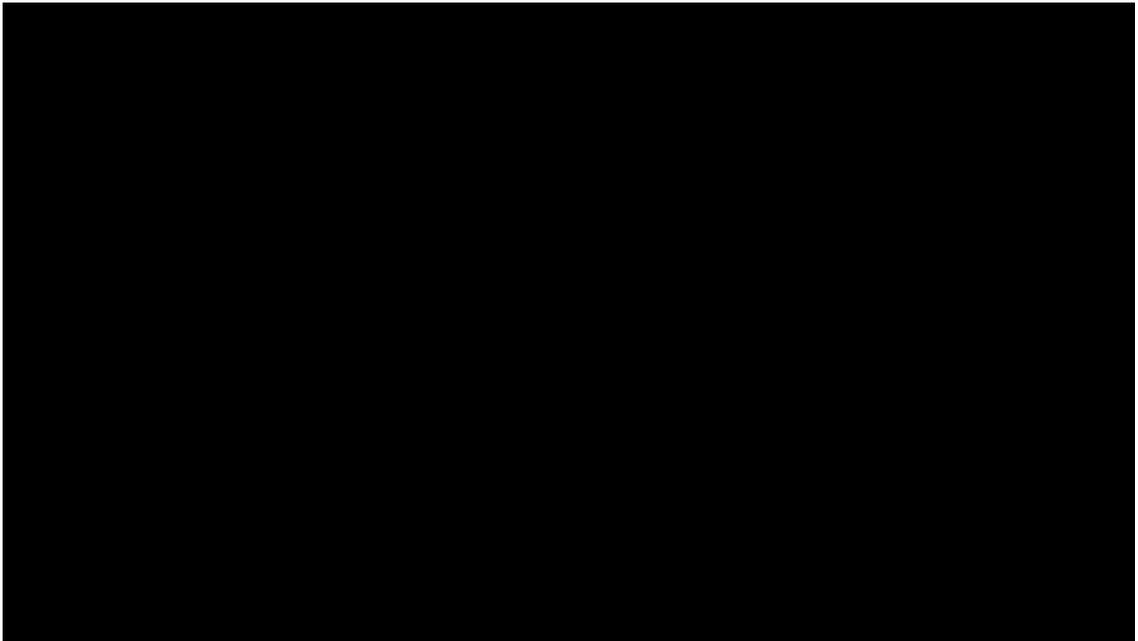
And it begins with the people.

Amazing Thailand.

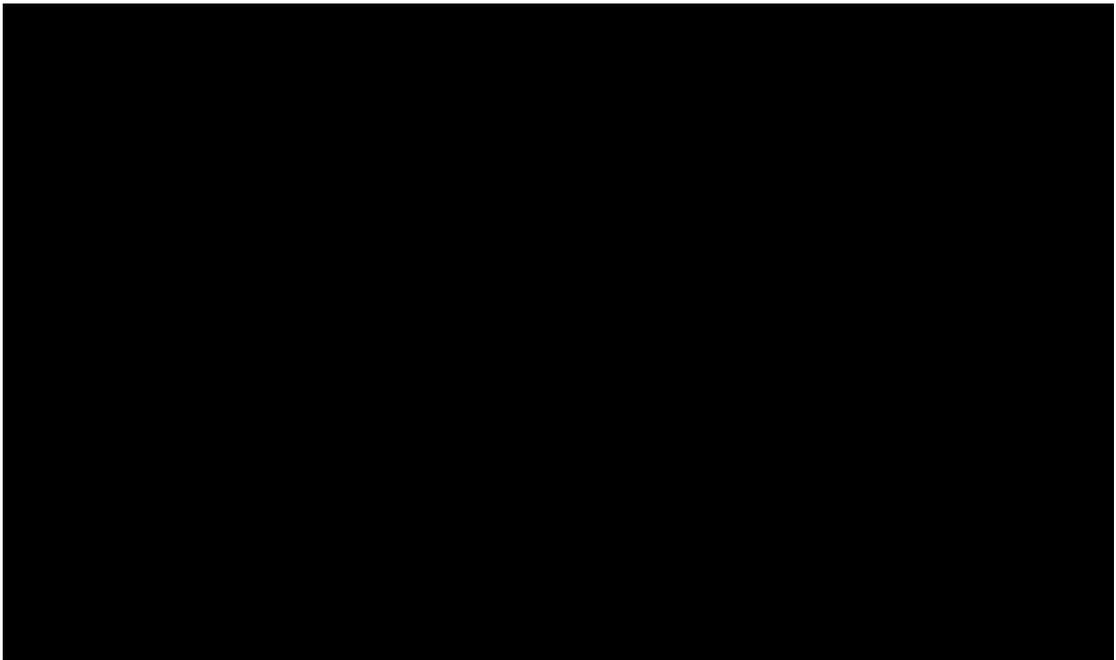
*[Picture pans around natural attractions such as beaches, waterfalls, forests and Thai traditions]*<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Insider Thailand. (2014). *Thailand: The Way We See the World (full length)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4LETYvdniM> [Accessed 15 March 2018].



*Figure 1. 'When We Don't Have Enough We Give' (2014)<sup>41</sup>*

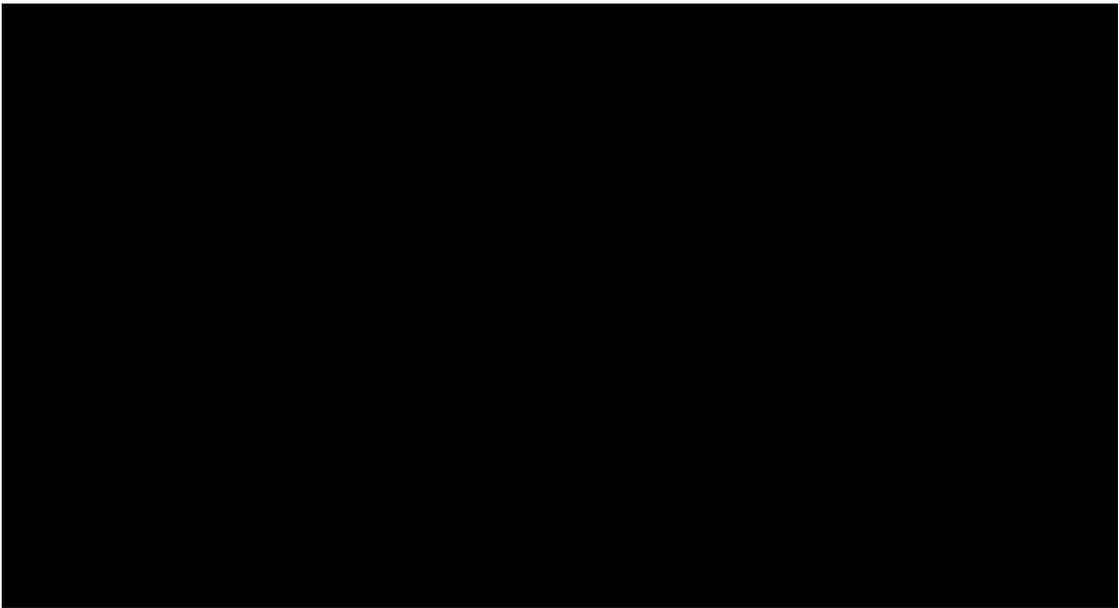


*Figure 2. 'The More Tired We Get, The Louder We Sing 1' (2014)<sup>42</sup>*

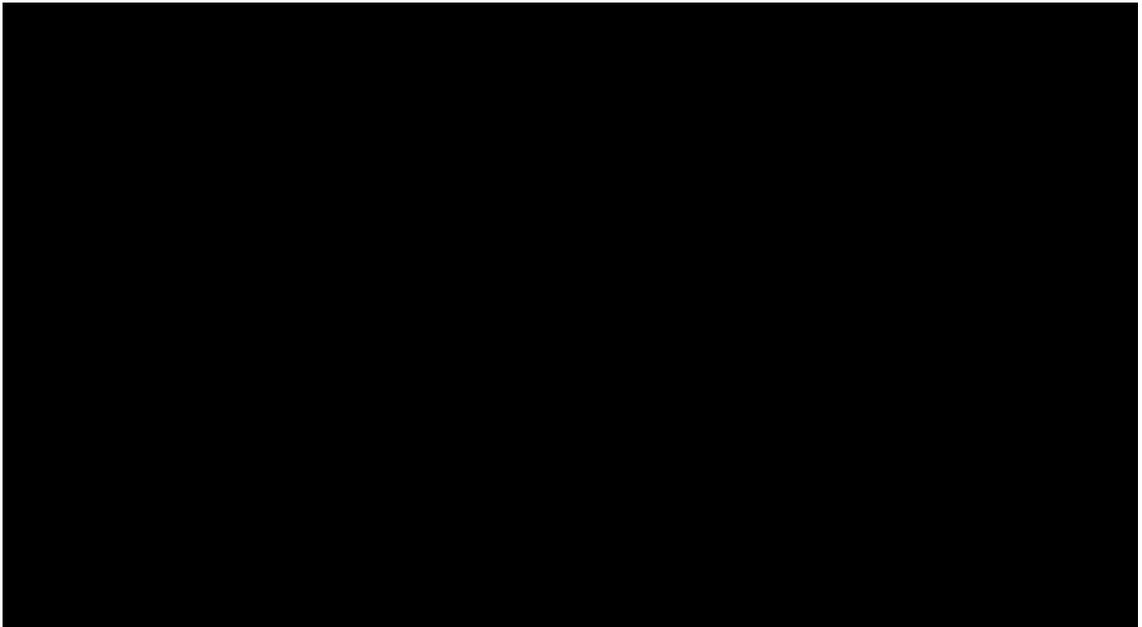
---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid Min. 0.22

<sup>42</sup> Ibid Min. 0.32



*Figure 3. 'The More Tired We Get, The Louder We Sing 2' (2014)<sup>43</sup>*



*Figure 4. 'When We Are Shy We Smile' (2014)<sup>44</sup>*

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid Min. 0.52

<sup>44</sup> Ibid Min. 0.08

From the content above, I argue that the brand of happiness performed by the government through this campaign manifests a substantial neoliberal logic. As a part of the performance, neoliberal governance called for a national consciousness to unify fragile neoliberal subjects under the new dictatorship state. The commercial aimed to promote nationalism and the way of Thai happiness by attempting to indicate how Thais deal with problems leading to happiness, suggesting that it is a unique and distinct characteristic. In relation to religion, it suggested that people will give when they do not have (Figure 1). This statement sounds illogical, and the picture also shows a woman offering food to a monk as a representative of Buddhism. The solution to poverty is therefore to invest in religion, rather than questioning the social structure or giving to the community. This scene exemplifies neoliberal logic fostered in Thai Buddhism discussed in Chapter Two.

In addition, the happiness performed in the commercial focuses only on an individual state of mind, ignoring external social conditions. Problems and burdens are simplified, indicating that it is an individual's responsibility to deal with them. The idealistic phrase 'happiness begins with the people' presented at the end does not suggest that it was the government's primary concern to enhance people's happiness; on the contrary, throughout the commercial, individuals are portrayed as being responsible for managing themselves. The solution to mental problems such as stress and boredom is to sing, play, kick, meditate and consume food, which arguably resonates with the neoliberal voice of self-care and self-help projects through both consumption and positive psychology mechanisms as previously discussed.

In relation to the idea of neoliberal optimism, the introductory phrase, 'Thai people see the world differently', indicates that being optimistic, as shown in the scenes subsequently displayed in the commercial, is a principal explanation for why Thai people are happy. Happiness performed in the commercial is conceived as smiling, being optimistic, cheerful and having a self-loving quality. It assumes that these traits are not merely consequences but a fundamental instrument enabling Thais to live happily under any difficult circumstances, which again mirrors

Berlant's 'cruel optimism'. To survive happily on the neoliberal track, one is required to be optimistic, and the commercial manifests that Thais are capable of doing so.

In addition to the script presented in the advertisement, arguably the set of visuals not only simplify but also fetishise poverty and social inequality. Most of the visuals represent Thai people who live in rural areas, which are, in reality, underdeveloped. For example, the scene of farmers singing in the field in Figure 3, I argue, romanticises a farmer's life in the northeastern region, which is recorded to be the most impoverished region in the country. The selection of settings and characters thus not only aims to project national happiness but in the meantime to reproduce the myth of happiness of the simple life in rural areas as it has always been rendered within the SE scheme discussed in Chapter Two.

Regarding tourism objectives, although the commercial shows scenes of tourist attractions and national culture, which will potentially attract visitors, my conviction is that it also seeks to convince people in the country that they can escape from their problems. As this was a government campaign, I propose that it was an attempt by the military regime to justify and conceal problems such as economic inequality and brutal martial laws in an undemocratic society in promoting the idea of 'unique happiness'.

In addition, portraying Thai happiness through a tourism campaign was not only aimed at international visitors. The ideas of nationalism, pride in being Thai and living as Thais, were also being promoted nationally among Thai citizens themselves. The state has drawn on the monarchy as a crucial instrument within this strategy. In Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-Cha's speech on the government's tourism strategy in 2015 he stated that:

The kingdom is famous for its royal institution and its rich, deep-rooted culture in which the Thai people should take pride. These characteristics could never be destroyed with everyone in society bending forces to make Thailand more recognised internationally ... Nevertheless, the important thing is to respect and uphold the royal institution and be grateful for the

contributions the royal institution has made to all Thais. Together, everyone must unite and carry on the traditions.<sup>45</sup>

In 2015, TAT started a parallel commercial directed at Thai people. This vigorously promoted the slogan ‘Discover Thainess’ through an online advertisement but this time the script was only voiced in the Thai language.<sup>46</sup> It instilled a sense of Thai values, encouraging Thai people to travel in Thai styles, show respect for the Thai national anthem, eat Thai food, go to Thai temples, dress in traditional Thai clothes, and be proud to be Thai.<sup>47</sup> In this regard, it can be seen that behind the scene of the performance of the happy nation to international tourists, the domestic operation via nationalism is still reproduced in order to unify citizens under the neoliberal dictatorship state. The narratives of happiness scripted by the junta government involved several aspects of neoliberal happiness, which I argue actively perpetuated the nation’s neoliberal agenda amid socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity. More importantly, the state normalised being optimistic and enjoying consumption when there are troubles, rather than being concerned with or challenging them. While it might be considered common to promote a positive tourism campaign to attract tourists, the next section discusses the state’s performance of happiness during a time of political turmoil, which I argue also emphasised neoliberal logic in Thailand.

---

<sup>45</sup> Lee, J. (2015). Does the ‘2015 Discover Thainess’ campaign really target foreign tourist markets? *eTurboNews*, 19 January. Para. 5. <http://www.eturbonews.com/54629/does-2015-discover-thainess-campaign-really-target-foreign-touri> [Accessed 22 October 2016].

<sup>46</sup> TAT (2015). ‘2015 Discover Thainess’ Campaign. Bangkok: Tourism Authority of Thailand. [http://www.tatpr.org/webdatas/files/Fact%20Sheet\\_2015%20Discover%20Thainess%20Final\(1\).pdf](http://www.tatpr.org/webdatas/files/Fact%20Sheet_2015%20Discover%20Thainess%20Final(1).pdf). [Accessed 30 May 2017].

<sup>47</sup> Amazing Thailand. (2015): *Discover Thainess*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vrhzcHBOOg>. [Accessed 15 March 2018].

## **Political Campaigns ‘Returning Happiness to Thailand’**

As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, over the past decade Thai politics has been unstable as a result of military coups and a series of protests in which a number of protestors were killed and injured. This section investigates the concept of happiness expressed in a political campaign called ‘Returning Happiness’, an attempt by two governments to reconcile with citizens following the suppression of protestors in 2010 and the military coup in 2014. I investigate how the notion of happiness was staged and performed by governments in public spaces and the media not only to unite the citizens but, more importantly, rewrite the protest site, celebrate, and retell the notion of national happiness by recalling cultural memory and reanimating national elements such as the monarchy and nationhood. I also explore how the performance of happiness was framed via a reassertion of political peace and stability in comparison with the period of protests. In other words, I investigate how the performance of happiness conducted by the authorities aimed to mask the performance of unhappiness staged by the citizens who were standing against the authorities. I begin with a brief background to the political conflicts in Thailand since 2006 to set the scene of how the ‘Returning Happiness’ campaign was conceived and driven by Thai authorities.

### **Political Conflicts in Thailand From 2001-2014**

Thaksin Shinawatra was the Prime Minister from 2001 until 2006 as he got elected twice with massive votes from working-class people. However, in 2004, his authority was critically challenged with a charge of corruption and concerns over inhumanely fought wars on drugs operated throughout the country. A group involving mostly urban middle-class people known as the Yellow Shirts led by Sondhi Limthongkul, a media tycoon, staged a protest wearing yellow shirts symbolising royalism as yellow was the code of King Bhumibol. Instead of focusing on Thaksin's political record, the Yellow Shirts claimed that Thaksin was the enemy of the nation who wanted to overthrow the monarchy by his dominant political

power and turn the country into a republic. The protest expanded and culminated in a military coup in September 2006 led by General Sondhi Boonyaratgarin. Thaksin was exiled from the country. The coup divided people in the country into two political camps since a pro-democracy group called the Red Shirts was founded in the meantime to oppose the dictatorial power enforced by the military coup. While the Yellow Shirts consisted of royalist and nationalist middle-class people, the Red Shirts majorly represented grassroots and farmers who were Thaksin's grassroots supporters.

The military coup in 2006 was considered a victory for the Yellow Shirts protesters. However, the 2007 general election saw victory for Thaksin's party, who defeated the Democrat Party, led by Abhisit Vejjajiva. With a process of lobbying, Abhisit's party took an opportunity to negotiate with one of the coalition government parties to form the new government when Thaksin's party was dissolved and required to form a new party due to charges of misconduct. In a night in December 2008, Abhisit formed a government at a military camp and became the Prime Minister of Thailand. This event was crucial in summoning political turmoil in Thailand.

The Red Shirts group returned on stage to protest and call for a general election proposing that the government led by Abhisit had undermined democracy. The protests took place in the centre of Bangkok, in a significant business area and gained in size wherein a hundred thousand protestors participated. In April 2010, while Abhisit's government was still holding power, protestors from across the country mobilised to the protest site and settled there for a month which started to challenge the businesses and interests of the business owners in the area as well as compromise the country's image on the global stage. Eventually, on 10 May 2010 Abhisit's government, supported by the military, commanded a crackdown over the protest with gunfire that led to almost a hundred people being killed (Bunyavejchewin 2011). It was the most brutal massacre in the country since 1976. The protest was over but fears, loss and anger remained. I would argue that this was the last event in Thailand, wherein the voice from below was staged loudly to ask for

the rights of democratic citizens. At this point in 2010, Abhisit launched the campaign called 'Returning Happiness to Bangkok People', aiming to restore peace to the country (Sripokangkul 2015). Before returning to investigate the performance of happiness in this campaign, I will move on to demonstrate the political journey that led to the happiness campaign being re-launched in 2014.

Abhisit's government ruled the parliament until 2011. As he was heavily criticised for his actions during the protest suppression, he dissolved the parliament and launched a general election. As was expected, Thaksin's youngest sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, was elected as the first female Prime Minister of the country with an enormous victory. Nevertheless, she was controversially criticised by the same conservative middle-class group on her skills and accused of being a puppet for her brother. Her parliament was challenged in 2013 on account of corruption and attempts to bring her brother back to the country. Another major protest was again staged in the centre of Bangkok. The protestors called The People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) involved the Yellow Shirts but they rebranded themselves as educated middle-class, white-collar royalists who claimed to be more knowledgeable and sophisticated than those Red Shirt grassroots protestors who always voted for Thaksin's government. Noticeably supported by Abhisit's party, the goal of the protest was not calling for a general election as the protestors already recognised that Thaksin's party would win. Instead, they called for a 'moral government', a group of people who represented morality and loyalty to the monarchy, not necessarily voted in via an election. To handle the protest, Yingluck decided to dissolve the parliament in December 2013 and held a general election in February 2014. However, the PDRC protestors blocked the ballot points, which led to an annulled election. Finally, in May 2014, the military again seized power and General Prayuth Chan-O-Cha became the Prime Minister and Thailand was governed under this dictatorship state for more than four years. Suddenly, after the coup, Prayuth recycled Abhisit's campaign 'Returning Happiness' but this time it was changed from 'Returning Happiness to Bangkok People' to 'Returning Happiness to

Thailand' (Sripokangkul 2015). Both of these campaigns were launched amid a political crisis and were staged as a mode of national performance by using the public sphere to retain state power as well as justify the government as a national hero returning happiness to the country. In the following discussions, I elaborate on how happiness has been interpreted and performed within these two different campaigns in the shifting time and contexts of Thai politics.

### **Rewriting the Fighting Street and Displaying Happiness**

Baz Kershaw has made a significant contribution in viewing an event of protest as a mode of street performance. He observes protest as a performative act involving the symbolic potential to project oppression and the oppositional political ideology of protestors. Unlike carnivals in which participants are somewhat contained by a state's rules and laws to display their political views, Kershaw insists that a protest is conceived amid socio-political instability and its act is often unlicensed and unframed by the law (1999: 89-126). As he notes in the case of the demonstration of the occupation of the White House in the US in 1970:

[T]he protest represents more than just time out from the mundane and everyday, framed by the law and the State. Rather, it fashions new or, perhaps, stolen time - time (and space) taken on the terms of the demonstrators, not contained by the law but beyond the law (at least until the police and troops move in). And secondly, it is more precisely other-directed than carnival, for not only is it a face-to-face statement against the most powerful authority in the world, it is a gesture made for the media. (1999: 101)

Although my aim in this section is to focus not on the performative entity of the protests but rather on the performance of authority after the protest, I propose that Kershaw's statement is valuable in terms of comprehending the character of the state's performances in opposing the street protest. Regarding the 'Returning Happiness' campaigns, which utilised the protest site as a stage in both 2010 and 2014, I propose that the performances were directed in the sense of containing and controlling unhappiness after the protest clampdown and military coup. The

authorities displayed their power by rewriting the fighting street into the scene of joyful events and celebrations and also by casting a series of media events to underscore the performance of returned happiness. Nonetheless, the act of erasing and masking rages and losses of the people who were against the dictatorial authority was insidiously and ubiquitously performed.

The discussion of the scene of performing happiness in the public via a series of performative and emotional processes to cover the conflicts could be linked to Erin Hurley's work on 'emotional labours' in national performance. As Hurley expresses, performativity projected in national displays has an affective link to participants not necessarily to forge connections through the nation's representational identification but also to prompt participants' feeling and identification. Hurley states that 'emotional labour makes, manages, and distributes relationships through affective appeals; it draws people and objects, real and imaginary, into affective webs' (2011: 28). In what follows, I demonstrate how the Thai authorities provoke the Thai people through a series of affects, in order to induce the people to believe that happiness has been restored amidst political upheaval.

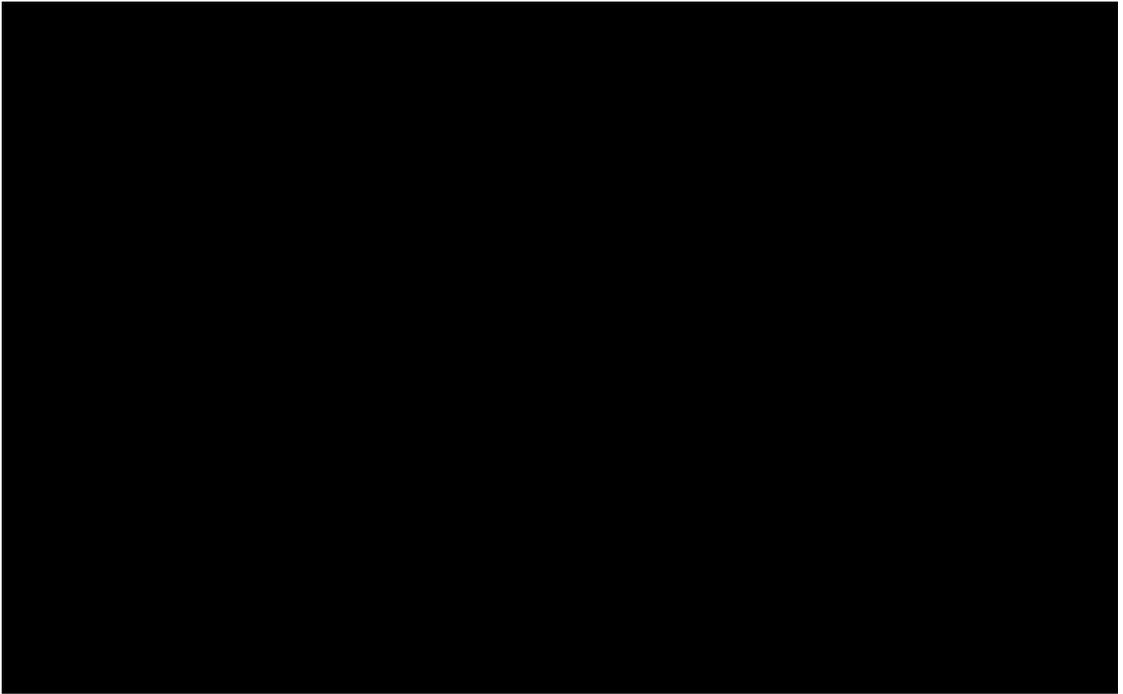
As a part of the Returning Happiness campaign in 2010, the first event organised by Abhisit's government in May 2010, a week after a protest crackdown, was called 'Bangkok Big Cleaning Day, Together We Can'. The event involved the government providing mops and brooms and encouraging Bangkok people to volunteer to clean up the protest venue, including removing protest signs and bloodstains. This activity was popular among middle-class Bangkok people, the government's main supporters, with thousands joining the event. The Bangkok Governor was in charge organising the event providing free food and drinks for the participants. The government claimed that this showed the spirit of the Thai people, who love their nation and wanted to help it recover from the crisis.<sup>48</sup>

---

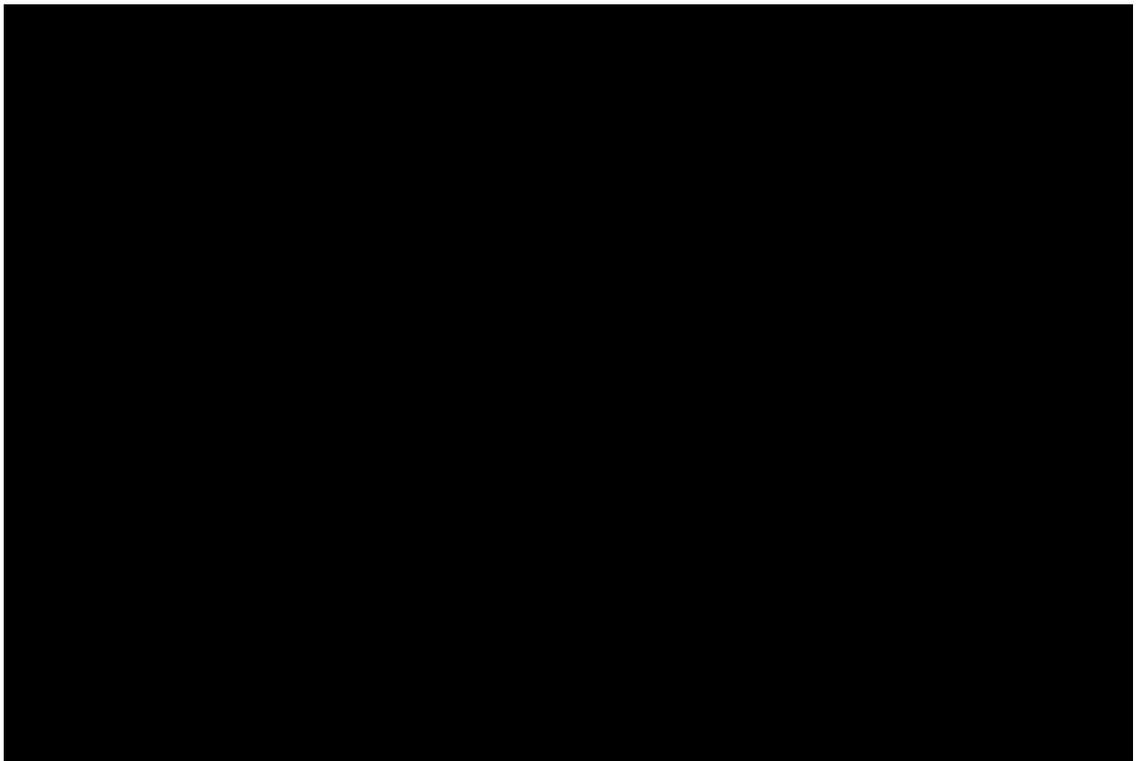
<sup>48</sup> RelishThai (2010). Bangkok Big Cleaning Day 2010. *RelishThai*, 27 May. <http://relishthai.com/2010/05/27/bangkok-big-cleaning-day-2010/> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

Regarding this Big Cleaning Day event, it is an illustration of how the government staged the first attempt to rewrite the meaning of the fighting scene. The symbolic means of fighting for democracy had vanished. The role of the protesters was rewritten from fighters for democracy to threats to the nation. The agenda of the Big Cleaning Day event aimed to gather the government supporters to display their presence while the opposition were not allowed to perform on this stage as their shows had been brutally suspended. Instead, a presentation of happiness is shown in the togetherness and joy of the people who came to clean the street.

As Kershaw emphasises a street protest requires symbolic and performative displays to harness media and global attention. I suggest that the street performance organised by an authority requires the same tactic, but it has to be assured to contain its oppositional power behind the scene. The costumes and props shown at the protest were also reassigned. The wave of red shirts and radical political signs were replaced with white t-shirts with a national flag on them stating a slogan, 'Together We Can' alongside brooms provided (Figures 5 to 7). In terms of collective emotions, rage and anger in the protest were concealed by a big smile and happy selfies. The projection of kindness and happiness of the people was captured and projected in the media by the state.



*Figure 5. The Redshirts Protestors before the Protest Clampdown (2010)* <sup>49</sup>

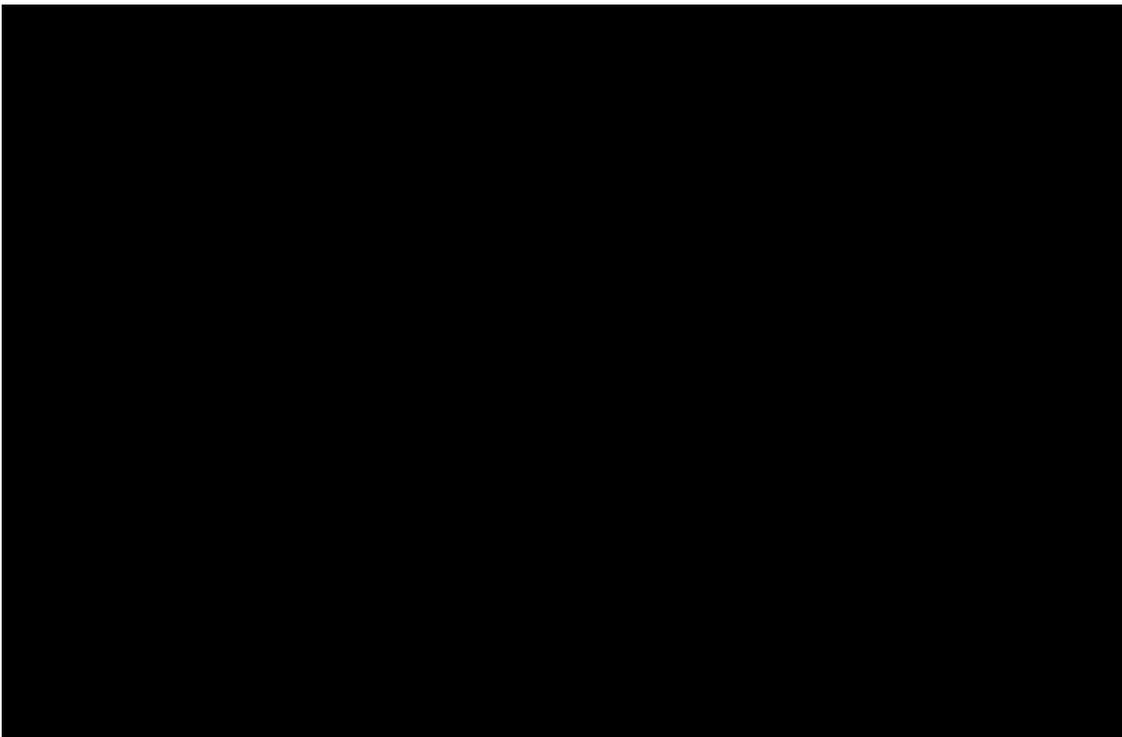


*Figure 6. The Big Cleaning Day Event after the Protest Clampdown (2010)* <sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Thairath (2010). Images Collection of the Red Shirts at Ratchaprasong Rally. *Thairath*, 19 September. <https://www.thairath.co.th/content/112434>. [Accessed 13 May 2019].

<sup>50</sup> EDTguide (2010). Big Cleaning Day. EDTguide, 24 May. <https://www.edtguide.com/review/5070/คนไทย-big-cleaning-day-กรุงเทพ> [Accessed 13 May 2019].



*Figure 7. Government Supporters & the Bangkok Governor (2010)* <sup>51</sup>

At this stage — despite the fact that the campaign was a part of a reconciliation — the Big Cleaning Day event has underlined a perception of the protestors as dirt who are excluded from the event, as it could be seen that the term ‘clean’ was employed to indicate that the protest had been ‘dirty’. According to Neža Lipanje, drawing on the work of Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1996), ‘dirt is a relative, normative construct and not a standardised concept. Its meaning and the meaning of its antipode (purity) is inherently unstable and interpretatively indefinite’ (2015: 27). Through this campaign, the government sought to control the country by undermining the protest, which had brought uncertainty and crisis to the nation. By defining the protestors as ‘dirt’, those who participated in the Big Cleaning Day event thus felt that they were heroes, playing their parts in bringing back happiness to the nation.

Another point that should be discussed here is that the fact that the government commanded the opening of gunfire on the protestors should be erased from history. Paul Connerton points out that ‘repressive erasure’ is the most brutal

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

form of forgetting, often used by totalitarian authorities to remove enemies from history and people's everyday lives: 'Repressive erasure can be employed to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to bring about a historical break' (2011: 60). Connerton suggests that such removal may take the form of invisible violence by removing some unwanted fact from the historical narrative. The story of the event in 2010 was reinterpreted by the government and media by stating that the Red Shirt protestors were the national enemy. Similarly, in the aftermath of the London Riots in the UK in 2011, people came onto the streets with brooms to clear up the venues, and the rioters were called 'scum' and 'waste'.<sup>52</sup> Imogen Tyler suggests that the fact that rioters were killed and injured during the suppression, as well as the economic inequality faced by the rioters, were shifted to the point that they were the destroyers. Tyler comments that this kind of phenomenon should be regarded not solely as a violent event, but also in political terms. She argues that 'the underclass is a polluting and radicalising category, which is employed to legitimise punitive forms of neoliberal governmentality' (2013: 183). Hence, I suggest that, in the same way that neoliberal governance shifts the socio-economic burden to its citizens, the promotion of happiness scripted by Abhisit's government in this campaign transferred the causes and hideous consequences of political conflict to its grassroots citizens.

Following the Big Cleaning Day event, as a part of the Returning Happiness campaign, the government launched a series of events in the following months in public space. For example, business owners and tycoons, whose businesses were located within the protest area, launched a campaign called 'Returning Green to Bangkok', which was supported by the Bangkok governor. They stated that 250,000 trees were to be planted to return happiness to the Bangkok people after the political

---

<sup>52</sup> Henley, J. (2011). The UK riots and language: 'rioter', 'protester' or 'scum'?. *The Guardian*, 10 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/aug/10/uk-riots-language> [Accessed 3 December 2019].

clashes.<sup>53</sup> Major-General Sansern Kaewkamnerd, the government's spokesperson, commented that as a result of the political turmoil, not only had happiness and smiles been destroyed, but the beauty of the trees had also been ruined. They thus wanted to recover the smiles and beauty of Bangkok and Thai people through a replanting initiative. Moreover, entertainment activities were also organised at the protest site as a part of the Returning Happiness campaign. A sub-campaign called 'Returning Smiles to Bangkok People' organised in August 2010 invited Bangkok people to funfairs, markets and free concerts.<sup>54</sup>

It can be seen that the state has reframed the scene of protest into a space of leisure inviting its supporters to be part of this rewritten stage. By using the protest site as a stage for a series of joyful events, the government exploits happiness as an important tool to mask, or even erase, the political conflicts that occurred there. The government uses the national sense of happiness to frame its performance, appearing in the form of smiles, cheerfulness, playfulness, peacefulness, and kindness, as presented earlier in this chapter.

Moving on to the campaign promoted by the military government in 2014, a campaign called 'Returning Happiness to Thailand' was promoted after the coup. Similarly to events held in 2011, the government organised street fairs and entertainment across the country, including free concerts, night markets and models wearing military uniforms singing and dancing on stage. TAT held the most significant event called the 'Thailand Happiness Street Festival', in Bangkok during July 2014. It took place in the centre of Bangkok, with parades, concerts, food, drink, fashion shows, and fun games and activities. For instance, the sub-campaign called 'Happiness Refills' asked people to take photos at the event and post them on Instagram with the hashtag #Thailandhappiness to win souvenirs. This activity used

---

<sup>53</sup> Manager Online (2010). Grà-cháp péun tée kwaam sùk 'keun kwaam sūay ngaam hâi grung tâyp' [Strengthen happiness space, 'return beauty to Bangkok']. *Manager Online*. Para. 7. <http://www.manager.co.th/CelebOnline/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9530000078458> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

a digital platform to exploit the urban culture of posting photos on social media. Also, this digital engagement claimed to document happiness, which was not limited to spatial reality, but was used as a tool to support the campaign to promote happiness and peace in the country through online platforms. These events apparently brought some level of temporary happiness to some participants. Farida Lee, who watched a show at one of the organised fairs, suggested that:

It [the campaign] makes the nation happy, sure. Without the army we would have had more fighting, more problems, more people killed. This is a good thing. Prayuth [the PM] is good.<sup>55</sup>

These organised events on returning happiness may seem similar to what had occurred in the campaign in 2010. However, I argue that they functioned differently in their use of public space. As mentioned, the military coup in 2014 was considered a victory of the PDRC protestors who denied the result of the general election. There was also a symbolic performative gesture played out by PDRC leaders and the military as one of the protest leaders even went to give a bunch of flowers to the military just a month before the coup happened which may suggest a favourable relationship (Figure 8). The military coup avoided bloodshed and ultimately enshrined what the protest demanded. In this light, the use of public space during the campaign to stage happiness to the country was, I argue, in the sense of celebrating rather than masking the political conflicts and bloodshed that had previously occurred in the 2010 protest. More importantly, the goal of the performance of happiness carried out in 2014 was attached to the agenda of using public space to justify the military coup.

---

<sup>55</sup> Hodal, K. (2014). Thai junta 'brings happiness to the people' with parties and selfies. *The Guardian*, 4 June. Para.11. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/04/thailand-to-bring-happiness-to-the-people> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

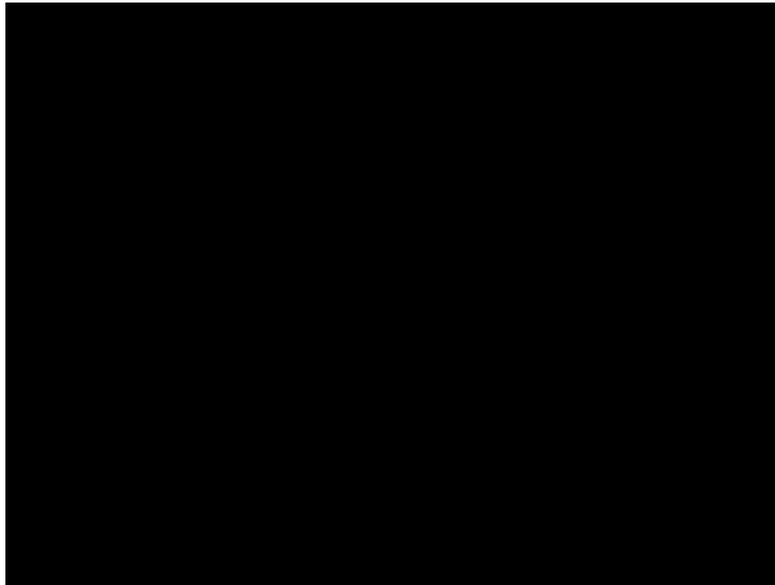


Figure 8. The main PDRC leader gave flowers to one of the military leaders (2014) <sup>56</sup>

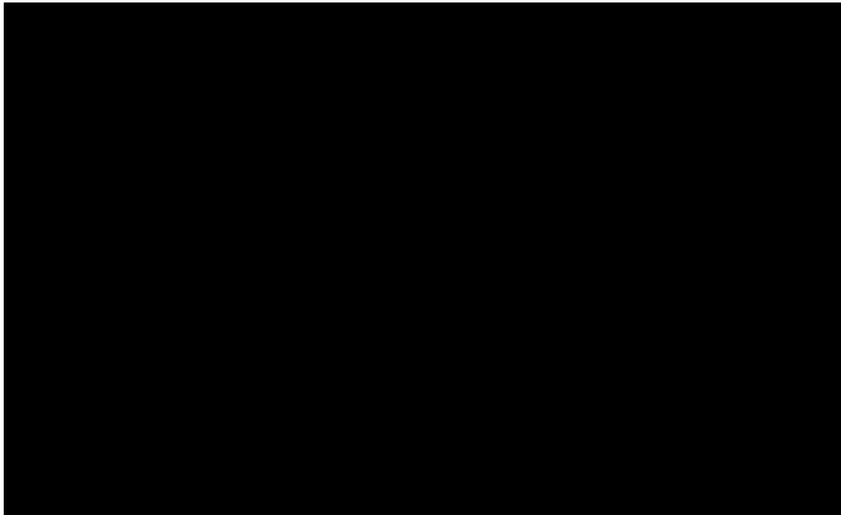
First of all, the use of military uniforms was visible as costumes in the events. It was unusual that the military co-opted in entertainment forms such as singing and dancing in public (Figure 9.1, 9.2). Military uniforms were strikingly staged in every event as a part of the Returning Happiness campaign. Secondly, the military government organised events across the country not only in Bangkok. The Returning Happiness events were organised in every region of the country offering not only entertainments but also other free services such as vaccine-injections and haircuts. This not only underpins the reconfiguration of the protest geography but also the whole country. Thirdly, the use of public space went further than just organised events as the government cooperated with big supermarkets and cinemas to offer a grand-sale event and free tickets. For example, the government offered free tickets for the nationalist and royalist film *The Legend of King Naresuan 5* to all Thai citizens.

Altogether, I argue that this phenomenon suggests the dominant military authority was being used beyond surveillance and an exertion of force, but had expanded into every domain of the people's lives and well-being such as leisure, health, and consumption. In other words, the image of the military was projected

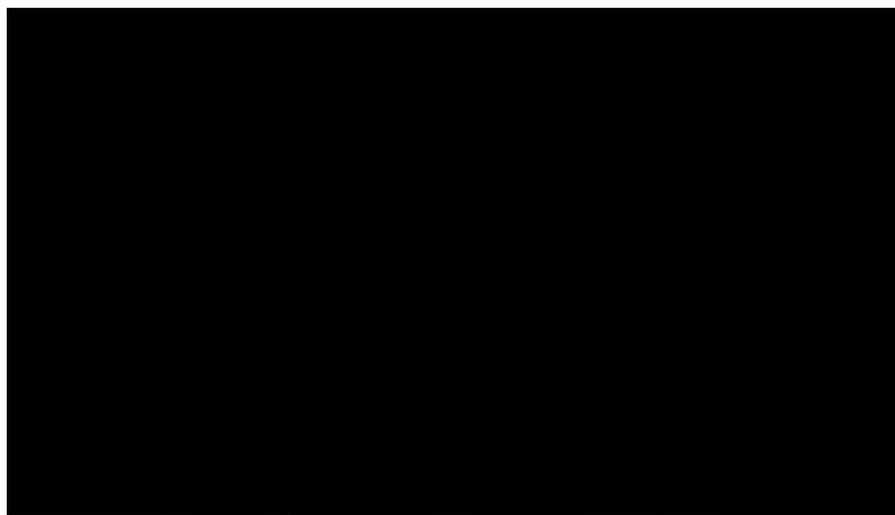
---

<sup>56</sup> MthaiNews (2014). <https://news.mthai.com/pic-news/314850.html> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

nationwide and tied firmly with the term happiness. While the use of public space in the campaign in 2010 was to mask and erase the performance of unhappiness staged by the protestors, the use of public space to perform happiness in 2014 was rather to manifest the manipulating authorities of the military government and to reassert a national agenda.



*Figure 9.1. Soldiers dancing as a part of the Returning Happiness event (2014)<sup>57</sup>*



*Figure 9.2. Military Supporters at the Returning Happiness Event (2014)<sup>58</sup>*

---

<sup>57</sup> Hodal, K. (2014). Thai junta 'brings happiness to the people' with parties and selfies. *The Guardian*, 4 June. Para. 11. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/04/thailand-to-bring-happiness-to-the-people> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

<sup>58</sup> CBC News (2014). Thailand military leaders launch happiness campaign. *The Associated Press*, 8 June. Para. 11. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/thailand-military-leaders-launch-happiness-campaign-1.2668950> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

Since May 2014 the military government went further than Abhisit's government in instituting both physical and linguistic violence on people who were against its authority. For example, Siwach Sripokangkul points out that along with its Returning Happiness campaign, the military government has constantly conducted a form of erasure since it took power in 2014 by taking various bloodless political actions to evade the fact that the power it gained is undemocratic. For example, pro-democracy signs have been removed, and pro-democracy websites and TV programmes have been banned (2015). The Education Ministry has also removed Thaksin from Thai political history textbooks.<sup>59</sup> Coupled with these non-physical violent actions, the junta government has also engaged in brutal and threatening operations to remove people who stand against the state's authority. Individuals who criticise or stage protests against the military authorities have been arrested and imprisoned, and a number of academics have been exiled. As a result of the government's actions to remove its enemies from history, Sripokangkul argues that these Returning Happiness campaigns display a parody of happiness:

With all these free events and campaigns, a lot of citizens feel overwhelmed with the word 'Happiness'. Many people have doubts about how this return of happiness relates to reconciliation, and 'happiness' has lost its meaning. (2015: 307)

I suggest that this erasure played a significant role in producing the performance of happiness. By prohibiting the performance of unhappiness to be staged, those in power ensured that people were more isolated from injustice and they inserted themselves as the only viable route to a returning happiness. The idea of happiness thus only related to temporary joyful experiences through entertainment and consumption, while freedom in political and economic activities was deliberately restricted.

---

<sup>59</sup> Fuller, T. (2014). Loved and Hated, Former Premier of Thailand Is Erased From Textbook. *The New York Times*, 15 September. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/asia/loved-and-hated-thaksin-shinawatra-former-premier-of-thailand-is-erased-from-textbook.html> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

The presentation of dancing soldiers, songs being sung on the stage in the free concerts, free health-checks and haircuts may not be directly relevant to the national sentiments, but it forged experiences that articulated shared emotions amongst participants as a part of a national event. In so doing, emotional labour on Hurley's terms does crucial work in emotionally delivering designated messages to contour a shared national sensibility either by creating affective experiences for audiences or being an affective object by itself. Apparently, the use of public space in both Returning Happiness campaigns in 2010 and 2014 reinforced collective thrilled responses through a series of events. It invited designated participants to feel and share the national moment of happiness within the mutual time and space via non national-referential activities - from cleaning to singing, shopping to playing identically reflected in happiness promoted in the tourism campaign discussed earlier.

The use of emotional labour in performing happiness during both Returning Happiness campaigns in 2010 and 2014 was also fostered by the use of media. Along with turning public space into a leisure space, songs were used as a crucial tool to perform happiness and emotionally unite the citizens. In 2010 a song composed by Nithipong Hornak, a well-known Thai composer for pop music, entitled *Wish Happiness is Returned*, was heavily promoted through the radio and public television and sung by hundreds of celebrities.<sup>60</sup> The song talks about how Thailand used to be full of smiles of happiness, but the political conflict blew happiness away. The chorus suggests that Thai people wish for happiness, smiles, love, kindness and peace to be returned to Thailand, and the lyrics ultimately stress the beauty of differences, stating that flowers look beautiful even though they are not all the same.

In the same way that the cultural memory of happiness such as smiling and peacefulness has been recalled in the events organised in public space, the lyrics of the song underpinned a similar scene of happiness. What I find as important as the

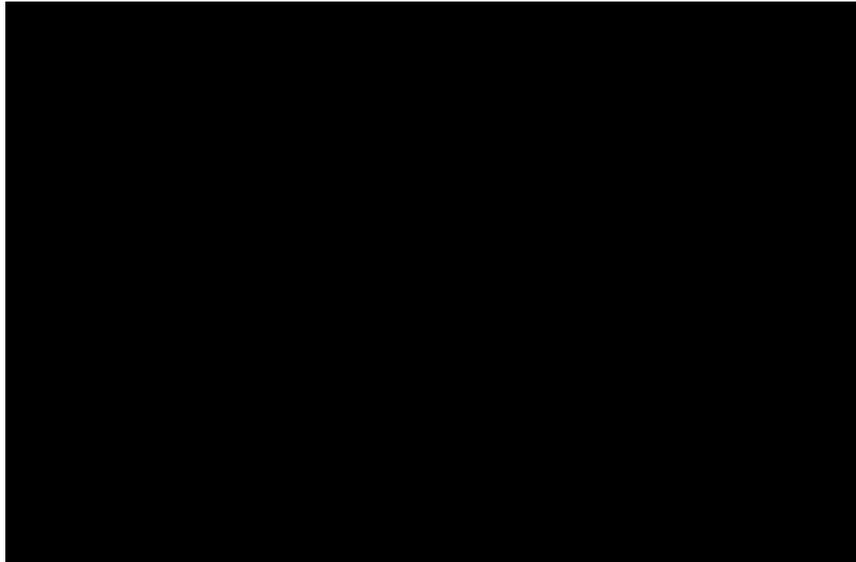
---

<sup>60</sup> Witternews (2010). Kōr kwaam sùk ... keun glàp maa [video]. *Witternews*, 27 May. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STZzu5ChYB0> [Accessed 20 January 2016].

lyrics here is the use of emotional labours to deliver the national affect in a similar way that Hurley observes how Céline Dion's image was projected to advance national affection for Quebec. As Hurley contemplates that:

All these (redundant) displays of emotion and insistent invitations to feeling provoke intense emotional responses – of love and of hatred. Because of the popularity, longevity, and widespread diffusion of 'the phenomenon', it is difficult in Quebec to escape being a participant. (2011: 158)

In Thailand's case, the gathering of hundreds of famous singers, actors and actresses whom citizens were familiar with, potentially strengthened the messages of the music and emotionally engaged audiences to share this rewritten story. The music video was repetitively presented on public television to emotionally provoke images of peacefulness and togetherness under the rubric of happiness. For instance, in the music video of the song some singers were filmed with the background of the protest riots and gunfire to underscore the damage caused by the political conflict. I contend that the affects created via the performance in the song potentially involved audiences emotionally through not only the lyrics but also the image, tune and tempo of the music which were catchy and dramatic. By employing a mass of celebrities to deliver a form of pop music, the performance arguably flags a sense of public consensus whereas the protestors were suppressed by the state and hidden backstage (Figure 10).



*Figure 10. Celebrities singing the song Wish Happiness is Returned (2010)<sup>61</sup>*

While the 2010 song utilised a mass of celebrities to deliver the message, the song composed in 2014 was different. Recycling the strategy of using music as a part of the campaign, it was claimed that the Prime Minister composed the song ‘Happiness Returns to Thailand’ himself and it was promoted extensively in society via public television and public spaces such as supermarkets, shopping malls and state offices.<sup>62</sup> The song was voiced by Assanee Chotikul, a Thai pop-rock singer famous since the 1980s. However, Assanee’s popularity was not scripted to represent people like the celebrities in the 2010 song. Instead, the image of the military was emphasised as playing a leading role in the show, both in the lyrics and visuals. While the song in 2010 stressed the unity and value of differences among people, the meaning of happiness projected in the song composed under the military regime focused on nationhood, royalism and the dominant role of the military. As the lyrics state:

The day that the nation, the King, and the people are safe.  
Let us protect you all with our heart and soul.  
This is our promise.  
As the nation is in imminent danger, with raging flame.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

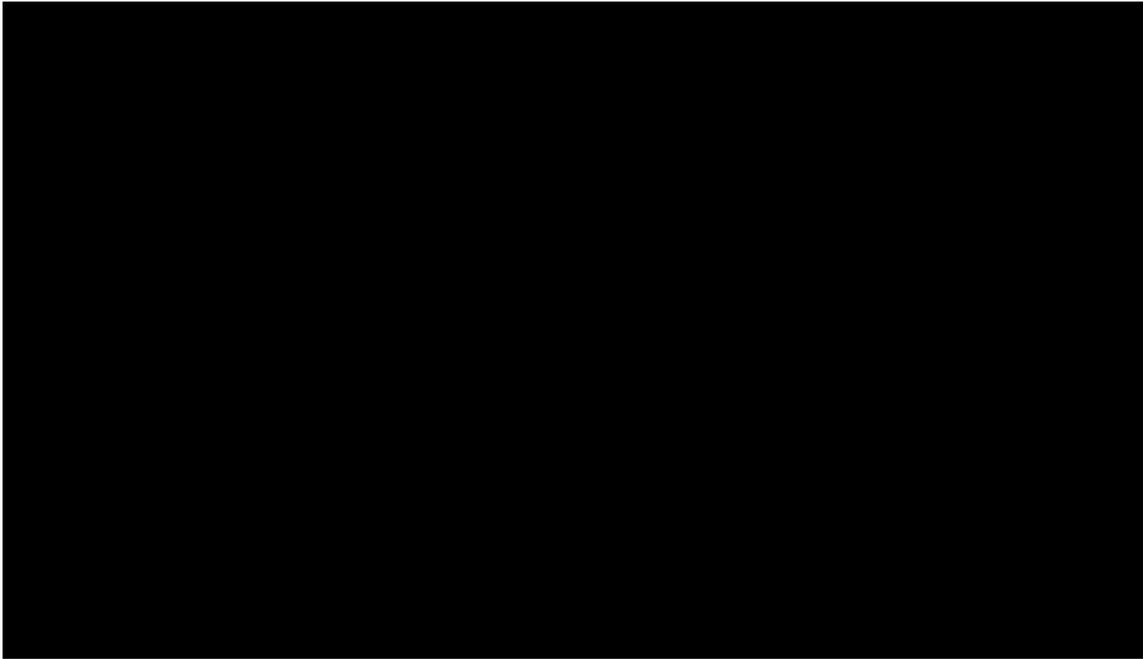
<sup>62</sup> Tantiphimonpan, V. (2014). Happiness returns to Thailand [audio]. National Council for Peace and Order, 6 June. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLYSBVmoPhY&nohtml5=False> [Accessed 12 May 2016].

Let us be the one who helps, before it's too late.  
To bring love back, how long will it take?  
Please wait. We will get through this conflict.  
We will keep our promise. Give us some time.  
And the glorious nation will return.  
We will be honest, please trust and believe in us.  
Goodness will return to the nation soon.  
Let us return happiness back to you, the people.  
We know the hardship we are facing.  
But let us fight the danger.  
Soldiers will never give up. This is our promise.<sup>63</sup>

I suggest that the use of language in the song explicitly refers to 'us' and 'them'. The symbolic use of words in the lyrics could be linked to the concept of violence in language. Slavoj Žižek points out that violence in language is often used by authorities and becomes symbolic violence by staging opponents as 'the other' (2008). As Tom Drahos explains, '[t]he imagined threat of the other to culture is essential in establishing solidarity; there can be no "us" without the inevitable presence of a "them"' (2011: 21). Regarding the lyrics, words such as 'danger', 'raging flame' and 'hardship' are employed to identify Thaksin's government and its supporters, whereas the junta government is portrayed as a hero for bringing back happiness and solidarity, using words such as 'protect', 'bring love back' and 'fight' to justify the coup. Not only has the significance of democracy been abandoned, but the song also promotes nationalist and royalist ideas, such as 'the King' and 'the glorious nation'. However, the people's rights are not important, as the people are asked to 'trust' and 'believe' in the military leader.

---

<sup>63</sup> Translated by Friendlyzz. (2014). Happiness Returns to Thailand English Version. <http://liveandlearneng.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/how-long-will-it-take.html> [Accessed 1 January 2016].



*Figure 11. A Soldier in the Music Video 'Happiness Returns to Thailand' (2014)<sup>64</sup>*

In terms of its music video and the use of visuals, the main characters shown in the video were a group of soldiers who have been working hard to secure the country. Also, images of King Bhumibol were displayed at the beginning and the end of the video to illustrate that the coup was conducted with the approval of the monarchy. While the 2010 song visually stressed that happiness and national unity could be returned by the people, the 2014 song displayed the importance of the autocratic role of the military who would return happiness to the country (Figure 11).

As Carlson observes, theatrical performances often recycle the pre-text or old elements such as the same type of characters or stories to evoke audiences' reception process through experiences and memory, happiness performed by the military government has exploited national narratives that the people were familiar with and ready to follow. For example, noticeably identifying the government's relationship with the monarchy was a crucial cultural text that could involve Thai citizens to support the Thai authorities. The scene of King Bhumibol shown in the music video noticeably reminds audiences of the royal anthem of Thailand, which has to be screened in every movie theatre prior to the beginning of a film. Moreover, retelling

---

<sup>64</sup> Happiness returns to Thailand [audio] (2014). National Council for Peace and Order, 6 June. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLYSBVmoPhY&nohtml5=False> [Accessed 20 January 2016].

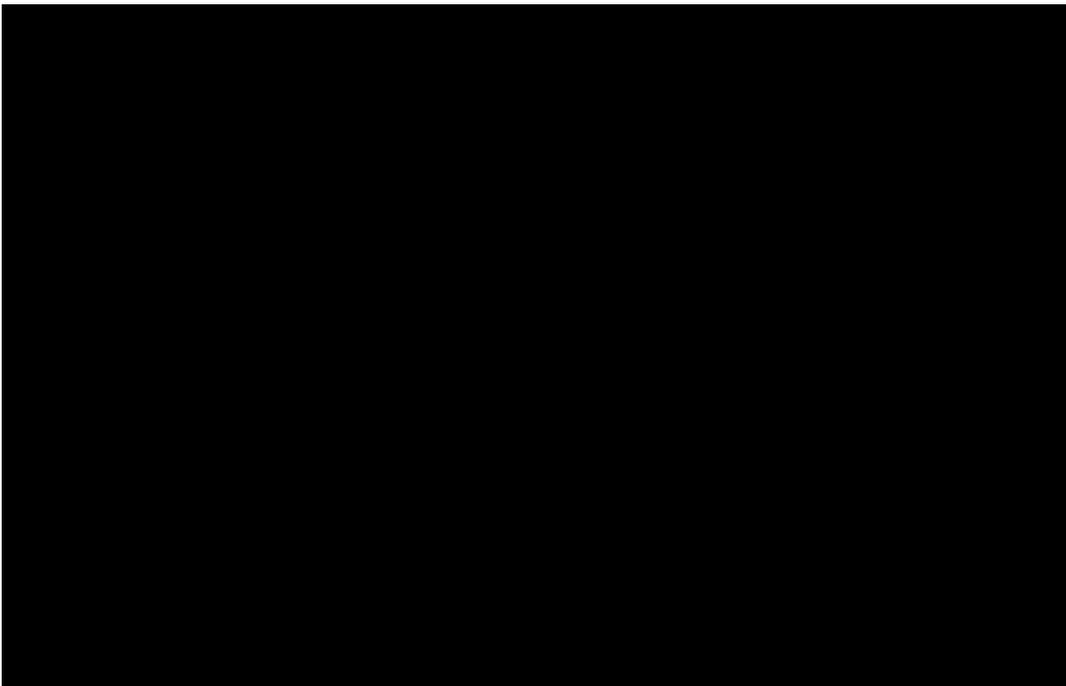
and dramatising the political conflicts during the last decade as a cause of the coup also potentially triggered the political memory in the past decade of the citizens who would be eager to see the country in peace.

What I am more interested in than the use of the music itself is how the music is routinely produced and reproduced in a citizen's everyday life as part of the projection of national happiness. As Michael Billig proposes in *Banal Nationalism* (1995), national identity has been passively consumed by people through different means, not least the media, which serves to instil a sense of collective identities both socially and emotionally. In this vein, the song has been continuously broadcast until it may become banal to citizens, like a national flag and the national anthem, but the song has gradually become a part of Thai citizens' life until it becomes a norm. Whether audiences will appreciate the song or not, the song is always in public space and is part of daily routines to remind people that the dictatorial manipulation of the government is a part of the performance of happiness. Above all, I argue that the notion of happiness used in both songs has been extended to the sphere of national unity and political stability underling the dominant power of the authorities.

Apart from the song that has been repeatedly reproduced as a banal routine, another example can be seen in the TV programme entitled 'Return Happiness to the People in the Nation'. The notion of happiness here was performed in the sense of propagating the legitimate role of the military. The sixty-minute programme was broadcast on all public channels once a week on Friday nights, between May 2014 - March 2019, when the prime minister talked to the public about the situation in Thailand, describing what the military government was working on to improve the country (Sripokangkul 2014). However, after King Bhumibol passed away on 13 October 2016, the Prime Minister changed the programme title to 'Turning the King's words into Practice'. However, the content was similar to the previous programme, which had stressed the hardworking role of the government alongside the importance of the monarchy while the idea of democracy was abolished. Whereas public events and songs may consist of joyful elements and affective

experiences for the participants, the TV programme is constructed in an informative way. Considering the mise-en-scène of the TV programme, in my view, it was set and designed in a straightforward and traditional style (Figure 12).

The Prime Minister was in the middle of the frame while the background was randomly changed within a range of traditional Thai buildings and offices with low-resolution graphics. The national flag was always at the right of the frame. The Prime Minister's costumes were varied from military uniforms to modern suits or traditional Thai outfits. Although the visuals and settings of the programme were ordinary and bland, I argue that it crucially performs the position of the dictatorial government in the sense of direct and absolute power. The performance of happiness on this stage does not represent any joyful or pleasant experiences but it is rather composed as a national report to routinely stress governmental authority.



*Figure 12. The PM on 'Returning Happiness to the People in the Nation' (2014)<sup>65</sup>*

In summary, with regard to neoliberalism and neoliberal happiness, I argue that the examples of the Thai governments' performance of happiness observed in

---

<sup>65</sup> Returning Happiness to the People in the Nation [TV Programme] (2014). The Channel of the Prime Minister, 9 August. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYUxiCr\\_f7Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYUxiCr_f7Q) [Accessed 20 January 2016].

this chapter suggest not only that the neoliberal rationale is a threat to democracy in developed countries, but also that it is even more significant in undemocratic circumstances. With the rigid authority of the dictatorial state, the neoliberal agenda in Thailand is driven and perpetuated under the rubric of neoliberal happiness. Temporary pleasures and optimism are applied and implanted in both institutional and cultural sectors. A sense of nationalism is stimulated to unify vulnerable individuals within a fragmented society. Nonetheless, martial law and the brutal acts that kept people submissive in Thailand under the military government from 2014 to early 2019 underpin the concept of aggressive neoliberal governance, wherein people are encouraged to focus only on themselves, adjust in order to be happy, and not question or challenge inequity. This observation echoes what I presented earlier about the role of the neoliberal state that is required not only to deregulate economic policies but also contain political movements that could challenge the role of the free market. This chapter shows how the happiness promoted by successive Thai administrations has been used as a tool to normalise inequality, injustice, inhumanity and undemocratic actions.

This chapter has also shown that the administration's use and reuse of the term 'happiness' seems to be dominant in Thai society. The notion of happiness has been constantly recalled, stressed, mediated, extended and performed in Thai society through similar means such as festive events in public space, songs and political campaigns, yet happiness is never conceptualised in terms of a good quality of life with secure and certain socio-economic status, nor even in terms of freedom and democratic rights as citizens. Rather, happiness is displayed in terms of individual positive psychology, which can be achieved through consumption, entertainment and reliance on religion or the nation.

The exploration of the performance of national happiness in this chapter shows how the Thai neoliberal state uses the term happiness as a non-static instrument to mask socio-economic incoherency and political turmoil during national conflicts. The next guiding question is: what kind of life is actually lived in the

situation where people live with socio-economic burdens but are bombarded by the notion of happiness by the state? When neoliberal authorities include not only the government but also the market, I suggest that if the state plays a vital role in promoting happiness at the national level, the market (supported by the state) plays a vital role at the everyday level. The following chapters explore how happiness performed by Thai administrations echoes the performance of happiness in everyday reality under neoliberalism, especially under the rubric of consumption. The discussion in the next chapters shows that the national performances of happiness demonstrated in this chapter are not newly invented to redress national conflicts, but are also organised, rehearsed, and performed in the everyday routine as a daily cycle.

## Chapter Four: Performing Happiness during Bangkok Working Days



Figure 13. A shot from *Citizen Dog* (2004)

Bangkok is a city where there are loners more than power poles.

It is a place that makes you forget who you are.

It is the city where a public bus is more packed than sardine fish in a can.

But among these absurdities,

there is still a hidden small beautiful thing called love.<sup>66</sup>

I begin this chapter with the above photo and quotation because I find it ironically represents a scene of neoliberal workers performing happiness in neoliberal Bangkok. The photo is drawn from a Thai film, *Citizen Dog* reflecting the social regime when the city rapidly grew with a massive stream of underpaid workers. The image shows a couple of underpaid workers hugging each other on top of a hill full of plastic bottles and garbage among concrete high-rise buildings in Bangkok. In the film, the main characters seek escapism in individual fantasy scenarios to make them feel happy in various ways such as watching television dramas, reading a foreign-language book that they do not understand, talking to a doll and seeking love from each other, all in order to address their desperate feelings about the city. The photo

---

<sup>66</sup> Sasanatieng, W (Director). (2004). *Citizen Dog* (Film). Thailand, Five Star Production: 100 minutes. [The quote is translated by the author].

suggests that individuals can finally find happiness in the midst of individual ignorance and social disorder. Although the film was made in 2004, by 2015- 2018, the quality of workers' lives in Bangkok had not changed very much. As an inhabitant, I see a city full of rapid development, amid many contradictions. It is lonely as much as it is lively. It is luxurious as much as it is poor. Sometimes, living there feels surreal, yet it is a reality.

In previous chapters, I have presented the performance of happiness manifested by national states including the promotion of Thai smiles, happiness branded in national tourism campaigns, and political reconciliation events. In the following two chapters, the spotlight shifts from Thailand to Bangkok, the capital city, as the stage for a performance of happiness. While the previous chapter focuses on the role of neoliberal states which script and direct the performance of happiness in the nation, the focus is now moved to the role of the market and people. In particular, in this chapter I explore happiness as it is performed by citizens through their everyday routines on working days to ask how social power relations engage with Bangkok workers' ordinary lives through a series of micro performances. I ask how the performance of happiness is played out by Bangkok workers as they negotiate neoliberal socio-economic uncertainties.

In order to suggest a scene of the everyday, I select two settings to discuss in this chapter, the morning commute and lunchtime break, which exemplify the daily routine for Bangkok office workers beyond the workplace itself. The writing is informed by my personal experiences and the ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in May 2017. I draw on photographs taken from the fieldwork and excerpts from interviews to support the analysis. Employing participant observation to investigate scenes, I mobilise myself in various ways, such as commuting, walking, wandering and dining, in order to embody and synchronise my body movements with the city, people and surrounding atmosphere.

In connecting two settings, a commuter train in a morning's rush hours and an outdoor market during a lunch break, the concept of time and space play a

significant role in the performances considered in this chapter. As I indicate in the introduction to the thesis, the imperative of neoliberal time and space is, in a way, informed by a Marxist reading of capitalist labour-time, when human life, either at work or leisure, is taken control of and restricted by economic production. However, neoliberal tactics go further, making individuals feel they are in control of their time rather than it being hijacked. I thus argue that the performance of happiness in everyday neoliberal life engages with a drama of self-investment and self-adjustment, whilst being attentive to time-management.

The management of time for individuals in neoliberal spaces is, to an extent, in accord with Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) — in which he suggests that everyday tactics enable ordinary people to reclaim their autonomy from social forces and orders. Although the substantial material of the performance of happiness elaborated on in this chapter, such as cheerful socialisation, lively dining and active shopping during a lunch break, could all be seen as tactics to liberate social power, I argue that such micro performances of happiness are just another mode of compromise for neoliberal workers. By viewing the management of time as a scene of negotiation between the market and labour, it is not only individuals' tasks but also the labour market itself that has to assure that labour is efficient. This idea is informed by Sarah Sharma's cultural critiques on time and cultural politics, which focus on the recalibration of time and space. Sharma proposes:

Today we are witnessing the proliferation of techniques of recalibration that revive temporal subjects stuck in otherwise confining spatial arrangements. The office is one node in the composition of spaces dictating how time is normally spent: at the office, in the shopping mall, in front of the television set, behind the wheel. (2014: 105)

Therefore, the neoliberal time I am concerned with in this chapter crucially links not only to a drama of individual adjustment to fit the given labour-time, but also to how the city and administrations accommodate it as evident by the way that commercials pervade on a commuter train and social activities occur around the

workplace during lunchtime. In other words, these micro performances are carried out in a dialogue between labour-time and free time.

In linking labour-time to the concept of space in neoliberalism, as mentioned in the introduction, I anticipate that the neoliberal spaces in this thesis are much informed by Doreen Massey's observations on space in terms of its non-static, multiple and interactional production rather than being a closed container for identities (2005). The everyday space selected in this chapter, to some extent, engages with Marc Augé's idea of 'non-places', which includes both their temporal and spatial aspects. He explains that time becomes a metronome conducting our rhythms as well as creating social interaction within 'non-places' such as airports, motorways, train stations, shopping malls and hotel rooms. Augé stresses how such 'non-places' are produced through temporal experiences rather than historical or cultural identities (1995: 104). To an extent, the data presented from my fieldwork shows labour-time and place to be products of the global neoliberal impact wherein people's movements through and between places are indicative of global neoliberal space. For example, a busy morning commuter train in Bangkok denotes a typical scene of the working routine, as in other major cities like Delhi, Tokyo or London.

Apart from the space of commuting, in a global neoliberal space, the idea of consumption crucially underpins neoliberal logic in everyday spatial practices. In neoliberal capitalism, happiness is increasingly associated with the consumer society. In this vein, Zygmunt Bauman addresses how the notion of happiness is fostered in a world of consumption when individual socio-economic lives are uncertain. The 'liquid consumer', as described by Bauman, is manipulated by the market to flow through the consumer world believing that happiness is only available in a marketplace. As he puts it:

The value most characteristic of the society of consumers, indeed its supreme value in relation to which all the other values are called on to justify their worth, is a happy life; indeed, the society of consumers is perhaps the only society in human history to promise happiness in earthly

life, and happiness here and now and in every successive ‘now’; in short, an instant and perpetual happiness. (2007a: 44)

Bauman’s term ‘instant and perpetual happiness’ in relation to consumption intersects in vivid ways with neoliberal space, at the core of which lies the project of investing in one’s life as an entrepreneur. Consumption seemingly allows individuals to access happiness instantly and perpetually, masking and allaying individual flaws and fears. The idea of urban consumption in a neoliberal regime is introduced in this chapter to demonstrate how the commercial promoted on a commuter train and micro-shopping at an outdoor market during the lunchtime break serve as a routine rehearsal of consumer culture in working days which is later performed extensively by individuals in a shopping centre during the weekend (which is expanded on in more detail in the following chapter). Furthermore, I aim not only to present the transition of the spatial engagements of workers from the contained space of a commuter train to the open street around the workplace, but also to show the different forms of happiness performed via technology on the digital monitors in the high-speed vehicle and the walking city dwellers.

Although the idea of neoliberal time and space inevitably circulates around the global neoliberal practices mentioned, such as the mundane commute, temporary liberation during the lunch break or consumption activities, the particular local scene cannot be ignored. From a viewpoint of performance studies, I pay attention to the specific cultural aspects that subtly and routinely frame the performance of happiness by the inhabitants within specific cultural settings. As D. J. Hopkins and Kim Solga ask: ‘What forms of performance reflect the greater vectors of globalisation and reveal the ways in which seemingly abstract economic and social forces have a real-world impact on individual city-dwellers, their daily lives and movements?’ (2013: 4). I aim to take performance perspectives involving spatial and sensory embodiment to connect the particular cultural practices of Bangkok and Thailand to larger scale neoliberal socio-economic forces. Therefore, I also draw on aspects of Thai culture such as nationalism, happiness gained from self-reliance,

optimism and consumption to underpin certain agencies of the performance of happiness in the daily routine in Bangkok.

In the introduction to this thesis I situate social drama as a tool for observing the performance of happiness amid neoliberal impacts, by locating the performance as a redressive process that integrates neoliberal conflicts and crises by making neoliberal subjects feel better about their lives. As well as the national level, it is equally important to investigate social drama in the form of micro performances occurring in everyday practice that potentially allow or restrict redress. As Jonas Larsen, John Urry, and Kay Axhausen observe:

People are involved in social dramas wherein actions depend upon negotiation, approval and feelings, and have social and emotional consequences. Individuals are part of networks that both enable and constrain possible individual actions. They are immobilised and mobilised in complex relational ways. (2006: 8)

Since this chapter deals in various ways with the concept of mobilisation, social drama is used to investigate the performance of happiness in everyday processes such as the face-to-face and interpersonal dramas involving various agents in the city such as passengers and workers in various sectors. The chapter deals with social power such as the consumption market, labour-time and social norms. In this light, Henri Lefebvre's conceptions of space, everyday life and rhythmanalysis contribute to the investigation of how workers, as products of society, participate in the given time and space. Kanishka Goonewardena et al. summarise Lefebvre's argument:

As homogeneous, profane time, it has provided the time measure for work and subjugated one sphere of life after another: sleeping and waking hours, mealtimes, private life, the relationship of parents to their children, leisure time, times spent at home, and so on. In spite of the merciless rule of the abstract clock time, the immense cosmic rhythms continue to exert influence on everyday life. (2008: 150)

Employing rhythmanalysis, I allow my body to experience everyday rhythms through a dance between mobilising and immobilising. I consider not only the rhythm of what is seen and heard, but also what is felt, empowered or restricted. For example, the rhythm

on the commuter train suggests physical mobilisation from one place to another, but it can be read as an immobile trap or box wherein a set of commercials are perpetually fed to the passengers. During the lunch break, when the passengers are liberated to move their bodies freely, immobility is somehow conducted via the invisible and inaudible metronome of their financial limits and labour-time. Instead, abstract immobility is overlooked and people are distracted by micro social activities that can be performed temporarily. The rhythmanalysis on this dialectic is essential in revealing the performance of happiness — which is conceived as a dialogue with unhappiness — and in reflecting the relational performance between the people and neoliberal power.

This chapter is organised in three sections. The first offers a brief picture of Bangkok as a neoliberal city. This section aims to initiate a discussion on how Bangkok is constructed and lived from a structural and macro perspective. Seeing the city as a stage, this first section presents how Bangkok consists of various socio-economic tensions. Jen Harvie's useful departure-point on contemplating the complexities of cities in *Theatre & the City* (2009) inspires the essential questions asked in the following sections. She asks how people actually negotiate to live and relate to each other in each circumstance amid complex and chaotic socio-economic structures under intensive capitalism and consumerism. In so doing, I first present Bangkok's demography as a site of everyday practice to provide a background to the city before drawing on my memories and experiences of negotiating the spaces and temporalities of the city as a tool to demonstrate how they impact on everyday life.

The second part elaborates on the promotion of routes to happiness staged on a morning commute on a Skytrain, the most convenient yet expensive public transportation in the city. I contemplate the whole journey as a piece of performance with multiple micro performances containing various power tensions and individual emotions. Simon Jones and Paul Rae's perceptive reflections on commuting performance, to and from work in Singapore, informs the way I read the commute in

my fieldwork, as a tool connecting individuals in space and time, both internally and externally. They state:

Each moment of each such journey is multiple. The commuter's sense of self, awareness of time, physical disposition, social demeanor, and imaginative world are in constant flux, subject to the promptings of a changing environment, a glance, a glimpse of the headlines, a snatch of conversation, the ache or prick or zing of memory, a new track on the MP3 player, a consuming problem or project, or any of the many declensions of anticipation that make up our sense of the future (2013: 144).

Although the experience of each journey cannot be generalised and not every trip is the same, the journey selected for the fieldwork offers a scene of ordinary life and evidence of daily experiences, which can be connected to a greater vector of neoliberalism. Emphasis is placed on a set of advertisements screened on monitors on the Skytrain. I ask how the promotion of routes to happiness, performed throughout these commercials, is used as a vehicle by the neoliberal authorities promoting and re-staging the notion of happiness allied to commodities, as well as self-reliance and management. Moreover, the importance of national agendas such as religion and the hegemonic monarchy discussed in Chapter Two is also promoted on the train as a means to underline the prospective happy life of neoliberal workers in Bangkok. Alongside the commercials, I posit the surrounding environment and passenger behaviour as an encountering dialogue with the commercials and the trip on the train. I argue in this section that although the reactions of the commuters on the train are banal, advertisements displayed on the train are daily reproduced in the inhabitants' lives as a norm — a rehearsal for such happiness to be performed in other everyday settings.

While the second part of the chapter demonstrates the performance of happiness organised by the market and state in the contained space of the train, the final part focuses on happiness performed by workers during a lunch break in the open-air streets of Ari, a busy office district in the city. Placing an emphasis on the flow of human traffic, I ask how workers perform happiness in their lunch break and

how lunchtime shapes their social and spatial engagements. Also, the key question asked in this section is how the performance of happiness during the lunch break could re-energise workers to remain within the neoliberal market and distance them from challenging the status quo by making a working day seemingly not just bearable but ‘happy enough’ to resume their duty the following day. I denote the lunch break as a ‘happy hour’ by discussing the happiness performed in lively and cheerful atmospheres through activities such as dining, socialising and shopping within and around the polluted outdoor-markets in the office district.

Walking is the main tool I use to mobilise my body within this space. To an extent, the writing about my walk in Ari is constructed much in the way Carl Lavery presents his pedestrian performance as two related actions, the walk itself, and the documentation of the walk. He states:

I do not see walking as a simple analogy for writing, an equivalent to language. Rather I consider it as a mysterious mode of language production, a bodily rhythm to tease out the strange song of self. I wanted to create an autobiographical text that would fold together memory, reverie and landscape. (2009: 49)

In presenting my walk, I firstly locate my subjectivity as an essential element of the scene I encountered in Ari, with unrestricted time and space and a set of reminiscences, memories, feelings and hopes. This process enables me to reflect on the walk itself in an autobiographical text. Later, I use a wider lens to reflect on my subjectivity in the moment, and present documentation of my walk. However, this can never be fully separated from my subjectivity or the way I performed my walk, the familiar location, district and city, and my reflection on the everyday negotiation of a neoliberal scene.

To a great extent, the performance of happiness discussed in this chapter could be seen through the Marxist lens of ‘false consciousness’, which intersects with Benjamin Radcliff’s connection to happiness discussed in Chapter Three. There is a restriction of individual rights and people’s belief in their ability to challenge the current contexts of society. Nevertheless, I do not attempt to present this as a

dominant form of control by neoliberal logics, I rather see that such false consciousness does not happen by chance but requires a subtle script of socio-economic forces and everyday cultural practices to create a temporary scene of dialectic negotiation. Ultimately, I propose that the happiness routinely performed in a working day is the instant happiness of time and self management manifested through activities such as consumption and socialisation as cultural practice, in order to yield to the ultimate neoliberal agenda of retaining subjects happily within the system rather than challenging it.

### **Neoliberal Bangkok: The City of Angels**

Among seventy-five other provinces, Bangkok was established as the capital city of Thailand in 1782 with the official Thai name 'Krung Thep Maha Nakhon', which translates to 'City of Angels' in English. Chao Phraya River, the largest river in the country, divides the city into two main regions. Even though Bangkok has been established as the capital city for two centuries, its population has seen a dramatic rise since the middle of the twentieth century. Located in the central region of the country, Bangkok occupies 1,569 km<sup>2</sup>, and is populated by 10.3 million people.<sup>67</sup> Having a tropical monsoon climate, the temperature in Bangkok is humid, remaining around 30°C throughout the year. Bangkok is the primary city in Thailand, where the nation's population and economic activity are heavily concentrated (Endō 2014).

Amid the global burgeoning capitalism, the rapid urbanisation of Bangkok flourished in the 1980s when the agricultural and rural zones of Bangkok were transformed into residential areas serving the growing population. Several ethnic groups, such as Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao and Chinese emigrated to Thailand, mainly settling in Bangkok. Since the 1980s, the number of high-rises, residential areas, business centres, shopping malls and entertainment centres has grown significantly (Endō 2014). The traditional architecture, such as palaces and temples, is mainly

---

<sup>67</sup> World Population Review 2019 (2019). Bangkok Population 2019, 12 May. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/bangkok-population/> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

preserved in the old town district, existing primarily as a tourist attraction. The sudden urban transformation has not only affected the city's spatial geography but also changed the economic activities and everyday lives of urban residents. Tamaki Endō notes that:

Bangkok thus represents a multipolar society, in which new and old features of labour coexist such as the informal economy on one hand and the informalisation of the formal economy and an influx of migrant workers on the other. Bangkok thus represents the complex interrelationships of today's world in compressed form. (2014:11)

Due to the disproportionate urban development in Thailand, Bangkok provides the most opportunities for workers to participate in a large and diverse labour market. There are both international and national firms manufacturing electronics, computers, clothing, telecommunications, food, gems, jewellery and cars. The working classes who are not able to complete a university or college degree due to financial difficulties, tend to have self-employed informal jobs such as motorbike or taxi drivers, running a mobile food stall, shoemaking or garbage collection. Some also do service jobs such as cleaners, hairdressers, massage therapists, maids and security guards (Endō 2014).

Owing to the governing neoliberalism, Bangkok is a site of significant contrasts and a huge market for life investment. Bangkok has notable disparities of wealth but there is access to social opportunities such as education, health, work and leisure. Christopher Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit observe that since the 1980s there has been increasing income inequality between urban and rural areas, resulting in rapid migration from rural areas into Bangkok. A labourer in Bangkok could earn more than a person relying on agricultural activities in the countryside. Selling land to move to Bangkok has become the norm for working-age people in rural areas to escape poverty while little children are left with their grandparents in the countryside (Baker & Pasuk 2005: 211). Due to the abject rural poverty, many people have traded their slow and peaceful lives relying on natural resources for the competitive industrial speed of Bangkok. Their labour-time, which used to be scheduled in

accordance with Thompson's notion of pre-industrial time governed by specific tasks and seasons, has been quickened to hours. Consequently, migrating to Bangkok is the primary investment that millions of Thai workers in the rural areas have made in order to survive.

In relation to the economic disparities — while there are luxury penthouses and luxury cars everywhere, it is still usual to see homeless people and beggars on every corner of the street, similar to many other major global cities. There have been a high number of slum communities established, as immigrants who do not own land cannot afford the rent in Bangkok, and the state provides no housing support. Many build small temporary shelters from tin and wood on empty land in the inner city to reduce their transportation costs and gain access to job opportunities (Endō 2014). There are around a thousand of these slums in Bangkok. The biggest, in central Bangkok, is Klong Toey, which is home to around 100,000 people. Located next to a filthy canal, people have a poor quality of life and a high level of risk. According to Mark Kramer, while residents in the Klong Toey slum try to improve their quality of life by working, some are trapped by a lack of education, money and social support to improve their skills (2006). Some turn to drug trafficking and prostitution to earn enough money to survive and send it to support their families. This typifies neoliberal meritocracy, wherein citizens' lives are framed by market-based rationality, which inevitably restricts them from accessing better choices.

Apart from the rapid growth of the labour market, Bangkok holds a monopoly on higher education within the country. It is common for villagers to invest in their children's college or university education in Bangkok, because of the greater choice and, arguably, better quality facilities. Public universities were privatised in the early 2000s, and there is little financial support from the state. However, a bachelor's degree can offer a worker more than double the minimum wage and is viewed as a golden ticket for young people from all classes either from Bangkok or other provinces, to rise beyond the minimum wage economy. Hence, it is clear that Bangkok features as another mode of the neoliberal marketplace, offering

education as a life investment not only with the purpose of educating people but also as a necessary tool to improve one's socio-economic status — to survive in the market.

Nevertheless, holding a bachelor's degree does not always safeguard a worker's life in reality. Bangkok workers still have to work hard amidst insufficient social benefits. The majority of workers in Bangkok work around forty-eight to fifty hours a week.<sup>68</sup> The notion of 'working hard' and 'being patient to the hardship' are reproduced as good traits for a worker in Thai society. For some office workers, late hours and hard work are not only a financial necessity, but a means to earn a better reputation with their employers in order to secure job positions and avoid unemployment since the unemployment benefits in Thailand are meagre. In summary, both the working classes and middle classes in Bangkok are all falling into the same neoliberal socio-economic precarity.

With its intensive labour force, Bangkok is a consumer society with a giant shopping mall located in every district, open late at night, serving people working long hours. With only a small amount of free public space such as parks, museums, and libraries, shopping malls in Bangkok act as leisure spaces for people of all classes. Not only are most market activities contained within the malls in Bangkok, such as groceries, entertainment and restaurants, other social activities and life domains such as education, health, banks, parks, libraries and gyms are commodified in most of Bangkok's shopping malls (Wongweerasert 2012).

Overall, the information presented above positions Bangkok as a scene of global neoliberalism. At one level, Bangkok may have metropolitan privilege but it must be traded with a series of investments, not only of money but also work, free time, energy and relationships with hometown and family. The following sections discuss my fieldwork amid the socioeconomic disparities and class struggles of

---

<sup>68</sup> National Statistical Office (2016). The Time Use Survey 2015 (July 2014- June 2015). Bangkok Thailand: National Statistical Office and Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.

neoliberal Bangkok, to show the everyday practices in which the notion of happiness is organised, promoted and performed as a daily routine in a working day.

## **A Happy Day, a Happy Life: Routes to Happiness Promoted on a Commuter Train**

Bangkok is known as one of the most congested cities. Motorists in Bangkok spend an extra sixty-four minutes a day stuck in congested traffic, which is the longest for any city in the world.<sup>69</sup> Commuting in Bangkok always sapped my energy even when I was little. It was routine for my family to commute twenty km to school and work from my house on the outskirts of Bangkok to the city centre. As members of the Bangkok middle class, we have a term for a child whose mornings and evenings are located in congested traffic, ‘a kid who has been brought up in a car’. I was one of them. When I was in elementary school, my parents would wake me at 5:30 am, carry me to the family car and let me continue sleeping. I woke up when we arrived in school at 7:00 am. I then changed from my pyjamas into a school uniform, had breakfast, brushed my teeth in the car, and got ready to enter the school gate by 7:30 am. School finished at 3:30 pm, but most children would be left playing at school or doing their homework until our parents finished work and picked us up at 6:00 pm. Then I would eat a light meal in the car. Without a tablet or a smartphone, the car radio was the only entertainment available. I also played with my brothers in the car. We often argued, fought, cried and laughed until we were tired and took a nap. There would often be an emergency if one of us needed the toilet when we were stuck in a heavy traffic jam. We would finally arrive home at 8:00 pm, and I would be totally spent. I can say that many of my childhood memories and my relationships with my siblings were based within the car.

Commuting became more challenging for me when I went to university. My parents stopped driving me and I had to use public transportation. Although my

---

<sup>69</sup> The Telegraph (2017). The world’s worst cities for traffic. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries/The-worlds-worst-cities-for-traffic/> [Accessed 10 August, 2017].

university was fifteen kilometres away from my house, I needed to take at least three or four types of transportation including a motorbike taxi, public bus, Skytrain and mini-shuttle bus. The journey took me around two hours depending on the time of day. I prepared for my exams on the bus. Reading, listening to music and even writing a play were my common activities while commuting. When I was in my last year of undergraduate studies, one of my screenplays was about life on a public bus; it was probably the topic I had most experience of.

When I started working in 2014, the university where I worked was located sixty km away from my house. I commuted via public transportation, which included a minivan and a taxi. Not only did the trip turn out to be very costly, on one occasion I was asked to get out of the van in the middle of a highway. The driver told me I was the last passenger and it was not worth the gasoline to drive me alone. Having calculated the price of renting a flat near my workplace or buying a car, I found that the car would leave me more money at the end of the month. Thus I started driving sixty km back and forth almost every day for two years. I always had breakfast in the car. I installed as many entertainment gadgets as I could in the car. Needing the toilet when I was in the car in a terrible traffic jam was always a disaster for me, the same as when I was little. The routine of the long commute of my childhood kept repeating itself, and remained a considerable burden. However, this is a common phenomenon for middle class Bangkok residents who are not affluent enough to afford accommodation in the central area.

In May 2017, when I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork and had to commute a lot in Bangkok, it brought back rich memories to me. Throughout the fieldwork I had a chance to commute to the city centre by various methods both public and private. The following section focuses on a trip to work via the Bangkok Skytrain, which is the most convenient means of transportation in the city. However, a trip by Skytrain costs at least three times more than by public bus. Established in 1999, Bangkok Skytrain (BTS) was the first high-speed public transportation in Thailand running on high over-ground rails across the city centre. Because of its

superior quality in terms of speed and higher prices, the space of the BTS is more than just a means of transportation, it is also a stage for social performance suggesting a scripted social power in which not all social actors are allowed to participate. In other words, due to the expensive fares, not every worker in Bangkok can afford to travel by BTS. In a certain way, the character of the BTS resonates with Melissa Butcher's observation that the Delhi metro is a space of negotiation between space and subjectivity. She states:

Even when not using the Metro there was a diverse range of meanings and uses given to this infrastructure other than just as a means of commuting. It was a theatre that demanded the negotiation of space, often on unequal terms, and a site for the development and deployment of skills to manage those negotiations that at times challenged the expectations of the city's proposed cosmopolitanism. (2013: 166)

The following section is an investigation of a morning trip in which the routes to happiness are promoted through commercials on the train to commuters who were prospective audiences. The journey that I select to discuss is from Bang Wa station, which is in a residential area on the outskirts of Bangkok, to Ari station, one of the central business areas of Bangkok (Figure 14).

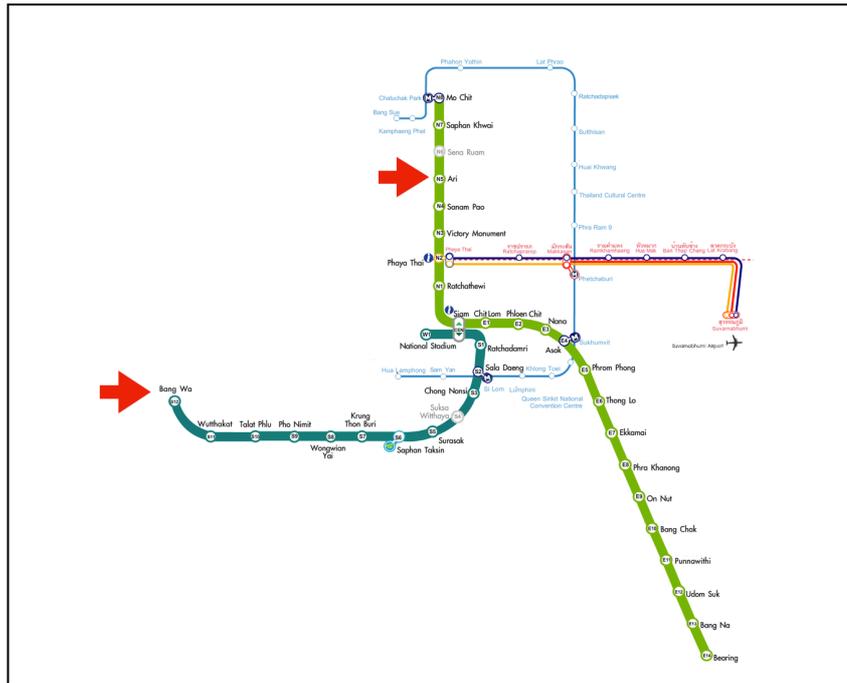


Figure 14. Bangkok Skytrain Map: Arrowed at Bang Wa and Ari Station (2017)

On the 3rd of May 2017, it was a scorching Wednesday when I woke up at six in the morning and got ready to go to Ari, the business centre. Planning to leave my house at seven, I asked my mother to drive me to Bang Wa station, the nearest BTS station, which was fifteen km away from my home. There was no public transportation going straight to the station. Although I could have taken a taxi, it would have cost me around 150-200 THB, which was around half a day at minimum wage. In the car, I chatted with my mother while I had breakfast, which reminded me of my old habits. Without too much congestion, it would normally take fifteen-twenty minutes to get to the station by driving, but during the rush hour we spent almost forty minutes on the road.

When I arrived at Bang Wa, the terminal station, a number of passengers were getting out of private cars, taxis, minivans and motorbike taxis and rushing to the entrance. It was easy to tell from people’s movements and outfits that they were hurrying to their workplaces located in the centre of Bangkok. Black trousers, formal shirts, knee-length dresses, and document bags or laptop backpacks are the standard uniform for Bangkok’s office workers. Although almost everyone had worn black and white outfits to commemorate the passing of King Bhumibol since October

2016, there was no trace of mourning or sorrow. People just followed their routines as usual. After getting out of a quiet air-conditioned car, the heat and polluted air suddenly overwhelmed me. The rumble of motors along with the high-pitched honks and traffic police whistles struck my nerves. The rhythm and pace of the other passengers were too fast to capture as they rushed to catch a train.

At the station, I queued to buy a ticket from the staff while other office workers passed through with their top-up passes. It was almost two years since my last trip by train from this station. I was surprised by the increased fare. To get to the city centre cost 60 THB for a single trip so I had to pay 120 THB for a return trip, which could buy me four standard meals. While I was calculating the price in my head, the clock at the station showed 7:45 am, which was the peak hour for commuting for people who wanted to get to work by 8:30 or 9:00 am. I stepped forward to join the crowded rows.



*Figure 15. Passengers at Bang Wa Station (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

The weather was boiling hot and humid enough for some of the waiting passengers to sweat. They already looked exhausted rather than energetic. After letting the first train leave as it was too overcrowded to get on, I finally squeezed into the next train. Silently, everyone tried their best to get on the train as soon as possible and all seats were occupied within ten seconds. Just like when I was a student there, it always seemed that those who got seated would taste a sort of victory. This time however, I had not been lucky or fast enough so I had to stand for thirty-five minutes until I arrived in Siam, the interchange station for Ari.

Compared to the public buses in Bangkok, the BTS is clean and well-presented with bright yellow seats in two rows facing each other. As soon as people got on the train, they synchronously started their usual habit of playing on their smartphones. There were air conditioners on the train, but the humid, fully packed coach, with intermingled smelly sweat from various individuals, did not have a pleasant atmosphere. There was no trace of a human voice, except an automatic lady's voice announcing the next station. There was also audio from a mini-screen on the train running a series of commercials, which filled the quiet train. Although the coach was full of passengers, invisible walls separated people from each other. Some took a nap, most were on their phones browsing social media apps, watching TV dramas, playing mobile games or listening to music on headphones. Despite the fast-moving train, there was a lady professionally putting on makeup as if it was her usual routine.

At first, I thought that everything looked normal and everyone looked familiar and fine with what they were doing. I thought that maybe it was not as bad as I felt. Tim Edensor explains how the experience of commuting can be perceived as encompassing more variety of feelings than just a boring, insufferable experience (2011). His work focuses on commuters as individual agents with the potential to design their journeys. He observes that 'the image of the passive body stuck in traffic or static train is also a familiar dystopian representation in popular culture and yet the sensual experience of commuting is more complex and varied than this

implies' (2011: 199). For Edensor, commuting allows commuters to read, plan, talk on the telephone or engage with technology such as listening to an iPod or using other hi-tech devices. Commuting, in his view, provides passengers time alone, which they can use to liberate themselves from the social order as well as experience media such as radio, books or newspapers as a way of gaining information and knowledge. He asserts that:

Commuting is akin to the ambiguities inherent in other mundane practices that produce movement and stasis, conform to powerful temporal and spatial regulation but seek certain freedoms, and find a balance between predictability and possibility. (2011: 201)

Nevertheless, after articulating my memories and experiences, I argue that this form of liberation is another mode of neoliberal logic, making struggles bearable while ultimately retaining people within the system. Commuters have no choice but to adapt their time to fit in with the situation. As a result of centralised administration and development in Bangkok, the limits of routes, and expensive transportation, Bangkok office workers inevitably have to invest their energy and money in the fastest transportation. Even de Certeau who clearly seeks for everyday tactics as a battle to social power asserts that the immobility inside a train is 'a bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity - that is what can traverse space and make itself independent of local roots' (111).

Having commuted in Bangkok for my entire life, the alone time that I had during commuting did indeed provide me with a chance to liberate myself from wasting time on the road, but it certainly did not liberate me from the relation between socio-economic power and labour-time. The living cost in central Bangkok was too high for me to afford so I just tried to reinvent my habits to be content with the existing conditions. I did not perceive my childhood living in a car as a pleasurable experience. I would have loved to sit and eat properly at home, not in the car. I would have preferred to watch films in a cinema or my living room rather than in a car. The norm of being stuck in traffic or taking a long journey to work has

become a banal routine which compels people to seek entertainment and activities to fill the otherwise useless time. Browsing on mobile phones, listening to music or watching entertainment during the trip are, I propose, activities that compel people to adapt themselves with the strict labour-time rather than challenging it. Sharma calls this ‘a chronography of power... where individuals’ and social groups’ senses of time and possibilities are shaped by a differential economy, limited or expanded by the ways and means that they find themselves in and out of time’ (2014: 9).

The train on which I was standing was expeditious, clean, well-designed and air-conditioned, but it was packed with people exhibiting low energy, visible tiredness and minimal interaction with their fellow commuters. At Siam, the interchange station, passengers ran to get to the platform, looked at their watches, stopped and waited, then rushed to another train, sat on the seat, occupied themselves with personal activities, and rushed to their workplace again. Amid the individual activities of the exhausted workers, I sought a trace of happiness, but I could not find it in any sense. But there was still a clear promotion of routes to happiness displayed on the digital screens of the train.

I shifted my focus from the sleep-deprived workers to the set of commercials running on the digital screens, which were, in contrast, lively and cheerful. I was struck by the way the commercials promoted routes to happiness. When I was a regular Bangkok commuter, I scarcely noticed those advertisements, but I knew they would always be there. Similarly, although the commercials did not really draw all the commuters’ attention, the vivid dancing visuals, cheerful voice-over and jingles were attractive enough to brighten up the monotonous train. However, after contemplating the whole set of the adverts, I found that they visibly circulated around the idea of happiness in the form of self-investment in various life domains such as health, appearance, leisure, financial status, housing and relationships. To uncover how the commercials on the train closely engage the particular performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand, I categorise all the commercials under five headings — health, relationships, convenience, financial status and leisure. These

aspects of happiness indicate a desirable life in Bangkok performed to the audience on the train.

Several health-related products were promoted. For instance, multi-coded glasses that filter brightness from a computer screen were promoted to office workers who work in front of monitors. Collagen drinks and food supplements were promoted by suggesting their importance to being a healthy worker. Even drinking water, the most important factor for the survival of humans, was advertised. In Thailand, drinking water companies are extremely powerful in the market and drinking tap water is not common owing to its, arguably, sub-standard hygiene. In addition, a good number of health and life insurance adverts promoted good relationships that could be invested in. The notion of 'love' was profoundly attached to an insurance package. The common theme of all the insurance adverts played around the concept of buying a life or health insurance package as a way to show love and care. For example, one commercial talked about a son who bought an insurance package for his elderly father to show love and gratitude.

The third category of commercial promoted an easy and convenient life in Bangkok, a working life that one could invest in. As an everyday routine, fast food and frozen food products from convenience stores were heavily promoted, emphasising their time-saving value and suggesting an easy-going life. In addition, there were a couple of commercials for a high-rise condominium located in the central area of Bangkok connected to metro stations, which certainly came with an extremely high price. These commodities suggested that Bangkok was a good place to live if you could afford to pay for them.

The fourth group of commercials promoted financial freedom. There were at least four commercials for credit card companies, repeating over and over. All placed an emphasis on the idea of 'empowering your financial freedom'. As covered in Chapter Two, most Thai workers are trapped in a debt economy due to the disparity between living costs and incomes, and the heavy promotion of an intensive consumer society. Hence, credit cards companies in Thailand are very successful and

highly promoted. On the train, it was clear to me that their target customers were salaried workers with a regular and predictable income.

It seemed that having good health, rewarding relationships, a convenient lifestyle, and financial freedom did not suffice in providing happiness for Bangkok workers. The fifth type of commercial was for cosmetics and skincare products. Having makeup on is essential for Thai female office workers. It is normal to see women doing their makeup on a metro or a bus. From my experience, in a public toilet in the early morning there will be a row of women in front of the mirror putting on their lipstick and mascara. While most of the commercials for beauty products particularly pertained to female office workers, for men there was a hair-care product promoted showing that a male salaried worker could travel on a motorbike in rush hour without having a bad hair day. It was evident that the value of looks and beauty are indicated to be a necessity to be invested in for a working day.

Lastly, since leisure and free time are important tools for retaining workers within the workforce, the final category of commercials showed that happiness can be gained from travel and entertainment. Throughout the screening of the adverts, films and entertainment were promoted as part of a Bangkok lifestyle and how city dwellers spent their leisure time. In addition, in one commercial, the Tourism Ministry introduced a campaign called ‘travelling during weekdays’, encouraging people to spend more money on weekdays regardless of the fact that workers in Thailand are eligible to have only six days paid holiday per year.

According to the advertisements, I propose that the Skytrain in Bangkok is a vehicle used to promote routes to happiness through a series of individual investments. Various agendas of desirable lifestyles are manifested on a day-to-day basis, such as daily consumption, and as a long-term life project, such as insurance and accommodation. On the surface, happiness and positive vibes are used to energise a mundane morning for office workers. However, what I found more noteworthy than just lifting the passengers’ emotions was that, as a place, the Skytrain is a tool of the neoliberal markets and corporations, filling commuters’

routines with the promotion of commodified happiness, instilling neoliberal logic of an entrepreneurial life. People are encouraged to spend more money, invest in time, and pursue a better life, but the fact is that individuals' leisure time is squeezed thin because of intensive work and living amid socio-economic uncertainty. This is a mirror of Wendy Brown's arguments about how one's life is commodified as a market place, discussed in Chapter Two. According to human happiness under the rubric of livability discussed in Chapter Three, owing to inadequate state benefits, it is evident from the commercials that the performance of happiness is engaged in turning neoliberal subjects in Bangkok into individual investors. Happiness in the sense of financial security, social relationships, and good health is dependent on private insurance and credit card companies. Instant but temporary happiness is repeatedly promoted through investment in entertainment and leisure. Happiness in the realm of self-confidence and self-actualisation is attained through looks and appearance. In a way, I propose that the existence of the performance of happiness shown in the form of commercials may look mundane in a capitalist society, but the performance is a daily rehearsal. Equally importantly, the reproduction of happiness gained from commodities is also a rehearsal for people to anticipate and practice later in the spaces of consumption like a shopping mall, on which I elaborate in the next chapter.

In considering the train as a stage for the promotion of micro performances of happiness, it can be seen that the assigned labour-time not only shapes and frames the inhabitants' speed and activities, but authorities and businesses also control people's time through the power they wield. Sharma explains how Michel Foucault's explanation of biopolitics is echoed in the way powerful agencies such as the state, the military, airlines, wellness enterprises, and the tourism industry control citizens' time. 'Such institutions derive and exert power through their investment and control of people's time' (2014: 18). The train is a production of temporal and spatial compression within global neoliberalism, wherein people have to commute to work to earn a living. According to Tim Cresswell, 'place was not simply an outcome of

social processes though, it was, once established, a tool in the creation, maintenance and transformation of relations of domination, oppression and exploitation' (2004: 29).

On the Skytrain, in spite of the passengers' inattention, the repeating commercials performed the route to happiness appointed by the neoliberal market — it is going to be a happy day and a happy life to live in the city. However, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, the particular culture of a place is somewhat different from people's daily practices. Although individuals may fall into the same routine as any other mode of the neoliberal lifestyle, I argue that the state and administrators in Thailand still employ particular cultural and national materials to support the neoliberal agendas of commodification and self-reliance that serve the performance of happiness via national sentiment. As explored in Chapters Two and Three, the narratives of happiness and neoliberalism in Thai culture have engaged philosophically, to a great extent, with the hegemony of the monarchy and Buddhism. To draw on the particular relation of the performance of happiness in neoliberal Bangkok and global neoliberalism, it is important to extract the culturally specific influences that are scripted. On the mini screen on the Skytrain, apart from the commodities presented to display a neoliberal Bangkok lifestyle which could resonate with other global capitalist cities, there were three other non-commercial videos promoting happiness in the forms of life philosophy, to encourage and remind Thai passengers of the centrality of morality, nationalism and royalism.

Firstly, there was a short clip of a Buddhist monk teaching how children should be grateful to their parents. Secondly, there was a clip of the present King Vajiralongkorn's glorifying poem. Finally, the famous philosophy of the previous King Bhumibol on Sufficiency Economy was emphasised. In the clip, the previous king's statement made in 1998 was quoted suggesting that the SE policy would bring achievements and happiness to the country and the people, but it must come with hard work, patience, calmness, less speaking out and no argument. If everyone

readily followed these principles, he believed, everyone would be content with life.<sup>70</sup> It is worth relinking this to Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism' (1995). Although the passengers did not pay attention to the clips, like an un-waved national flag in a country, its existence should not be underestimated. I argue that the religious agenda of being grateful to parents visibly accords with the private insurance commercials that commodify family relationships as individual investments. The philosophy of 'speak out less, work more, no arguments', which was stressed in the SE promotion as a route to happiness, not only illustrates the life of Bangkok neoliberal workers that lack the power to negotiate with their employers or the state itself, the commercial also stressed the attributes of a 'good Thai citizen' by linking this philosophy to the monarchy and the nation. Although I saw at first that the SE clips seemed to contradict the life-investment promoted by earlier clips, it instead denoted how neoliberal subjects in Bangkok are pushed into a complete form of individual responsibility. While they were encouraged to spend, if they went in debt, SE was derived to justify that it was their own flaw for not being content with what they already had. The examples of the promotional clips show that neoliberalism and nationalism in Thailand clearly support each other in terms of restricting people's right to challenge socio-economic conditions and promoting a perspective of a happy life which could be invested in consumer society and individual management. With an insufficient income and a low minimum wage, the promotion of pathways to happiness is commodified and attached to people's daily routine as a norm.

Before leaving the train, when I had nearly arrived at Ari, my destination, I reshuffled my thoughts about the whole trip. What was visible to my eyes was the contradictions in what I had been fed about the promotion of routes to happiness presented through the commercials. The smiling faces, active tunes and cheerful words of the commercials did not match the workers who lowered their heads and studied their phones. The train stopped at Ari station. People got off, walking fast,

---

<sup>70</sup> Translated by the author. DMCR NEWS. (2014). King Bhumibol's Statement Given on 4 December 1998. <https://www.dmcr.go.th/detailAll/2460/pc/23> [Accessed 30 May 2019].

and headed to the office, leaving the commercials running on for the next group of passengers.

### **Happy Hours in Ari's Lunch Break**

I went from the commuter train to an outdoor public space in Ari. The business centre is the main focus of this section. The analysis that follows is based on a series of walks through Ari's alleys. I firstly deal with an exploration of Ari's demographic characteristics. Then I demonstrate the walking route I took in order to show how walking in the area beneath high-rise buildings serves hundreds of office workers in the area. I investigate the performance of happiness occurring during lunch break at an office district by drawing on the physical environment such as walking paths, food stalls, and outdoor markets. The walking route was selected from my first-hand experience of the area. Walking the city streets provided me with a chance to experience the mutual paces and rhythms of other pedestrians in the same space and time. The density of the crowd, the speed of walking and the sensory experiences produced and reproduced by people who shared the space rendered the everyday rhythms of the city.

In comparison to the morning commuter train, walking in and around the office district enabled me to observe the multiple layers of everydayness, as Charlotte Bates and Alex Rhys-Taylor put it:

Walking the city streets is not always a pleasurable experience. The odours that we dress in, consume and leave behind as traces, from sandalwood and coffee to the faint smells of baby sick and shit, the sounds of traffic, accents and announcements, and the ways in which they reverberate differently in space, can be overwhelming, even disgusting at times. (2017: 5)

Compared to the outdoor space in Ari's lunch break, the atmosphere on a commuter train is staged under a set of rules and social manners. Passengers are not allowed to consume food and the space is clean and well organised. The space in a Bangkok street, on the contrary, is a cluster of unorganised sensory inputs, such as polluted air,

food vendors on the sidewalk, stinky smells from trash, splashes from undrained puddles and, more importantly, a mix of people from all classes doing diverse social activities under relaxed social rules.

The analysis of happiness performed during workers' lunchtime in this section is originally informed by Karl Marx's conception of 'the struggle for a normal working day', which gives an insight into how time manipulation has hijacked the everyday. He proposes that capital's control of labour-time leads to 'haggles over the meal-times, where possible incorporating them into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, and grease and oil to the machinery' (1867: 375).

To adapt Marx's statement to the context of neoliberal Bangkok, I contend that the purpose of a lunch break offered to workers in the twenty-first century still features as energy regeneration so they can continue working for the rest of the day. However, I argue that, owing to the neoliberal reasoning of making one's life bearable through a series of positive agencies, as discussed in Chapter Three, it is crucial to negotiate with workers a sense of having micro individual freedoms. In this sense, instead of merely seeing workers as machines that need fuel to continue their tasks, I suggest, neoliberal logics attempt to set a package of happiness for workers, to feel that re-fuelling is meaningful and designated by their own will, choice and freedom. Thus, the performance of happiness during a lunch break in Ari plays an important part in making the individual worker feel that their energy is not merely refilled, but that they have reclaimed their sense of self as a member of society. This is informed by Thompson's idea of the internalisation of time in which the labour-force is normalised and workers use time for various forms of discipline which they are habituated to (1967). A break in the workday is a given, and freedom is sought by the workers within the entitled period, not beyond. To elaborate on the issue in this section, I investigate how Thai workers' assert and perform a sense of agency through everyday practices including strolling, shopping, dining and casual socialisation.

### **Lives Beneath High-Rises in Ari**

To set the scene, Ari, or ‘Soi Ari’ in Thai, is an area mixing traditional and modern characteristics. Ari in Thai means generosity and Soi means a small alley. Initially, it was mainly a residential area where the state’s ministry offices were located. After the establishment of the Bangkok Skytrain in 1999, Ari became a major station connecting Mo-Chit and Victory Monument, which were both central transportation hubs in Bangkok. Ari then became a burgeoning zone where high-rise condominiums, office buildings, shopping centres, elegant restaurants, co-working spaces, and independent trendy cafés and bars rapidly flourished.

Aree’s [Ari] street hawkers and sidewalk stalls line corridors that lead to freshly painted cafés with monosyllabic names. By day, banking and government workers lunch at the noodle shops around the Ari BTS station. By night and weekend, creative youngsters and social entrepreneurs fill the neighbourhood’s cafés and bars.<sup>71</sup>

In Ari, there are small alleys connecting across an area packed with lines of street food vendors and outdoor markets serving thousands of workers. Due to its affordable prices and fast service, street food in Bangkok is central to most workers’ lives. To give an illustration, considering the price and processing time, street food in Bangkok is like McDonalds or Subway in Western culture.

---

<sup>71</sup> Airbnb. (2016). "Aree: Street hawkers intersperse between new bars and restaurants near the Ari BTS station". <https://www.airbnb.co.uk/locations/bangkok/aree> [Accessed 10 November 2017].



*Figure 16. The Main Road in Ari Alleys (Taken by the author, 03/05/17)*

For a one-hour break, street food from stalls is often ideal, being quick and hot. The menu of a food stall mostly consists of local cuisine and includes ready-made meals and cooked-to-order dishes, such as soup noodles, stir-fried rice or stir-fried meat served over steamed rice. Typical street food in Bangkok would cost from 30 to 60 THB (£0.75 - £1.5) depending on the location in the city. Among the rich street food culture in Bangkok, Ari is known as a fruitful place with plenty of selection.

Exploring Ari by car is not ideal, as the lanes are narrow and mostly one-way. It is thus usual to see loads of Bangkok's famous tuk-tuks and scooter taxis in the area providing riding services for people who do not want to stroll around in the hot and humid weather.<sup>72</sup> As a business centre, Ari has banks and government offices located in and around the area including the Ministry of Finance, Comptroller General's Department, Revenue Department, and Bureau of the Budget. Due to Ari's mixture of housing, business and leisure, real estate prices in the area have increased dramatically since 1999. At night, Ari might seem an expensive and stylish area, but

---

<sup>72</sup> A tuk-tuk is a three-wheeled rickshaw with a small engine.

it serves most workers as a place for affordable food during the daytime. Although there is an air-conditioned community mall located in the centre of the area, owing to its expensive merchandise, compared to the national minimum wage, the majority of workers still fill their stomachs with street food. Walking through the uneven roads to dine and shop people inevitably encounter outdoor pollution.

Regarding my personal experience of Ari, I spent around sixteen years studying in public elementary, primary and high schools in the area as the location was close to my parents’ workplaces. Several of my friends were lucky enough to be resident in and around the Ari alleys before it was transformed into a posh area to live. During my school years, Ari was often the place where my friends and I hung out for street food after school. Ari was a meeting point for my friends and me at later ages due to its central location. This brief picture gives a sense that Ari has a mixture of inhabitants, students, young freelance workers, office workers and local residents. However, during lunchtime, Ari’s spaces are mainly occupied by office workers and street merchants.

### Strolling in Ari at Lunchtime

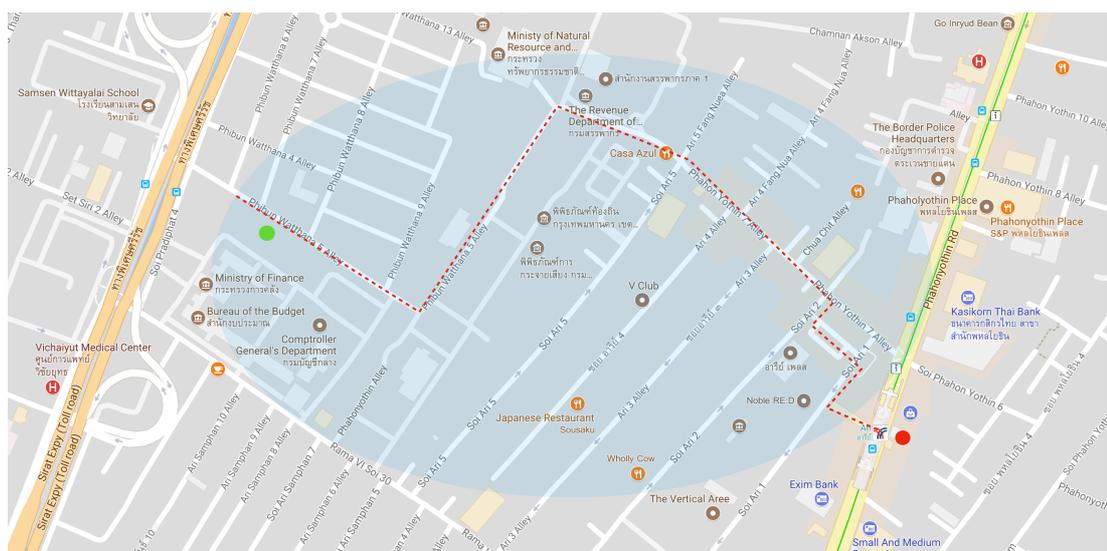


Figure 17. The Walking Route in Ari from the Red to Green Spot

On a boiling hot, humid day, the 3rd of May 2017, at 12:30 pm, after working on my notes from the morning commuter train, I came out of an air-conditioned café located at the bottom of Ari's Skytrain station. The heat in the air suddenly hit my face and fogged my glasses, which reminded me that I needed to be better prepared as I did not bring a hat or umbrella. I climbed the stairs to the station to cross to the other side of the road where Ari's alleys are located. From the broad view from the top of the station, I saw workers walking from their offices and heading to have lunch. The road that had been packed with cars in the morning was already flowing, yet the pollution was permeating everywhere. Like the other workers, I set out to walk through the alleys to have lunch. Figure 17 shows Ari, the circle covers the walkable area and the dashed line shows the route I took which was about 1.5 km. The route was selected from my own experience of the area, chosen as the most vibrant and active area. It was the main route to the most popular outdoor market in Phibun Wattana Five passing other mini markets and food stalls.



*Figure 18. Pavements in Ari Alley Filled with Food Stalls (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*



*Figure 19. Packed Market During Lunchtime (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

Strolling around the area is the best way to see every vendor and possibly spend money on something you did not plan to buy. However, I found the alleys in Ari did not prove a safe walk. Like other pavements in Bangkok, the pavements in Ari are not only too narrow but also loaded with barriers. The pavements in Ari are no wider than three metres, and the room left for walking is a metre or less, as shown in Figure 18. During lunch hour, lots of workers walk and squeeze by each other on the narrow and packed pavements. Therefore, to get through the crowd faster, it is unavoidable that some pedestrians walk on the road, risking passing motorcycles and cars that seem to come from random directions.



*Figure 20.1 - 20.2. Damaged Pavements in Ari Alleys (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

I tried to squeeze myself into the crowd to get through it as fast as possible since I would have loved to have some air — as polluted air is still better than no air. But it was clear that most of the pedestrians were moving very slowly. At a leisurely pace, workers stopped to buy food, snacks or fresh fruit or look at the clothes sold on the pavement, which consequentially delayed the flow. The hot, humid weather began to make my body sweat and I felt irritated and uneasy. Of course, this was not new to me, but I had barely noticed how uncomfortable it was before. I finally managed to cross to another pavement with a better-flowing crowd and kept walking along the lane, trying to find a place where I could sit and eat at the outdoor market in Phibun Five alley. While I was walking past a high condominium and glancing at the headquarters of the enormous Revenue Office, I almost fell down, as the pavement was badly damaged and uneven. I managed to be more careful with the path but found the sidewalk that led me to the market got narrower and eventually disappeared. The sidewalk had somehow merged with the main street. Without a choice, I had to walk on the edge of the main road. I joined the workers who were walking in a line on the road also heading for the market when a motorcycle came

from behind honking at me to give way. Sharing the path with vehicles is considered normal on most Bangkok streets. In Ari where more tuk-tuk and motorcycle services have been launched, more pollution has been generated. During my journey through the Ari alleys, the smoky odours of stir-fried food from woks mixed with the poisonous fumes from motor engines. It was a familiar scene to me, not only the polluted route I was walking but also the polluted food I could be consuming.

The struggles during my walk in Ari suggest the mobility difficulties workers face in their lunch break. I was informed by one of my interviewees, an office worker, that the food offered at the canteen in the office building often has limited choices and is often expensive. She mentioned that: 'Of course, I cannot afford to buy a nice meal in an air-conditioned restaurant every day; it's way cheaper to have street food for lunch'.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, strolling in the outdoor markets with its uncomfortable humid polluted atmosphere to find affordable street food is a common practice for office workers.

When I reached the food stalls in Ari it was around 12:45 pm, and people were queuing to get food while some had already started their lunch. I wandered around and checked out the prices. A dish in Ari starts from 45 to 50 THB (£1.30). After walking from the beginning of the alley to almost the end, I ended up at a food stall selling cooked to order style dishes where you could choose your preferred meat, sauce and ingredients to be fried in a wok. The food stall was right on the street (Figure 21.1), not even on the pavement. Cars and motorbikes kept passing the stall. There were three tables and a few plastic chairs, which customers could stack up, considering their own height. There was a huge shabby colourful umbrella next to each table to protect customers from the sunlight. The plastic table cover was filthy and dusty enough to be easily noticed.

---

<sup>73</sup> Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

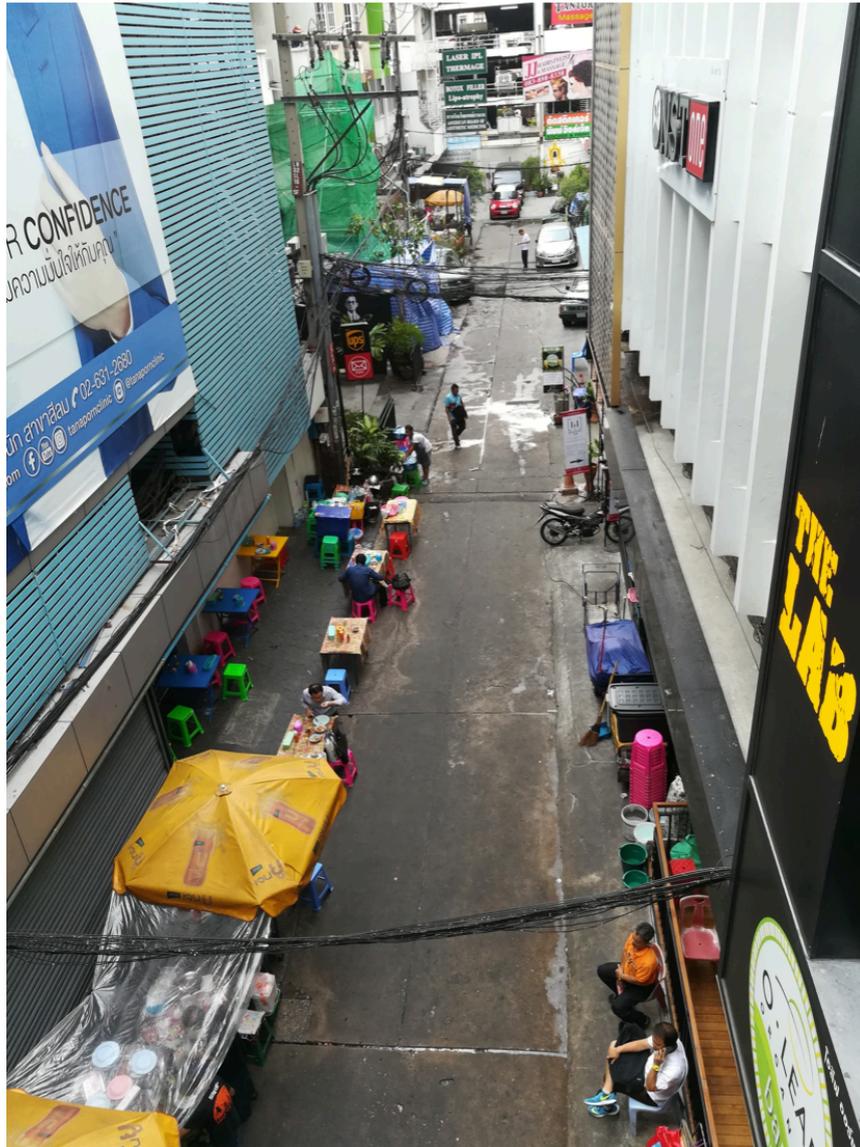


*Figure 21.1. Seating at a Foot Stall (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*



*Figure 21.2. The Meal at The Food Stall (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

Directing myself to the chef and stall owner who was cooking food in a wok, I ordered my favourite, Pad Ka Prao Kai, stir-fried chicken with chillies, garlic and basil, served over steamed rice and topped with a fried egg (Figure 21.2). I sat down waiting for the food, breathing in the polluted air and sweating. At the table next to me, two ladies were having their lunch and complaining about their boss loudly enough that I could hear. While I was waiting, another salaried worker came to sit next to me, sharing my table. My food arrived within ten minutes. The taste and amount of food were standard comparing to its relatively high price as street food. However, it is a standard price in Ari, a busy central office district. I had the chance to explore another business centre, Silom. I found that although the types of businesses in Ari and Silom were different (Ari is occupied by government offices while Silom has more private firms and banking), in a sense the space around both business centres are similarly arranged to serve office workers. Silom's dining spaces, shown in Figure 22, mirror the description of the dining area in Ari.



*Figure 22. Street Food Stalls in Silom Area (Taken by the author, 04/05/2017)*

I looked around, and my surroundings were full of parked cars, motorcycles and trash on the dirty street, and those elements did not produce any desirable sensory impression. The obstacles encountered during my walk, such as uneven roads, polluted air and unclean food, are a regular fact faced by workers and pedestrians. Sold as a ‘hipster and cool place to hang out’, among the upscale high-rise condominiums, luxury cafés, restaurant and bars, there were still many people struggling to routinely move through the area at lunchtime. Each day they have to walk on the narrow, uneven and ruined pavements, being cautious of unpredictable vehicles all the time, and breathing in the polluted air. It might sound like an

exaggeration when I describe the distressing sensations and atmosphere I encountered in Ari alleys, but nevertheless those unpleasant feelings did not appear to agitate the expressions of the workers who were walking there. On the contrary, they were lively, cheerful, and indeed seemingly happy. To deal with this paradox, I investigate how happiness is performed by these workers in the following section.

### **Eat, Chat, Shop: Happy Rhythms in Ari**

Rhythms: the music of the city, a scene that listens to itself, an image in the present of a discontinuous sum (Lefebvre 2004: 45).

As I have described, the physical space in Ari's alleys was not very attractive, however the way people moved and participated within the space convinced me there was a clear sense of a joyful and happy place, unlike the morning train. As a production of labour-time, people's movements are constrained by the given time and space. People's rhythms are not only implied by their visible pace but also their social interactions which includes how they socially encounter the space and interact with it (Goonewardena et al. 2008: 158). Workers in Bangkok are forced to wake up early and required to commute for a long time. The way people proceed at lunchtime on a working day is also rhythmised even though it is a break. I propose that the rhythm of the workers in Ari and the performance of happiness are exercised through various domains such as consumption and socialisation which seemingly empower their sense of agency during the short break.

When I walked through the Ari alleys during lunchtime, the noise from the cars, Tuk-Tuks and motor-scooters on the main street made up an ambient background of low pitches continuously played along with the moving vehicles and pedestrians as drums and bass. However, the tempo of the pedestrians' movement did not follow the metronome. Workers were slowly strolling and stopping by each stall whenever they wished. The main melody was a mix of the vibrant voices of the workers who were chatting with each other and the shopkeepers who were talking to their customers from everywhere.

Comparing the soundscape during lunchtime to the morning commute, I found that the rhythms and atmospheres were differently orchestrated. The commuter train moved quickly and people rushed around, but the human voices were silent and only the automatic audio spoke. During lunchtime in Ari, the soundscape of the people was vivid and cheerful, the physical movement was relaxing and at ease. Although the physical landscape under the high-rises of Ari was not planned to serve the pedestrians pleasantly, the energy of the sleepy workers was revived. The robotic movements in the morning on the trip to work were replaced by liveliness.



*Figure 23.1 - 23.2. Workers Shopping and Dining in Ari (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

The reason behind the vibrant and happy noises in Ari was that most of the workers were in groups of at least three or four, dining and strolling around together. I found that the happiness performed through socialising was a fundamental factor that energised the lunch break in Ari. From what I saw, there were not many workers who ate alone.

I continued my walk through a small alley filled with a mass of workers, their black and monochrome suits sheltered by colourful umbrellas and shopping bags.

Social interactions also occurred between sellers and buyers in the market. The buyers called the sellers' names with familiarity and talked in a manner that showed they knew each other. The language used between clients and sellers also indicated an informal relationship. Auntie, uncle, sis and bro are the pronouns Thai people regularly use when they communicate with informal agents. I suggest that these small aspects of the social engagements performed during lunchtime should not be abandoned, as they provoke a sense of happiness in human beings, as social animals. Social engagement is one of the basic needs mentioned by Abraham Maslow in *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943). For individuals to have sustainable self-actualisation and feel in control of their own lives, along with physiological needs, safety, security and self-esteem, they also require their social needs to be met to provide a sense of belonging (Radcliff 2013: 88). Given the socialisation I observed during the lunch break in Ari, it was out of my remit to evaluate whether the relationships between workers were honest, trustworthy or superficial. However, what should be highlighted here is that amid socio-economic precarity and the continuing struggle to move about in an appalling environment with non-hygienic food, happiness was clearly being performed through lively social interactions between people.

Apart from social interaction, shopping at outdoor markets during lunchtime is also popular among office workers. It is common in Bangkok to see at least one outdoor market around the business centre. Like other business centres in Bangkok, Ari is filled with stands along the street selling unbranded clothes, household items, jewellery, cosmetics and electronic gadgets. Each booth takes up no more than two or three metres with a big colourful umbrella attached to each. Ari and Silom share the same form, under high-rise buildings (Figures 24.1 & 24.2). The outdoor market in Ari during lunchtime was packed with office workers who were strolling around selecting merchandise.



*Figure 24.1. An Outdoor Market in Ari District (left) (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

*Figure 24.2. An Outdoor Market in Silom District (right) (Taken by the author, 04/05/2017)*

The products sold in the market were diverse but the majority of items were women's clothing. Owing to the period of commemoration of the king's passing, most of the clothes sold in Ari's alleys were monochrome. Most of the clothing came directly from factories and was considerably cheaper than items sold in a shopping mall. Additionally, the temporary booths in outdoor markets in Bangkok were mostly independent, meaning the seller could be the owner or temporarily hired by investors, so each item could be verbally bargained for and did not always have a fixed price. This casual characteristic made the outdoor market a space for social interaction, not one where customers just come and go like a formal shopping mall. The boundary generated between the inhabitants of a society leads to a form of living. I argue that the outdoor markets around the business centres brings these places to life, as places where people can subtly express their personal power and freedom through micro economic activities and social interaction. Consequently, they could feel less socially alienated and still a part of society, before returning to their desks in the afternoon.

At lunchtime in Ari, workers can choose what kind of affordable street food they want, soup or stir-fried rice or noodles. They can decide for themselves what design of dress they want to buy. It is also their choice to walk through the risky alleys or pay to take a motorbike taxi. Again, it is their option to have food outside in the hot weather or pay more to dine at an expensive restaurant. Apparently, those choices all come with financial conditions and a series of investments, which are not just an exchange for a product, but also for safety, convenience and health.

The concept of consumption plays an important part in shopping at the outdoor market at Ari, which offers a form of happiness to the individual workers. Free choice in consumption is a primary ideology of the neoliberal marketplace, which encourages individuals to express their freedom through modalities of consumption. If consumption in capitalism goes beyond the meaning of use and exchange value to include a sense of regaining self (Lunt & Livingstone 1992), consumption in neoliberal capitalism goes further by transforming the role of consuming into an enterprise (Lemke 2001). This argument was also voiced by Robert D. Sack, who explains how the concept of ‘self-commodity’ is brought into the world of consumption:

We can enter the world of consumption through the realisation that mass produced products are not only objects having exchange value and use value in the sense of food, clothing, shelter, and entertainment... It presents commodities as devices enabling individuals to create their own contexts, their own worlds, however ephemeral or enduring they may be. (1988: 643)

To exemplify the above argument, my interviewee said:

The best part of my job is during lunchtime when I can chat with my colleagues, dine, and shop around the office building. I admitted that there was some time that I tried to stay outside of the office building as long as possible, having fifteen to twenty minutes longer is good enough. I don't want to get back to work in the afternoon.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

She honestly confessed to me that the main reason she kept working at her current company of five years, was the workplace community not the nature of the work. Socialising with colleagues outside the working hours was the primary factor that made her feel she belonged within the company. Also, she informed me that she did not know what else she could do if she resigned, as the routine of administration work had diminished her passion for her working life. More importantly, she was concerned that the social environment at a new workplace might not satisfy her as much as the current place did.

Although it should not be generalised that all workers experience the same thing, what I would like to stress here is that this is evidence of alienation from a job and how lunchtime potentially becomes an escape from the work routine, enabling happiness to be momentarily performed through the chance to socialise and consume. The interview statement above reflects a ‘battle’ between workers and labour-time. It appears that, in this case, workers just move from one trap to another. The evidence of resistance, such as the worker’s attempt to have a lunch break of fifteen minutes more than permitted, was certainly not able to release her from social forces and should be considered a daily struggle rather than an idealistic tactic. Guy Standing addresses that when work is not a source of happiness, workers seek to pursue it elsewhere (2009), and for working days in Ari this elsewhere happens to be the lunch break. I suggest that such happiness and bustling social engagement potentially rendered a sense of belongingness and self-actualisation, and temporarily authorised workers to control their speed, movement, choice of food and merchandise, if not their life — even it was just for an hour.

At 2:00 pm, the overflowing mass eventually disappeared from Ari’s alleys. The lively human voices were replaced by noisy vehicles. The atmosphere was clearly calmer, yet lonely. The sellers at each stall returned to their usual habits, preparing food, watching TV dramas, chatting to each other or using their smartphones, waiting for the last chance to sell their items after 5:00 pm. As I finished my lunch and aimed to walk back to the Skytrain station, the blazing sun

was still beating down on me. I was sweating, dehydrated and my body said that I needed a refreshing drink. I randomly entered a small air-conditioned café located in the main alley. It was not strange that the café was already empty as the break was over. I ordered a glass of iced green tea latte (Figure 25). As expected, the drink cost me the same as the street food. With the privilege of not having to rush back to the office desk like other workers, I sat on a comfortable couch to organise my thoughts and cool my body from the outside heat.



*Figure 25. Iced Green Tea Latte in a Cafe in Ari (Taken by the author, 03/05/2017)*

The café was neat, clean and well decorated with colourful flowers. There was a relaxing tune coming from wall-mounted speakers. It was like another world compared to where I had eaten my lunch. I looked through the windows to the area outside the café where tangled electricity cables and parked cars blocked my vision. Cheaper drinks could easily be found at a vendor across the street but at that moment I preferred fresh clean air under a roof. Sitting in the delightful atmosphere amongst

the turmoil outside, I could see a daily way of living beneath the high-rises in the central office district of Bangkok, so complicated and full of dynamics. It was evident that a good quality of life is not a hidden gem in Bangkok. Clean and healthy food, unpolluted air, hygienic restaurants, and safe movement were everywhere, but not everyone has equal access to them. The majority of people cannot consume such a standard of living in their everyday lives. I am not talking about luxury cars or rooftop penthouses, but the standard quality of life that should be accessible to everyone in society. Despite seeing this paradox, people do not have time to step back and reflect due to the neoliberal rhythms that mask the struggle and distract them from difficulties and inequalities. Those self-interested neoliberal subjects have to manage their remaining free time to think only about themselves, seeking for micro happiness that would enhance their own pleasures. This explains the image from the film introduced in this chapter when the workers were hugging each other ignoring a mountain of trash around them. Also, internalising the everyday battle between unhappiness and happiness is a crucial tool of the neoliberal state, normalising the idea that access to better and fairer living is not the right of the citizen, but rather a product that individuals have to invest in, as shown by the commercials on the train. Consequentially, amid these paradoxes in neoliberal Thailand, there is a popular culture of performing how wonderful your life is by checking-in on social media platforms to upload photos when you drink a cup of coffee from Starbucks, dine in a stylish restaurant or visit a well-decorated café. I elaborate on this in the following chapters. Such acts offer a special period where individuals can temporarily perform the lifestyle shown in the commercials and television dramas although it is absent from day-to-day life.

## Chapter Five: Performing Happiness in Bangkok Shopping Malls



Figure 26. Siam Paragon, Bangkok (Taken by -Z-Penguin, 28/12/2010)<sup>75</sup>

Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). (Baudrillard 1994: 12)

Jean Baudrillard raised an insightful argument during the 1990s when capitalism was flourishing and the culture of consumption was gaining pace. If Disneyland served Americans in terms of offering a substitute reality while concealing an unpleasant reality, I suggest in this chapter, that in the neoliberal regime in the twenty-first century a shopping mall in Bangkok serves as a stage for the performance of happiness, not only compensating the people of Bangkok for socio-economic struggles in their everyday working lives but also becoming a crucial part of neoliberal subjects’ life projects in order to secure their presence as members of society. Moving on from the everyday practices in a working day discussed in the

---

<sup>75</sup> -Z-Penguin (2010). Photograph from new year's event @ Siam Paragon. *flickr*, 28 December. <https://www.flickr.com> [Accessed 13 May 2019].

previous chapter, in this chapter I focus on the performance of happiness in Bangkok's shopping malls at leisure time including after work on a Friday night and weekend. The main question asked in this chapter is: How has neoliberal consumption affected and shaped the performance of happiness, triggering reinvention and adjustment of people's lifestyles, social relations, and individual values?

This chapter has two sections. In the first, I set up crucial frameworks concerning neoliberal consumption and its relation to the concept of happiness and performances. To expand on the consumption framework introduced in the previous chapter and further navigate the performance of happiness under the rubric of neoliberal consumption, I focus on some key texts: Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Zygmunt Bauman's *Consuming Life* (2007a), and an article by Anisha Datta and Indranil Chakraborty 'Are you neoliberal fit? The politics of consumption under neoliberalism' (2018). To pinpoint how consumer society has become an essential instrument of performing happiness in neoliberal Bangkok, I ask two main questions. Firstly, I ask how happiness is incubated in consumption as a reward and escape promising neoliberal subjects that happiness can be bought, not only in material form but also in intangible domains such as leisure, appearance, mental health and skills. Second, I ask how the very practice of neoliberal consumption features as a platform for happiness to be performed in both collective and individual senses. I aim to articulate how neoliberal subjects, who are treated as individual entrepreneurs, must invest in the social marketplace to garnish their solo performance by spending time and money on self-care, self-development services, and products or experiences that enhance their self confidence in order to deal with the neoliberal struggle and factors such as stress, indebtedness, overwork and anxiety. Moreover, I elaborate on how the performance of happiness is maintained as a restored behaviour and a repetitive act to constantly secure neoliberal subjects' fearful and uncertain reality.

The focus of the second section moves to my fieldwork analysis of selected examples of the performance of happiness that emerged in both local and city centre Bangkok shopping malls. I first demonstrate how shopping malls serve as a crucial part of Bangkok residents' lives. In so doing, I suggest that local shopping malls in Bangkok serve as more than just a leisure space and a space of consumption of material goods but comprise various means by which individuals can invest in areas such as education, appearance, health, skills development and finance. To elaborate on these issues, I employ my observation at a local shopping mall called Central Pinklao at which I have had many experiences since I was a child. This section shows how consumer culture is embedded in people's everyday lives in Bangkok as a domestic space for families and young citizens to spend their leisure. I argue that a local shopping mall in Bangkok is a crucial site for a rehearsal of happiness performed under the rubric of consumption before allowing the performance to be performed in the more intensive consumer society of a city centre mall.

Afterwards, I chose a famous city centre shopping district called Siam Square as a focal site for discussion. If the local mall is indicative of how a series of investments shape the ordinary everyday life of neoliberal subjects in Bangkok, I contend, the city centre shopping mall plays a vital role in producing and reproducing a series of fantasy spectacles and extraordinary experiences, adding another layer to the necessity of consumption in a neoliberal lifestyle. I first explore the space of Siam Square, both exterior and interior, to elaborate on how the space acts as the link between the banal everyday routine and the fantasy offered in the mall. Then I explore happiness performed and practiced by people in the mall by discussing two settings, a beauty shop and a popular dessert bar. In the beauty shop section, I emphasise how the practice of glamorising women's appearances becomes a crucial source of happiness performed in neoliberal Bangkok. I select the beauty store to unpack how neoliberal consumption governs the idea of happiness at the very micro scale of our lives, which is appearance. The discussion is mainly framed by the idea of the aesthetic entrepreneur, in which neoliberal logics of self-

investment govern not only socio-economic circumstances but also bodies and mentalities, especially of the female. More importantly, I elaborate on how the project of investing in beauty in the store is largely seen as a welcome joy or happiness rather than a burdensome task.

For the dessert bar, I select the pleasurable experience of dining out to highlight the shades of instant happiness performed through consumption. The phenomenon of taking photos, checking-in at the place you visit and posting photos on social media are bonded intimately with such trendy dining places. Thus, I ask in this section how the lived experience of consuming in such locations engages with the performance of happiness before moving on to investigate social media platforms in the next chapter. The idea of ‘eatertainment’, coined by John Hannigan in 1998 acutely frames the analysis in this section, where the act of dining out at an uptrend cafe or a fancy restaurant entails more than goods consumption but also a form of entertainment. I elaborate on how the form of eatertainment (taking photos of food and promoting them online) infused within the neoliberal consumer society arguably leads to the changing role of the diners in which they are not necessarily only audiences of spectacular dishes or superior experiences but also investors and promoters at the same time. In so doing, I also investigate how the act of capturing the experience of being there marks superior cultural capital, enabling those neoliberal subjects to deal with people in their social spheres and themselves by reinforcing the sense of belonging within the urban consumer culture amid the uncertain socio-economic reality.

Regarding the research methods, the analysis of Bangkok shopping malls is derived from the walk I took in and around the selected areas. While the walk in the office district at lunchtime let my body flow and participate in the space in the same manner as other office workers, in this section I explore the area with the purpose of investigating and observing the space in specific detail in order to uncover the performative features of the settings, people and ambience, and how they influence each other. The process of undertaking my walk in a shopping mall and documenting

it is framed as a conversation between my personal memories and past experiences and my present day observations. The concept of the *flâneur* is crucial in framing my walk in this chapter. The idea, introduced in nineteenth-century France, is that it is a privilege to use walking to escape commodification, seeing consumer society as a spectacle of play and theatre to gain inspiration rather than merely a site for consuming (Pearson & Shanks 2001). In *Street Scenes* (2005) Nicolas Whybrow adopted the *flâneur* figure as a practice to assemble and recollect historical and socio-cultural traces and pieces in the city of Berlin. By combining two classic models of Bertolt Brecht's 'epic street scene' and Walter Benjamin's 'one-way streetscapes', Whybrow observes that these approaches create a dialect allowing the *flâneur*, the street-walking figure, to read and inspect the space of the city, and meanwhile immerse and experience firsthand urban life. He describes:

Both these are, of course, forms of witnessing: of seeing, feeling implicated, and responding. Out of this emerges a poetics of walking and writing, a conjunction of wandering and wondering, which seeks to find a relationship between the immediacy of the encountered (the city as 'text') and the complex elaboration of that encounter (the text as 'city'). (2005: 18)

This approach has informed my walk in locating my body as both a wanderer and wonderer who is not a merely passive character in the surroundings. Nevertheless, while the *flâneur* in Whybrow's application involves a sense of the outsider and the touristic gaze, in my fieldwork I evoke the *flâneur* in framing my walk amid the intensive consumer society in the neoliberal era that I am familiar with and in the sense that it is an ordinary part of everyday life, as Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks observe:

With the advent of the modern city, the concept of the *flâneur* has come to stand as a metaphor for the contemporary urban dweller, moving through the flux of the city, as a mode of being in the world, in relation to the dazzling consumer spectacles: in a modern shopping centre we are all *flâneur*: gazing, grazing, consuming. (2001: 149)

During the walk in both the local and central malls, I explicitly located myself as not only a researcher but also a consumer. I did not aim to isolate myself from the site of

consumption or see it entirely from an outsider's viewpoint. Instead, I fully allowed my thoughts and desires to stroll through, in and around the shopping malls as a customer who could at anytime be attracted to the flashy items on the shelves, pampering services or cosy cafes. Approaching the task in this way enabled me to later contemplate my walk as a subject of the neoliberal consumer society rather than seeing myself as somehow divorced from its attractions.

During the walk in Siam Square, the city centre shopping district, I was accompanied by one of my interviewees who is also a good friend.<sup>76</sup> As an urban salaried worker familiar with Siam Square, she kindly offered to be a guide, showing me the favourite spots for urban workers. Therefore, the places discussed at the central shopping centre represent a mode of performance not only by myself but also by my friend who decided what was and was not popular enough to visit, participate in and present. I see this as a collaboration, documenting my walk in terms of a conversation between perhaps an inhabitant and a visitor. However, I do not entirely see myself as a stranger to the space nor a tourist, but rather a person that was once familiar within but now distant from the space that has been gradually transformed by the neoliberal flow.

Ultimately, in this chapter I propose that the micro performance of happiness in a shopping centre in Bangkok not only masks neoliberal struggles and compensates people for what they have traded in their working time but increasingly inhabits a part of people's body and mind. The consumer world invites and perhaps compels neoliberal subjects to participate in the market and, arguably, reinforce their self-value, identity, and confidence, which is compromised by neoliberal working conditions.

---

<sup>76</sup> Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

## Consumption as an Escape and Reward

Developed from Karl Marx's (1867) idea of the 'fetishism of commodities' and the alienation of labour, theorists debate the commodified life in terms of how the culture of consuming unnecessary goods becomes hegemonic and adds a layer of alienation to everyday life. In terms of the social implications, it is argued that, since the early twentieth century, consumer culture has become a hegemonic form of leisure, as individuals seek pleasurable escapes from the constraints and pressures of everyday life, both at work and at home (Featherstone 1991; Langman 1991; Lefebvre 1991; Debord 1994; Urry 1995; Miller 1998). Achieving happiness and pleasurable experiences through consumption as a form of escape marks a significant transition from capitalism to neoliberal consumption. Under neoliberal rationality, although the forms of labour may be transformed from industrial to office-based, freelance and self-employed jobs, work time is still compressed in a sense that many workers have to work two or three jobs or work long hours to compensate for zero-hour contracts. For example, one of my interviewees, despite holding a master's degree, had to work five jobs in order to secure his family income.<sup>77</sup> When more people work in insecure economic conditions, consumption under neoliberalism does not simply mean a compensation to labour-time. I argue that the happiness gained from neoliberal consumption is increasingly embedded in individual lives as one of the last resorts of achieving tangible and instant forms of happiness amid fearful and uncertain neoliberal conditions.

Concerning happiness and neoliberal consumption, much of the material in this chapter is still informed by Bauman's *Consuming Life*, mentioned in the previous chapter with regard to how the notion of happiness is shifting in the world of consumption offering 'instant and perpetual happiness' (2007a: 44). As mentioned in Chapter Three while happiness in neoliberal times is increasingly seen as not just a positive emotion but a necessity and a tool to be consumed and invested in in order to compensate for the struggles, the markets need to manipulate neoliberal subjects

---

<sup>77</sup> Interviewee Three. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 11 May 2017

through their emotions to make them remain perpetually in consumer society — and fear is the key. William Davies discusses, in *Happiness Industry* (2015), how control over anxiety is a tool for marketers to retain consumers in the market:

Marketers speak of various emotions today, including ‘liking’ and ‘happiness’, but these positive ones can never be the end of the matter. ‘Anxiety’ and ‘fear’ are also important parts of the mix, or else the shopper may find a degree of peace and comfort which requires no further satisfaction. (2015: 115)

Happiness derived from consumption may not last long, but the market is always available for neoliberal subjects to seek new products in which to invest. In other words, the trend of an individual product can rise and fall over a period of time, but as long as anxiety remains the market can continuously introduce new products that perpetually offer instant happiness. Although Bauman asserts that shopping offers the promise of some sort of momentary certainty among life’s uncertainties, he says the task of seeking and identifying oneself through consumption has consequences for social relations by fostering aggressive competition through social comparison, dividing humans into individual competitors and investors — which resonates with neoliberal logics. This argument is developed by Carlo Bordoni who observes that:

Consumerism helps to change society, to separate individuals from each other, to lose the sense of social solidarity, to feel solitude no longer as a punishment and a form of intolerable marginalisation, but as the only form of self-defence against a hostile community. (2017: 74)

Although these views are not new, as they are very much informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s observations about how consumption can replicate social inequality through taste as a class marker in modern France, such as wine as a marker of higher social class than beer (1984), I propose that in neoliberal consumption, especially in Bangkok, the market allows consumers to experience tastes across classes through an intensive and extensive consumer society. This appears in the ease of spending on credit cards and excessive overdraft limits. These are popular trends for the middle classes, and the circle of participants is no longer limited to a small group of elites.

The cost of the merchandise seems to be more expensive than everyday items, but not too high to invest in — not just once but perpetually.

An example of how consumerism potentially divides and isolates individuals in neoliberal Bangkok can be seen in products with high exchange value rather than use value, such as high-end designer bags. Among the middle class these indicate the higher social rank of the owner compared to the owner of a high street bag. In the same way, dining out at a luxurious bar or international restaurant signals superiority, compared to dining on street-food stalls. For this reason, consumption in the neoliberal era promises temporary superiority, makes one extraordinary, is itself a rewarding experience, and promises instant happiness not only for elites but for precariously positioned individuals who can escape from the uncertain and insecure socio-economics of their everyday reality.

A marker of neoliberal consumption that has been intensified by late capitalism is the strong relationship between the neoliberal market, consumers and happiness, stressing the values of self, self-love and self-care. All these can be attained and performed through consumption, not only of material goods but also experiences, appearances, self-promotion, education and possibly career success if one has enough financial means to invest in extra skill development schemes. These modes of commodity act like a badge of achievement in the neoliberal game. In their work, Datta and Chakraborty coin the term ‘neoliberal fit’ within the rubric of the politics of consumption under neoliberalism. They suggest that the rising consumption of commodified happiness and self-care services, which is fostered by neoliberal agents such as state and market cooperation, has played a significant role in maintaining neoliberal conditions. Such happiness, stemming from consumption and saturated with self-interest, may appear in various forms, including keeping up an attractive appearance, being fit and youthful and reading self-help or positive thinking books, life-coaching and stress management programmes, getaway experiences and leisure activities such as relaxing with a cup of coffee in a café. All of these domains involve financial and time investment and are not entirely free

choices as they have increasingly become a mandatory means of consoling and maintaining vulnerable neoliberal subjects. Particularly for females, the discourse about beauty plays a subtle but dominant role in marking neoliberal logic of the self-care project, in which it is not merely about a woman being beautiful, it is also her task to be confident and embrace the fact she has work to do if her appearance does not meet a particular social standard. Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff posit this agency of neoliberal beauty:

This highlights the complexity of contemporary beauty discourses, entangled as they are with exhortations to self-love, confidence, gratitude and anti-beauty messages (in the service of selling beauty products) in a context of neoliberal and postfeminist governmentality and capitalism's move to colonise all of life—including our deepest feelings about ourselves. (2017: 33)

I deal with this issue in the beauty store section and elaborate on the beauty discourse in neoliberal Bangkok in which the performance of happiness is actively intensified via investment in cosmetics and the beauty business.

## **Consumption and Performing Happiness**

In order to mask the incoherency of everyday life, the practice of consumption involves crucial performative elements that highlight a series of affects within the space of consumption. Hence, in this chapter, I view the spaces of shopping malls as scenes involving staging and props, while customers represent both performers and audience at the same time. I anticipate that a shopping mall engages a series of spaces with their own *mise-en-scène*, which, in Patrice Pavis's view, is 'the bringing together, or confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience' (1992: 24). To induce individuals to be a part of the consumer world, Guy Debord suggests, 'everyday life in a consumer society has been colonised and transformed by mass media into a series of fragmented "spectacles", staged performances' (1994: 111). Baudrillard also observes that by employing a series of signs and fantasies, such as images,

advertisements, theme parks, restaurants and shopping centres, mass commodities have framed the production of social meaning and social relations.

It is not only the physical space and materials that foster the performative quality of a shopping mall. I contend that the participants are crucial actors who complete the performance of happiness. Consumption has become integrated into the concept of identity and being self-made. Discourses such as ‘you are what you buy’ and ‘you are what you consume’ emerge as a crucial part of consumer society (Baudrillard 1994). Scripted by socio-economic conditions, the identities of individuals in neoliberal times become aligned with market actors portraying a solo performance, for which they must invest in their props, scenes, settings and lifestyles in order to perform their “best self” until their identities become like tags describing products on a shelf.

Performing happiness in a shopping mall plays into both internal and external domains of the self and society. Considering the importance of self as a part of the performance of happiness, Erving Goffman’s seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) contributes significantly to the study of performances in everyday life as an outcome of the consumer society. He employs dramaturgical metaphors to explain social behaviours in the context of consumer societies, the settings of which are mostly shops, and decodes the roles of salespeople and shoppers. He also discusses how someone performs to an audience in public through the idea of impression management which is crucial in shaping the way neoliberal subjects are increasingly required to invest in several modes of their self-presentation such as hobbies, appearances, gadgets, and lifestyles. The relation of the presentation of self and neoliberal consumer society is reflected in Lauren Langman’s article which illuminates a crucial point about affective symbolic value:

So many of the products and experiences of consumer society are loaded with affective symbolic value; in a society of simulacra, presentations of self have themselves become simulations, commodified spectacles to provide the recognition that confirms existence, to feel good and to ward off deeper anxieties. (1991: 116)

To pinpoint the connections between performance, self and consumption, I propose that the performance of happiness expressed in a sphere of consumption is potentially conceived as a way of asserting an identity. In the same way that Judith Butler emphasises how a social drama requires a repetitive act of performing gender until it becomes a norm, which is re-enacted and re-experienced, I argue that the performed self and identity in the neoliberal era is also, in Butler's term, a 'regulatory fiction' (1990: 135), resulting from the regulated conditions of life in a consumer society until it becomes a norm. However, instead of making the continuously repetitive actions tedious and mundane for the participants as happens in rituals, I argue that, in neoliberal Bangkok, the more individuals engage in the performance of happiness in the social drama of consuming, the more they feel empowered. The emphasis on repetitive acts becomes a restored behaviour, reminding uncertain and fearful neoliberal subjects that they are part of a day-to-day show, if not a civic and democratic society. By playing the role of an entrepreneur and an investor in their selves, they are reinventing themselves to fit into a neoliberal role through the micro performance of investing in pleasurable experiences. Therefore, the role of neoliberal logics, consumption and the performance of happiness are intertwined. I adopt these views in order to elaborate on the data presented in the next section that explores the performance of happiness in shopping malls in neoliberal Bangkok.

### **Bangkok Shopping Malls: A Heart of Entrepreneurial Life**

When the family goes to the shopping mall together at the weekend, the mall provides a form of leisure, of structuring time, and a site for constructing family relations of gender and generation. Our identities and experiences are produced by the experience of participation in the cultural form of late capitalism—the shopping mall. (Lunt & Livingstone 1992: 21)

In 2017 Bangkok, multifunctional shopping malls serve as the major spaces of consumption and a public space where people from all classes spend their leisure

time away from work and study as well as a market to shop and invest. According to the prominent business media outlet Bangkokbiznews, in 2017 the shopping space in and around Bangkok occupies 7.6 million square metres with plans to expand over the next two years.<sup>78</sup> A shopping mall plays a significant role in reinforcing workers' banal routines by offering a space where they can reclaim their self-values through provided services and a pleasant environment. Debord clarifies the process:

Once his [sic] workday is over, the worker is suddenly redeemed from the total contempt toward him that is so clearly implied by every aspect of the organisation and surveillance of production, and finds himself seemingly treated like a grownup, with a great show of politeness, in his new role as a consumer. (1994: 21-22)

Furthermore, a shopping mall in a neoliberal regime also serves residents' neoliberal lifestyles in which multitasking and maximising time are key to survival. As Bordoni states:

The shopping centre, in its most complex and advanced design (where we go to shop, of course, but which is also a pleasant place that offers opportunities for recreation), can be considered the symbol that is best suited to represent the idea of "multitasking" and the need to maximise our time: all kinds of goods are housed here, from food to clothing, from household appliances to the most diverse devices for entertainment and communication. (2017: 15)

According to the National Statistical Office's report (2016), in 2015 Bangkok people averaged 9.15 hours of work including commuting time and only 3.57 hours of free time per day for Thais in their working-age. Since there is inadequate free public space, such as parks and libraries, a multi-purpose local shopping mall, which exists in every district, becomes dominant in citizens' leisure. In a multifunctional shopping mall in Bangkok, one can conduct all kinds of activities including shopping, banking, dining, skill development, attending a spa, doing laundry, and even having a Botox treatment. During their leisure time in a shopping mall, while

---

<sup>78</sup> Bangkokbiznews. (2017). Peid s̄hiti ph̄n th̄i ch̄xp p̄ng n̄i k th̄m. M̄i ph̄a kh̄r. <http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/770829> [Accessed 28 March 2018].

people believe they are liberated from work-time, they enter the world of consumption where they are persuaded to spend more than they earn on the various modes of happiness available on the shelves. To depict how neoliberal consumption is set up in Bangkok people's domestic lives via a local multifunctional mall, I begin at Central Plaza Pinklao, a local shopping mall, which I use as a focal case study in the analysis that follows. I argue that the multifunctional local mall echoes a neoliberal agenda by constructing the inhabitants' leisure, identities and family time, through the idea of the entrepreneurial self within a consumption space.

Central Plaza Pinklao, also called Central Pinklao, is a giant shopping mall located to the west of Bangkok surrounded by residential areas. Central Pinklao is one of a chain of malls run by the Central Group owned by the Chirativat family, billionaires who play a significant role in many national business sectors such as retail, real estate, hotels and food. In 2017 there were fifteen Central Shopping Malls in and around Bangkok. Central Pinklao opened in 1995 and was renovated in 2015. The mall occupies 135,018 square metres, is six stories high and is packed with hundreds of restaurants, banks, post offices, ticket centres, pharmacies, clinics, cinemas, spas, massage parlours, clothes, and supermarkets. Open from 10:00 am to 10:00 pm serving a long-hours work lifestyle, it is a destination for local inhabitants to shop or buy services, especially at the weekend.

Central Pinklao links directly to my first-hand experience and memories. I could say that, besides being brought up in a car, I was brought up in the shopping mall. My family used to call it 'the second home'. 'We can walk through the mall without opening our eyes' was a joke my mother would say when someone asked her about the mall. In 1995, when I was six and the mall opened, twenty km from my house, my mother sent me to a language training school there to attend an English class every Saturday from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm. Later on, when more skill-development institutions for children opened at the mall, my whole Saturday daytime from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm was spent there. English, art and piano classes occupied my Saturdays for almost twelve years. This followed the same pattern as my two

brothers before me, so I did not question it. To some extent, I enjoyed my time in those classes, as the style of the teaching and learning was completely different from what I experienced in the public school I attended five days a week. The English class in the mall was taught by native speakers who encouraged me to get involved with my learning by thinking and playing, whereas the English class in the public school was about repeating what the teacher said. The music and art classes were also fun as I did not have a chance to do such creative activities in school with more than forty students in each class.

While my brothers and I were attending classes, my parents would take that time to manage personal and household errands such as banking, paying bills, buying groceries, reading newspapers and having massage treatments. We would meet up after classes to have dinner in the mall and go home. It was a norm, and most of the middle class families in Bangkok, including many of my friends, would do their best to invest in their children. When achieving a better quality of living depends on how much you can afford to invest in your skills and opportunities, it crucially mirrors Brown's argument on entrepreneurial life.

On Saturday 6th of May 2017 as a part of my fieldwork, I visited Central Pinklao, my first visit since its big renovation in 2015. It was the first weekend of the month and predicted to be very busy as salaried workers had just been paid. Thousands of cheerful shoppers were in the mall. A flow of people walked past each other while some sat in a relaxed manner, but all acted as if there were nobody else there. Apart from the range of products such as clothing and groceries which one can find in any shopping mall, a local mall in Bangkok usually consists of several services other than material goods on every floor. Each floor was designed to serve a different purpose. On the ground floor, which was the most busy, there were hundreds of international cafés and restaurants, all packed with families. There was also a vast supermarket providing all household groceries. The first floor comprised banks and insurance and credit card companies, for people to make transactions, pay bills and purchase insurance seven days a week. The second floor, apart from a long

line of fashion retailers selling clothes, accessories and jewellery, was packed with booths selling mobile phones and other electronic gadgets. There was a line-up of mobile phone service providers and hundreds of people were waiting to receive services. The next floor had services for improving one's appearance and relaxing treatments from haircuts to Botox, a manicure or a full body massage. There were several inviting signs showing spotless models promoting each clinic, along with price lists in front of each shop (Figure 27.1 & 27.2). The top floor was the location of entertainment experiences such as cinemas, karaoke booths and bowling arcades. The top floor linked to a tower called the 'education zone', packed with personal tutoring schools and skill development centres for children (Figure 28.1 & 28.2).



Figure 27.1 - 27.2. Beauty Zone in Central Plaza Pinklao (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)



Figure 28.1 - 28.2. Education Zone in Central Plaza Pinklao (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)

Compared to my childhood experiences in the mall, I could see that the services provided were not significantly different now. Nevertheless, they were clearly more intense and multiple, and more people seemed to engage with the services commonly and familiarly. For example, the number and type of courses offered in the education zone had been extended, including to very young children. There were brain training skills for toddlers and tutoring classes for children to prepare for the entrance examination to first grade in school. ‘Special offer for summer break’, it said on the large pink advertising board. There were lists of the institutions presented there, along with price lists, reminiscent of food menus. From science to maths, English to Chinese, cooking to singing, and pre-tutoring for the next academic year, there were many special classes that parents could pay for to develop their children’s skills. This resonates with neoliberal self-investment. When a child is brought up in a society with increasing fear and uncertainty, it becomes a parent’s burden to invest in the child. Parents have to offer all sorts of social and cultural capital to build a protective wall to provide them with the best opportunity to climb away from economic risks and socio-economic instability — as my parents did for me.

Not only products and services are offered. Local shopping malls in Bangkok have become part of people’s lives by offering them public space for relaxing without spending. Similarly, other local malls I have observed, such as Central Salaya, provide a small playground with fake grass for children and a working area with free wifi and sockets for people who want to work remotely. In Central Eastville, there is a working space in the mall’s giant bookstore, which looks like a public library.

As I continued my walk through Central Pinklao, I could see that on each floor along the hallways there were benches, fake-grass rugs, and comfortable sofas provided like a public park. There were families dressed in casual clothes, some with babies, sitting on the fake-grass carpet on the floor. Some took off their shoes and laid back on the public couches as if they were picnicking, talking, relaxing and,

mostly, playing on their smartphones. Most of the sofas provided electric sockets for people to charge their phones while they were playing on them. This was a scene I had not seen before.

It seemed reasonable to visit a shopping mall without any goal of buying or consuming anything, just relaxing. I saw many children left on their own on the public benches in every corner of the mall playing on their phones. While I had the chance to play with my neighbours on an outdoor field when I was little, it seemed that the social sphere of childhood in neoliberal Bangkok these days, with advanced technology, had narrowed from a very early stage of life.



*Figure 29.1 - 29.3. Seating Areas in Central Plaza Pinklao (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

The use of the space in the mall was rendered in such a way to serve as a public space for everyone, not just shoppers or middle class families. According to Yuwadee Wongweerasert's observation of multifunctional shopping malls in Bangkok, the design of space clearly identifies class and social hierarchy. She points out that while shopping malls in the city centre attract middle class workers and upper class residents, local shopping malls aim to serve people from all social classes (2012: 162).

In Central Pinklao, even poor people who may not have been able to afford to buy products were allowed to lay back and move freely within the mall. People

flowed in and out all day in a visibly cheerful and relaxing manner compared to the working days. I told myself that maybe it was a good sign to see diverse groups of people from different classes and ages gathering in this public space. Could it be a sign of equality and a collective society? I sat back and saw that, yet again, this was a delusion of the neoliberal goal, making people feel they were free and in control of their life, while consumption insidiously worked as a tool. This resonates with what Bauman defines in an uncertain society as ‘free space (free for myself, of course), a kind of empty space of which the liquid modern consumer, bent on solo performances and only on solo performances, always needs more and never has enough’ (2007b: 50).

Having set up the scene of the local shopping mall in Bangkok, it can be seen that the neoliberal consumer society has been actively engaged in Bangkok residents’ domestic lives. In the local mall, most of the participants were family and mostly young people whose leisure was spent within a shopping mall. While a Saturday is supposed to be a free day from work, school and duties for most people, many neoliberal subjects in Bangkok still have to proceed with their duties to ensure that they are efficient investors. Not only a specific duty relating to skills developments that a family want to invest in for their children, but also a task of being able to be a part of the space and the consumer community.

Amidst the socio-economic inequalities of Thailand, shopping malls in Bangkok occupy a space of not only consumption but also identity, hopes, and class mobility. Bangkok people’s everyday lives are commodified and shifted from state support to private firms, from participating to investing in social, cultural and, ultimately, human capital. A popular piece of Thai country music called ‘Ma Jark Din’, translated to ‘Come from the Ground’, voiced by Tai Oratai, talks about a rural woman who migrates to work in Bangkok when she finishes high school and is eventually able to survive contentedly. A verse in the song says, 'owing to the hard work I did, I can smile; now I can dress up, and I can walk in a shopping mall

sometimes'.<sup>79</sup> The ability to walk in a shopping mall signals a specific identity and membership of Bangkok society, which relates to Loïc Wacquant's observation:

There is the curse of being poor in the midst of a rich society in which participation in the sphere of consumption has become a sine qua non of social dignity - a passport to personhood if not citizenship (especially among the most dispossessed, who have nothing else at their disposal to signal membership). (2007: 30)

A shopping mall in Bangkok, which used to be perceived mainly as a leisure space under late capitalism, has visibly become a concrete space of neoliberal practice. This suggests not only that leisure space and time are commodified in a neoliberal context but also the ways in which life is formed and embodied by the logic of consuming as an essential of domestic life, and from the very early stages of life. It shows how the spatial memory and experiences of a young neoliberal subject are scripted by neoliberal consumption, such as seeing a shopping mall as a domestic space. For instance, the image of my house in my childhood memory is vivid only at night time and on Sunday, while school, long hours in the car, and a local shopping mall occupy much of my childhood memories.

The importance of the local mall to the performance of happiness is that, although it may not be a space where happiness is explicitly performed, as I consider the city centre shopping district that follows, everyday practice in the local mall is a crucial rehearsal of the performance of happiness under the rubrics of consumption. As in Ari's outdoor markets, where happy vibes were clearly performed by workers, in the local mall such happy vibes, expressed through domestic consumption, to some extent are an ordinary routine. I suggest that these subtle micro practices expand extensively in numerous spheres of people's lives, national media, the commuter train, lunch break on a working day, and now leisure. These elements cannot be isolated from the fantasy offered by the central shopping mall where vivid forms of happiness and extraordinary spectacles are emphasised. Unlike a theme park such as Disneyland, that draws a clear line between reality and fantasy, I

---

<sup>79</sup> Kunawut, S. (Writer). (2007). *Ma Jark Din*. On *Ma Jark Din*. Bangkok: Grammy Gold.

propose that the performance of happiness in the city centre shopping mall is another layer of a mask, above all ordinary settings, blurring the borders wherein the logic of consumption is inhabited in not only a shopping mall but almost every sphere in an individual's life.

### **Happy Friday at Siam Square**

'Siam' is the former official name of Thailand. Siam Square is located at Rama I Road and Pathumwan Intersection, surrounded by a business district, luxury hotels, a prominent university (Chulalongkorn University), and opulent shopping malls. Right at the centre of the city, the shopping centre has been a destination since 1975 (McGrath 2006). Influenced by American-style 'park and shop' convenience, the area was first arranged as a grid of blocks and alleys filled with boutiques, cafés, restaurants, entertainment arcades and movie theatres. Due to the privatisation of education in the 1990s, Siam Square has been engulfed by private tutoring schools.<sup>80</sup> A significant number of leading academics have become private tutors providing courses at Siam Square, including live and recorded lectures at weekends and after school hours. Siam Square became popular as a meeting point for young people in Bangkok.

---

<sup>80</sup> Tutoring centres which are specialised schools offering courses to improve students' grades and performance in school or examinations.

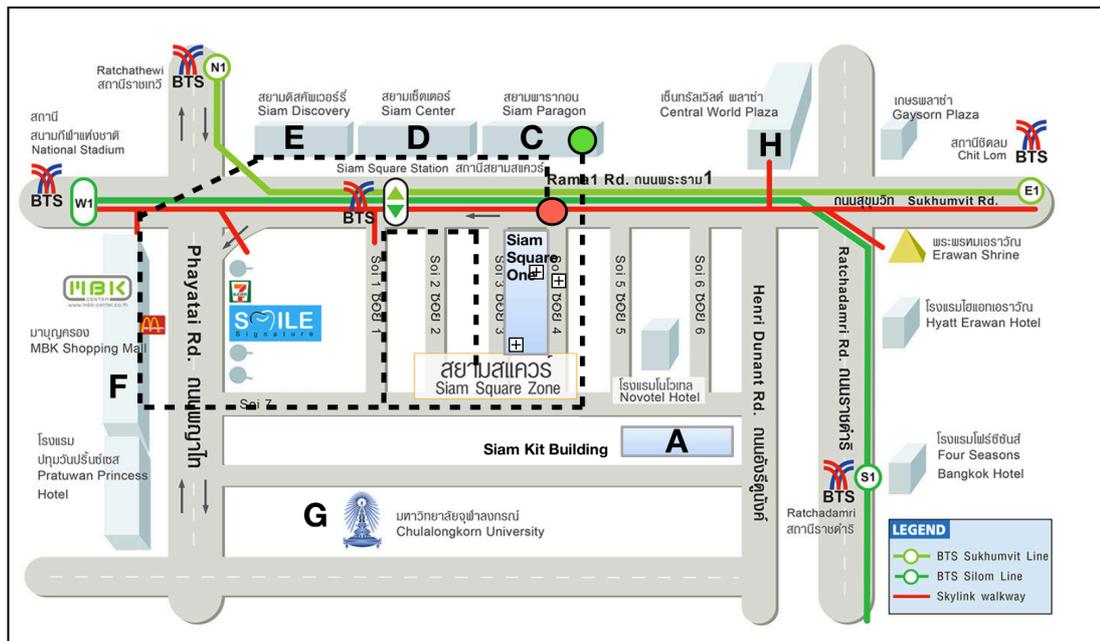


Figure 30. Siam Square Map and the Taken Route From the Green to Red Spot

In 2001 when the Bangkok Skytrain was established, Siam station was constructed at the heart of Rama I Road, which brought more people to Siam Square. Although Siam Square was at first an outdoor shopping arena, nowadays high-rise towers of shopping malls owned by billionaires and royal families in Thailand have replaced most of the outdoor boutiques and small enterprises. Similarly, the local movie theatres did not survive, as modern IMAX cinemas opened in the shopping malls. Even the tutoring schools, which were spread throughout the area are now gathered and organised in a high-rise tower called Siamkit Building (A in Figure 30) owned by Chulalongkorn University, a public university (G in Figure 30). The university also owns Siam Square One, the newest shopping mall, located just opposite Siamkit Building. On the top floor, there is a luxury opera theatre called KBank Siam Pic-Ganesha founded by Kasikorn Bank, a dominant banking group, and Workpoint Entertainment Public Co. Ltd, a prominent Thai media company. Since the theatre culture in Bangkok serves mainly the upper-middle class, this luxury theatre barely denotes as an art space for the public.

Across the connecting footbridge on the other side of Siam Square One is Siam Paragon (B in Figure 30). This is a remarkably luxurious and modern shopping

mall co-run by three major corporations and the Thai royal family, which also leased the Bureau of the Crown Property land to build the mall. Siam Paragon opened for business in 2005 with an elevated walkway along the Skytrain tracks linking the mall to the Ratchaprasong Intersection where Central World (H in Figure 30), the seventh largest shopping mall in the world, and several other shopping malls and hotels are located. Siam Paragon is the tenth largest shopping mall in the world covering 3.22 million square feet. The mall offers several high-end designer brands and a variety of modern restaurants and cafés.<sup>81</sup>

The interior of Siam Paragon connects to Siam Centre and Siam Discovery. Without leaving the building, shoppers could stroll across three shopping malls (C to D to E in Figure 30). The sky footbridge from Siam Discovery comfortably brings shoppers to ‘Mah Boon Krong Center’ or MBK Center (F in Figure 30), another giant shopping mall. The eight story building is owned by affluent rice merchants on land leased from Chulalongkorn University since 1985 (McGrath 2006). Nowadays, MBK Center is a well-known destination for local people, selling technological devices such as smartphones and tablets, with more than 2,000 retailers. For international tourists, MBK Center is famous as a place to find souvenirs such as wooden antiques, handmade textiles and summer clothes.

This brief overview of Siam Square shows there are at least five large shopping malls that are interconnected, so that people can reach them conveniently by a safe walk on the sky walkway. Disneyland offers tourists ‘unreal’ experiences, and I suggest that the shopping malls around Siam Square to a certain extent turn local inhabitants into tourists exploring a hybrid of reality and fantasy. On the surface, Siam Square district performs as an affluent, modern and attractive area, a space to hang out among upper and middle class youths, workers, celebrities and tourists. However, in the same way as Silvija Jestrović sees the supermarket in Belgrade performing its better self, masking the traces of war and class struggle in the city (2014), I contend that the space of consumption in Siam Square paints over

---

<sup>81</sup> Tourtopia. (2017). 10 Largest Malls in the World. <http://www.tourtopia.com/largest-malls-in-the-world/> [Accessed 1 Feb 2018].

the impoverishment, class struggle, and scars of political movements. Just four kilometres away is Klongtoey, the biggest slum in Thailand, which is home to approximately 100,000 people (Endō 2014). Around Siam Square itself, it is common to see beggars and homeless people on the road below Siam Station. More importantly, the Ratchaprasong intersection near Central World (H in Figure 30) was the site of a massive democratic protest of working class people in 2010, where the government clampdown killed almost a hundred protestors. It was also the site of the Big Cleaning Day and Returning Happiness to Bangkok events, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Between 2005 and 2008 when I was in high school, while I mostly spent my weekend at a local shopping mall, it was a common trend for most of my friends to spend every weekend at Siam Square attending tutoring schools, hanging out and meeting people from other schools. My engagement with Siam Square was vivid during my undergraduate-student life. Having studied at Chulalongkorn University for four years from 2008-2012, I was inevitably spatially bounded to the Siam Square area. I took the Skytrain to Siam station daily and either walked or took a mini-bus to the campus. I also hung out with my friends around Siam Square from time to time. Due to the massive size of Siam Paragon and MBK Center, I was often lost. Nevertheless, apart from using the clean bathrooms in the mall, as a student I was rarely able to afford the expensive food so I instead strolled around the area for street food from vendors on the pavements. The way I saw Siam Square shopping district after I graduated, was as a place to meet my old friends, due to its central location. However, it was not a place where I, nor my family, would travel to through the heavy traffic from the outskirts of Bangkok to relax or dine as it was too crowded, noisy and time-consuming.

While a local mall in Bangkok serves mainly as a domestic space where people tend to dress casually and participate in a routinised manner, I suggest that the city centre shopping district represents an extraordinary space. It is a catwalk, where up-to-date fashion is staged by teenagers, shoppers, and celebrities. In 2018, a viral

clip was made by young Thai YouTubers who scouted around Siam Square and randomly interviewed teenagers about the price of each piece of their clothing. The title of the clip translates to ‘How much does it cost for your clothes to stroll in Siam Square?’. The prices of their costumes, which were proudly revealed by the teenagers, began at £300 and could be as high as £2,000. Although this could be selectively presented by the editor, the clip shows how the space of Siam Square is distinguished from the local mall in transforming people’s bodies and appearances; a market requiring a massive investment to mark ones’ superior status, and this begins with the very young.<sup>82</sup>

From this illustration of Siam Square area it can be seen that the site is a consequence of a consumer society in transit between late capitalism and neoliberalism. Its space became a shopping district where the exchange value was stressed through commodities and entertainment as a mode of leisure. Later, when education increasingly became commodified and public universities were privatised, the tutoring schools and shopping districts were blended in. Luxurious shopping malls filled with high-end entertainment, imported goods, designer brands, stylish international and cafés and private tutoring schools eventually swallowed the whole area. I argue that in Siam Square the line between exchange-value and use-value has been blurred by a new form of lifestyle that pivots around an investment and projection of self. It is a site of the neoliberal consumerist world where people are investors, promoters and customers all at once, projecting not only what they consume but what they look like and how they want to be looked at by others, including local inhabitants, shoppers, celebrities and international tourists. As such, this shopping district introduces a new stage of social drama enabling the ways of consumer culture rehearsed in a local mall to be fully realised on a bigger stage.

To elaborate on the above arguments, I draw on materials from my fieldwork. The discussion below is derived from the walk I took in and around the area. Figure

---

<sup>82</sup> Kualoak (2018) มาเที่ยวสยาม แต่งตัวกันก็บาท?!! (‘How much does it cost for your clothes to stroll in Siam Square?!’). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtriYlaoiso> [Accessed 15 July 2019].

30 shows the route of my walk on Friday, May 5th, 2017 from 4:30 pm to 10:00 pm. I started by exploring Siam Paragon where I met my friend who was also an interviewee. We had an interview at a milk-tea bar at Siam Paragon. Then we strolled around and dined at a popular cafe called After You. Afterwards, we walked from Siam Paragon to Siam Square One and shopped around Siam Square. Then we walked to MBK Center, Siam Discovery, Siam Centre and finally returned to Siam Square One to have dinner. I first discuss the performance of happiness that occurring in terms of the space and environments before moving to the ways in which people participated in it.

### **Bridges to Fantasy: In Between Real Life and Fantasy**

In this section, I begin with an exploration of the exteriors and the spaces around the shopping malls before moving to a discussion about the inside of the malls. The focus on the exterior and outside space is informed by John Urry who observes how the concept of space should not be considered an isolated object or unit. Spatial qualities such as ‘distance, ‘continuity’ and ‘betweenness’ should be included in a comprehension of spatial relations. He states:

Different areas, towns, agricultural zones, new trading estates, shopping centres, arterial roads, etc. are not merely elements of a given spatial structure and determinative of human activity from outside. Rather they are themselves social, socially produced, and socially reproducing. They cannot therefore be separated from the significant social objects present within a given society, and from the characteristic forms in which such objects are interconnected. (1995: 66)

I therefore contemplate the exteriors of the shopping malls and their outdoor space in Siam Square as a pre-show or scene setting for the performances of happiness within the shopping district, in order to make the point that the performance of happiness is not an isolated entity but significantly informed and inspired by the surrounding context and the existence of unhappiness and social disorder.

I stepped onto Siam station platform at 4:30 pm on the first Friday of the month. It is common in Bangkok at the beginning of the month to see salaried

workers hanging out at shopping malls as they have just been paid. Standing on the three-level platform, huge billboards on modern skyscrapers embraced me and filled my sight, shouting to me with a bundle of sale promotions, which confirmed that I was at the heart of the shopping district. Unlike the dull morning commuter train I previously explored, the happy vibes were evident on the after-work train to Siam. While the outdoor markets in Ari were most vibrant during the lunch break, Siam Square was busy at any time of the day as it was a major tourist attraction.



*Figure 31. Fountain Garden in front of Siam Paragon (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

Having an appointment to meet my friend for an interview, Siam Paragon was my first destination. From the first floor of Siam station, I walked directly towards the entrance of the mall. The outside of the mall was beautifully decorated. It was colourful enough to distract people from the congested traffic underneath and the grey Skytrain tracks. The lines of palm trees suggested a vacation as they usually

appear on tropical beaches. The trees were nicely set along with a dancing fountain garden. The large, diverse, stylish posters advertising luxury-brand products were displayed in the tall glass windows. The forty-degree polluted air nonetheless overpowered the gorgeous palm trees and lively fountains. I recognised that most of the local people, except some international tourists, were walking quickly, aiming to enter the air-conditioned building instead of relaxing on the benches provided outside.

While the pavements I explored around the business district were narrow and uneven, the outdoor path in front of Siam Paragon's entrance was clean and broad enough to carry hundreds of people. At the middle of the walkway connecting Siam Paragon and Siam Centre, there was another dancing-fountain garden cheering the atmosphere (Figure 31). The water-popping sound competed with the honking cars and buzzing engines on the main road. The big greyish concrete building of Siam Paragon was graced by tall glass windows and the enormous golden sign announcing the mall.



*Figure 32. The Photo Booth of King Vajiralongkorn (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

During the walk, I felt compelled to stop by a large golden booth presenting a ten-metre high photo of King Vajiralongkorn, the latest King, who was his father's successor (Figure 32). The promotion of the monarchy's grace, already staged that morning in the commercials on the train, was restaged here. The exterior designs evidently projected a grand, modern and luxurious sense, yet they made me feel like a powerless human being. As a social actor, the beautiful setting around me convinced me I was experiencing something extraordinary, which I could not find on the street below, nor at the office district. Nevertheless, I did not have any rights over those beautiful props and sites apart from viewing them. This made me feel like a window shopper, not for expensive products, but for luxury and the comfortable life right in front of my eyes. The walkway in front of the mall not only connected one place to another but also connected people from the external reality to the fantasy offered by the mall.

After having an interview, my friend accompanied me to show the current hotspots of Siam Square. During our walk from the outdoors of Siam Square to MBK Center, I found that even though my body was surrounded by honking cars, polluted and humid air, food vendors, and a few homeless people and beggars, my eyes were still caught by the jumbo-sized billboards of stylish models and merchandise (Figure 33). Even without palm trees and dancing fountains, walking in Siam Square's alleys was enjoyable for shoppers as they could easily pop in and out of each shop. 'That's the newly popular fashion outlet gathering clothes and jewellery from retailers on Instagram', my friend and local guide cheerfully pointed out as we walked, 'that's the new popular café', 'that's the new famous cosmetics shop'. Countless 'new' and 'famous' attractions had been recently established in Siam Square. My head lifted to look where her finger pointed to the giant billboards, decorative lights and many clothes shown through the tall glass windows. A car suddenly honked at me while I was crossing the road listening to my friend looking at the signs on the top of a boutique, which brought my focus back to the road. The quality of the pavements and disorganised traffic in Siam Square's alleys was no

better than Ari's alleys, but apparently the focus was not on mobilising but shopping. If the shops in Ari's markets offer affordable day-to-day products, the shops in Siam Square offer a more costly, trendy and fashionable lifestyle with many more options. If Ari's outdoor market subtly and gently promotes happiness during the lunch break, the site of consumption in Siam Square on Friday night shouts and announces the happiness you can buy at top volume.



Figure 33. Siam Square's Outdoor Walk (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)



Figure 34.1 - 34.2. The Bridge Linking Siam Square & MBK Center (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)

Heading to MBK Center from Siam Square, my friend and I climbed the two-level stairs to the sky-bridge, which led us directly to the entrance of the mall. The bridge was no longer than 100 metres. While people were walking ahead of me to get to the other side of the road, I stopped in the middle of the bridge at the rim of the walkway (Figure 34.1 & 34.2). The metal floor, large glass wall and structural poles of the bridge entirely enclosed me. I glanced through the wall at the traffic and the life down on the street. Numerous taxis were queuing and waiting for customers. The metal bars and glass made me feel safe and protected from the outside world. Down there people were standing at the bus stop waiting to be packed into the next open-air public bus. Some were walking along the broken and narrow pavements. Beggars and disabled people sat at the corner of the dirty street. The scene of struggling people living sadly made me move my sight away and instead I looked at the long line of towers alongside the road. Although there was some space left for the bright sky, reminding me that I was still a part of nature, the grid of metal bars made me feel like I was in prison. In this large cage, people seemed to move freely, but I doubted whether they did. If where I stood was the prison, I wondered whether the outside world, down there, was the place I would like to live. Or we were all living in a gigantic invisible jail where two ways of life are only divided by those bars. However, the higher I looked up, the more the social disarray disappeared. There were only grand billboards presenting fashionable, stylish models, new movies and celebrities who looked energetic and cheerful — performing the happy and lively modern city.

The contradictions between the lavish exteriors of the shopping malls and the social cracks were gradually allayed when the sun went down. Social struggles underneath the bridge were hidden in the dark and the scene I saw became more surreal. On the sky walkway in front of MBK Center, I encountered a massive cat statue (Figure 35). The neon lights from the building were glowing, inviting people who had just left their offices to enter the building as the lights from the traffic beneath shone spotlights on the city.

In a similar way to how I locate unhappiness as part of the performance of happiness in previous chapters, the class struggles and environmental disorders around Siam Square throw into relief the tendencies to perform happiness within and around the space. Not only do the exteriors of the malls physically offer people ways to move themselves into the building, I found they merged two stages of life — reality and fantasy or perhaps unhappiness and happiness. The architectural exteriors and outdoor structures implicitly suggested a sense of ‘betweenness’ and reminded people of class struggles, at least in the daytime. The metal walkway, and even the short route through Siam Square, did not completely shut people out from the outside world. The architecture reminded those walkers of the divisions of life, with people still struggling beneath and around them.



*Figure 35. The Giant Cat Statue in front of MBK Center (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)*

By standing on the bridge between the modern luxury skyscrapers and those struggling with life, happy images were juxtaposed with misery. Debord says:

The spectacle exists in a concentrated form and a diffuse form, depending on the requirements of the particular stage of poverty it denies and supports. In both cases, it is nothing more than an image of happy harmony surrounded by desolation and horror, at the calm centre of misery. (1994: 41)

This intersects with the term ‘city of illusion’ coined by Christine Boyer (cited in Hannigan 1998), which she uses to describe public space in New York that focuses on the touristic fantasy and abandons the social horrors of reality. John Hannigan develops this idea further in the concept of a ‘fantasy city’, which is ‘a metropolis which ignores the reality of homelessness, unemployment, social injustice and crime, while eagerly transforming sites and channels of public expression into promotional spaces’ (1998: 4). In this light, the exploration of the exterior of the shopping mall was just the beginning, setting the scene for the performances of happiness within.

### **Mise-en-scène in Shopping Malls and The Landscape of Fantasy**

If the external architectural structure of shopping malls in Siam Square suggested a prison, life in the mall is arguably ‘the escape from the iron cage to its simulated form in multicolour neon’ (Langman 1991: 118). I resume discussing the space of the shopping malls as a stage of the performance of happiness in this section but move on to the interior and atmosphere. When I entered Siam Paragon, the chilled clean air immediately comforted my skin, which was sticky from perspiration. I was under the impression that one of the reasons Bangkok people favoured the atmosphere in a shopping mall was because it offered better air than the polluted outdoors. I passed a quick security check at the entrance gate and joined the crowd. Unlike local shopping malls, a big central mall such as Siam Paragon or Central World entails a serious security check and CCTV cameras throughout. Although neoliberal agendas promote the freedom of individuals over the free market, it turned out that surveillance was an essential aspect of public life. Guy Standing points out his concerns about surveillance in neoliberal eras, saying that ‘surveillance chips away at civic friendship and trust, making people more fearful and more anxious. The group with most reason for that fear and anxiety is the precariat’ (2011: 153).

Although individual privacy was traded for security, I see that, for fearful and uncertain neoliberal subjects, surveillance plays an important role in making them feel protected and safe. In neoliberal Bangkok, there are relatively high levels of CCTV all over the city, especially in public spaces and shopping malls. Amid the socio-economic inequality, high rates of crime, and uncertain and fearful socio-economic conditions, I argue that Bangkok individuals are desperate for high levels of surveillance, despite it reducing their personal privacy, which suggests they need a sense of the reassurance. Chris Rojek coins the term ‘the recurrence of reassurance’ and points out that sites of consumption and leisure in the US create a predictable and reassuring environment. He suggests that:

They offer passive, relatively unchallenging consumption experience in a clean and secure environment. They can be relied upon to start and end on time. The consumer can slot the experience into his or her free-time schedule. Essentially these leisure attractions cater for our desire to be reassured by our escape experience. Many popular leisure and tourist attractions are based upon idealised roles and stereotypical situations which are calculated to deliver the feeling of reassurance. (1994: 205)

This statement of reassurance aligns with what Siam Paragon offers. In the mall, shoppers were assured that those beggars they saw beneath the walking bridge outside would not be allowed to join the space. Not only were shoppers aware of, and perhaps welcomed, the fact that their safety was guarded and watched by authorities, the space in the mall also provided them with a sense of reassurance in the well-presented and predictable spatial arrangement.



*Figure 36. Shopping Zone in Siam Paragon (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

After I passed the security check, I walked through the vast walkway in the mall. The warm ceiling-lights gently shone on the floor and reflected off the clear glass shop windows. The greyish concrete street and colourless train tracks outside were other worlds. The polished tiles on the floor were so clean that they cast the lights from the ceiling. The luxurious brands were neatly presented in each shop along the hall. There was a fancy dessert bar not far from the entrance with a friendly lady in a uniform constantly and automatically smiling to passers-by. Unlike the street food vendors in Ari's alleys that I explored in the previous chapter, the presentation of self of the salesperson in the mall did not casually and naturally communicate with the customers but rather played a role of smiling machine. The atmosphere and services offered in the shopping mall were obviously secure and predictable. I suggest that this is part of the compensation for what was perhaps absent in the other atmospheres people experience daily. While the performance of happiness the administrations and people expressed in the morning commute, lunch break and local shopping mall could somehow be seen as an ordinary routine, the city centre shopping mall delivered a rather special meaning of escape from such routines and temporarily turned local residents into tourists. This idea of making the environment in the central mall foreign from the everyday life is discussed by Urry

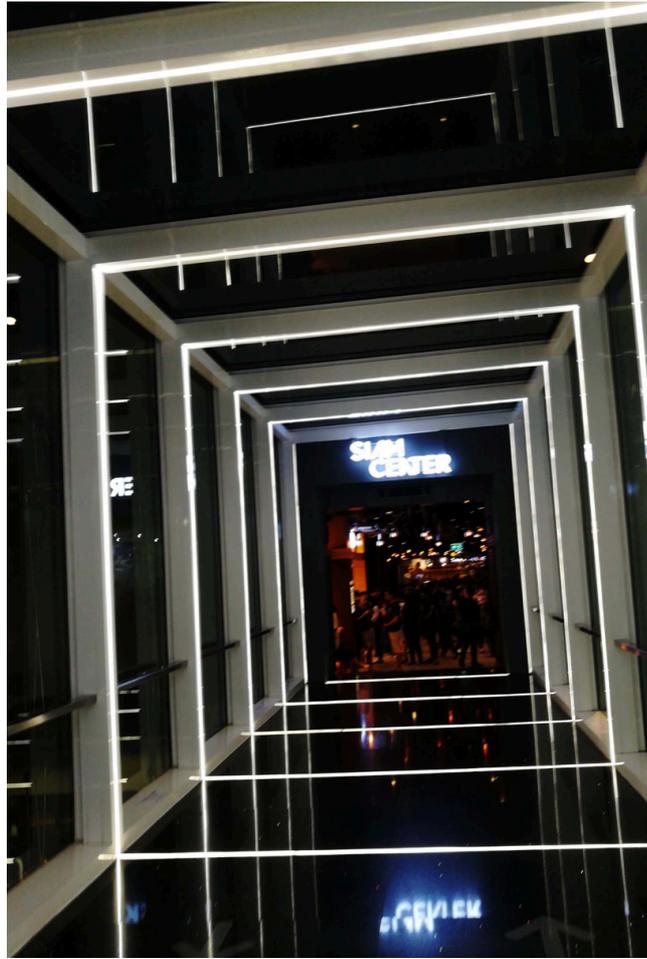
who insightfully describes the features of tourists regarding spectacle. He explains that the tourist gaze is 'directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday and routine experiences. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out-of-the-ordinary' (1995: 132).

The early essence of happiness performed by the ambience and environment of the space inside the mall played out as a scene both extraordinary yet predictable. It was extraordinary in the sense that people were having experiences not available in their daily routines such as clean air, a beautiful setting and assuring security; while it was predictable as they already expected to participate in these particular environments.

Moving on from observing the space, I continued my walk in order to find the visible link between a troop of consumers and the surrounding space. Strolling around Siam Paragon gradually offered me a chance to come into close proximity to the spectacle of fantasy of a superior life. The arena of happiness performed was expanded from the sense of provided security to a supreme display of materiality. Only thin, clear glass windows separated me from a supercar in a grand showroom; a luxury designer bag that cost as much as my car was within my sight. Even though such expensive merchandise was far beyond the majority in reality, the open interior design of the mall with transparent windows invites people to create their own fantasy and imagine themselves in those high-end clothes, owning cars and other luxury products. This is strongly echoed in Datta and Chakraborty's recent observation influenced by Collin Campbell (1987):

A modern consumer, instead of seeking pleasure entirely through sensations, seeks out emotional experiences through consumption. Modern consumption (e.g., window shopping at swanky shopping malls) creates dream, imagination and aestheticization of our humdrum life. If the worker/producer of capitalist economy follows an over-disciplined, tedious and time-bound work life, the arena of consumption allows him/her to relax and become an irresponsible pleasure seeker. (2018: 458-459)

I suggest that the shops featured as a gallery of a superior life, displaying happiness in the sense of superior materiality, offering a dream as much as marking the bond between the market and individuals. This reflects familiar neoliberal ideas, stressing class mobility and individual freedom through participation in the free market. Everyone can rise beyond socio-economic precarity if he or she is efficient, works hard and is smart enough to invest in their lives as an investor in the market. The transparent windows signal a dream state amid neoliberal capitalism whispering, if not shouting, to passers-by, ‘one day you can have it’. As is evident from Wongweerasert’s research into shopping habits in Bangkok’s city centre shopping malls, most people tend to just stroll around, rather than intending to purchase luxury merchandise as products are incredibly expensive so window-shopping is preferable. In this light, I suggest that if a local shopping mall offers a leisure space for the lower classes who may not be able to afford any merchandise or services in the mall, luxury commodities displayed in a city centre shopping mall serve the middle class as a leisure space — casting them as an audience for, if not a member, of high society.



*Figure 37. The Indoor Walking Bridge in Siam Centre (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)*

Towards the end of my walk through Siam Paragon at night with my friend, I was struck by the indoor bridge linking Siam Centre and Siam Discovery (Figure 37). The square white frames were multiple and layered along the avant-garde walkway. Lines of white neon lights emphasised the structure of the frames and highlighted the reflection on the floor. When it was dark outside, the glass windows prevented me from seeing anything outside but my own reflection. Some people stopped and took photos of the reflection on the glass wall. Unlike the outdoor bridge, the indoor bridge completely shut me off from the outside world with its futuristic and minimalist design. It momentarily lured me into thinking I was in an empty space. The people were all strangers to each other, browsing and floating around pretending there were no class divisions. The military junta was not ruling the country, and the national mourning for the late King was just a tale, as if we were anonymous stars hovering in an unknown universe. 'I just ignore anything bad or

serious stuff around me picking up only good things and focusing on myself only’, my friend said about the socio-economic uncertainties in her life and the country during the interview.<sup>83</sup> This resonates with neoliberal individualism as much as the bridge where I stood. The bridge stressed placelessness and timelessness, enabling consumers to leave the banality and unpleasant reality behind and fully immerse themselves in the landscape of fantasy.

This discussion shows the performance of happiness carried out by the space under the rubrics of security, an extraordinary but predictable environment and a luxurious ambience. However, although there were several luxury retailers spread throughout the building, it occurred to me that those shops were relatively quiet and empty. As earlier mentioned, neoliberal consumption plays the crucial role of offering markers of cultural capital for most people treating every subject as an investor, not just a small group of the upper class. The luxury shops and merchandise were there to underline the ladder to superiority that individuals could dream of, but the reality of most customers being able to afford it was not there. Therefore, I anticipate that what kept the mall lively and vivid was not the luxury products displayed but rather other modes of consumption, which enables most consumers to engage with the consumer world actively.

In every mall I observed, the actual activities practiced by most people were dining at restaurants and cafés, and shopping for street designer brands, cosmetics and accessories. This denotes a scene of happiness performed through products they could afford, ‘here and now’, resonating with Bauman’s views. At Siam Paragon, the busiest areas were the ground floor and the top floor where the hundreds of restaurants and the IMAX cinema were located. The noise of people chatting was most vibrant on the ground floor where there were restaurants, cafés and a food market, along with a large open-air self-service food court. Similarly, in the Siam Square area, the most lively zones were the dining zones and shops selling affordable clothes and cosmetics. To demonstrate how happiness is performed by the people in

---

<sup>83</sup> Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

the city centre shopping mall via instant pleasures and experiences, the following section moves from space to practice by discussing the performance of happiness through shopping for beauty products and eating-out experiences.

### **Buying Happiness in a Beauty Store**

[P]ostfeminism promises women that their ‘capital’ lies especially in beauty. Thus it is that under conditions of neoliberal postfeminism, women are hailed and guided to be entrepreneurial in their pursuit of beauty. (Dosekun 2017:179)

The argument made in this section is much informed by the above quote stressing how neoliberal tasks do not steer our lives through socioeconomic restrictions alone, but increasingly govern our bodies and appearances, especially female bodies and appearances. The previous chapter discussed a line of beauty products that were heavily promoted on the commercials screened on the commuter train. In this section, the focus is placed on the connection between the performance of happiness and the neoliberal rationale that governs female appearances.

I was recommended by my friend to visit the hotspot of Siam Square, which she sarcastically called ‘a place that enormously absorbs female salaried workers’ money’. Located on the underground floor of Siam Square One, Eve and Boy The Underground is a recently opened chain beauty store, which occupies 1,500 square-metres. Led by my friend, we entered the shop and the first thing I noticed was the scent. The shop smelled ‘beautiful’ to me, mixing fragrances from perfume, beauty care and cosmetics, which clearly dissolved away the smoky polluted air outside the mall. The term ‘beautiful smell’ stuck in my head and the way it described the atmosphere crucially reflects the way in which the concept of beauty has been inserted into my life — which I have always seen and heard from TV commercials since I was little. For a woman, to be beautiful, I was long occupied with a thought that one has to gather several of the beauty ingredients offered in the market, from skincare to multiple forms of cosmetics. And it has been known to me that it is a

woman's special skill to distinguish ten shades of pink lipstick. There were several techniques a girl had to practice and learn for when she grew up. Although my mother was not a role model for putting on heavy makeup, my circle of female friends and the media had enough influence to persuade me to see the process of putting on makeup as a playful thing rather than a task. To unpack the smell of the beauty that I sensed, I moved around the shop and explored.

In my line of sight there were more than a hundred shoppers, mostly teenagers, students and female office workers. The reason for the shop's popularity was that it offered a wide price-range of cosmetics and beauty products, from 50 to 5,000 THB (£1-100). It claimed that there were more than a thousand brands and 80,000 items sold in the store. By selling relatively lower priced items than other retailers, Eve and Boy Underground had become the primary destination for salaried workers, especially women, to adorn their appearances. If the luxury brands offered in high-end retail shops displayed an out of reach lifestyle for neoliberal subjects, I argue, the beauty products in Eve and Boy Underground clearly rendered a form of commodified happiness that could be achieved instantly.



*Figure 38.1. Eve and Boy The Underground, Siam Square One (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)*

*Figure 38.2. Water Spray Presented in front of the Store (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)*

*Figure 38.3. People Queuing to Pay in the Store (Taken by the author; 05/05/2017)*

Like a dance floor, the shop had upbeat background music to create ambience. The loft-style open ceiling was full of spotlights shining on everyone as if

we were in a theatre — leading actresses and actors on the stage. People were picking up items from the shelves and putting them back, picking them up and putting them in shopping baskets, repeated as a rhythm. While I was looking around the store astonished, I turned to my friend and found that she was busy picking up bright red and white bottles from a shelf. They were ‘pure mineral sprays’, which I had earlier seen advertised on a huge poster in front of the shop (Figure 38.2). She explained that the item was trendy among her colleagues at her workplace. It would refresh their faces and sore eyes through a tiring day at work. Her colleagues asked her to stockpile the items for them when they knew she was visiting Siam Square. Referring to this consumption, my friend explained it to me:

It’s normal for people at my office; we usually spend like a millionaire at the beginning of the month. But in the middle and end of the month, you will start seeing them bringing a home-made lunchbox to work, as they are already broke (laughing).<sup>84</sup>

Judging by what I was seeing, I would agree that most of the shoppers indeed picked up multiples of products. There were at least ten tills open, more than a hundred customers queuing to pay without any trace of boredom or tiredness, but instead showing happiness in their consumer pursuits.

Personal beautification for females has become an increasingly significant part of popular culture in Thailand over the last decade. Improving and modifying ones’ appearance to serve a public perception of beauty is encouraged through popular celebrities and actresses. Many celebrities and sometimes non-celebrities have become beauty bloggers, Youtubers and cosmetics reviewers.<sup>85</sup> TV commercials and advertisements in public spaces are full of the value of beauty,

---

<sup>84</sup> Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

<sup>85</sup> See an example: Momay With You (2017). *Momay Pa Plearn: Tang Nar Suay Fresh* [Make up for a refreshing look]. 13 April. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGMkcAPeRgY> [Accessed: 2 December 2019].

often presented through perfect white clear skin and heavy makeup.<sup>86</sup> More importantly, the processes of beautification in Thailand, such as nose and breast surgery, Botox, whitening treatments and weight loss programmes are increasingly typical at an ever earlier stage of life as I demonstrated in the section of the local shopping mall. I argue that this phenomenon of beautification in Thailand, especially in Bangkok which is packed with pop-culture and mass consumption, is conceived in relation to the idea of the neoliberal entrepreneurial self in two ways — new floating markets and self-investment.

Firstly, a neoliberal society requires the constant creation of new markets to generate the flow of capital and serve new entrepreneurial individuals of all ages. This phenomenon resonates with the idea of neoliberal happiness in terms of how the aesthetic of being beautiful is clearly commodified. Selling beauty for subjects who crave it becomes a form of merchandised happiness and is intensively performed on online platforms in neoliberal Thailand. Sarah Banet-Weiser points out the burgeoning trend of beauty bloggers:

There are necessary cultural and economic conditions that allow for the emergence of beauty vloggers as a particular kind of success story. YouTube make-up tutorials can be seen as a quintessential neoliberal industry in that the focus is on the individual entrepreneur who mobilises her own creativity and gumption into a lucrative career. (2017: 278)

For a couple of years in Thailand, there has been a boom in businesses which sell beauty products such as soap or facial whitening cream, both from manufacturers or home-made through Instagram, regardless of the producer's qualifications or business registration. Anyone can make money from beauty products, and social media plays an important role. It is common for teenage students to sell unlicensed

---

<sup>86</sup> See an example: Citra Thailand (2017). *Pew Aura Mae Hai Ma Tang Tae Kerd Jing Ror?* [Did you really get the clear skin from your mother?]. 12 September. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdQ4\\_1SbWbk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdQ4_1SbWbk) [Accessed: 2 December 2019].

beauty products via Instagram and Facebook.<sup>87</sup> This shows how the idea of beautification in Thailand has become essential and sets the background to why shopping in a beauty shop is crucial for many female workers. It is not only a hobby or a joy, but also a business project that potentially turns an individual into an enterprise.

Secondly, not only the beauty practice is commodified as a trendy business but also viewed and embraced as an optimistic self-love and self-care project. The micro performance of happiness shown through makeup is a mode of expressing symbolic value, a way of deriving selfhood and a marker of the entrepreneurial self. It is worth mentioning Elias et al.'s points. They observe that beautification is aligned with neoliberal reasoning in that it requires neoliberal subjects to invest in their physical bodies and appearance.

[W]e pursue a psychosocial perspective in relation to beauty, that is interested in the relationship between culture and subjectivity, in complicated and ambivalent subjective experiences, and also in the way that contemporary injunctions to look good require not only physical labours and transformations but also the makeover of psychic life to embrace qualities such as confidence, happiness and authenticity. (Elias et al. 2017: 5)

Not only does the collective presentation of beauty performed through a specific look represent the way in which structural power intervenes and scripts individual lives at a micro level, the popularity of investing in cosmetics and beautification in Bangkok is, I argue, a platform for self-empowering as much as concealing the fears of being left behind. Guy Standing addressed this, stating:

It is no wonder that 'beautification' treatment is booming. Those in the precariat, or fearful of being in it, learn that 'a nose job', breast enlargement, Botox or liposuction is potentially an income-earning investment as well as lifestyle enhancing. The borderline between

---

<sup>87</sup> MGROnline. (2015). "ud yxd s̄aw n̄xy "mi lkh-r̄ay chi d̄a" x̄ayu 14 th̄a th̄urkic ch̄i h̄n̄i p̄en l̄an ch̄wy p̄h̄x m̄e (Super Girl "Milk - Ritchie" aged 14, doing a business paying millions of debt to help parents.". from <http://www.manager.co.th/Home/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9580000126937> [Accessed 20 March 2018].

personal 'consumption' and 'investment' is blurred. Youthfulness and beauty are partly acquired or re-acquired. (2011: 144)

In linking the performance of happiness and beautification, I would like to readdress Ahmed's argument presented in Chapter Two that being happy is increasingly viewed as a vital tool for survival amid social struggles. I suggest that beautification plays an important role in offering happiness in the sense of self-empowerment through individual choice about appearance, and performing as attractive supports self-confidence. To put it another way, the rubric suggests that if you conform to socially sanctioned beauty standards, you will be happy.

Performing the best, most saleable, self emphasises the fact that having an appearance that complies with the norm assures people they are still part of society. After all, the process of convincing an audience is a part of what Goffman calls the 'impression of self'. Equally important is that individuals feel self-empowered by putting on makeup before starting the day. I could see in the shop that the process of buying cosmetics was part of the performance, where the value of the self was presented through the choice of products, the number of items and the amount of money spent.

While online shopping spatially disconnects customers, and their choice of items is kept to themselves, shopping on site, interacting with cashiers surrounded by hundreds of strangers amid cheerful and bustling music, inevitably sparks a sense of presentation of self as much as a collective performance in a social sphere. In *Eve and Boy Underground*, waiting in a queue for almost twenty minutes was pleasurable, as everyone did it. Filling baskets with items was not tedious, as everyone did it. The continuous light-hearted music, bright lights, happy noise, and active-nonstop shoppers collectively generated the happening — the performance of instant happiness among many salaried workers whose experience of the mundane routine of work and oppressive authoritarian regimes were momentarily parked outside.

Although the shop was designed as pick and pay style, where customers did not tend to spend more time after they had paid, the process of selecting and picking items was strikingly important. ‘It’s the small happiness, you know, shopping therapy. I have a lot of items that I have not had the chance to use yet. Sometimes I forget what I have bought’, my friend proudly told me about her shopping habits. It sounded to me that it was not always necessary for the product to equate to happiness, but the process of shopping itself was part and parcel of the happiness project.

The role of consumer at Eve and Boy Underground evokes a sense of temporal privilege for many female customers, being in control of their own choice of merchandise in a tidy and joyful atmosphere without any explicit orders telling them what to get or not to get. Nevertheless, such self-empowerment depicts another side of Lauren Berlant’s cruel optimism, as a negotiation among the Bangkok female workers who seem to be trapped in not only the precarious workforce conditions, but also the roles of their gender. Thai women are required to be both efficient mothers and workers without adequate concern for fair benefits such as maternity leave or equal pay.<sup>88</sup> While the shoppers picked up items that made them feel better about themselves and think that they were liberated from the rules and conditions of work, they fell into another neoliberal trap of both self-investment and expectations of being a ‘beautiful’ working woman. Simidele Dosekun states a concern over women’s self-empowerment in the process of beautification:

I cast aesthetic vigilance and aesthetic rest as cruelly optimistic for further binding or attaching the women to disciplinary power... In subscribing to such logics, being passionately attached to the terms and tools of their spectacularly feminine style, the women took up subject positions as aesthetic entrepreneurs: subjects guided by the fundamental postfeminist and neoliberal rationality that, for women, beauty is a most serious business. (2017: 179 -180)

---

<sup>88</sup> Oxfam (2016). Underpaid and Undervalued: How inequality defines women’s work in Asia. Oxfam Issue Briefing. June 2016. [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/ib-inequality-womens-work-asia-310516.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/ib-inequality-womens-work-asia-310516.pdf) [Accessed 19 July 2019].

Towards the end of my journey through the store, I looked around while I was queuing with the other patient women to pay for the bundle of good-value facial masks in my shopping basket. The experience in the shop indeed looked like a sort of therapy as my friend had voiced earlier. The lines between the concepts of feminine and appearance, beautiful and healthy, playful and skilful, confident and happy, were somehow blurred and blended together under the beauty discourse of neoliberal Bangkok. Above all, the scene I faced sharply underlined happiness in the sense of micro individual freedom. When there was no general election in the country, no channel for a debate for better working conditions, not much time to worry about other societal problems only personal issues, I totally understood why having the freedom to choose the colour of a lipstick could offer many people instant happiness. While beautification in neoliberal Bangkok seems to be central to female rather than male consumers, the next section discusses the performance of happiness in dining experiences, which includes all participants regardless of gender.

## **Happy Meals: Eating is a Big Deal, Problems are Trivial**

‘Eating is a big deal. Problems are trivial’ is a quote from the national tourism campaign promoting ‘a unique way to happiness’ for Thai people, as presented in Chapter Three. There is always a parade of street food available in every Bangkok community and also in every shopping mall, wherein the food and restaurant sections are the most crowded. According to a series of interviews undertaken with salaried workers, most agreed it was usual to dine in a fancy restaurant or a café with colleagues or friends on Friday nights. This was evident when I strolled around the Siam Square area after 6:00 pm and found that there was already a long queue of people eagerly waiting to dine at each trendy restaurant (Figure 39.1 - 39.3).

In this section, to articulate how eating is associated with the performance of happiness in neoliberal Bangkok, I select a trendy café to demonstrate the fantasy elements evident in the experience of eating out. I propose that eating in trendy bars and stylish cafés in a Bangkok shopping mall to a great extent denotes an important part of happiness performed by neoliberal subjects who seek extraordinary experiences to compensate for their uncertain and precarious identities as labourers and citizens. As David Bill and Grill Valentine observe, the consumption of food is a ‘container of many social and cultural practices, norms and codes’ (1997: 125). Similar to how shopping for affordable beauty products potentially offers instant joy to the customers and empowers their self-confidences through their appearances, expensive dining in a well-presented environment serves diners happiness through the performance of superior cultural capital, for instance knowing what the latest trendy café is and what to order for maximum impact.



Figure 39.1 - 39.3. People Queuing to Dine out on the Friday Night (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)

In *Fantasy City*, Hannigan discusses the concept of ‘eatertainment’ in American culture, which is a process in which ‘the former boundaries between eating and play are collapsed and recast into something new’ (1998: 88). For example, the process of cooking itself is somehow turned into a piece of performance, such as Japanese live cooking where diners sit at a bar in front of the open-plan kitchen. The idea of eatertainment also emerges in the form of themed restaurants that create a fantasy wherein the consumers experience a fictional world. For instance, The Hard Rock Café is decorated with rock-and-roll memorabilia with stage-like lighting, providing an experience like dining at a rock concert. Although there are a substantial number of such live cooking performances and themed restaurants in Bangkok, such places are often only trendy for a short period. When customers already know what the experience is going to be, it is less amusing when they visit for a second time.

To give an illustration, a themed café called Sanrio Hello Kitty House Bangkok, located in Siam Square One, was extremely popular in 2014 when it first opened. The café had the theme of Hello Kitty, the famous Japanese cartoon character, offering a cartoonish fantasy of dining in a fictional world through the decoration, service and menu. However, after a few months, the popularity decreased. This come-and-go popularity of themed cafés indicates swift neoliberal consumption and what Bauman called the ‘liquid’ modern society of consumers, in which the core of the experience is making consumers feel constantly happy.

The society of consumers stands and falls by the happiness of its members – to a degree unknown and hardly comprehensible to any other society on record. The answers given to the question ‘are you happy?’ by members of the society of consumers may legitimately be viewed as the ultimate test of its success and failure. (2007b: 44)

For this reason, I suggest a themed restaurant in neoliberal Bangkok offering specific experiences could not sustain its success, since repetitive fantasy experiences no longer offer consumer happiness in terms of novelty. To put it another way, once the extraordinary is repeated, it becomes ordinary. Under the rubrics of performance of happiness and eatertainment, the Bangkok shopping mall is not a place that offers particular themed ambiances, but rather happiness that infuses the identity of consumers. This requires repetitiveness, performed over and over as an indication of the capability to afford a lifestyle, not just a product or a one-time experience. In such cases, the second and third visit would not be tedious, but regularly highlights the consumer’s superior status in the society of diners, an example of Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital as a marker of taste and class. Such cultural capital enables individuals who manifest their cultural resources to potentially gain an advantage in their dealings with others — even if it is not permanent. To illustrate this argument, in the following I discuss After You, a trendy dessert bar specialising in big bowls of shaved ice with various toppings.

## After You - Happiness After Work



*Figure 40.1 - 40.2. After You Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

The first branch of After You was launched in 2007 and there were more than 30 branches in the country by 2017. Its success led the business into the stock market. After You rapidly grew in popularity among Bangkok's middle class, alongside the burgeoning of social media. It was common to see floods of posts of its giant bowls on Facebook and Instagram when the café first became famous. I had never visited After You before since it had only recently become visible in the food market, but during my one-month fieldwork I had the chance to visit the cafe with friends and relatives four times. It became a trend for the middle classes including young people, workers and families to have dessert there during their leisure time.

On the same day that I strolled around Siam Square, it was suggested by my friend after we had an interview that I should visit After You as it was a hotspot among trendy dessert bars at the moment. Located on the ground floor of Siam Paragon with other cafés, it was noticeably distinguished by long queues. 'There is always room for dessert' is the café's motto. Ironically, there was not always enough room for diners. A lady was managing the queuing system of the café and announcing the name of the next customer who would be allowed to go in, as happened at almost every restaurant in the mall.

At 5:00 pm, still off-peak, my friend's name was called after thirty minutes of waiting. My friend and I were led to the two-seat table at the very end of the café. The buttery scent greeted my nose as a welcome. The tables were set extremely close to each other leaving only enough space for one to walk through. The cosy lighting and wooden floors created a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere. Compared to the street food outside, the environment in After You was far more favourable. However, the chatty people in the tiny, packed space and the long queue outside of people looking through the store's black glass windows hardly made me feel relaxed. Those strangers' gazes pressured me to quickly look at the menu and order as soon as possible. I asked my friend, who was more familiar with the place, to order for me. She went to the counter, ordered and paid immediately English pub style. The dessert was served at the table and there was also a tiny bar providing empty glasses and water where you served yourself. Since it is normal for most cafés and restaurants in Bangkok to offer full service from the moment you step inside, I was curious why After You — where it is difficult to get a seat and you need to order and pay at the bar — became so popular amongst Bangkok's middle class people. I started to look around to find the answer.

While we were waiting for the dessert, I was struck by the similar patterns of action among the customers when the pudding was placed on the table. Almost every customer took photos of the dessert. Some took selfies with the dessert, and some groups took photos of each other. The process could take up to ten minutes before they would start eating. However, most were busy with their phones while eating, presumably checking-in and posting what they were eating. While the idea of 'play' in Hannigan's eatertainment focuses on playful events performed in the sphere of interior decoration under a particular theme or a live-cooking show, I suggest that the 'play' in After You is performed by the consumers themselves. There was a brief playful moment before eating when the customers framed their desserts, selecting the right angle, smiling alongside the bowl to capture their happy moments. Although I was not surprised by this as it had been my habit too, I could see that the process had

became more intense yet normal for everyone. Taking photos of food prior to eating in order to post them on social media has, to a great extent, become a modern ritual in neoliberal Bangkok which I elaborate on in the last chapter.

Moreover, I propose that the *mise-en-scène* on display in After You is organised to serve neoliberal consumers. The tiny size of the well-designed space does not matter to consumers, since what matters is only what fits in a square frame on the phone. The staring eyes of strangers through the glass wall is not a problem, since diners focus on their own tables and those strangers are excluded from their photo shoot. The transparent windows allow people outside to see what is going on inside, which somehow imitates the luxury merchandise showrooms, but with people. This renders the diners part of the neoliberal entrepreneurial self as they think they are consumers, but they are also investors and promoters at the same time.

When our order arrived it was an impressive bowl of Thai milk tea shaved ice covered with white foamed cream and garnished with almonds flakes (Figure 41). My friend cheerfully promoted the dish, saying it was the signature of the café and her favourite. As everyone did, I took photos of my dessert without the shame I had felt in my first months in the UK when I kept my old habits. At After You, I took as many photos as I wanted, which revived my old skills at Foodstagramming (taking a photo to upload on Instagram). Indeed, being served on a wooden tray with wooden forks and spoons made the dessert look attractive, classy and photogenic. Although this similar kind of dish could easily be found at an outdoor market for the price of 25 THB, the café claimed that they used the best quality ingredients following Korean and Japanese recipes. Surprisingly, the bowl of dessert we ordered cost us ten times more, almost a day's minimum wage.



*Figure 41. A Popular Dessert at After You Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

I asked my friend curiously whether the same kind of dish would be popular if it was sold at a regular outdoor market alongside street food stalls. She confidently shook her head and said that the After You brand was more important than the taste. This chain café is only located in big shopping malls and posh residential areas. So it is essential to underline the fact that you were at the place, at the exact location, paid a lot and that you experienced After You — not just once but again and again. After You has affective symbolic value, in Langman’s terms, as it offers not only the experience of taste but also a stamped passport saying that you have been to the café and are able to afford the dish. When I later visited After You in other places, most customers repeated the same pattern of taking photos and checking-in on social media. This resonates with what Hannigan notes, that the act of eating becomes ‘eventful in many senses of the word, even to the extent that the food itself may become secondary to the amusement experience’ (1998: 93). Therefore, the

happiness performed at After You was framed significantly as a distinct marker of a higher social status, allowing people to capture the splendid spectacle of a dessert bowl and tag themselves alongside the product.

After You may offer an attractive presentation of food indicating higher cultural capital, temporarily allaying individual fears amid the neoliberal turbulence. However, I argue that happiness performed through the consumption of food does not play on visual affect alone, since it is inevitably the physical process of consuming which sensorily enhances the body of the diners. The taste, temperature, smell, texture, and the way it is processed and digested in the body all highlight that diners are not just there as an audience to observe the food. The sweet refreshing taste of chilled smooth ice in my mouth was invigorating, and we finished the dessert forgetting how expensive it was. The taste of After You immersed my body, but was also carved into my emotion and memory. If happiness was being performed in the dessert bar through the appealing spectacle of the dish and the playful act of taking photos as a stamp on a passport of experience, then I suggest that the taste confirms the sensory experience as a participatory performance.

Having discussed aspects of the city centre shopping mall from the space, atmosphere, and people's consumption activities such as shopping and dining, I argue that the performance of happiness is played out and underpinned in two temporal ways, momentary and long-term. The momentary aspects include the charming atmosphere and spectacle of both the interior and exterior of the mall which temporarily repay people for what they do not have in their everyday routines. Bustling and active shopping in the cosmetic store temporarily offers happiness by empowering shoppers' self-confidence through beautification and convincing them they are in control of their own lives and individual choices. Dining at a trendy but expensive café in the mall, happiness is conceived of as energising consumers, providing extraordinary eating experiences, compared to consuming food from a polluted street vendor, and confirming individual self identity as a part of a better

moment one can occasionally afford month to month, or week to week, unlike the remote fantasy of a supercar showroom.

The long-term aspects of happiness performed go beyond the temporary happiness gained from a sense of escape from banal routine. The narratives of happiness performed in the shopping centre are not newly invented for a particular space and time. On the contrary, they are continuously rehearsed, restaged and passed over in a cycle. The performance of happiness via consumption is repeatedly highlighted by media, accumulating in people's everyday lives and played out in the malls. The advertisements on the morning commuter train presented Bangkok's desirable life through a series of life investments, which can be realised in the mall. The value of beautification in a tiring working day shown by the commercials was evidently practiced by many office workers at Eve and Boy Underground. The TV commercials for tourism stating that happiness can be obtained through mass consumption, as discussed in Chapter Three, are a rehearsal for what is offered in the shopping mall from dining to self-care. The importance of the local mall serving as a domestic space for Bangkok families internalises the neoliberal self-investment rationale, which explains the intensive consumption practiced in the city-centre shopping mall.

Overall, the performance of happiness in a Bangkok shopping mall is precisely aligned to Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. Individuals need to adjust their attitudes to be positive in order to feel good about themselves and neoliberal society. I have shown that consumption plays an essential role in this. It is not only happiness and optimism that work to retain people within the system, I have shown in this chapter that the way happiness is organised and performed in a shopping mall in the form of spectacle, experience and self-empowering allows people to feel better about their lives, even for just a moment. Happiness performed through consumption is facilitated by the individual mentality to do so. By identifying their happiness with what they consume and how they look, and with the unlimited commodities and services available in the market, people focus only on themselves and are detached

from a broader collective identification. However, the circle of performance in neoliberal Thailand does not end with the physical space. In the final chapter, I discuss the performance of happiness on social media, which, I argue, has become a crucial stage for the neoliberal subjects of Bangkok to perform their selective selves and happiness in the twenty-first century.

## **Chapter Six: Performing Happiness on Social Media**

In previous chapters, I demonstrate the ways in which happiness is performed in neoliberal Thailand through various agencies such as national culture, political campaigns and events, the media and everyday spaces. This final chapter comes to the point of the thesis when I turn to an exploration of the performance of happiness on social media — which I suggest is another stage that facilitates neoliberal subjects in Bangkok seeking platforms for self-empowerment through their selective performances of happiness. Amid the advanced technology of the twenty-first century, social media is a central platform that connects people around the globe and creates communities online. In the context of the neoliberalism of the twenty-first century, which involves several forms of life-investment and self-adjustment, it is impossible to disregard the necessity of social media and the way it influences individual lives and the experience of market-based rationality. To articulate how social media frames the performance of happiness in a neoliberal context, I ask three guiding questions in this chapter. Firstly, I ask how the features of social media facilitate the performance of happiness under neoliberal conditions in Thailand. Secondly, I ask how consumer society influences the performance of happiness on social media. Ultimately, I ask how the individual uses and negotiates social media to perform a ‘happy’ version of themselves.

In linking performance studies with social media in the neoliberal era, this chapter is informed by Martina Leeker et al.’s insights into digital cultures. They argue that ‘Digital cultures are performative cultures. They condition and are shaped by techno-social processes and agencies, and they afford new possibilities for performative practices and interventions’ (2017: 9). In this chapter, I do not contemplate social media as a standalone technological stage existing in a digital vacuum that merely facilitates performative agencies. Instead, I view social media as part of a socio-cultural process that inevitably interrelates with cultural performance in the other social spheres of everyday life such as relationships, work, leisure,

emotions, attitudes and identities. Therefore, the concepts of space and time play a significant role in reading the social media as a stage for happiness to be performed. I investigate how the online space of social media sites interconnects with other social spaces and neoliberal time. I argue that neoliberal subjects tend to use the flexible character of time and space on social media to perform happiness by exercising their micro freedoms and reinforcing their self-worth in the midst of being overloaded with work, having limited leisure time, and carrying socio-economic burdens. The agency of social media involves social engagements and interactions by humans, through which they manage their self-presentation in more specific ways than in-person social interactions. Hence, I observe the performance conceived in and by social media, which is profoundly associated with both social and individual registers such as social values and norms as much as self-value and self-empowerment.

The performance of a happy and desirable self on social media in the twenty-first century is clearly not only happening in Thailand. According to research undertaken by The Institute of Happiness (2016) about comparison on social media in Denmark, Danes become happier when they take a break from Facebook, and feel better social equality in life without it. I would argue that, owing to Denmark's strong social collectivity and secure welfare system, they potentially feel happier and can gain social equality in their offline reality. However, this case is different in Thailand, as I have demonstrated. When offline life is full of uncertainties, I suggest that social media for Thai people potentially offers an alternative reality, enabling them to be in control of their presentation of self within the parameters enabled by social media platforms.

Similar to previous chapters, in order to elaborate on the happiness performed on social media, a discussion of unhappiness is equally necessary. The sphere of happiness considered in this chapter includes positive emotions and superior cultural capital infused by consumption, resulting in self-empowerment. These aspects form a dialogue with the insidious neoliberal impacts of personal fears and uncertainty

about being unable to achieve a secure socio-economic life. The material discussed in this chapter is not isolated from previous chapters but is presented to pinpoint the central argument that the agency of happiness performed in Thailand is restaged and transformed in various settings and contexts, as discussed throughout the thesis. Much of the material in this chapter is derived from my own observations of social media, especially my own experience as an active user and my online circle of friends. I draw on participant observation from my fieldwork in a shopping centre and a café and extracts from the interviews to exemplify my arguments.

This chapter has two main parts. The first explores the tangled relationships between neoliberalism, social media and the performance of happiness from a broad perspective. I first discuss how social media is an important stage for neoliberal subjects to deal with unhappiness such as personal fear, stress and loneliness while fostering happiness in the realm of neoliberal individualism and self-investment through consumer society. After exploring the broad picture, the second section pays particular attention to the performance of happiness on social media in the neoliberal Thai context. I illustrate the burgeoning popularity of social media usage in neoliberal Thailand and how it is a crucial platform in everyday life. I illustrate in this section how social media in Thailand is employed as a stage not just to perform happiness but also for stressful and alienated workers to express their despair and anger about their working lives. Then I investigate the performance of happiness as a tool to distract neoliberal subjects from socio-economic precarity.

To illustrate the performance of happiness in neoliberal Bangkok, I adopt the idea of ritual performance to investigate why Bangkok people are obsessed with taking photos of their food for social media. Whereas the previous chapter focuses on the playful act of taking photos as a part of food consumption, this chapter moves on to observe the process of updating food and other commodities online as a ritualised pattern within the sphere of performing happiness. I elaborate on how an act of posting a happy version of a lifestyle on social media is crafted and organised as a modern form of ritual, and what users, who I define as social actors, accomplish

by completing such a ritual. Ritual is an emblem of a simplified or reduced form of the real world and connects the performers and the audience within a certain experience. I suggest that social media users are performers of ritual who craft and organise their self-presentation through the selection of their offline personas in order to produce, reproduce and highlight a certain positive outlook and persona on the online stage, not merely to their audience but also the user themselves. They carry out a performance of a favourable self, while acting as an audience for others' performances, driven by a collective urge to connect, be remembered and engage in the virtual community. Apart from the process of taking and updating photos of hyper-presentable meals and checking-in at key trending locations, I also interrogate the recent feature on Instagram called 'IG Story' to demonstrate how it increasingly echoes the offline neoliberal scenario where struggling in the present and having an unsecured future causes an individual to flit from one moment to another, while the arena of life is gradually narrowed down to self-interested individualism — the stage of a solo performance.

Ultimately, I argue in this chapter that the performance of happiness, which emerges on social media in neoliberal Thailand, highlights a fearful society, masking vulnerability with overt displays of a happy life. This resonates with the cultural performance of happiness in the Land of Smiles discussed in Chapter Three. Crucially, this social media process in neoliberal Thailand is scripted by consumer culture in which individuals take on the roles of commodities, promoters, and consumers. The technology of social media is a stage offering neoliberal subjects temporary self-empowerment after the performance is delivered repeatedly to construct a desirable identity, which I argue, serves as a tool for individuals to negotiate with the neoliberal disorders of their offline world. Whereas such a performance on social media potentially promises instant happiness in the sense of self-affirmation and self-confidence, not unlike other domains such as optimism and consumption, I propose that in the neoliberal context and dictatorial regime in

Thailand it scarcely promises any change in socio-economic certainty and equality in offline reality.

### **Social Media and the Neoliberal Context**

In the twenty-first century, the social sphere that is social media is no longer limited to the youth. As Wendy Chun observes in her book *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (2016), the task of updating oneself and remaining part of the online stream has shifted somewhat from a trend amongst the young to a habit embraced by all ages as a part of their everyday lives. Social media enables a space where one can seek an escape from the lonely, insecure, uncertain and fearful reality by crafting, scripting, promoting, selling and performing the desirable self, in order to enhance one's self-actualisation among a group of so-called 'friends'. Chun also suggests that neoliberal subjects tend to keep themselves updated online. They do this to ensure that they are still a part of their 'imagined neighbourhood', in which they are seemingly in control of their image, something they do not feel in reality:

Online friendship — a concept that muddies the neat boundary between public and private, work and leisure — encapsulates the promise and threat of networks: the promise of an intimacy that, however banal, transcends physical location and enables self-made bonds to ease the loneliness of neoliberalism; the threat of a security based on poorly gated 'neighbourhoods'. (2016: 103)

Amidst the notions of friendship and community that might release people from boredom or loneliness, Sherry Turkle says that 'technology helps us manage life stresses but generates anxieties of its own. The two are often closely linked' (2011: 234). The idea of fear and anxiety on social media is, I argue, to a great extent a reflection of neoliberal governance that undermines the sense of community, stressing individualism and leaving people with uncertainties and fears about their lives and futures. Individuals seek a place where they are empowered and reconnected, and social media is potentially this place.

On social media in a neoliberal society, the sense of community is somewhat a duplicate of the real world, where market-based rationalities rule our lives. Many social media users keep their identities updated and publish online streams, ensuring they are still part of another mode of market-based life. It is worth quoting Turkle that ‘technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. Also, as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy’ (2011: 1). In this light, discussing the idea of performing happiness on social media, it is necessary to read between the lines of the happy displays and images. It is in the gaps and silences where fear is manifest.

Despite the fact that social media potentially reconnects neoliberal subjects, it has been argued that social media in the twenty-first century is a significant tool for fostering values of individualism and undermining social solidarity through the processes of neoliberal capitalism such as social comparison, competition and mass consumption (Bauman 2007a; Turkle 2011; Chun 2016). Cooperating with the premise of neoliberal reason, which underscores the value of individualism and the free market, social media becomes a platform that encourages the user to be a self-entrepreneur, controlling and managing his or her best images, performing to audiences in online circles. I argue that concepts such as time, space and self play an essential role in a social media supported by neoliberal premises.

Social media requires only a short time to engage with it — with just a tap or swipe neoliberal subjects can experience the online community. Social media potentially liberates individuals for an instant from work-time and responsibility. There is no formal punishment if one does not post, share or reply at a particular time. In other words, on social media people are in control of their time, a sometimes far-removed contrast to their offline reality. The physical space of social media in its smallest form is a smartphone, no larger than the palm of the hand. The virtual space of social media offers a bigger world to explore. Browsing social media is a form of leisure that gathers subjects who are isolated in offline reality and connecting them in the virtual world. This is exemplified by the journey from home to work on a bus

or train, where a commuter can easily browse the vast online world in order to distract them from wasted time and congested traffic, as illustrated in Chapter Four.

In addition to time and space, I argue that social media potentially serves as an online marketplace that allows neoliberal subjects to present their mediated self expanded from their offline world to the online platform. This is different from online games such as Second Life, where players are allowed to create desirable characters, controlling their appearance, career and financial status (Gamble 2016). Social media enables users to fabricate and mediate an extracted, or perhaps reinvented, self from particular elements of their offline self, such as appearance, identity, taste, hobbies and lifestyle. For instance, I can select what type of my favourite music or movies I want presented on my Facebook profile, or I can only check-in at locations I think are on-trend and where people will give me 'likes'. Therefore, the social media self is neither a virtual identity reinvention nor a multiplicity of identities. While Corey Jay Liberman suggests that the social media self is 'merely an extension of offline personas' (2013: 113), I argue that that online personas are not only the extension but, to a greater extent, acutely invoke a process of crafting, selecting, and staging in order to portray the desirable version of self.

Leighton Evans and Michael Saker suggest in their book *Location-Based Social Media: Space, Time and Identity* that the repetitive performance which used to occur at an interpersonal level now extends to social media where the performance eventually constructs one's identity (2017). The self-publication on social media is increasingly how one is seen indefinitely, not just on occasion. A coherent online presence accumulates with each post, and posts need to be regular enough to construct an identity. As Chun puts it 'to be is to be updated: to update and to be subjected to the update. The update is central to disrupting and establishing context and habituation, to creating new habits of dependency' (2016: 2). Chun suggests the subject in the digital age of the twenty-first century has shifted from 'we' to 'you', from collectivity to subjectivity. Still, the independence of selfhood does not exist in a vacuum, instead it is evaluated and judged by the social norm. Evans and Saker's

analysis of an app called Foursquare stresses the importance of linking selfhood to the public and to audiences. This location-based social media allows users to update the locations they visit. The process of updating leads to the idea of ‘I am where I am’, wherein one’s identity is represented via the checked-in location (2017). The performed self in the digital age thus intensifies the transformation of the notion of self from ‘what I am’ to ‘how I would like to be seen’.

The discussion of the performed self on social media is conceived within an ongoing interaction between the online and offline worlds, which I propose is a process of selection rather than invention. An online user of social media is not just an online performer but a social actor whose online performance is derived from reality and affects real identity, and vice versa. I argue that to portray the best and most impressive performance on social media, requires a selective *mise-en-scène*. The choice of self that is captured and performed on social media is an artistic decision with its own implications. For example, the angle of a selfie must suggest the best self, such as a v-shaped face or clear skin, as judged by mass culture, or the choice of location checked-in must be a positive indicator of the user’s lifestyle.

The whole process of producing and reproducing space, time and self on social media, is a daily social drama, a socio-cultural process that is embedded and circulates within and around identities, events, narratives, props, settings, actors and audiences. It is a crucial method of demonstrating the neoliberal reasoning which shapes our daily lives. To clarify how social media serves as a stage for the happy self to perform, I take Facebook as a case for discussion in the following section.

Facebook is the most viable platform due to its abundance of features which allow users to express social complexity (Miller & Sinanan 2017). For instance, it allows users to communicate through text, images and videos, both live and pre-recorded, and has interactive features such as likes, shares and comments. Although Facebook requires the user to create an account using personal contact details pertaining to the individual’s real-life identity, it generously allows users to script freely and perform their virtual self in the best way. Research conducted by Amy L.

Gonzales and Jeffrey T. Hancock (2010) shows that people become more confident in themselves when they scroll through their profile page. The study indicates that while a mirror reflects everything including any trace of age and imperfection, Facebook reflects only a selective self-presentation, or managed impression of the self. On their 'wall', users can design their character, presenting a personal background to audiences via their profile photos, interests, circle of friends and statuses. They can control how much information is visible to people they are not connected to as friends. In this case, the static character of technology efficiently serves human cultural performance, and crucially dissolves the boundary of Erving Goffman's interpersonal interaction. Whereas face-to-face interaction is, to some extent, unpredictable, possibly leading to embarrassment, Facebook can protect and filter the self to ensure one can simultaneously perform different versions of self to specific audiences. The next section discusses the performance of happiness that emerges on social media in neoliberal Thailand.

### **Social Media and Neoliberal Thailand**

As mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, it was my habit to report my happy life and stylish food to Facebook and Instagram. Clinging to social media not only changed my personal habits but also changed how I spent my leisure time and my social relation landscape. The selection of places to visit in my free time depended on how cool and attractive they would appear in a square frame on Instagram. It was common at a family dinner for us to look at our phones with only a few words being spoken to each other. However, I was confident that I was not the only one who did this, as I was influenced by similar activities among my online and offline circle. The statement below was made by an interviewee, a freelance worker, who confirmed his addiction to Facebook:

There was a period that I was addicted to Facebook. I woke up and if I had no duty; I scrolled down on the feed, again and again, the same stories returned, so I put the phone down. Then I picked it up again and

went through the same feeds I saw. And I put the phone down again and picked it up again. Then I realised that it was too much.<sup>89</sup>

Another interviewee explained how Facebook affected her usual habits:

I deleted Facebook apps so many times because I wanted to focus and I couldn't do that with having the app. It's a platform where I can reach people, news and trends easily but it makes me un-focused and multitasking. I can't even finish an episode of TV series which is only fifty minutes long without pausing and looking at the phone. It didn't happen before I became addicted to Facebook.<sup>90</sup>

In Thailand, even though the majority of workers live in uncertain socio-economic conditions as depicted in Chapter Two, social media is central to their everyday lives. In Bangkok especially, having a smartphone and connecting with friends on social media is common for people of all ages and classes. According to a report on social media use, in 2017 Thailand was in the top ten countries for social media usage. Thailand had 46 million registered Facebook users, and 30 million were in Bangkok. The number of Instagram users was 11 million, which had increased by 41% since 2016.<sup>91</sup>

According to the same report, many users see social media as a convenient business tool. Many teenagers turn themselves into entrepreneurs selling beauty products or clothing on Instagram. As a result of the massive social media culture, a recent term 'sang kom gom na' translated as 'lowering-head society' has been coined to describe Bangkok society where people keep their heads down, busy on their smartphones, rather than engaging with their physical surroundings (Figure 42).

---

<sup>89</sup>Interviewee Four. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 12 May 2017

<sup>90</sup>Interviewee Six. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 16 May 2017

<sup>91</sup> Fredrickson, T. (2017). Thailand in social media world's top 10. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/1255403/thailand-in-social-media-worlds-top-10> [Accessed 15 May 2018].



*Figure 42. A Scene of the 'Lowering Head Society' (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)*

Not only are social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram popular among users, social media is a central platform used to stimulate consumer society in Bangkok. I demonstrate in the previous chapter that posting images of a meal in an up-market restaurant on social media before consuming the food has become normal in Bangkok. Many restaurants and cafés in Thailand promote their businesses by marketing campaigns on social-media platform. For example, in May 2018, Dolce Cafe, a high-end coffee bar, announced that if a customer checks-in at the location on Facebook, they get 15% discount.<sup>92</sup> Some restaurants and cafés encourage diners to take photos of the food and post them on their Facebook wall to get extra discounts or free treats – usually tagging the company’s Facebook page. This reflects how neoliberalism has turned consumers into promoters and sellers. While customers are encouraged to take photos for a discount, they turn themselves into salespersons for the business by presenting the product to their online circle of contacts.

In addition to individual use of social media as a platform to connect with people and participate in the consumer market, in Thailand social media features as a

---

<sup>92</sup> Imikaru. (2018). Check-in at Dolce Cafe to get 15% discount.<https://promotions.co.th/check-in-ที่-dolce-cafe-ลดทันที-15.html> [Accessed 16 May 2018].

significant stage for workers to release stress about their jobs. This indicates the neoliberal conditions in which many workers are trapped, with uncertain and unfair work conditions due to the impotence of labour unions and an oppressive military power. Numerous Facebook pages talk about how miserable a salaried worker's life is. The posts on those pages appear as funny memes or sarcastic jokes about living a precarious life, but many comments agree with them. For instance, a page called 'Tard Nai Hong Air' translated as 'a slave in an air-conditioned room', which refers to office workers, has almost 200,000 followers.<sup>93</sup> The page regularly posts satirical cartoons and memes about the life of office workers. Examples include, 'although we are bored with the same loop of tedious routines, the slaves like us can do nothing but be patient'; and 'home is not a place to sleep, it is only a place for taking a shower before getting back to work'. These statements suggest how neoliberal life in Thailand has intensified and it is people's task to manage their attitudes and mentality. Statements about being patient with overworking appear in the media presented in Chapter Four on a commercial on the morning commuter train which shows the past King suggesting how workers should be patient and speak less if they want to succeed and be happy. Apparently, this idea is restated on several Facebook pages hosted by individuals, rather than the state or market. It seems that the attitudes to work manifested by the neoliberal administration have been successfully delivered to and embedded within individual minds, as evident on social media — at least as a path to a bearable life, if not happiness.

Complaints about struggles in neoliberal Thailand do not only appear on public Facebook pages, but also personal posts. From my experience, whenever I scroll through my news feed on Facebook, among the happy faces and attractive meals, it is common to see posts venting about how sad people's lives are or expressing anger about work. Interestingly, some users turn the hardship of working into a form of self-promotion, epitomised by the trend of posting on social media how hard one is working. Lauren Jackson discusses this new phenomenon in her

---

<sup>93</sup> SlavesRoom. (2017). SlavesRoom. <https://www.facebook.com/SlavesRoom/> [Accessed 15 June 2018].

article ‘*Playing the Workaholic on Social Media*’, explaining the concept of public displays of working (or PDWs) that promote being a workaholic. It is a form of humble brag that increases one’s self-esteem, as Jackson points out:

If social media is a place to display our best selves, and we live in a culture that values extreme productivity, then our exhausted, burnt-out selves can perversely become the “best” selves we want to display. Posts about how tired we are, how hard we’re working, and self-deprecating jokes centred on “the grind” serve as evidence of goodness. Gripping becomes capital in the economy of bad feeling.<sup>94</sup>

This example could be viewed as a symptom of an intensified neoliberal society wherein the value of people’s life is put on work alone. Having free time is not as important as working hard. More importantly, what I find problematic here, is that the promoting of being overloaded with work is positioned as an admirable action, presenting a person as an effective labourer rather than seeing it as a form of exploitation. My conviction is that, as the exploitation over working conditions continues, the supreme dystopian form of happiness performed by some workers may ultimately include negative agencies such as stress and tiredness from long-hours work. These negative displays are indicative not only of competent self-value but also self-affirmation — a confirmation of a survival — which could enhance the sense of happiness for some while still being part of an extremely competitive type of neoliberal governance.

Nevertheless, this response to exploitative working practices as a form of reclaiming an individual’s happiness, has multi-layered influences and intentions. I talked to an interviewee who was a man in his early thirties working five jobs in Bangkok in order to survive and support his family. Even though he held a master’s degree from a prominent university in Thailand, he was working as a part-time lecturer, back-stage crew member, content writer, playwright and part-time taxi driver. Apart from the happy vibes on his Facebook wall, he regularly posted about

---

<sup>94</sup> Jackson, L. (2016). *Playing the Workaholic on Social Media*. The Atlantic, 16 November. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/11/playing-the-workaholic-on-social-media/507830/> [Accessed 20 December 2017].

his life struggles, how hard he was working and how little he was sleeping. Feeling repressed by his conditions, he explained to me sadly. ‘I choose to use Facebook as a platform to express that my life sucks, I am struggling to live, I am working hard, and I am super patient, so everyone, please hire me. Those are what I am performing on social media’.<sup>95</sup> So, social media in Thailand draws attention to the stresses and burdens that individual subjects have to bear amid the performance of happiness.

In terms of using social media as a tool for social movement, although I do believe that social media is a platform that enables freedom to speak out in various places around the world, it is not that effective in Thailand. Hacktivism and cyber-activism are activist actions that show how human beings use technology to exercise their rights when there is social and political oppression (McKenzie 2005). For example, the Arab Spring movement of the early 2010s was mobilised through social media including Facebook, Twitter and Youtube (Arafa & Armstrong 2016). As I have shown throughout the thesis, owing to intensive neoliberal individualism combined with limited rights to access public goods and being oppressed by dominant dictatorial rules, the social struggles in Thailand are masked by the drama of individual adjustment to religious, royalist, and intensive consumer society. Therefore, I suggest that social media in Thailand is instead a stage allowing isolated individuals to use their own little voice, not a collective social movement. A few forms of political challenge have been mobilised on social media, such as a piece of underground rap music criticising the dictatorial government which went viral, but was suddenly suppressed and removed by the military, hence fear governs online society.<sup>96</sup>

This section shows that social media in Thailand has become an essential part of neoliberal life in the twenty-first century, governing people’s habits and social interactions and facilitating individuals transferring personal emotions to the public sphere. Although expressing anger or stress on social media rarely challenges the

---

<sup>95</sup> Interviewee Three. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 11 May 2017

<sup>96</sup> Rap Against Dictatorship (Artist and Producer). (2018). RAP AGAINST DICTATORSHIP - ประเทศไทยกูมี [music]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZvzvLiGUtw> [Accessed 10 May 2019].

neoliberal reality, I suggest that there is great evidence for a disorder that the neoliberal authorities, the state and the markets try to conceal from everyday life in the offline sphere. In the meantime, regardless of a civic collective movement to react to those repressive voices, social media is only a stage to heal, listen to users' own voices, ensure they are remembered, remind themselves they are alive when the offline world is full of struggles and despair, before sending them back to deal with the offline world. The next section explores the agency of happiness crafted and staged on social media by investigating the act of uploading photos of food and stylish commodities on social media.

### **Taking Photos Before a Meal = Grace Before Meals**

'Wait, Let me do the ritual first' my sixty-one-year-old mother said before we were allowed to dig into the food at a family dinner at a restaurant when I returned to Thailand for my fieldwork in 2017. She did not ask us to pray or be grateful to farmers who harvested rice as I was taught to do in primary school, instead she took her smartphone out to take photos of the food. 'Ok, everyone can proceed' she said while she was busy on her phone contentedly sharing the photos on Facebook. Despite the fact of being at retirement age, my mother mentioned to me that it was a ritual among her friends. Although I was not completely surprised by this, I did not expect this habit to be practiced by the elderly generation. It could be argued that the act of taking photos of food and happy moments and uploading them to social media is a ritual performance associated with the neoliberal rationale of turning our lives into a marketplace.

In Richard Schechner's observation, influenced by Roy Rappaport, ritual and performativity are closely connected and not limited to a religious view. Ritual appears in various forms in everyday life. 'The rituals of everyday life can be intimate or even secret; sometimes these are labelled as "habits", "routines", or "obsessions". But all rituals — sacred or secular, public or hidden — share certain formal qualities' (Schechner 2002: 52). Catherine Bell observes that performance

and ritual interrelate in terms of creating a sensory experience and form particular social meanings within a broader context of the world:

In brief, performances seem ritual-like because they explicitly model the world. They do not attempt to reflect the real world accurately but to reduce and simplify it so as to create more or less coherent systems of categories that can then be projected onto the full spectrum of human experience. (1997: 169)

From my observations, I suggest that, under the rubrics of performing happiness, the act of taking photos before a meal at an up-market restaurant or café to post on social media in neoliberal Bangkok is, for many consumers, a sort of ritual performance of the happy self. Psychoanalysts, Kathleen D. Vohs et al. suggest in their article 'Rituals Enhance Consumption' (2013) that a brief ritual before a meal potentially enhances the food consumption for diners. What I am interested in is the process that enables happiness to be mediated and performed on the social media platform. In order to elaborate on this argument, the following discussion moves to materials derived from my fieldwork.

On the 6th May 2017, during a walk in a shopping centre in Siam Square, I walked past a café called Mo & Moshi and was immediately struck by the scene in front of me (Figure 43). At the café, was a group of eight people I assumed to be a family, with a mix of ages. They were all holding phones excitedly taking photos of a big bowl of ice-cream before consuming it. Some were standing, trying to get a photo from above. After the photos were taken, instead of beginning to eat the glamorous dessert, the family got busy on their phones.



Figure 43. Mo and Moshi Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)



Figure 44. A Menu at Mo and Moshi Cafe (Taken by the author, 05/05/2017)

To solve the mystery of such collective action, I stopped and explored the menu showing the various types of ice-cream. The ice-cream they had was called ‘serious sorbet’ and had cost 850 THB, the equivalent of almost three days minimum wage. However, the highest price on the menu was 3,000 THB, the equivalent to ten

days minimum wage for ‘strawberry supreme’. The presentation of the ice-cream was indeed stunning in its size and decoration. Colourful fruit and multi-flavoured ice-cream were layered and packed in a giant glass bowl. It seemed to me that the irrational price did not bother the diners at all. On the contrary, they looked happy and enjoyed the fantastic spectacle of the dish — enjoying the superior experience they were able to afford.

The situation of selecting a place that indicates superior cultural capital does not only occur in shopping mall cafés, but also independent trendy cafés located outside malls. One independent café I observed on the 10th of May 2017 was Coffeestand & Design Cafes at The Bloc (Figure 45.1 - 45.3). Although the place is located on the outskirts of Bangkok, owing to its unique decoration and architecture (the café is in a large container box), it is highly popular among urban workers and youths. It was recommended by a café blogger as one of the top cafés that ‘you should visit and check-in on social media to make your friends envious’.<sup>97</sup> When I was observing the café and having a glass of coffee, which cost me a half-day’s minimum wage, a young lady who was with her partner sitting at the table just in front of me took almost half an hour to take photos of a glass of coffee. She started from her usual sitting position then left her chair. She constantly moved back and forth, up and down, and finally kneeled down to take closer photos of the coffee. Although it was a small café and all the seats were occupied, it was quiet. Apart from myself, all the guests visited as couples or groups, but nobody really talked to each other. They were busy taking photos and lowering their heads to their smartphones.

---

<sup>97</sup> 1535Spice. (2017). "Khàd mā nèn«10 khāfè peid h̄im ñā rāk dí dī th̄i t̄xng p̄i chēkh xin h̄i phēuxn xic̄hā! (Selected 10 lovely cafes you should visit and check-in on social media to make your friends envious)." <https://spiceee.net/th/articles/11831>. [Accessed 25 March 2018].



*Figure 45.1 - 45.3. Coffeestand & Design Cafes at The Bloc (Taken by the author, 10/05/2017)*

To articulate how these acts relate to the ritual performance of happiness, I use Schechner's observation that ritualising is 'a way for people to connect to a collective, to remember or construct a mythic past, to build social solidarity, and to form or maintain a community' (2002: 87). The ritual of taking photos before meals is not merely one of capturing the moment, instead the process of mediating the moment is, arguably, indicative of superiority, the extraordinary, positive agency and potentially happiness. In order to perform the ritual, the performer must be a consumer who has selected a place to dine and a meal or a drink to order, under the script of presenting it to the online world. As in the above giant ice-cream case, the props in the scene cannot be just any cheap street food or coffee from a stall that can be found on every sidewalk. The item has to signal speciality, superior cultural capital and an affluent lifestyle. The rule of the ritual is that the performers have to proceed before the meal, even if it is dessert or drinks, so the food is at its best, directly from the kitchen. The props required for the performance are only a

smartphone with a camera and mobile data or wifi to allow them to upload to their social media platforms.

The main question is which individuals or groups are fulfilled by the ritual. This is an important feature that makes the ritual either fail or succeed. In the act of premeditating a pleasurable experience, before a meal, I argue that it significantly accomplishes individual happiness by empowering self-value. Tagging themselves along with the product signals an extraordinary experience such as an overpriced jumbo bowl of shaved ice, multi-layered ice-cream or expensive coffee in a stylish container box. However, considering social media as a stage, the process is not complete until it is shared with the audience. The process of performing to others potentially allows practitioners to stage and re-stage their happy selves as a part of a mass consumer society. On social media, the important indicator of the success of the ritual is the audience, judged by the number of likes and comments. ‘Let’s post this photo a bit later when people finish their work so they can see my post and like’, was the recommendation of one of my friends who regularly posts photos of food and coffee on social media, which suggests how far this process is advanced. By relying on audience feedback, social media is a marketplace for individuals putting their happy selves onto the market, suggesting their superior cultural capital, amidst the precarity of the neoliberal society.

In terms of how social media serves as a stage for the ritual, allowing happiness to be performed through this social drama in neoliberal Bangkok in the digital age, Goffman’s idea of impression management is useful. The idea refers to strategies individuals implement to convince their audience of an impressive act. ‘When an individual plays a part’, Goffman asserts, ‘he [sic] implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them’ (1959: 19). The book *Social Networking and Impression Management: Self-Presentation in the Digital Age* (2013) edited by Carolyn Cunningham, extends Goffman’s arguments by suggesting that social media is a crucial platform that intensifies the process of impression management. On social media sites, the concept of self-presentation is

deeply intertwined with self-promotion, likability, a happy face and the admirable self. Liberman asserts that for some users, their online identity is performed like a brand that they need to maintain. ‘Just like brand managers highlight and communicate the qualities of certain products to appeal to consumers and potential consumers, so, too, do Facebook and Linked In users highlight and communicate qualities about themselves’ (2013: 113).

In this light, I argue that the boundary between the back and front regions of social media is blurred and fluid. This blurred border between the back and front plays a significant role in saturating the performance of happiness amidst the neoliberal conditions and individual lifestyles in each fleeting moment (Bauman 2007b). Meanwhile, when individuals consume a commodity in the offline world they perform their happy selves on the online platform, as a promoter.

Since ritual performance involves a sense of collectivity and belonging, it is evident that the social media community gathers performances of happiness derived from mass consumption among users. When the neoliberal socio-economic approach does not have a secure place for everyone competing and promoting happiness, as it is a valuable commodity, there is a fear of being left behind in socio-economic uncertainty in neoliberal Thailand. It is evident that, these days, there are a large number of advertisements on most online content. For example, on Instagram feeds there are advertisements shown every two posts. However, what I find more problematic than commercials is that users themselves turn into sellers and promoters. Apart from the assigned advertisements, other posts tend to feature luxury merchandise, beautiful presentations of meals, selfies at tourist spots and views from luxury restaurants or cafés. Neoliberal subjects in consumer societies are more than consumers, they are an enterprise, and so are the commodities they promote (Featherstone 1991; Bauman 2007a; Brown 2015). According to one interviewee, social media efficiently stimulates her materialistic desires to spend money on merchandise as she could see that many people were. Seeing friends or celebrities visiting a cool place or having an expensive meal made her want to do the same:

If there were no social media, my life would be totally different. It would definitely eliminate my materialistic desires. Posts on social media make me want to consume more extravagant food. Luxury bags shown on a celebrity's feed are very beautiful so I have to struggle to get it. I think that if there were no social media, I would not have wanted it in the first place. Nowadays, people are buying expensive stuff and dressing like what celebrities post on their social media.<sup>98</sup>

The performed self of individuals on social media is indicative of the process of ritual performance, as 'being a part' of the online community as much as of consumer culture. Having a similar pattern of happy posts embedded in consumption on social media suggests the user's status as part of the market.

Ritual requires repetition, like the ritual of updating one's happy self on social media in neoliberal Thailand. This is served well by social media, which allows the performance to be conducted as often as an individual wishes. During my fieldwork, every meeting with friends involved an act of photographing meals. However, while the process requires time for selecting, crafting and applying filters to the photo, what struck me is the recent feature of Instagram, called IG Story, which plays with the more instant characteristics. When I had a chance to return to Bangkok for a few weeks in January 2018, I scheduled a lunch with a friend at Siam Paragon, the city-centre shopping mall. When I saw her from about five meters away, I noticed she was holding her phone towards me. I was told that she was recording the moment of seeing me to upload on her IG Story. Although I had never been interested in this feature, I had noticed its popularity among my circle of friends. To complete this chapter, I explore this feature, which has been developed to serve the performance of happiness under the rubrics of individualism and marketisation in neoliberal society.

While Facebook plays with the complexities and multiple layers of social interaction, Instagram, its sub-company, employs a much simpler form that empowers users in different ways. Instagram, or IG, is a purely visual platform.

---

Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

Apart from a comment box, only likes are available for interaction. There is no sad or angry face on IG. Because of its simplified features, I argue that a perpetually playful character is applied to Instagram. Unlike the rich texts and stressful news that might be found on Facebook, scrolling through images, tapping likes, recording or capturing a short moment and sharing with others, enables users to participate in the platform more playfully and quickly. IG Story has become very popular in Thailand. Users publish selective moments of their lives in an even quicker, and, it could be argued, less-responsible way. Similar to Snapchat, the stories published are automatically deleted after twenty-four hours. Neither public comments nor likes are allowed. IG Story provides playful gimmicks for users such as adding emoticons or funny stickers, features that turn faces into a comic style. Also, it enables users to broadcast their moments live and upload short pre-recorded clips. Due to its playful and impermanent nature, compared to the main IG feed, it appears that the images and clips posted on IG Story are more frequent and not as well crafted in terms of quality, rather it documents a user's lifestyle — from waking up to bedtime.

According to one of the interviewees, she was more active on Instagram than Facebook, because Facebook sometimes has serious news and long text, which she was too exhausted to consume. Browsing Instagram for her was more relaxing and kept her in touch with market trends. For example, she could be informed by celebrities and friends what kind of fashion is in, or what dessert is trendy. She explained that although she engaged with others' posts, she rarely updated on Instagram's main feed as she was not confident in her photo-taking skills:

It's not that I don't want to upload any photos, but I'm not good at taking a beautiful photos (laughing). I also don't know what I should upload since my life is pretty much the same every day.<sup>99</sup>

In February 2018, I had a chance to catch up with her to discuss IG Story. She told me that IG Story encouraged her to be more active as it did not require the best representation, it did not stay for long, people could not publicly comment on her

---

<sup>99</sup> Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

story, and she found it a quick way to release her from the boredom of work. ‘It’s easy and playful. You do not have to overthink before posting any photos, just putting on puppy and kitty’s faces’.<sup>100</sup>

Instagram, to a greater extent than Facebook, facilitates users promoting their happy lifestyles more visually, instantly and materialistically. IG Story eliminates the open-conversation of a group or community, which appears in the form of the public comment box on Facebook or Instagram’s main feed, reducing it to only ‘me and me’. It invites users to publicise their personal life regardless of the concern of being judged. It ensures the user that there will be no stalkers and highlights that he or she is always on show, being watched by an audience even though not everyone has given them a like. I argue that the evidence of the popularity of IG Story in Thailand is a mirror to the commodified happiness of neoliberal life in which individuals live in every fleeting moment, caring less about others. Their identities become more fluid, impermanent, adjustable and unstable — there is no thought for yesterday or tomorrow — only the here and now.

Therefore, performing happiness in neoliberal Thailand by updating a desirable identity on social media, potentially fosters the meaning of someone’s life by stressing they are still valuable and meaningful. Additionally, the process of updating a happy display becomes a task, a road and, arguably, a temporary shortcut to tangible success. Although social bullying happens on social media, social media sites still instantly offer the promise of being liked, being remembered and being somebody with just a few taps on a mobile device. This accords with what Lauren Berlant asks:

What happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to “have a life” that adjustment seems like an accomplishment?. (2011: 3)

---

<sup>100</sup> Interviewee One. Online messages to the author. 12 February 2018.

Social media sites serve as a stage for an advanced form of capitalism in which the realm of materialistic life is effortlessly and repetitively selected and presented to create the illusion of success. Chun says that, ‘even as users become habituated to and become inhabitants of new media, new media, as forms of accelerated capitalism, seek to undermine the habits they must establish to succeed in order to succeed’ (2016: 3).

The central question is, if social media enables us to be in control of our lives and enjoy our happy displays, why do many Thai people feel the need to report every precious moment of private life back to social media, and why, given recent evidence of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica’s data harvesting scandal, are we willing to provide personal data to online platforms which use it for financial proposes.<sup>101</sup> Bordoni says that ‘fear makes us seek out personal forms of defence, because we know that no one will come to help us and that in the future there will be no prospects’ (Bordoni 2017: 72). Hence, performing a ritual in the social drama of social media, could potentially help resolve crises, I argue, by serving as a reintegration process in connecting neoliberal subjects in Thailand into an alternative community. When there is no solution to a better life in the offline world, social media potentially helps to heal an individual’s anxiety. In considering the performance of happiness on social media in Thailand, I propose there are two potential fears — the fear of being forgotten and the fear of being left behind by society.

In 2018, the ‘right to be forgotten’ gained awareness in developed countries, especially in Europe, which launched the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018.<sup>102</sup> It is interesting to discuss whether such

---

<sup>101</sup> The personal data of up to 87 million Facebook’s members was harvested by Cambridge Analytica through a quiz app, which it then passed to a political consultancy. Cadwalladr, C. & Harrison., E. (2018). Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach. *The Guardian*. 17 March. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election> [Accessed: 1 December 2019].

<sup>102</sup> A regulation in European Union law on data protection and privacy for all individuals within the EU to be in control over their personal data.

regulations will be implemented in neoliberal Thailand. When life is full of socio-economic uncertainty, people are unsure about their identities and abilities. I argue that social media comforts individuals by ensuring that they will be remembered. In Thailand, under the neoliberal and dictatorial regime, the rights over an individual's life are continually compromised, both in terms of human rights and consumer rights. I assume that if social media is to be a platform that reminds people of their happy lives, it may be unproblematic to be recognised, recorded and remembered in the virtual world. Facebook and Instagram work to record users' selective selves, identities that they have now been crafting for years, and continually reminds users of their precious moments, while the number of likes often judges those moments. Rather than urging the user to take more control over their privacy or stop using social media, I argue that for some neoliberal subjects in Thailand having their data published and watched reassures them of being alive and thus masks or diminishes their fears of being a nobody — being forgotten in the liquid neoliberal society. One of my interviewees commented on how social media relates to the self-esteem of Thai people:

I think the way social media affects users also depends on a particular context. In Thai society, I think people lack self-esteem, and they don't know how to build or gain it. I admit that sometimes I also feel the same way. But for me posting on social media is not the way I gain my self-esteem. To have a chance to work on a job I love with passion and to have a chance to develop my skills that should be the answer.<sup>103</sup>

The interviewee was competent enough to get a job he loves and which allows him to improve his skills. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people in the country who are trapped in low-paid jobs that given the choice they would rather not do. For them, social media platforms are a potential tool to refresh their lives. An interviewee commented on happiness and social media in Thai society:

I don't feel that people around me are really happy. It seems like they have to do something to compensate what they have lost all the time. The

---

<sup>103</sup> Interviewee Six. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 16 May 2017

shown happiness looks like some sort of guiltiness. For example, posts of the excellent food they have consumed are subjected to relieve their stress. I think that many of my colleagues have to keep telling and reproducing dramatic stories in order to conceal flaws in their life.<sup>104</sup>

In this chapter, I demonstrate that the social media usage in Thailand is increasingly becoming a simulation of the real world competitive market where one needs to invest and promote oneself in order to compensate for what is absent in reality. Above all, happiness is still used as a viable tool for neoliberal subjects to navigate neoliberal difficulties. In other words, an individual is not only encouraged to be happy in offline society but also online, to overcome the lack of self-esteem as a whole.

However, in Thailand, being liked and popular on social media hardly changes the socio-economic certainty of real life, unless one deliberately uses it as a business platform seeking profit. This thesis was conceived from my personal curiosity about my own habits on social media. In exploring the performance of happiness throughout the thesis, I find that the happiness performed on social media in neoliberal Thailand is just the tip of the iceberg. Social media is a platform for individuals to express their repressive emotions either anger or joy amid the socio-economic turmoil of the country. It is a stage allowing individuals to perform prescribed cultural texts from other spheres. Without Facebook or Instagram, the intensive consumer culture would still exist in every shopping mall and on public billboards, just as it did when I was a child. At present, there are still many people who do not engage in posting their happy self on social media, but they are still trapped within the neoliberal world of overwork, uncertain working conditions and economic burdens. The progress of technology is supposed to facilitate happiness. This can be linked back to Keynes's prediction in his lecture in 1930 that, owing to technological advances, the challenge of the twenty-first century would be a flood of leisure and boredom since humanity would work only fifteen hours a week unless politicians made mistakes (1963). Returning to the scenario in Thailand in 2017,

---

<sup>104</sup> Interviewee Two. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 9 May 2017

where people work fifty hours a week, technology is indeed advanced enough to accommodate people at everyday small scales, such as mobile phones, laptops, transportation and social media. However, the socio-economic certainty of life is rather different, and that technology seems to be employed to trap the people within the status quo. An extreme example of where this could lead is shown in an episode of the television series *Black Mirror* called 'Nosedive'.<sup>105</sup> It depicts a future reality where an app, much like Instagram, governs citizens' lives based on popularity. Better access is gained if you earn higher ratings on social media and you lose credits if you conduct any public misbehaviour. For instance, if you are rated as four stars on the app, you do not have to queue at the airport. However, such platforms do not generate social equality, but stimulate extreme competition, merging the online virtual world into offline reality. Thus, I argue that in the midst of the neoliberal context of Thailand, coupled with the ruling military junta, the primary focus should be placed on people's welfare and quality of life, democracy, improving socio-economic equality and certainty. I believe that if people are empowered in a humanitarian way in their offline world, they have a greater potential to exercise their rights rather than being a passive commodity governed by market-based rationalities. Otherwise, social media and technology could be employed by the neoliberal agents to maintain the vulnerable status of individuals in an unequal system.

---

<sup>105</sup> Wright, J. (Director). (2016). Nosedive, *Black Mirror*. The United Kingdom.

## Conclusion

Across the four-year journey of my research into the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand, I have been through several processes of articulating not only the research data presented but also my thoughts about my personal life. Four years was a challenging length of time for a twenty-six-year-old woman who left her family and home to investigate the emotionally involved concept of happiness. It has constantly brought into question the state of my emotions and my social stance both as an individual and a member of society. I have argued throughout the thesis that the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand denotes, to an extent, an escape from the socio-economic struggles of ordinary life. Towards the final phase of my research I had a feeling that conducting research overseas was a temporary escape from the uneasy prospect that I am committed to return to soon. The journey of the research has somehow been a rehearsal, a preparation for my future in Thailand.

The concept of ‘performing happiness’ sounds astonishing to many, and throughout the research process there were times I struggled to answer the question of how the performance studies perspective is essential in dealing with a broad and universal concept like happiness. As a researcher, I found the answer became manifest when I got deeply immersed in the topic. Performance research in the realm of happiness involves processes such as participating, observing, feeling and decoding, which have made me acutely sensitive to my surroundings and more empathetic to the people around me. The emergence of embodied experiences gives me a confident answer that the performance perspective greatly contributes to reading happiness, especially what lies between the lines; what is abstract yet powerful; and what is not measured by a one to ten numerical scale but rather described by feelings and words.

The further this research advanced, the more it became clear to me that the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand is like a blooming flower in muddy dirt, with polluted air, in a storm. I clearly saw the flower’s beauty and what

surrounded it, but I could not understand its existence without exploring what was in the ground, and how the flower was rooted, planted and maintained. The cultural, political, social and economic circumstances of neoliberal Thailand are, more often than not, selectively narrated from isolated perspectives. As shown in the thesis, the notion of happiness is constantly romanticised, at least where problems are concerned. This thesis illuminates the reading and understanding of the neoliberal scene under the dictatorship state of Thailand, by connecting the dots between positive and negative agencies and uncovering the subtle process of negotiating socio-economic upheavals within everyday life.

Throughout the analysis of secondary and ethnographic material, I find that the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand engages with unorganised reality and everyday disorders in a way that masks and maintains them. I demonstrate that particular national cultures, rooted in the country, have been adopted, and flourish, in the neoliberal state. I link the firm cooperation between the state and markets to their reproduction of personal fears while promoting a route to happiness which temporarily liberates yet perpetuates those fears. I present the way the performance of happiness in neoliberal Thailand involves contemporary stages, such as modern shopping centres and social media, and how it is not simply located in the vacuum of modern urban society in the twenty-first century, but entails national and cultural practices that have been rehearsed and cultivated for years.

I demonstrate that in the national agenda, neoliberal individualisation resonates with a belief in Buddhism, which has been adopted to promote the Sufficiency Economy — which significantly relies on the hegemonic monarchy of the past King Bhumibol. The dictatorship state conveniently employs this package to underscore the moral authority, by re-staging the notion of happiness in the realm of morality, individual optimism, political stability, and momentary pleasure — rather than equality and quality of life. I portray the way that dominant state authorities are not isolated from the market but rather synchronously carry out unfair competition,

encouraging individual happiness to be individually performed through a series of life-investments in the neoliberal consumerist society.

My exploration of people's lives in neoliberal Bangkok has been a worthwhile experience. Participant observation has offered me a refreshing view of my hometown — the familiar scene I inhabited but would never have been able to comprehend, with its entangled power relations between neoliberal logics and everyday routines. The interviews with familiar people have provided access to astonishing opinions, which they had previously kept hidden. Before conducting the interviews, seeing most of them looking contented with their lives, I did not know that my friends and colleagues were similarly concerned about their insecure socio-economic statuses. Although not all their words and feelings are quoted in the analysis, the interviews confirm to me that neoliberal subjects in Thailand are far from ignorant of neoliberal logics. The socio-economic struggles and uncertainties embodied and implanted as everyday rhythms combine with their hopeful yet fearful future. Though interviewees have shown me that socio-economic struggles never vanish without structural change, it is clear that the drama of individual adjustment and management are essential as part of well-being. Throughout the thesis, I show that people do not passively submit to conditions, but the platform on which they seek to reclaim happiness from neoliberal struggles is a temporary stage, offering an escape designed and stimulated by neoliberal logics. A happy lunch break, a delightful Friday night at a shopping centre, and the presentation of happy self on social media, are all vital in finding happiness amid the socio-economic uncertainties, and allow neoliberal subjects to feel grateful for their lives and carry on. Therefore, when there is a need for people to prioritise their individual matters in order to survive, the space for possible alternatives or resistance to neoliberal practices in neoliberal Thailand becomes very limited. Coupled with the rigid authority of the government preventing people from challenging the status quo, this does not help tackle the problem in the long term. The longer neoliberal logic is

normalised and internalised, the more I am concerned that the room for resistance could gradually disappear.

In revealing how happiness is organised and performed amid the global impacts of neoliberalism, through the lens of performance studies, in Thai society, it is clear that this thesis is firmly associated with the global concerns about burgeoning neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. The stages and tactics of neoliberal governance may be transformed from the capitalism of the previous century, but I argue that the ultimate goal of reproducing social inequality and uncertainty remains the same, and may be intensified.

For the four years of this study, the military junta has ruled Thailand. What concerns me is that insidious neoliberal logics could be less in the public spotlight than the power of the dictatorship. It has been incredibly upsetting for me to see Thailand going backwards under a dictatorial regime, and the price paid by individuals and society at large. During the general election of March 2019, which I had hoped would see the end of the dictatorial government, the military junta formed its own party. In designing an unfair rule by the military to support its own victory in the election, the result of the vote said a lot.<sup>106</sup> There were many voters who appeared to support military power, as many as supported democratic parties. Social media was full of anger from democratic supporters who deny the legitimacy of the military junta in any form. On one hand, I was optimistic at seeing people from the younger generation being increasingly politically active and courageous, challenging the state on social media. On the other, I was filled with fear at seeing the great number of voters who supported the military, and the fact that the military were to continue their duties running the government in the name of democracy for the next

---

<sup>106</sup> The Election Commission supported by the military junta took six weeks to review and validate the final election results, and failed to explain how it had calculated the votes. Moreover, since 2016 the junta amended the constitution which allowed the junta to appoint senators in the parliament who can vote for the prime minister in the parliament. More detail: Chachavalpongan, P. (2019). A Military Dictatorship in Thailand is Clinging onto Power – With the Tacit Support of the Western Powers. Independent, 22 May. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/thailand-military-dictatorship-junta-palang-pracharat-king-vajiralongkorn-a8925476.html> [Accessed: 2 December 2019].

four years. If this happens, I anticipate that the performance of happiness in Thailand could become more surreal and further distant from the quality of life.

At the final stages of the research, the questions I initially asked have, to some extent, been answered, while new questions have come along with the changing context. What will happen to Thailand in the next decade when the present King can no longer be employed as a national role model like his father, as his life story becomes gradually vaguer for the younger generation? What will connect neoliberal subjects when internet idols increasingly act like a religion for many Thai workers, and paying money to shake their idols' hands enhances their happiness instantly? What kind of state propaganda will be created when the Sufficiency Economy becomes a sarcastic myth too bland to reflect the intensive consumer society? What kind of morality will there be, when the idea of merit purifying the mind seems like nonsense to a generation posting happy images on social media? Ultimately, how could I return to Thailand and live happily without adjusting, or even reinventing, my personal habits and attitudes to fit the neoliberal context?

None of these questions can be answered easily. I suggest that the explanations derived to answer these questions will never come to an end, if structural power is not reformed. Above all, this thesis does not propose concrete solutions to deal with the socio-economic uncertainties and inequalities of neoliberal Thailand. The frameworks I employ to shape the analysis do not change the state of what exists but explain it deeply.

In conclusion, this thesis explores the register of happiness that is continuously performed within the circle of the neoliberal trap. As long as Thai society is not governed with concern for enhancing people's quality of life through fair collective democracy — in practice not just in name — I contend that the spheres wherein happiness is performed will continue to rely on neoliberal logics. The agencies of happiness may be converted into numerous forms, but never fully reflect the quality of life in terms of secure socio-economic circumstances, social equality, citizen freedoms, and the right to be part of a collective democratic society.

## Bibliography

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (2006). Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy. In B. G. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Jason L. Mast (Ed.), *Social performance : symbolic action, cultural pragmatics, and ritual*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arafa, M., & Armstrong, C. (2016) Facebook to mobilize, Twitter to coordinate protests, and YouTube to tell the world: New media, cyberactivism, and the Arab Spring. *Journal of Global Initiatives*, 10(1), 73-102.
- Arinjayo, P. T. (2004). A comparative study of the Buddhist doctrine of the middle way and the concept of the mean in Confucianism. MA dissertation, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Arkkhawanno, K. (2011). An analytical study of Buddhist giving culture performed in Thai society. MA dissertation, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Augé, M. (1995). *Non-places : Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Baker, C. J., & Pasuk, P. (2005). *A history of Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2017). 'I'm beautiful the way I am': Empowerment, beauty, and aesthetic labour. In Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bates, C., & Rhys-Taylor, A. (2017). *Walking through social research*. New York: Routledge.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2007a). *Consuming life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2007b). *Liquid times: Living in an age of uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bell, C. (1997). *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (1997) *Consuming geographies: We are where we eat*. London: Routledge.

- Bennett, O. (2015). *Cultures of optimism: The institutional promotion of hope*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bennett, S. (2013). China's global performatives: 'Better city, better life'. In D.J. Hopkins and Kim Solga (Eds.), *Performance and the global city*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berlant, L. G. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). *Nation and narration*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Blanchflower, D. G., & Oswald, A. J. (2011). International happiness. NBER Working Paper 16668, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA.
- Bordoni, C. (2017). *State of fear in a liquid world*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press.
- Boylorn, R. (2017). Bitter sweet(water): Autoethnography, relational ethics, and the possible perpetuation of stereotypes. In S. L. Pensoneau-Conway, T. E. Adams & D. M. Bolen (Eds.), *Doing autoethnography* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Bunyavejchewin, P. (2011). Thailand four years after the coup: The struggle against the dissenters. *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia*, 10(2), 47-56.
- Butcher, M. (2013). Cultures of commuting: The mobile negotiation of space and subjectivity on Delhi's metro. In D. J. Hopkins & K. Solga (Eds.), *Performance and the global city*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Capuccino, C. (2013). Happiness and Aristotle's definition of eudaimonia. *Philosophical Topics*, 41(1), 1-26.
- Carlson, M. (1996). *Performance: a critical introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Carlson, M. (2001). *The haunted stage: The theatre as memory machine*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Carpio, X. D., Messina, J. n., & Sanz-de-Galdeano, A. (2014). Minimum wage: Does it improve welfare in Thailand? *IZA Discussion Paper*, 7911(January).

- Certeau, M. d. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chaney, D. C. (2002). *Cultural change and everyday life*. New York, Palgrave.
- Chun, W. H. K. (2016). *Updating to remain the same: Habitual new media*. London: The MIT Press.
- Coffey, A. (1999) *The ethnographic self: Fieldwork and the representation of identity*. London: Sage.
- Conley, D. (2009). *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Connerton, P. (2008). Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies*, 1(1), 59-71.
- Connerton, P. (2011). *The spirit of mourning: History, memory and the body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cresswell, T. (2004). *Place: A short introduction*. Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell.
- Crouch, C. (2011). *The strange non-death of neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cunningham, C. (2013). *Social networking and impression management self-presentation in the digital age*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Datta, A., & Chakraborty, I. (2018). Are you neoliberal fit? The politics of consumption under neoliberalism. In Kravets, O., Maclaran, P., Miles S., & Venkatesh, A. (eds), *The SAGE handbook of consumer culture*. London: SAGE.
- Davies, W. (2015). *The happiness industry*. New York City: Verso.
- Debord, G. (1994). *The society of the spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.
- Dolan, P. (2014). *Happiness by design: Change what you do, not how you think*. New York: Hudson Street Press.
- Dorjee, D. (2014). *Mind, brain and the path to happiness: A guide to Buddhist mind training and the neuroscience of meditation*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Dosekun, S. (2017). The risky business of postfeminist beauty. In Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Douglas, M. (1996). *Purity and Danger*. London: Rutledge.
- Drahos, T. (2011). 'Us' and 'them': *Violence and abjection in language*. Paper presented at the Cultural ReOrientations and Comparative Colonialities, University of South Australia.

- Eberhardt, N. (2014). Everyday morality: Constructing a Buddhist ethos in rural Thailand. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 42(3), 393-414.
- Edensor, T. (2011). Commuter: Mobility, rhythm and commuting. In T. Cresswell & P. Merriman (Eds.), *Geographies of mobilities: Practices, spaces, subjects*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Elias, A. S., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). Aesthetic labour: Beauty politics in neoliberalism. In Elias, A., Gill, R., & Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elliott, M. (2014). Thai Buddhism and well-being: An application of stress process theory. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 17(9), 923-936.
- Endō, T. (2014). *Living with risk: Precarity & Bangkok's urban poor*. NUS Press; Kyoto: Kyoto University Press.
- Evans, L., & Saker, M. (2017). *Location-based social media: Space, time and identity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Featherstone, M. (1991). *Consumer culture and postmodernism*. London: Sage.
- Feist, G. J., Bodner, T. E., Jacobs, J. F., Miles, M., & Tan, V. (1995). Integrating top-down and bottom-up structural models of subjective well-being: A longitudinal investigation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68(1), 138-150.
- Foucault, M. (2008 [1979]). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. M. Senellart. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fraser, B. (2015). *Toward an urban cultural studies: Henri Lefebvre and the humanities*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gamble, R. (2016). *The practice of everyday (Virtual) life: A participatory and performative artistic enquiry*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Nottingham Trent University.
- Goffman, E. (1959), *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gonzales, A. L., & Hancock, J. T. (2010). Mirror, mirror on my Facebook wall: Effects of exposure to Facebook on self-esteem. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 0(00)
- Graham, C. (2009). *Happiness around the world: The paradox of happy peasants and miserable millionaires*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gruber, J., Hendren, N., & Townsend, R. M. (2014). The great equalizer: Health care access and infant mortality in Thailand. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 6(1), 91-107.

- Guillen-Royo, M., Velazco, J., & Camfield, L. (2013). Basic needs and wealth as independent determinants of happiness: An illustration from Thailand. *Social Indicators Research*, 110(2), 517-535.
- Hämäläinen, T. J., & Michaelson, J. (2014). *Well-being and beyond: Broadening the public and policy discourse*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Hannigan, J. (1998). *Fantasy city: Pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis*. London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2000). *Spaces of hope*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvie, J. (2009). *Theatre & the city*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harvie, J. (2013). *Fair play: Art, performance and neoliberalism*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hayek, F. A. v. (2001). *The road to serfdom*. London: Routledge
- Heap, M. (2008). The validity of some early claims of neuro-linguistic programming. *Skeptical Intelligencer*, 11: 1-8.
- Heddon, D. (2008). *Autobiography and performance*. Basingstoke England; New York: Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Heddon, D., Lavery, C., & Smith, P. (2009). *Walking, writing and performance: Autobiographical texts*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1983). Introduction: Inventing traditions. In Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.), *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holdsworth, N. (Ed.). (2014). *Theatre and national identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Hopkins, D. J., & Solga, K. (2013). *Performance and the global city*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Howard, M. C., & King, J. E. (2008). *The rise of neoliberalism in advanced capitalist economies: A materialist analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hurley, E. (2011). *National performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion*. Toronto; Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press.
- Jackson, R. A. (2007). Aristotle on what it means to be happy. *Richmond Journal of Philosophy*, 16(Winter), 1-8.
- Jestrović, S. (2014). Performing Belgrade: Itineraries of belonging. In N. Whybrow (Ed.), *Performing cities*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Jones, G. S., & Rae, P. (2013). Commuting performance → Working the middle. In D. J. Hopkins & K. Solga (Eds.), *Performance and the global city*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kanishka Goonewardena, S. K., Richard Milgrom, Christian Schmid. (2008). *Space, difference, everyday life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*. New York: Routledge.
- Kershaw, B. (1999). *The radical in performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. London: Routledge.
- Keynes, J. *Essays in Persuasion*, New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1963, 358-373.
- Kitirianglarp, K. (2014). Everyone is an artist: Immaterial study of labour. *Sociology and Anthropology*, 33(2).
- Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* (1st ed.). New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Kramer, M. (2006). *Dispossessed: Life in our world's urban slums*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Kravets, O., Maclaran, P., Miles, S., & Venkatesh, A. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of consumer culture*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Kusalasaya, K. (2006). *Buddhism in Thailand: Its past and its present*. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Langman, L. (1991). Alienation and everyday life: Goffman meets Marx at the shopping mall. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 11(6/7/8), 107-124.
- Larsen, J., Urry, J., & Axhausen, K. W. (2006). *Mobilities, networks, geographies*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Latham, A. (2008). *Key concepts in urban geography* (1st ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Lavery, C. (2009). Mourning walk and pedestrian performance: History, aesthetics and ethics. In R. Mock (Ed.), *Walking, writing and performance : autobiographical texts*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Layard, R. (2005). *Happiness : Lessons from a new science*. New York, Penguin Press.
- LeBaron, G. (2010). The political economy of the household: Neoliberal restructuring, enclosures, and daily life. *Review of International Political Economy* 17(5): 889-912.
- Leeker, M., Beyes, T., & Schipper, I. (2017). Introducing In M. Leeker, T. Beyes & I. Schipper (Eds.), *Performing the digital: Performativity and performance studies in digital cultures*. Germany: Transcript Verlag.

- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time, and everyday life*. London: Continuum.
- Lemke, T. (2001). 'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality. *Economy and Society*, 30(2), 190–207.
- Lieberman, C. J. (2013). Branding as social discourse: Identity construction using online social and professional networking sites. In C. Cunningham (Ed.), *Social networking and impression management self-presentation in the digital age*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Lipanje, N. (2015). The act of erasure: Žižek's psychoanalytic discourse in the nationalistic construction of the 'other'. *Družboslovne Razprave*, 78, 25-40.
- Lunt, P. K., & S. M. Livingstone (1992). *Mass consumption and personal identity: Everyday economic experience*. Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Marx, K. (1844). Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction. In L. Colletti (Ed.) (1992), *Karl Marx Early Writings*. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. Vol. 1, intro. E. Mandel, trans. B. Fowkes (1976), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.
- Massey, D. (1993). Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place, in Bird, J., Curtis, B. Putnam, T., Robertson, G., & Tuckner, L. (eds), *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Chance*. London: Routledge.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. London: Sage.
- Mau, S. (2015). *Inequality, marketization and the majority class: Why did the European middle classes accept Neo-liberalism?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mauss, M. (1954). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- McCargo, D. (2009). Thai Buddhism, Thai Buddhists and the Southern conflict. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40(1), 1-10.
- McGrath, B. (2006). Modernities and memories in Bangkok. *Nakgara: Journal of Oriental Design and Planning*, 1, 25-40.
- McKenzie, J. (2005): Hacktivism and machinic performance. *Live Ends. Performance in the Information Age. Performance Paradigm*, 1, 22- 30.

- Mead, K. K. (2004). *The rise and decline of Thai absolutism*. London & New York: Routledge Curzon.
- Mead, K. K. (2008). Rat Thai Nai Kea Sae Lo Ka Phi Wat [Thai]. *Journal of Social Sciences: Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University*, 39(1), 1-32.
- Mead, K. K. (2013). The internationalization of capitalism and neoliberalism. *Social sciences: Neoliberalism, Policy, Impact, and Critique*, 43(2).
- Miller, D. (1998). *Shopping, place, and identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miller, D., & Sinanan, J. (2017). *Visualising Facebook : A comparative perspective*. London: UCL Press.
- Ministry of Education (2008). *The basic education core curriculum B.E. 2551 [A.D. 2008]*. Bangkok, Thailand: Ministry of Education.
- Ngamarunchot, B., Fagthong, T., Rangsipol, P., & Pattarasakkamjorn, W. (2015). Status, Dream, and the Strategy for Workers in Informal Sectors. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. Bangkok.
- Noy, D. (2011). Thailand's sufficiency economy: Origins and comparisons with other systems of religious economics. *Social Compass*, 58(4), 593-610.
- O'Donnell, G., Deaton, A., Durand, M., Halpern, D. and Layard, R. (2014). *Wellbeing and policy*. London: Legatum Insititute.
- Ochs, M., Niewiadomski, R., Brunet, P., & Pelachaud, C. (2012). Smiling virtual agent in social context. *Cognitive Processing*, 13(22), 477-501.
- Oldenburg, R. (1997). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day*. New York: Marlowe.
- Paek, S. C., Meemon, N., & Wan, T. T. H. (2016). Thailand's universal coverage scheme and its impact on health-seeking behaviour. *SpringerPlus*, 5(1), 1952.
- Pavis, P. (1992). *Theatre at the crossroads of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Payutto, P. (2013). *Kwaam sām-kan kǒng prá pút-tá-sàat-sà-nāa nai tǎa-ná sàat-sà-nāa bprà-jam châat [The Importance of Buddhism as a State Religion]*. Bangkok: Munlanithikansakue Saphueasantiphap Phrathammapidok.
- Pearson, M., Shanks, M. (2001). *Theatre/archaeology: Disciplinary dialogues*. London: Routledge.
- Pearson, M. (2006). *"In comes I" : Performance, memory and landscape*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

- Pearson, M. (2013). *Marking time: Performance, archaeology and the city*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Phuaphansawat, V.-o. (2017). *Neoliberalism, governmentality, education reforms and teachers in Thailand*. (Doctor of Philosophy), University of Cambridge.
- Pimpa, N. (2012). Amazing Thailand: Organizational culture in the Thai public sector. *International Business Research*, 5(11), 35-42.
- Pink, S. (2009). *Doing sensory ethnography*. London ; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pongpaiboon, P., Hiranpradith, P., & Chenaksara, N. (2015). "Siamese Smile" in the Viewpoint of Foreigners in Thailand. Paper presented at the The 5th STOU Graduate Research Conference, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University.
- Pongsawat, P. (2017). *Meūxng kin khn*. Bangkok: Power of Innovation Foundation.
- Radcliff, B. (2013). *The political economy of human happiness: How voters' choices determine the quality of life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rojek, C. (1994). *Ways of escape: Modern transformations in leisure and travel*. Lanham: Md., Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rossi, A. (2012). Turning red rural landscapes yellow? Sufficiency economy and royal projects in the hills of Nan province, northern Thailand. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 5(2), 275-291.
- Sack, R. D. (1988). The consumer's world: place as context. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 78(4), 642-664.
- Schechner, R. (2002). *Performance studies : an introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Schrecker, T., & Bamba, C. (2015). *How politics makes us sick: Neoliberal epidemics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Seamon, D. (1979). *A geography of the lifeworld: Movement, rest, and encounter*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Seubsman, S.-a., Kelly, M., & Sleight, A. (2013). The sufficiency economy and community sustainability in rural northeastern Thailand. *Asian Culture and History*, 5(2).
- Sharma, S. (2014). *In the meantime: Temporality and cultural politics*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

- Sripokangkul, S. (2015). 'Forgetting', 'returning to ironic happiness', and 'threatening and hunting': Reconciliation process of 2014 post-coup Government in Thailand. *Asian Social Science*, 11(15), 302-312.
- Standing, G. (2009). *Work after globalisation: Building occupational citizenship*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Academic Press.
- Standing, G. (2014). *A precariat charter: From denizens to citizens*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Thammaboosadee, S. (2015). Failure of development under neoliberalism: Involution of migrant towns in Thailand: Involution of migrant towns in Thailand. *Asian Review*, 28(1), 87-98.
- The Happiness Research Institute (2014). *The happy Danes: Exploring the reasons behind the high levels of happiness in Denmark*. Copenhagen, Denmark: The Happiness Research Institute.
- Tromholt, M. Lundby, K., Andsbjerg, K., & Wiking, M. (2016). The Facebook Experiment: Does social media affect the quality of our lives? The Happiness Research Institute (Vol. 2017).
- Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism. *Past & Present*, 38, 56-97.
- Thompson, K. (2017). Pleasures and paradoxes of new media: An autoethnography of a Redditor. In S. L. Pensoneau-Conway, T. E. Adams & D. M. Bolen (Eds.), *Doing autoethnography* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Tiger, L. (1979). *Optimism: The biology of hope*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Tomalin, E. (2007). Buddhism and development: A background paper. Religions and Development Research Programme, University of Leeds, Leeds.
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.
- Turner, V. (1974). *Dramas, fields, and metaphors : Symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1986). *The anthropology of performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books.
- Ungpakorn, G. J. (2010). *Thailand's crisis and the fight for democracy*. London: WD Press.

- Ungphakorn, P. (1977). Violence and the military coup in Thailand. *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 9(3), 4-12.
- Urry, J. (1995). *Consuming places*. London: Routledge.
- Veenhoven, R. (1993) Happiness in nations: Subjective appreciation of life in 56 nations 1946-1992 RISBO, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands.
- Veenhoven, R. (1999). Quality-of-life in individualistic society: A comparison of 43 nations in the early 1990's. *Social Indicators Research*, 48(2), 157-186.
- Virilio, P. (1986). *Speed and politics: An essay on dromology*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Vohs, K. D., Wang, Y., Gino, F., & Norton, M. I. (2013). Rituals Enhance Consumption. *Psychological Science*, 24(9), 1714–1721.
- Walker, A. (2010). Royal sufficiency and elite misrepresentation of rural livelihoods. In S. Ivarsson and L. Isager (eds), *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand* (241-265). Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Wanasilp, W., & Tangvitoontha, N. (2015). The relationship between the understanding of philosophy of sufficiency economy and the living standard: The case study of sufficiency economy community in the lower northern region of Thailand. *International Journal of Business and Economic Development*, 3(1), 87-95.
- Wasi, P. (1999). *Sufficiency economy and civil societies: The way to revitalize the economy and society*. Bangkok: Rural Doctor Printing.
- Whybrow, N. (Ed.) (2010). *Performance and the contemporary city: An interdisciplinary reader*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whybrow, N. (Ed.) (2014). *Performing cities*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whybrow, N. (2005). *Street scenes: Brecht, Benjamin, and Berlin*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Wongtedj, S. (2008). Yim Siam. *Matichon Daily*, 19 September, p.21.
- Wongweerasert, Y. (2012). *Department store: The practical space of class distinction*. (Master of Arts Program in Sociology), Thammasat University, Bangkok.
- Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: Six sideways reflections*. New York: Picador.

## Other Sources

### Reports, Policies, and Statistics

MOTS (2015). *Thai tourism strategy 2015-2017*. Bangkok: Ministry of Tourism and Sport.

MSDHS (2013). Social security. Ministry of Social Development and Human Security [website]. Available at: [http://www.m-society.go.th/more\\_news.php?cid=48](http://www.m-society.go.th/more_news.php?cid=48) [Accessed 20 January 2016].

NSO (2014). *The 2014 survey on conditions of society, Culture and mental health*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

NSO (2015a). *The informal employment survey 2015*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

NSO (2015b). *Summary of survey on child labour in Thailand in 2015*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office. <http://www.nso.go.th/sites/2014en> [Accessed 20 January 2016].

NSO (2016). *The time use survey 2015*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

NSO (2018) *Household Socio-Economic Survey 2017*. Bangkok, Thailand: National Statistical Office.

### Interviews

The respondents did not want their real identities to be revealed. The order of the interviewees is listed according to the interview dates. All interviews were conducted in Thai and all presented quotes were translated into English by the author.

Interviewee One. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 5 May 2017

Interviewee Two. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 9 May 2017

Interviewee Three. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 11 May 2017

Interviewee Four. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 12 May 2017

Interviewee Five. Telephone interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 13 May 2017

Interviewee Six. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 16 May 2017

Interviewee Seven. Interview by Thammaboosadee, Rubkwan, Bangkok. 23 May 2017