

Pleasure of Abjection:

Cheap Thai Comics as Cultural Catharsis

CHANOKPORN CHITIKAMOLTHAM

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Chanokporn Chutikamoltham is currently a doctoral candidate in the Centre for Cultural, Literary and Postcolonial Studies at School of Oriental and African Studies. Her research interests focus on cultural theory and popular culture in Thailand.

Cheap Thai comics (khatoon lem la baht) are an overlooked cultural product. In this paper, I argue that cheap Thai comics are cultural products with subaltern credentials due to their production process and the location of their distribution. Moreover, their status as an example of vernacular Thai culture segregates them from mainstream culture as they do not conform to official Thai cultural norms. The rigid and static interpretation of culture by the Thai state in its shaping of 'Thainess' (khwam-pen-thai) creates and supports patterns of cultural marginalization. The paper further adopts a psychoanalytical lens in its analysis of cheap Thai comics. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, I argue that these comics serve the purpose of cultural catharsis by allowing vicarious experience to release repressed emotions. Despite their grotesque visuals and storylines, they are Buddhist didactic parables, conveying Buddhist messages such as morality and law of karma. Furthermore, cheap comics rely upon the aesthetics of horror and evidence an idiosyncratic artistic style.

Cheap Thai comics, commonly referred to by Thais as one-baht comics (*khatoon lem la baht*), are an example of an often overlooked cultural material. Though the price has now risen to between 5 baht and 15 baht, people still widely refer to them as one-baht comics. Cheap Thai comics are sold at small bookshops and convenience stores such as 7-Eleven. Interestingly, however, although the comics can be easily found in the Bangkok suburbs and in rural areas they are rarely to be seen in the city centre.

In this paper, I argue that cheap Thai comics are a subaltern cultural product for subaltern people. Firstly, I discuss its place in the Thai cultural realm categorized by Pracha Suveeranont as "vernacular Thai". "Vernacular Thai" or "*Thai-Thai*" pertains to everyday Thai culture situated at the margins of the cultural realm and is perceived to be of lower status in relation to mainstream culture.¹ Secondly, I propose that cheap comics have a cathartic function in that they help to release repressed emotions. I expand this argument by drawing on psychoanalytic theories and approaches in the analysis of one sample text. I draw largely on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection and its cathartic function

to argue that cheap comics work as cultural catharsis. Furthermore, I argue that cheap comics also have a Buddhist didactic function. My objective here is to increase the visibility of the culture which is regarded as lowbrow and has subaltern status in Thai cultural realm. Rather than seeing it as trivial, I propose that it has cathartic function and opens up cultural space for subaltern people.

History

According to Chulasak Amornvej, a veteran cartoonist, cheap Thai comics emerged around 1977. Their history can be traced back to the one-baht illustrated novels in the 1950s such as the works of P. In-tarapalit. Although cheap Thai comics came later, the size of the two are similar: 16 pages at 13 cm by 19cm. Both were also sold at the price of one baht although the value of the money had changed significantly between the two points of time.²

Chulasak proposes that the emergence of one-baht comics was due to certain market factors. Many newly established publishing houses were responding to the increasing number of literates in the population. The

new publishing houses used cheap pulp comics – with their low production cost – as a way to enter the publishing market.³ However, the number of cartoonists was limited, hence, there were not enough works to publish. Publishing houses then printed the works of amateur cartoonists. The genre of comics most popular at the time was that of comedy. The printing cost of comedy comics and Japanese comics, however, were high.

At the height of the popularity of cheap Thai comics more than ten publishing houses were involved in the cheap comics business. Each month, more than one million copies of cheap comics were sold. However, many of the comics were of low quality as publishers opted to decrease the cost and time of production. Moreover, because each issue was short, the stories also had to be simple. Hence, their popularity declined. Cheap comics also came under criticism for their provocative visuals and old-fashioned and stories about the supernatural.⁴ Nowadays, cheap comics are not popular. They are still available in the suburbs or in small rural bookshops and convenience stores, and are a source of entertainment among low-income people. Their popularity has decreased through time as there are many newer cultural products. Now people see them as lowbrow, out-dated, and marginal.

I argue that cheap comics are subaltern cultural products as they have been relegated to a low status in the Thai cultural realm, despite the fact that they are still relatively popular. Their affordability makes them more accessible to low-income readers. Also, their loose production process allows amateur artists to publish their works.⁵ Their distribution system reaches grass-roots readers in particular locations. Their lowbrow aesthetics and stories based on local myths also attract rural readers.

Cheap Comics as Vernacular Thai Culture

Thai culture has its classifications and different cultural materials are assigned their corresponding value based on a perceived hierarchy. High-status culture revolves around Thainess. Thainess is believed to be the quality of being Thai and is regarded as the nation's cultural heritage. Its formation is inextricably linked to the nation-building projects of the Thai elite's 19th century centralization efforts and to the nationalism of Phibun Songkram's military regime during World War II. Thainess as the nation's cultural heritage is believed to be sacred and a reflection of the essence of the Thai people's national identity. However, identity cannot exist on its own; rather, it needs to

be compared with other aspects of culture. This leads to the process of comparing, contrasting, and classifying cultures within the cultural realm that creates a hierarchy of cultural expressions.

Thainess as the national identity emerged in response to the emergence of Siam/Thailand as a modern nation state in late 19th century. The geo-body incorporated the small kingdoms that were tributaries in indigenous polity of mandala which technically was the embodiment of *mueang* (literally a city-state).⁶ The boundary drawn up by agreements between Siam and Britain and Siam and France disregarded the diversity of people under the indigenous polity and assimilated them into one bounded nation-state. The territory was bounded, enclosing diverse people with diverse cultures. The Siamese court, in the late 19th century, invented the term *chat*, according to Western notion that a nation was the political expression of race. The two overlapping concepts of defining the Thai race were at work. The first one was the people who spoke Thai language. The second one was the people who lived within the boundary. Thainess as the national identity was the cultural instrument to unify people along with centralization process in other aspects such as judiciary and bureaucracy aimed to tighten control over the people.⁷ Hence, Thainess is coercive per se.

Thainess does not have a clear definition and does not function according to strict criteria. Nonetheless, it has led to a classification of cultural manifestations. The conservation of highly regarded cultural materials is of paramount importance, while those deemed as lowbrow are given lower status.⁸ The classification is repressive. For example, Central Thai culture is regarded as the official Thai culture. Hence, it holds higher status than other local or regional cultures such as the Northeastern (*Isan*) culture or the Southern Thai culture. Official traditional culture is considered to have higher value than everyday popular culture. The official definition of the term culture or "*wathanatham*", coined under Phibusongkram's military regime, pertains to the "qualities which indicate and promote social prosperity, orderliness, national unity and development, and morality of the people". This definition also creates a top-down and centralized vision of the state's culture. As the national narrative seizes the mainstream official position, popular culture is thrust to the margins of the cultural realm as subcultures, especially those that touch on taboos like sex, gambling, or magic, which contradict the definition of social prosperity.⁹

Thainess and Cultural Repression

Thainess (*khwan-pen-thai*) was constructed as a result of the elite's encounter with Western colonial powers in the late-nineteenth century. *Sivilai* is the cultural project, which selectively adopted Western cultural influences and fused them with traditional Thai culture to constitute a national cultural identity.

The *sivilai* project has been claimed as one of the survival tools which helped the country to preserve its sovereignty from Western colonial threats by weakening the colonisers' claim to "civilise" Siam/Thailand. However, it also had a crypto-colonial internal effect as a cultural hegemony that repressed other cultures that did not conform to it. The invention of Thainess as well as the concept of the Thai nation was associated with the project of centralization cobbled together by the Bangkok elite. Thainess is intimately connected with the distinction drawn by the Siamese elite between commoners and "good people" (*khon di*), which flourishes in popular discourse as "We, the included" (in Thainess) referring largely to the urban elite and the bourgeoisie, to the exclusion of the rural subaltern."¹⁰

Thai literature is an integral aspect of national pride, and is thus, heavily sanitised. This is echoed in Thanapol's study of "good books" in which he observes that, under Vajiravudh's reign, any literature not conforming to the conventional criteria of the Royal Society of Literature would face devaluation, which he refers to as "dismissive criticism". Those literary materials were relegated "to the domain of irrationality, insanity, backwardness, uselessness, immorality, or vulgarity".¹¹ In the contemporary form of dismissive criticism, the failure of conforming to convention is equated to the "inability to attain a standard of authentic Thainess and was punished by cultural exclusion".¹²

Apart from literature, in the wider cultural realm, the process of sanitising culture was reflected in the Red Shirt protests in Bangkok in 2010. The Red Shirts were stereotyped based on their rural origins and were given the derogatory epithet of Red Buffaloes (*khwai daeng*), which connotes stupidity. The protests faced violent suppression by the Thai military resulting in the deaths of 92 people. This incident can be read as "emblematic of a process of cultural purification", expelling contamination of the capital by the rural subaltern. This was reconfirmed by the mass clean-up operation by organised by Bangkokians that followed the crackdown on the protests.¹³

In the official narrative, what is considered as authentic Thai culture should conform to Central Thai culture, court culture, and Thainess. Culture from

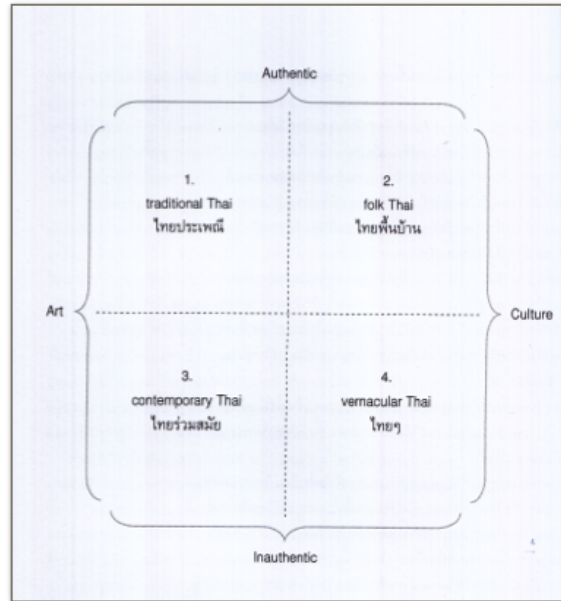


Fig. 1. Ethno-space of Thainess. From Pracha Suveeranont, "Ethno-space of Thainess," in *Attaluk Thai: Chak Thai Soo Thai Thai [Thai Identity: From Thai to Thai-Thai]* (Bangkok: Sameskybooks, 2011) 54.

other regions is considered to be folk culture. Popular culture seems not to be regarded as culture as it does not fit well with the official definition of "*wathanatham*". Thainess, therefore, is not only a question of national cultural identity, but also regulates cultural power relations. It represses and excludes what is Other from its canon. Cornwel-Smith raises the issue of everyday popular culture not being recognized as culture. He states: "Like other everyday popular culture, Modernising Thailand often treats anything 'street' as undeveloped, low-brow or kitsch. Public and official comments tend to gloss over the reality of local lifestyles, especially when they touch on taboos like sex, gambling or magic".¹⁴

I argue that cheap comics can be classified as "vernacular Thai". Their characteristics do not conform to official Thainess as they contain elements of vulgarity and are considered to be examples of lowbrow culture. Cheap comics are a cultural product excluded from mainstream culture. They represent the culture that has been expelled to the margins of cultural acceptability. Vernacular Thai is considered to be tasteless in Thai society as it connotes a sense of lower class and it can be seen as kitsch.

Vernacular Thai

In his analysis of Thai culture, Pracha Suveeranont applies James Clifford's semiotic squares to categorize dimensions of Thai cultural materials. Cheap Thai comics are categorized as vernacular Thai. Pracha coins the term "*Thai-Thai*" to refer to vernacular Thai culture. Citing Kasian Tejapira, he suggests that if a

Thai word is followed by the punctuation mark, “*mai yamok*”, which denotes word repetition, its meaning is diluted. For example, the word “*daeng*” means red; however the word “*daeng-daeng*” means somewhat red. Hence, the meaning of “*Thai-Thai*” is a diluted sense of what it is to be Thai. *Thai-Thai* is culture of a lower status and is found in everyday life. It does not have any roots or reflect any essence of “approved” Thainess.¹⁵

According to Pracha Suveeranont, the trend of using something “*Thai-thai*”, vernacular Thai or popular Thai culture to represent Thainess in the domain of art, design and advertising started in 1995. This trend was initially initiated when Bhanu Inkawat, an advertising creative director, wrote an essay called “Hotdog, Hamburger and Apple pie” in B.A.D. Awards’ book. There, Bhanu states that Thai people needs to find their own “hotdog”, a term being used as an allegory for something ordinary in everyday life. This essay was considered to be ground-breaking because it was the first time that the need to find new Thai identity was explicitly stated. In the same time, the essay also criticized existing Thai identity that it was limited to only official version of Thai culture.¹⁶ Further, Pracha proposes that the trend of vernacular Thai emerged during the period of Thailand’s economic boom when urban culture was expanding. In response to that, the sentiment of yearning for something simple and nostalgic, or to return to “community culture” emerged from the middleclass. In the same time, the state also launched campaigns to preserve Thai identity. Besides, this trend was also influenced by the global trend of post-modernist movement, which admired vernacular culture or culture of ordinary people.¹⁷

Here, I further argue that this trend was partly due to the 1997 economic crash, when national pride was damaged. As a result, the populist localism emerged as the reaction to this crisis. Nationalist sentiment expressed the disappointment with liberalization and market economics, while there was also a call for a return to rural, indigenous Thai roots.¹⁸ Hence, arguably, vernacular Thai culture, which is a part of localism, emerged as the reaction against neoliberal globalization.

However, it is important to note that the trend of vernacular Thai is selective. While some parts of the vernacular culture are being seen as organic, nostalgic and more Thai, some of them are still being seen as crude, out-dated and lowbrow. Only the sanitised ones are more acceptable and are more likely to be admired by the urban middle class. For example, the simplicity of rural lifestyle and nostalgic vintage stuffs have been popular and highly romanticized. Alas, some of the

vernacular culture with wild elements, that do not conform to the official Thai culture, such as superstitions and sexual elements, are still at the margins of cultural realm.

Vernacular Thai culture is essentially composed of cultural expressions that lack authenticity and do not have the qualities of being masterpieces. Vernacular Thai is marginal Thai culture. It can be found in public and private spaces of everyday culture. It contests both traditional Thainess and folk Thainess as it asks the questions: what is Thainess and what are the criteria of good taste?¹⁹

Based on Cornwel-Smith’s illustration, Pracha provides examples of vernacular Thai culture found in everyday life, namely: Thai street lifestyles (*tuk-tuks*, street vendors), folk ritual (mediums and shamans, ghost stories, magical tattoos), local entertainments (temple fairs, beauty queens, *luk thung* and *mor lam*), etc.²⁰ These represent everyday life culture and regional culture. They are perceived to lack seriousness and sacredness which make them differ from the official Thai culture. Hence, they are not quite considered as “*wathanatham*”.

Cheap Thai comics can be considered as examples of vernacular Thai and lowbrow popular Thai culture. I argue that the nature of Thai cheap comics is quite liberal and flexible and they have a loose production process compared to other cultural materials (although they are still subject to capitalist processes). They lack proper seriousness and are not conferred with the sacredness of official traditional Thai culture. Still, it can be said that they are not less Thai, only that they have lower status compared to other cultural materials. They contest folk Thainess as well because they do not have any authentic root.

Cheap Thai comics’ visual aesthetic is also similar to other vernacular Thai. Examples are the vibrant contrasting colour scheme that can be seen in popular street culture such as motorcycle-taxi jackets, graphic art on buses and trucks, and other aspects of *Thai-Thai* visual culture.

With regard to the reception of cheap comics, I conducted two focus group discussions in Thailand, one in Bangkok and one in Roi-et, a province in North-eastern Thailand. I argue that because cheap comics have a low status in the cultural realm there should be a significant difference in how the comics are perceived between these two locations. In the two focus groups I conducted, some of the informants shared similar demographic characteristics. Mainly, my informants were people involved in local politics and bureaucracy such as village headmen or people who hold positions in

local administrative organizations. Mostly, they are from rural areas, not Bangkok.²¹

In Roi-et, my informants said that they used to read this kind of comic but now they are too busy working to have time to read. Two out of 10 of my informants still read cheap comics regularly. They say that in their locality, there are people who still read this kind of comic. However, in Bangkok, my informants see cheap comics as out-dated cultural products. They repeatedly compared cheap comics with what they regard as modern cultural products such as iPhone5, iPad, Facebook, or Siam Paragon (a luxurious department store in downtown Bangkok). They seemed uncomfortable answering my questions. One of my informants said that cheap comics are “*khatoon bannok*” (rustic cartoon). He further said that it is Thai but part of rural Thai culture which differs from present-day Thai culture.

Here I propose that because cheap comics are vernacular cultural products, the reception of them diverges clearly between the two groups of respondents in the different locations. People were more comfortable talking about them in Roi-et while informants in Bangkok tended to reject cheap comics and see them as out-moded cultural products.

Cheap comics have lower status and are devalued, as indicated by the awkwardness of the discussion in the metropolitan area or in the group in which people need to act or behave in modern ways.

Cheap Thai Comics as Cultural Catharsis

Through their mundane visuals and stories, comics help readers work through their maladies without really acting them out. However, in the wider context, they act as Buddhist parables that teach Buddhist beliefs and morals.

Stories

In general, cheap comics are horror tales. In an interview with Tode Kosumphisai, he said that he draws the ideas of the stories from the news and he then uses his imagination to complete the stories. For example, if he hears a tale about a *phi pop* (ogre), he would write a story about it. The horror genre is the most popular according to the record of the publishing house. Tode Kosumphisai said that ghost stories and supernatural beliefs are embedded in Thai society. He said he would never run out of *phi*²² to write about because there are many different kinds such as the 32 kinds of *pret* (dead sinners who become hungry ghosts).²³

Ghost stories have social function as they impart social messages. Pattana Kitiarsa cites Malinowski that experiences of encountering ghosts and ghostly presence are collective social phenomena and can be counted as a social idea.²⁴ Pattana proposes that ghostly haunting in horror films can be taken as a serious category of social analysis.²⁵ Waller puts that the horror-film genre “mirrors our changing fashions and tastes, our shifting fears and aspirations, and our sense of what constitutes the prime moral, social, and political problems facing us individually and collectively”.²⁶ Conforming to them, I propose that this can be applied to the case of cheap comics as well.

In another study about popular religion in Thailand, Pattana argues that magic monks and spirit mediums, who provide clients spiritual and psychological services, have become popular due to the expansion of capitalist society as they are able to give material assurances in modern life.²⁷ Citing Peter Jackson, Pattana concludes that popular religion in Thailand reached its “boom-time” during the period of the economic boom because of “the break down of the village-based sense of community among the many recent rural immigrants to Bangkok”.²⁸ “*Saiyaasaat*” (superstition) can provide “a more meaningful and immediately accessible means of expressing and dealing with the anxieties of life” than conventional Buddhism.²⁹ In the same manner of “*saiyaasaat*,” ghost stories also provide immediately accessible means in order to make sense out of the rapid shifting worldview caused by sudden change of immigration and fast expansion of modern capitalist society. Ghost stories fill up the gap between rural local worldview and modern worldview in order to help rural people making sense of rapid changing lives. They explain incomprehensible things according to rural worldview by using superstitious explanations.

Ghost stories in cheap comics can tackle a broad range of issues. The stories are social critiques and reflect society’s anxieties and its repressed emotions. For example, one story, entitled “*Phi tang dao*”, (literally “foreign ghosts”) depicts the story of a Burmese couple who are in Thailand as illegal migrant workers for a Thai-Chinese businessman. The businessman has physical affections for the wife and tries to rape her. She resists him but the businessman accidentally kills her. Her spirit comes back to take revenge and kills him.

The issue of Burmese illegal migrants has been a concern in Thai society. Johnson elucidates that ghost and criminal stories in abandoned high-rise buildings and gated communities in Chiang Mai are linked to the anxiety towards illegal alien migrants from the Shan States who come to work as wage labourers. They are

viewed as *prachakon faeng* (lurking population) and are assumed to be capable of criminal and immoral acts.³⁰ One good example is provided by the 2010 film “*Laddaland*” which depicts the story of a family that suffers in a neighbourhood haunted by the ghost of a Burmese maid. Another is titled “*Thoh ha phi*”, literally, “telephoning the ghost”. It depicts the story of a man who wants to contact the owner of a piece of land in order to buy it but who ultimately finds out that the

cheap comics. However, these visuals also work as a form of catharsis in order to release repressed emotions. After letting readers imagine the catastrophic consequences of immoral acts, cheap comics teach Buddhist morals: that good acts beget rewards while bad acts beget punishments. Bad guys always get bad karma in the end. Therefore, I propose that cheap comics have double functions: one is to release repressed emotions, and the other is to teach Buddhist



Fig. 2. Covers of cheap comic booklets

From Mod Ant-art. “Cover of *Phi tang dao*,” *Phi tang dao*, (Bangkok: Samdao Publishing, no date)
Wittaya Moolwan. “Cover of *Thoh ha phi*,” *Thoh ha phi*, (Nontaburi: Bua Kaew Publishing, no date)

owner and his daughter are murderous ghosts. I argue that the story is a manifestation of the anxiety over the use of and encounter with modern technology, such as mobile phones, which have significantly altered rural lifestyles.

In general, the stories in cheap comics are quite clichéd. The storylines often involve the protagonist doing something bad, such as killing someone. The bad spirit then comes back to take revenge, or the protagonist faces bad karma as a consequence of his bad actions. I argue that they are Buddhist parables that teach people about morals, despite the provocative and abject visuals, which is always a point of criticism of the

morals. Hence, despite the grotesque and out-dated look of their visuals, they are moral parables.

Buddhism plays an important role in Thailand. It is the primary religion and around 93 percent of Thai people practice Buddhism.³¹ Buddhist belief underlies Thai way of thinking and karmic law influences Thai logic in perceiving the world. Merit (*bun*) associates with power and justifies hierarchy in social order.³² Lucien Hanks states;

“As good Buddhists, the Thai perceive that all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective and of varying degrees of freedom from suffering. ... This hierarchy depends

on a composite quality called “merit” (*bun*) or “virtue” (*khwaamdii*), or one may also speak of a graded series of penalties (*baap*).³³

By confirming the law of karma, in cheap comics, the order is restored not only the order of the reader’s mind but also the social order in his perception. Hence, the reader would be able to cope with his reality again.

Theoretical Approach

As cheap comics often belong to the horror genre, I will draw on a psychoanalytic approach to analyse them. A psychoanalytic lens can be used to examine horror fiction because it incorporates such elements as dreams, nightmares, the supernatural, sex, violence etc. Freudian theories hold that Man retains remnants of his primal nature or the “beast within”, along with Freud’s latency myth which indicates that unexpressed emotions are kept “inside” until they are allowed to come out. Horror fiction is assumed to function as a mode of “cathartic purification” of the mind from the unconscious. It works as a “vicarious experience” that allows the repressed elements of the mind to safely come out without acting them out. Horror fiction articulates “repressed emotions”, violent desires, terrors and repressed urges that are believed to be kept in the unconscious.³⁴ (Brottman 2005:113-114).

“The horror text is often described as a failsafe vehicle for the articulation of these normally ‘dangerous’ and therefore ‘repressed’ unconscious desires, needs, and urges.”³⁵

Abjection

In this section of my paper, I draw on Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. Psychoanalysis holds that subjectivity is constructed rather than arising at the time of birth. A person is born in oneness with the environment and the “I” must therefore be formed and developed by creating borders between the self and the other. Lacan argues that subjectivity arises from the mirror stage, when an infant has a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Reflecting Lacan, Kristeva argues that the mirror stage brings about a sense of unity of subject, but she thinks that even before that, the infant starts to separate itself from others, creating the borders between “I” and “Other”. Kristeva proposes that the infant does this by a process of abjection. Abjection means, “the state of abjecting or rejecting what is other to oneself – and thereby creating borders of an always tenuous ‘I’”.³⁶ “The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself”. It is at

the periphery of one’s existence and challenges the borders of selfhood.³⁷

The abject can be experienced in many ways. One way relates to biological bodily functions. The other has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy.³⁸ Bodily abjection may be exhibited in such behaviour as food loathing and in such processes as excretion of body waste. The abject is the object that the “I” does not assimilate. “I” expels it but it is not an “other” for “me”. The body ejects these substances and extricates itself from them and the site where they fall in order that the body might continue to live. The extreme form is the cadaver. The cadaver is extremely abject because it is no longer “I” who expel; instead the “I” is expelled. The abject is what both threatens and creates the self’s borders. According to Kristeva: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order”.³⁹

Abjection relates to religious structures and reappears in a new form at the time of their collapse. In the West, Kristeva proposes that abjection elicits more archaic resonances that are culturally prior to sin. It is defilement in primitive societies. It is in a world where the Other has collapsed. Kristeva also asserts that: “Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, ‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject”. The abject is “the place where meaning collapses”.⁴⁰

In horror films, Barbara Creed distinguishes three categories of the typical imagery of abjection. The first one is the grossness of the physical body, the corpse being the extreme form both whole and mutilated, as well as bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, putrefying flesh, etc.⁴¹ This category generates perverse pleasure by eliciting disgust and fear from spectators. The second category is the abject of the unstable state between human and inhuman. It is the state which is the border between “the clean and proper body”⁴² and the abject body. A monster is constructed by crossing the border, for example the werewolf, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde etc. The third category is the abject as maternal figure. This stems from the archaic struggle of mother-child relation in which the child attempts to break away from the mother. The maternal body hence becomes a site of conflicting desires. This is “a precondition of narcissism”.⁴³ The maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine.

Abjection and Literature

In Kristeva's view, literature helps the author and the reader to work through maladies that afflict their minds. It allows subjects to work through conflicts without acting them out. Literature can be cathartic.⁴⁴ I propose that cheap comics function the same way as literature.

"By suggesting that literature is [abjection's] privileged signifier, I wish to point out that, far from being a minor, marginal activity in our culture, as a general consensus seems to have it, this kind of literature, or even literature as such represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses. Hence its nocturnal power."⁴⁵

Kristeva proposes that religions create various means of purifying the abject – various catharses with the "catharsis par excellence" called art. Artistic experience which is rooted in the abject also has the same token of purification. She suggests that some literatures have this function.⁴⁶

Creed argues that the ideological project of popular horror films is the purification of the abject through a "descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct".⁴⁷ Horror films bring about the confrontation with the abject to help eject the abject and redraw boundaries. It is a form of modern defilement rite. It attempts to separate the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability.⁴⁸ Conforming to Kristeva and Creed, I argue that cheap comics have the same function as literature for Kristeva and horror film for Creed. Cheap comics make extensive use of abject visuals such as rotten cadavers, entrails, and blood. Abject visuals are some of its idiosyncratic characteristics. The illustrations of blood, putrefying flesh, entrails, and the cadaver are normal images to be found in comics. I propose that these abject visuals have the cathartic function of nocturnal power proposed by Kristeva.

More than abject elements, cheap comics also contain visuals and stories regarded as immoral in Thai society, for example sexually provocative pictures, female nudity, immoral actions of protagonists, etc. Abject visuals and immoral stories disturb the proper/clean self. They disturb social order and symbolic order. They let out repressed unconscious emotions. I argue that these abject and immoral elements work as catharsis. They allow the subject to imagine bad things and work through conflicts, let out stress and repression. Order then is restored again through the way in which, at the end of the story, protagonists receive karma in the framework of Buddhist teachings. Abjec-

tion in cheap comics stirs and disturbs identity and order. However, the overall didactic storyline of Buddhist morality helps clean, purify, and restore order, leading to the reconciliation of the subject with the symbolic order.

This process is not only confined to cheap comics but also appears in other forms of popular culture such as films. Nonzee Nimitbutr's "Nang Nak" (1997) provides a good example of this process, one whereby the malevolent ghost disturbs order, which is then restored by Buddhist authority. I argue, in agreement with Creed, that this demonstrates the ideological project of horror texts in popular culture.

Aesthetics

According to Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, humans are instinctually aggressive creatures. The explicit nature of the horror texts demonstrates this point. It provides a graphic portrayal of human flesh that produces perverse pleasure in its viewers.

Brottman proposes that the visions of split and broken bodies represent graphic depictions of "subjects in process".⁴⁹ They create pleasure as they offer an implicit, subliminal depiction of the continuous division between Imaginary and Symbolic Orders which Lacan calls "glissage". The visual depiction of the body's inner organs spilling out into the world and becoming nothing but matter is horrifying because it destabilizes the self by blurring the division between Self and Others.⁵⁰ I believe that cheap comics contain a lot of visually broken bodies and organs which can be considered as abject imagery. They serve as a means to generate the "glissage" pleasure.

Cheap comics possess their own idiosyncratic visual style that are easily recognizable. The preferred style of illustration is not neat. The lines from the Chinese paintbrush are messy. The colour scheme is vibrant and intense with high contrast, similar to other everyday popular Thai cultural materials that one can easily see on a Thai street, such as colourful plastic wares, motorcycle taxi jackets, taxis, bus graphic art, etc.

In order to give an example of my analysis and argument, I have chosen to analyse one comic titled *Lai-tai* by Tode Kosumphisai, who is a veteran cartoonist of the genre.⁵¹ I should mention that the exact print date of the *Lai-tai* is unknown. I located a copy in a bookshop in a Bangkok suburb in 2011.

"*Lai-tai*" is a syndrome with the medical term Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death (SUND) which Mills refers to as "nightmare deaths".⁵² The syndrome results in the unexplained death of adolescents or adults during sleep. It is an Isan folk belief that this is

caused by an encounter with malevolent spirits. In 1990, there was an incident of a healthy Thai man working in Singapore who died from this syndrome. People in Isan believed that his death was caused by “widow ghosts” (*phi mae mai*). People used wooden penises and painted their nails with bright colours in order to protect men from widow ghosts. Mills argues that such mass belief and explanation is a by-product of the meeting of modernity and long-held folk beliefs within a society’s collective experience.⁵³

Lai-tai depicts the story of Diew Donklang, an orphan who rapes a woman and who then escapes to Bangkok to work at a construction site. In Bangkok, he dreams that a malevolent spirit in the form of a big strong man is attacking him. In reality, nothing happens. His colleague suggests that he should move the site where he sleeps. (It is a common folk belief that one can be haunted by a malevolent spirit if that person sleeps on a haunted site or where a person had died.) Distressed by the nightmare, he cries out loud, causing his next-door neighbours to get angry with him. They have a fight. His employer, Sia Kuang, who knows that he is the suspect in a rape case, likes Diew’s aggressive character and asks him to join his illegal business. Diew moves to Sia Kuang’s place but the malevolent spirit still follows him in his nightmares. The spirit tells Diew that she is the spirit of the woman he once raped. The spirit says that she has gained merit in her many past lives to be reincarnated as this woman who was about to become successful in life. This woman’s life had to end because of Diew’s lustful action. Diew works as a gunman for his employer, Sia Kuang. He meets Ded, chief gunman, and Jeab, who is the mistress of Sia Kuang. One night, Diew meets Jeab and is about to have an affair with her. Jeab tells him that every gunman would be killed after he finishes his job, which is why his boss has sent him here. It turns out that Jeab is the female malevolent spirit. Two spirits steal Diew’s spirit. Diew dies because of Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death (*lai-tai*), as do Ded and his boss. At the end of the comics, the malevolent spirit talks to the reader, saying: “They think evil, do evil in various ways, but they die in similar ways. It is no surprise that in their past lives they all committed sin”.⁵⁴

The story is apparently intended to be a Buddhist parable. It is the story of a sinner who receives bad karma as reflected in the Buddhist belief: “Do good, receive good. Do evil, receive evil”. Diew, who commits a crime, earns his bad karma through the vengeance of the malevolent spirit. Overall, the story teaches a moral lesson with the aim of preventing people from committing sin. However, throughout the story the illustrations contain many scenes considered



Fig. 3. Ending of “Lai-tai” From Tode Kosumphisai, “Scene from Lai-tai,” *Lai-tai*, (Bangkok: Sam Dao Publishing, n.d.) 16

to be immoral in Buddhism, such as rape, murder and adultery. I argue that these elements of the comics function as catharsis. They allow readers to imagine bad things and let out repressed emotions; and the tragic conclusion is punctuated with the imparting of a moral lesson. It is clear from the ending that the story is intended to be a Buddhist parable. It teaches people about karma and how one would receive bad karma if he commits sin.

Mills posits that the belief in “nightmare deaths” is related to labour mobility.⁵⁵ From the storyline, Diew moves to Bangkok and dies of “nightmare death”, caused by a malevolent spirit. The story also depicts anxiety over the health and welfare of wage labourers from the countryside who move into the city, a situation easily relatable for the target readers of cheap comics.

I further argue that this sample story of cheap comics also works similarly to that of Mill’s mass hysteria case. Although the story is fictional, it is a localized version of a social event and uses folk myths such as superstitious beliefs, the law of karma etc. to explain things. In *Lai-tai*, the protagonist moves to the city with rapidly changing social condition as a wage labourer. The ghosts can be read as the myth that the protagonist creates to perceive the changes he could not understand from the local worldview. Also, the ghosts can be read as his anxiety toward the changes and the adverse living condition of wage labourers. In this manner, the ghost stories are related to reality. According to the interview with Tode Kosumphisai, current affairs found in newspapers serve as a basis for many plots in cheap comics. He then uses his imagin-



Fig. 4. Cover of "Lai-tai" From Tode Kosumphisai, "Cover of Lai-tai," *Lai-tai*, (Bangkok: Sam Dao Publishing, n.d.)

tion and folk myths to expand the story, linking up myths and social events.⁵⁶

In terms of aesthetics, the cover of *Lai-tai* provides a good example of the use of abject visuals in cheap comics. The hand of the malevolent spirit turns the head of the protagonist to face the cadaver of the woman he once raped and killed. The victim's face has rotten skin, a drooping eyeball, and a protruding tongue.

The visual conforms to Kristeva's notion of abjection as it depicts the image of the cadaver. It abjects and horrifies spectators. What makes it more horrifying is the face-to-face encounter of the cadaver and the protagonist. It accentuates the confrontation with the abject. Moreover, drawing from Lacan's notion of glissance, the aesthetic of the visual generates pleasure from hor-

ror of the subject in process.

Above is the scene of Diew's nightmare. The malevolent ghost comes to him to explain his sin. In his dream he is brought to the site where he raped the woman and he is forced to confront her corpse. It is the confrontation of the most horrifying abject, the corpse of the protagonist to whom readers therefore relate. (I feel like this sections needs a step by step analysis of how the readers relate.) It also connotes the Buddhist belief in the corresponding consequences of one's actions as the man is forced to face his karma. The scene also conveys the ephemeral nature of the body – the once beautiful woman turns into an ugly corpse when she is dead.

Conclusion

Cheap comics are subaltern cultural products. They have comparatively low status in the Thai cultural realm and could be seen as lowbrow. Drawing from Pracha Suveeranont's categorization, I argue that Cheap Comics can be categorized as vernacular Thai culture. Cheap Comics sits at the margins of Thai culture because it is deemed to be severely lacking in authenticity, and is thus excluded from officially sanctioned Thainess. They contest official and traditional Thai culture by questioning the authenticity of Thainess and the criteria of good taste. They have their own idiosyncratic aesthetics of everyday popular Thai culture.

I propose that cheap comics possess a cathartic function. They help let out the repressed emotions of readers; they catalyze the confrontation with the abject. They use abjection to disturb order, which helps read-



Fig. 5. Nightmare scene of "Lai-tai" From Tode Kosumphisai, "Scene from Lai-tai," *Lai-tai*, (Bangkok: Sam Dao Publishing, n.d.) 8-9.

ers to work through their own maladies and conflicts without acting them out. Ultimately, the themes and storylines of cheap comics reflect the restoration of order through the invocation of Buddhist teachings such as morality and the law of karma. With these dual functions of cheap comics, I argue that they are cultural materials that uphold cultural space for subaltern people.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rachel Harrison for her guidance and comments on the earlier drafts of the manuscript. Special thanks go to Jatupon Innachit for his comments and encouragement. I also would like to thank my editor, Piyawit Moonkham for his useful comments and his kind cooperation.

Bibliography

- Brottman, Mikita. *High Theory / Low Culture*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.
- Chulasak Amornvej. *Legend of Cartoons and Comics*. Bangkok: Saengdao, 2001.
- Cornwel-Smith, Philip. *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*. Bangkok: River Books, 2005.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Hanks, L. M. "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order." *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962): 1247-1261.
- Harrison, Rachel. *Disturbing Conventions*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2013.
- Hewison, Kevin. "Resisting globalization: a study of localism in Thailand." *The Pacific Review* 13, no.2 (2000): 279-296.
- Johnson, Andrew Alan. "Progress and its Ruins: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand." *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013): 299-319.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Power of Horrors*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1977.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. "Balowa: The Spirit of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 46 (1916): 353-430.
- McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Mills, Mary Beth. "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand." In *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. A.Ond and M. Peletz, 244-273. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Nirawan Kurathong. *A Brief History of Thai Comics and Graphic Novels*. Bangkok: LET'S Comic, 2010.
- Pattana Kittiarasa. "The Horror of the Modern: Violation, Violence, and Rampaging Urban Youths in Contemporary Thai Ghost Films." In *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. K.Endres and A.Lauser, 200-271. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000.
- _____, "Magic monks and spirit mediums in the politics of Thai popular religion," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no.2 (2005): 209-226.
- _____, "You May Not Believe, But Never Offend the Spirits: Spirit-medium Cult Discourses and the Postmodernization of Thai Religion" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1999).
- Pracha Suveeranont. *Attaluk Thai: Cark Thai Soo Thai Thai [Thai identity: From Thai to Thai-thai]*. Bangkok: Sameskybooks, 2011.
- Thongchai Winichakul. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995.
- Tode Kosumphisai. *Lai-tai*. Bangkok: Sam Dao Publishing, no date.
- United Nations Statistics Division. "Demographic Statistics." Last modified February 10, 2014. <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=table-Code%3A28>.
- Waller, Gregory A. "Introduction to American Horrors." In *The Horror Reader*, ed. K.Gelder, 257-64. New York: Routledge, 2000.

EndNotes

- ¹ Pracha Suveeranont, *Attaluk Thai: Chak Thai Soo Thai Thai [Thai identity: From Thai to Thai-Thai]* (Bangkok: Samesky-books, 2011)
- ² Chulasak Amornvej, *Legend of Cartoons and Comics* (Bangkok: Saengdao, 2001)
- ³ *Ibid.*, 607-611.
- ⁴ Chulasak, *Legend of Cartoons and Comics*, 619-623. ; Nirawan Kurathong, *A Brief History of Thai Comics and Graphic Novels*. (Bangkok: LET'S Comic, 2010), 51-54.
- ⁵ The production of cheap Thai comics is quite a loose process. Normally, a cartoonist makes the original copy and sends it to the publishing house. The publishing house pays him, and the copyright is then transferred to the former, which then prints the copies that are sent to distributing companies or stores. In a telephone interview with Bua Kaew, a publishing house, they acknowledge that they normally print around eight titles per month. Printing cheap comics is only one part of their business, which includes cheap novels, games booklets, and other cheap publications. Cheap comics are a good side business for a publishing house as they use A4-sized paper. So, the publishing house can use leftover paper from other printing jobs and while the printing machine is not used for regular production (interview with Tode Kosumphisai). The production process of Bua Kaew publishing house is also interesting. They advertise the need for cartoon stories on the back cover of the cartoon booklet. Those interested in being published send their work to the publishing house. Judging who will be published is based on two criteria: firstly, the story must be funny and the title should sound interesting; and secondly, the quality of the artwork must be acceptable. If the work is selected for publication the cartoonist will be paid around 1,200 baht per 16 pages, not including the cover. A more skilled cartoonist sometimes draws the cover because readers buy the comics often based on the cover. The quality of the work on the cover is therefore higher than the work inside. Because the fee is quite low, a cartoonist could not make a living from illustrating comics alone. Generally, drawing for one-baht comics is just a part-time job. The artists are normally amateurs. Very few people do it as a profession. In general, the artists work in government offices and they draw during their spare time to earn extra money. Some famous cartoonists include Tode Kosumphisai, Wute Lampoora, Daeng Palao, Amphol Jane, etc. The prominent publishing houses of cheap Thai comics include Sam dao and Bua Kaew.
- ⁶ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5-9. ; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995), 81-94.
- ⁷ Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 62-66.
- ⁸ Pracha, *Attaluk Thai: Chak Thai Soo Thai Thai [Thai identity: From Thai to Thai-thai]*, 43-44.
- ⁹ Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* (Bangkok: River Books, 2005) 9-11.
- ¹⁰ Rachel Harrison, *Disturbing Conventions* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, forthcoming)
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*, 9.
- ¹⁵ Pracha, *Attaluk Thai: Chak Thai Soo Thai Thai [Thai identity: From Thai to Thai-thai]*, 36.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.
- ¹⁸ Kevin Hewison, "Resisting globalization: a study of localism in Thailand." *The Pacific Review* 13, no.2 (2000): 284-288.
- ¹⁹ Pracha, *Attaluk Thai: Chak Thai Soo Thai Thai [Thai identity: From Thai to Thai-thai]*, 94.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ²¹ The focus group in Roi-et was conducted on 18th July 2013 with 10 informants ranging from 41 to 55 years old. The focus group in Bangkok was conducted on 3rd August 2013 with 20 informants ranging from 26 to 59 years old.
- ²² *Phi* is an umbrella term for 'supernatural being'. The concept of *phi* is based on the Buddhist 'rebirth-linking consciousness' as it refers to the soul of the dead. While *phi* generally connotes the terrifying mysterious entities, that is not always the cases. *Phi* can be good and benevolent, as well as bad and harmful. Sathirakoses categorizes *phi* into three major types; bad spirits (*phi ra*), good spirits (*phi di*), and ambiguous spirits (*phi khap sen*) or guardian spirit (*phi arak phi thammachat*). See Pattana Kitiarsa, "You May Not Believe, But Never Offend the Spirits: Spirit-medium Cult Discourses and the Postmodernization of Thai Religion" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1999), 53-55.
- ²³ Tode Kosumphisai, interview by Chanokporn Chutikamoltham, Samut Prakan, August 1, 2013.
- ²⁴ Pattana Kitiarsa, "The Horror of the Modern: Violation, Violence, and Rampaging Urban Youths in Contemporary Thai Ghost Films." In *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. K.Endres and A.Lauser et al. (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 216.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.
- ²⁶ Gregory A. Waller, "Introduction to American Horrors." In *The Horror Reader*, ed. K.Gelder et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 264.

- ²⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Magic monks and spirit mediums in the politics of Thai popular religion," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 223.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Andrew Alan Johnson, "Progress and its Ruins: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand," *Cultural Anthropology* 28(2013): 310.
- ³¹ "United Nations Statistics Division Demographic Statistics," last modified February 10, 2014, <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=tableCode%3A28>.
- ³² L.M. Hanks, "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order", *American Anthropologist* 64(1962): 1247-1248..
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 1247.
- ³⁴ Mikita Brottman, *High Theory / Low Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 113-114.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.
- ³⁶ Noelle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 2004), 45.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.
- ³⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 9.
- ³⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
- ⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors*, 17-18.
- ⁴¹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 10-11.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁴⁴ Noelle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 50.
- ⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horrors*, 208.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.
- ⁴⁷ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 14.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁹ Mikita Brottman, *High Theory / Low Culture*, 127.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Tode Kosumphisai, *Lai tai* (Bangkok: Sam Dao Publishing, n.d.)
- ⁵² Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand." In *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, ed. A. Ond and M. Peletz et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 249.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 244-273.
- ⁵⁴ Tode Kosumphisai, *Lai-tai* (Bangkok: Sam Dao Publishing, n.d.), 16.
- ⁵⁵ Mary Beth Mills, "Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand"
- ⁵⁶ Tode Kosumphisai, interview by Chanokporn Chutikamoltham, Samut Prakan, August 1, 2013.