

Visual Rhetoric of the Construction of Beauty in Thai Alphabet Primer, Yaw Ying

Benjadol, Piyaluk*

** Silpakorn University and Bangkok University, pbenjadol@yahoo.com and piyaluk.b@bu.ac.th*

Abstract: This paper is part of a research study aimed at addressing an in-depth understanding of how visual languages in Thai alphabet primers are used to shape the meanings of femininity ideologies. Visual rhetoric of Thai woman representations on specific page of letter Yaw Ying, the thirteenth letter out of forty-four, is analyzed to reflect their relations to social practices and cultural discourses. By focusing on the “beauty” characteristics predominantly found amongst 28 Yaw Ying pages in different publications during 1899 to 2012, this study uncovers two visual tropes used to symbolize stereotyped “beauty”, the flower and the umbrella. In the context of political power and social myths in Rattanakosin period during absolute monarchy and democracy, these patterns of femininity ideologies reveal how Thais constructed ideal beauty and encoded them as objects of desire for men. The absences of visual images representing good wives, good housewives, and good mothers, and also female commoner portraits, conveys that Thai society, under patriarchic social system, still considers beauty as the most admired female characteristic. This visual rhetoric study will extend the field of gender related issues in design research, especially in Eastern cultures, which are to this day, predominated by patriarchy and influenced by Westernization.

Key words: *visual rhetoric, beauty discourse, femininity and representation, Thai alphabet primer*

1. Introduction

This paper is part of a research study aimed at investigating the relationship between visual rhetoric in Thai alphabet primers and social practices and beliefs regarding women. Yaw is the thirteenth of forty-four letters in the Thai alphabet, each of which includes a verbal accompaniment such as Ying (meaning “woman”) and So-pa (meaning “beautiful”) as its rhyme. To understand how visual languages in the Yaw pages organize and construct meanings and ideologies regarding the “beauty” of Thai women, visual rhetoric and social semiotics are used as analytical tools.

Alphabet primers, as a “printed text” and a mode of cultural transmission, is a design artifact that, from generations to generations, has encoded visual language with fixed meanings dependent on the authorities holding power to control this process of communication between producers and receivers. Social agents of varying individuals and institutions, such as authors, publishers, schools, parents, and children, are all involved in this semiosis.

Throughout the nearly hundred years of Thai alphabet primer history, the letter Yaw and its verbal accompaniment, Ying, use different rhyming words literally meaning “beauty” to describe how woman should be.

Illustrations, and at times photography, of Thai women representing various physical characters ranging from ladies of the court, middle class women, housewives, actresses, beauty contestants, and working women, are depicted carrying out a variety of activities such as sitting, reading, typing or standing while holding an umbrella. The images succeed in creating the first visual models of “reality” that pre-school children learn and memorize alongside the letter’s verbal rhymes.

This study focuses on the period before and after the political transformation of 1932, and investigates the various types of visual representations of beautiful woman employed, which are obviously related to the discourses, social beliefs, and social practices under patriarchal norms during both the reign of the absolute monarchy and democracy. Women ideologies are endlessly and repeatedly reproduced as objects of desire for men in varying verbal and non-verbal codes.

2. Findings

The visual representations of Thai women in twenty-eight alphabet primers’ Yaw pages of varying publications ranging in date from 1899 to 2012 are investigated. The verbal accompaniment of the letter Yaw, “Ying” word, is firstly found in a primer published in 1899 (the first publication was in 1889 but no copies are found) and is believed to have been composed in 1887 by H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanupab, the Director-general of Education at the time [1]. These primers were restricted in use to a limited number of schools for royal family members and noblemen. At this time, Thai girls were not allowed to study at all, and boys were taught by monks at the temples or by teachers in schools.

Words other than the word Ying are scarcely found attached to the letter Yaw. Amongst twenty-eight different Yaw pages, there are only four publications where either the verbal accompaniments or the illustrations are not related to the context of woman. One example, published in 1922, used the word “Ya” (meaning “grass”) and another in 2000 used the word “Ga-tun-yoo” (meaning “be grateful”). In 1915 and 1922, two publications used words in conjunction with the letter Yaw that indicated nationalities of foreign people; however, even though the words “Yuan” (meaning “Vietnamese people”) and “Yee-poon” (meaning “Japanese people”) were applied, the images nevertheless illustrated Vietnamese and Japanese women in their national costumes (see Figure.1).

Accompanying the attached word Ying, the feminine characteristics typically found are words used literally to describe beautiful women. Interestingly, one word found in 1930 and 1931 emphasizes a body with a thin waistline (Yaw Ying Aew Bang). The most commonly used and memorized example is the rhyming word “Sopa” (meaning “beautiful”) alongside different types of illustrated images of women. Amongst the fifteen different Yaw pages using only the word Ying and those attached with the rhyming word meaning beauty, nine different types of women representations can be categorized as follows:

- (1) Lady-court illustration type (1899, 1907, 1910): a woman is depicted sitting courteously while wearing a traditional Thai costume.
- (2) Urban or middle class woman illustration type (1930, 1931): the illustration depicts beautiful and well-dressed women in Western-influenced clothing.
- (3) Woman holding an umbrella illustration type (1947, 1956, 1966 and 1977): includes both women dressed in traditional Thai costumes and in everyday life clothing.

- (4) Woman reading a book illustration type (during 1957 to 1977): a woman is depicted sitting and reading in a relaxed manner.
- (5) Working woman illustration type (circa 1957): a secretary is depicted sitting and typing.
- (6) Modern woman illustration type (1970): the illustration depicts a woman posing in a bathing suit while sitting on the ground.
- (7) Famous actress illustration type (1986 and 1989): the illustrations depict famous actresses dressed in Western-influenced clothes and Thai traditional costumes.
- (8) Beautiful and hard-working woman illustration type (1991): the illustration depicts an air-stewardess paying respect in the traditional Thai manner and a secretary sitting and typing.
- (9) Cartoon-styled illustration type (2006 and circa 2012): the illustrations depict a schoolgirl and a woman holding a garland in her hand.

3. Discussions

In Thai alphabet primers published for children to memorize, verbal text, “beauty” rhyming words, and visual images of typical beautiful women become a part of the social ideologies regarding how woman should be. Through both physical and mental influence, girls learn how beautiful woman dress, act, and even work. This study discovers two apparent visual tropes used to symbolize Thai “beauty,” the flower and the umbrella.

In Thai literature composed by aristocrats or the royal family and dating to the Rattanakosin period during the reign of the absolute monarchy, women were judged by their beauty and primarily associated with the appreciation of sexual valuation. Women were admired by men as desirable objects through the metaphor of flowers and bees [2]. As visual tropes, in (1) Lady-court illustration type (1907) and (2) Urban or middle class woman illustration type (1930), women are illustrated holding a stem and a bouquet of flowers respectively (see Figure.2). After being admired as women of the ruling class, during the reign of the military-led Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram administration and World War II era, Thai women were propagandized as “the nation’s flower” who must be beautiful as well as strong in supporting their husbands who fought for the nation. These ideals are obviously linked to the classical dance lyrics in the song titled “The Nation’s Flower,” composed by Madame Laliad Phibunsongkhram.

In 1934, two years after Thailand became a democratic nation, the government, powered by military leaders, arranged the first national beauty pageant as a means of encouraging people to attend the annual constitution celebration. Before the final round of the festivity, which was held outdoors, all beauty contestants walked across the platform holding an umbrella (a paper sunshade) and greeting their admirers (see Figure.3). The umbrella has gained additional function as a form of sunlight protection and meaning as a connotation symbolizing a pretty and charming lady.

Visual trope of (3) Woman holding an umbrella illustration type (1947, 1956, 1966 and 1977) is culturally decoded as an icon of a beauty contestant (see Figure.4). Women in the Northern parts of Thailand are typically considered to be the most beautiful women and have historically won many beauty pageants. Thais memorize pictures of these women dressed in traditional costumes and bicycling while holding an umbrella. Thereafter, this symbol became internationally recognized when Miss Apasra Hongsakula portrayed herself holding an umbrella in a bathing suit and was later crowned as the first Miss Universe from Thailand in 1965 (see Figure.5). Until present, Chiangmai province continues to organize a famous local beauty pageant annually, the highlight of which

is the beauty contestants parading on bicycle, and, not surprisingly, holding umbrellas (see Figure.6).

In contrast to pre-school alphabet learning with the representations of beautiful women, through word of mouth, schoolbooks, and literature, Thai girls are told and taught to be good wives, good housewives, and good mothers. However, interestingly, this study found that no words or images representing these qualities were shown in any Yaw pages of alphabet primers. Moreover, in the primers, there are absences of the portraits of local folks and peasants. This could be evidence of how Thais are inculcated, from generation to generation, with the importance of beauty as the ideal of femininity, and the social role of serving as an object of desire for men gains appreciation. In contrast to the images of beautiful women in alphabet primers, the cover of the “History of Thai Women” book by Kularb Saipradit (1976) (see Figure.7), with controversial content, portrays a close-up photograph of a tough female rice farmer. Urban upper or middle class women dominate representations of females in mass media, and the absence of rustic female images persists unless used for the purpose of parody.

All social agents seem to agree and accept that beauty is the most desirable characteristic of femininity. Otherwise, authors or publishers of alphabet primers would choose different words and images unrelated to beauty or femininity. Some possible and simple words that begin with the letter Yaw are “Yart” (meaning relative), “Yan” (meaning knowledge), “Ya-nee” (meaning one who has wisdom), or even words that have the letter Yaw in the middle of them such as “Pun-ya” (meaning wisdom), etc. If these words were employed, Thai femininity discourses, especially those related to the significance of beauty, might differ.

When examining other visual images of women in printed mass media during the same periods, such as books and magazine covers, advertisements, and movie posters, “beauty” is similarly coded as the most significant female characteristic.

4.Conclusions

For Thai studies related to schoolbooks, besides the critical content analysis by Professor Nidhi Eoseewong in *Thai Nation and Thai Country in Elementary Schoolbooks* (1995) concerning ready-made concepts regarding the state and nation delivered to students and the role of schoolbooks as key factors in the reproduction of social discourses, there is a lack of studies focusing on visual languages and their social and cultural meanings in Thai schoolbooks. For studies related to English primers, Patricia Crain has successfully synthesized the role of the alphabet and the relationship of letters to meaning in early ABC American primers in *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from The New England Primer to The Scarlet Letter* (2000), but Thai alphabet primers have, in exception to the renowned historical compilation by Anake Nawigamune in *Tracing Gaw Gai Alphabet* (1993), yet to be visually studied. Therefore, this visual rhetoric study focusing on the relations between representations of femininity in Thai alphabet primers and social ideologies regarding the “beauty” of women will extend the field of gender related issues in design research, especially in Eastern cultures which are to this day predominated by patriarchy and influenced by Westernization.

Visual images in alphabet primers, words and illustrations, are signs that have been intentionally or unintentionally deployed, by the individuals or institutions that produce them, to deliver social meanings to their readers. As a primary text or visual resources for the study of this paper, the combination of cultural resources being symbolically used in the pages Yaw with verbal accompaniment Ying show typical discourse patterns of how Thais construct social meanings of “beauty.” As design artifacts that are considered to be one of the most

published prints, some of which are reprinted extensively over many years, alphabet primers serve as learning tools in which visual languages play an important role in transmission of cultural meaning. Since the functional purpose of the primer is to facilitate learning by rote in childhood, the social ideologies regarding femininity encoded in the words and images that are memorized undoubtedly affect children's points of view and behaviors.



Figure.1 Yaw Yuan (1915) and Yaw Yee-poon (1922)
(Left and right images from Nawigamune, 1993)



Figure.2 Yaw Ying (1907) and Yaw Ying Aew Bang (1930)
(Left and right images from Nawigamune, 1993)



Figure.3 A beauty contestant walked across the outdoor platform (1954)
(Image from <http://www.thailandpageant.com>)



Figure.4 Yaw Ying Sopa (illustration-1956) and Yaw Ying Sopa (photography-1977)
(Left image from Nawigamune, 1993 / right image from Piyaluk Benjadol's collection)



Figure.5 The first Miss Universe from Thailand (1965)
(Image from <http://www.thaifilm.com>)



Figure.6 The annual beauty pageant parade in Chiangmai province (2012)
(Image from <http://www.thaimiss.com>)



Figure.7 “History of Thai Women” book cover (1976)
(Image from http://www.lovesiamoldbook.com/product.detail_643405_th_3429926)

5. References

- [1]Crain, P. (2000). *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from The New England Primer to the Scarlet Letter*, Stanford University Press, Standford.
- [2]Eoseewong, N. (1995) Thai Nation and Thai Country in Elementary Textbooks in *Chat Thai, Meung Thai, Babrien lae Anusauwaree (Thai Nation, Thai Country, Textbooks and Monuments)*, Matichon, Bangkok.

- [3] Nawigamune, A. (1993) *Gae Roy Gaw Gai (Tracing Gaw Gai Alphabet)*, Sarakhadee, Bangkok.
- [4] Saipradit, K. and Phoumisak, J. (1976) *Prawattisart Satri Thai (History of Thai Women)* [Online PDF]. Available at <<http://kulap.org/index.php/component/content/article/35-e-book/44-historyofthaiwomen>> [Accessed 20 November 2012]

6. Citations

- [1] Nawigamune, A. (1993) *Gae Roy Gaw Gai (Tracing Gaw Gai Alphabet)*, Sarakhadee, Bangkok, pp 39.
- [2] Preechajareon, S. [pseud.] (1976). Past, Present, and Future of Thai Women in Saipradit, K. and Phoumisak, J. *Prawattisart Satri Thai (History of Thai Women)* [Online PDF]. Available at <<http://kulap.org/index.php/component/content/article/35-e-book/44-historyofthaiwomen>> [Accessed 20 November 2012]