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The Promise of Happiness: Political Imagination in Contemporary Thai Society

Abstract

This paper examines how emotions play an important role in Thai politics in the past decade (2006–2016). The specific emotion I choose to discuss in this paper is happiness. Certainly, the emotions of anger, hatred, and fear became the affective economy permeating Thai social polity for the last decade; but, with the consolidation of the new government led by Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, Thai citizens are now subjects of an official campaign to “Bring Back Happiness” after the time of political conflict. How might we understand the political agenda of this emergent affective economy of happiness and the effect of the economy of happiness on Thai citizens? To answer the question, the paper explores two social phenomena sponsored by the government; namely, the song “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” and the fair “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End.” In accordance with the government’s campaign to “Bring Back Happiness,” these social phenomena project a phantasmatic vision of a prior Thailand, located in an earlier moment when people lived in a peaceful, stable, happy national unity. The government’s promise of happiness achieves its power to the degree that happiness is forever postponed, thereby remaining phantasmatic, the psychic investment in believing in something that never exists. Pleasure and delight citizens get from listening to the song and visiting the fair direct them towards things associated with the vision of happiness. However, in order to live with the promise of happiness, citizens must follow a system of regulations advertised to them as means to achieve the end of national unity and thus happiness. In this sense, then, their attachment to the fantasy of happiness is similar to what the cultural critic and affect theorist Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism.”

Key words: Thainess, happiness, political fantasy, affect theory

The political conflict in Thailand during the past decade between the Yellow Shirts (anti-Taksin) and the Red Shirts (pro-Taksin) has been the topic of study by many scholars both Thai and foreign. Amid this political unrest, various kinds of emotions such as hatred, anger, fear, stress, anxiety and sadness have risen. However, scholars who study this political conflict so far have not focused on the role of emotion in politics. This paper aims to study Thailand’s political conflict in the past decade (2006–2016) through the study of emotions. Among various kinds of emotions, happiness is chosen as a focal point of the study because after the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) seized the power and volunteered

to govern the country, it was stated that their main objective was to bring back happiness to Thai people. Since political crisis has roused negative feelings including hatred, fear, sadness and despair, giving people hope that happiness is going to be brought back suits the situation. NCPO formed the government in 2014 with Prayut Chan-o-cha as the prime minister and has been in power for 6 years; however, if we take a look at Thai society in the present, we will see that problems such as poverty, social disparity and human rights violation still remain. Therefore, “happiness” that we hear so often is nothing but “fantasy of happiness”.

Using the affective approach to study the role of happiness in Thai politics, I select two social phenomena; namely, the NCPO’s song called “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” and the event “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End.” The selected social phenomena have happiness as the main theme. Happiness in these two pieces of works are fantasy as it is something that we are waiting for in the future (“Bring Back Happiness to Thailand”) or something that was in the past so it does not exist in the present (“Love and Warmth at Winter’s End”). Though happiness is merely a fantasy, this research wants to point out that fantasy of happiness is a significant force which can drive social and political movements. According to Sara Ahmed, happiness is a force that directs us to a certain path—a path that we believe will lead us to the desired happiness at the end, so happiness is “end-oriented” (Ahmed, 2010b, 26). Happiness as a fantasy is a desire that comes from what is lacking, and it drives the society to move forward. The power of happiness as a fantasy then comes from postponing happiness indefinitely. This paradox of happiness corresponds to what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism.” According to Berlant, “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your own flourishing” (Berlant, 2011, 1). In my analysis of the selected social phenomena, happiness is an example of our attachment to fantasies which is unattainable. Happiness not only gives us hope, but it also makes us able to endure desperate situations as its fantasy convinces us that everything will be better in the future. Cruel optimism shows that believing in fantasy of happiness is even more important than the existence of happiness itself. Because of fantasy, our lives can go on despite all depressing and helpless situations. Living with fantasy is better than facing the fact that there is no hope left in our lives or that there is only emptiness, and we are at dead end and there is no way out.

NCPO and The Promise of Happiness

The song “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” is written by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, leader of National Council for Peace and Order or NCPO. The song was written after NCPO seized power and volunteered to govern the country. Its lyrics is about NCPO’s promise to bring back happiness to Thai society. As stated in Chorsaard Media website (2017), Colonel

Krisada Sarika, head of the Royal Thai Army band, said that “[General Prayuth Chan-o-cha] called me to see him. It took him only one hour to write the song and he wrote it by hand. He wanted to express his wish to bring back happiness to Thai people and to link the song with other “bring back happiness” activities held by NCPO at that time. He wanted just one song that could express his feeling for Thai people. Actually, the lyrics he wrote was longer but after we arranged it, it became like what you all hear. He wanted a song that would make Thai people love one another again soon.”

“Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” reflects NCPO’s political policy that focuses on looking forward with happiness as everybody’s goal (“Thai people love one another again soon.”). The correlation between happiness and looking forward policy is also reflected in NCPO’s TV program called “Thailand Moves Forward,” produced to announce government’s policies and update its achievements; “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” is used as its soundtrack. NCPO also promotes this song through various channels including television, radio and online platforms. Moreover, in order to satisfy wide-ranging target audiences, the song is rendered into various versions. There is a version sung by a soldier, another sung by Thailand’s all time popular band, Asanee-Wasan. There is also a version that assembles singers, artists and celebrities to sing the song together. In addition, many versions of music video are produced. This presentation with vivified sound, image and content makes “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” become famous overnight. Many people, regardless young or old, can sing along the song. Its lyrics (translated by Khaosod English) is as followed:

The day the nation, the King, and the mass of people live with danger,
We offer to guard and protect you with our hearts.
This is our promise.
Today the nation is facing menacing danger.
The flames are rising.
Let us be the ones who step in, before it is too late.
To bring back love, how long will it take?
Please, will you wait? We will move beyond disputes.
We will do what we promised. We are asking for a little more time.
And the beautiful land will return.
We will do with sincerity.
All we ask of you is to trust and have faith in us.
The land will be good soon.
Let us return happiness to you, the people.

Today, we will be tired [because of our mission], we know.

We offer to fight the danger.

Lives of soldiers will not surrender.

This is our promise.

Today the nation is facing menacing danger.

The flames are rising.

Let us be the ones who step in, before it is too late.

The land will be good soon.

Happiness will return to Thailand.

“Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” and Its Soft Power

By using the song “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” as a medium for communicating with people, NCPO has shown that politics is inseparable from emotion as the song is not only a way of presenting content, but it can also move listeners. As the editor of *Song and Politics in Eastern Africa* says, “...songs speak to composers and audiences in fundamental ways and in the process shape perspectives, change attitudes, question authority, challenge human weakness, cajole and rebuke” (Njogu & Maupeu, 2007, xii). Song is often part of rituals and activities as it can encourage, comfort, heal and create joy. In addition, Adams Oloo also states that music has a power that is different from normal conversation as it can dominate and convince listeners. He says, “Musical language, like most forms of narrative language, is not merely descriptive. It also informs and influences” (Oloo, 2007, 179). The song “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand,” composed and released by NCPO, is popular and relatable for listeners of all ages; people can remember lyrics and sing along the same way they do with other popular Thai songs. This success significantly transforms politics from something distant and abstract into relevant and relatable matter.

Using song as a medium to communicate with people reveals how soft power works. By stating that “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” is written by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, NCPO is implying that its leader is not just a strong and harsh soldier; being able to write such a beautiful song, he also has an artistic side. “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” thus reveals the gentle and romantic side of NCPO’s leader. This song also differs from previous patriotic songs which have strong, exuberant lyrics and melodies. It is a romantic song that uses man-woman metaphor to describe the relationship between the nation and its leader or between Thai people and the junta. Besides, regarding pronouns used in the lyrics, NCPO is substituted with “Rao (we)” and the people is substituted with “Thoe (you)” in order to create intimacy and familiarity. The song is also similar to romantic novel as it tells a story about

waiting and overcoming obstacles with patience before ending with happiness. (“To bring back love, how long will it take? Please, will you wait? We will move beyond disputes.”)

While the song reinforces nationalism which relates with patriarchal ideology¹, it also transforms hard power to soft power, as reflected in the song’s first verse, “The day the nation, the King, and the mass of people live with danger / We offer to guard and protect you with our hearts / This is our promise.” The song erases violent image of coup d’état; NCPO taking control of the country is not coercion but an act of love for the nation and the people. (“We offer to guard and protect you with our hearts.”) The song thus encourages positive attitudes towards the military and NCPO. In addition, the lyrics and music video also go along with each other. Images of soldiers representing NCPO and of women and children representing Thai people highlight NCPO’s heroism; they stepped in to protect Thai people from danger, while the people could only wait for their help. Images of women and children signify weakness, dependence and victimization, so they are symbols of the suffering Thai people have to endure as a result of the past political crises. Images of them smiling in the music video, therefore, represent hope and happiness people will have after NCPO took charge of the country.

“Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” can change its audiences’ attitudes towards NCPO to be more positive, as seen in the comments of those who listen to the song online; for example, “I like every version of this song.” “The mv is touching, cute and heartwarming... especially the chorus by young students from Wattana Wittaya Academy...it makes me feel so good.” “So touching...I cry every time I listen.” “I can feel happiness in the song.” “Love it so so much...my tears stream.” “This gets me goosebumps LOL.” These reactions mainly focus on the song’s emotional meaning; that is, the song gives them what kind of feelings rather than what opinions they have after listening to it. Delivering emotional meaning better than speech, a song can dominate one’s mind; and thus, “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” becomes NCPO’s important political tool. Happy and impressed by the song, people then have positive attitudes towards NCPO and the nation. This is reflected in many comments, for example, “Beautiful...meaningful lyrics...Love all sacrificing soldiers.” “Soldiers, keep fighting! I support you.” “I cry every time I listen. Keep fighting Thai soldiers.” “Beautiful. Listening to this, I am happy and love Thailand.” However, not every comment is positive as some say, “Never do as they promised + Take freaking long time...” “Two years already past, where is happiness?” “Bullshit song.” These reactions of the audiences on cyberspace show the clash between automatically bursting emotions and rational thinking. Nonetheless, most of the reactions are based on the audiences’ emotional responses, which lead to

¹ See Joane Nagel’s *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* (New York & Oxford: Oxford Universities Press, 2003) p.140-176.

our question: what makes most audiences momentarily put down logic of reasoning or what is right, and turn to support NCPO's government who came to power by executing a coup.

In "Crafting Confucian Remedies for Happiness in Contemporary China: Unraveling the Yu Dan Phenomenon," Zhang Yanhua (2014) discusses two kinds of relationship people have with their nation. The first one is the paternalistic moral order which allows criticism based on the logic of righteousness; the other is the maternal affective affinity—love and pride in the nation which base on the attachment one has with his/her mother land. Nation in the first meaning is a political community (the nation state as polity) which focuses on duties and responsibilities the state has to its people; while the people can criticize the state if it is defective. On the other hand, nation in the second meaning is a land which is a shelter, a birthplace and the origin of one's identity (nation-culture). The attachment to the mother land is expressed in a form of loyalty and pride one has for his/her nation.

Zhang's idea can explain why audiences are happy and impressed after they listen to "Bring Back Happiness to Thailand." This is because the song creates a bond between the audiences and their nation in the form of maternal affective affinity. This bond is reflected in the song's lyrics; for example, "We will do what we promised / We are asking for a little more time. And the beautiful land will return / We will do with sincerity / All we ask of you is to trust and have faith in us / The land will be good soon / Let us return happiness to you, the people." The message is also recapped in music video with images of beautiful religious places (temples), together with images of Thai customs, ways of life, culture and landscape of Siam. Both of the lyrics and the music video reflect longing for beloved land, a land which is a birthplace and shelter and provides comfort. NCPO responds to this longing by promising to bring back "the beautiful land." What NCPO wants from the people is not criticism or opinions but faith and belief in its leader. By saying that NCPO took charge of the country because of love for its mother land, no one can reject this good intention. One comment says "All leaders have good and bad sides. Don't look at the bad part only. Imagine how stressful it is to take all the burden and try to fix problems for everybody in the country...I don't take side, but this is our country; we'd better do what it takes to make sure it will remain and not create more conflicts." This comment reflects the negotiation between two concepts, the paternalistic moral order and the maternal affective affinity that were mentioned above. Even if coup d'état is not legitimate nor righteous, the desire to see our beloved nation come back to peace can make the writer of the comment see "good side" of NCPO. Thus, legitimacy or righteousness alone cannot evaluate or define NCPO's values.

Happiness and NCPO's Political Power

The main theme of “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” is happiness, which is NCPO's promise. This song has simple rhythm and melody with a chorus that repeats the same verse to emphasize that happiness will return soon. (“We will do what we promised. We are asking for a little more time.” and “The land will be good soon. Let us return happiness to you, the people.”) Moreover, there is an assemble of artists, stars and celebrities to sing the song together by sharing verses (similar to the song “We Are the World”) to show that happiness is what everybody in the country hopes for. The lyrics talks about purpose of the coup which is to return happiness to Thai society and not to let it be destroyed by conflicts. (“Let us be the ones who step in, before it is too late.”) This lyrics creates NCPO's image as a hero who came to rescue Thailand from disasters, and who willingly took this duty because of love and care for the nation. Hence this song diminishes NCPO's harsh image and finds righteous reason for the junta. Selected images in the music video also match the lyrics that talks about promise of happiness. For instance, image of children chorus at the beginning and the end of the song represents the country's hope and future; we can endure all hardships today for the sake of our children's future. Moreover, the presentation of Siam's beautiful landscape, together with images associated with religion, tradition and Thai culture, all arouse the audience to long for the virtuous Thainess, which will bring us happiness.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2010b) points out that the desire for happiness attracts us to what we believe will bring us happiness or “happy object”. Happiness creates a bond between us and that object, which she terms “affective attachment.” She also says that desire for happiness has a compelling power that can drive or lead us to actions. Happiness leads to the gathering of community of those who have happiness as mutual goal. This community which is formed on emotional attachment can be called “affective community.” Ahmed says, “If the same objects make us happy—or if we invest in the same objects as if they make us happy—then we would be directed or oriented in the same way. To be affected in a good way by objects that are already evaluated as good is a way of belonging to an affective community” (Ahmed, 2010b: 38). Hope for happiness which is everybody's mutual goal creates affective community.

In “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand,” happiness is used as a political tool to reduce bias society has against coup d'état. Desire for happiness also encourages people to support and cooperate with NCPO, all because of its promise to bring back happiness soon. Using happiness to drive politics results in what Ahmed calls “wishful politics.” She explains that “Happiness translates its wish into a politics, a wishful politics, a politics that demands that others live accordingly to its wish” (Ahmed, 2010a, 527). People then support and cooperate with NCPO, not by law enforcement or coercion, but because of desire for

happiness which is a mutual goal of everybody in the society. Therefore, politics and fantasy are inseparable; social control and organization are carried through fantasy of happiness, and we may call this kind of politics as “a wishful politics.” Images of smiling people in the music video is an example of the fantasy of happiness because these images reflect the desire for happiness that is not there in the present or still not happens; meanwhile, these images also conceal hardships, endurance and efforts people have to put in in order to bring back happiness. Happiness that NCPO promised comes with conditions which force us to do as the government told; the obvious example is 12 core values that NCPO enacted for people to adhere to. Fantasy of happiness has transformed this narrow-minded custom into what is wishful as it is a path that will lead us to happiness. The promise of happiness is thus a “cruel optimism” for those who stuck in it. Therefore, it is not surprising that Thailand’s happiness index has been continuously declining since NCPO rose to power. According to World Happiness Index in 2018, Thailand’s rank dropped from No.32 in 2017 to No.46 with a score that went down -5.48%. This is a continual decline since 2014 when there was a coup and NCPO promised to “return happiness” by “asking for a little more time” (Saengthai Khaoputhai, 2018). This dropping happiness index exposes that the happiness NCPO promised is just a fantasy. While the junta focuses on looking forward with hope that happiness will be brought back in the future, the index shows that Thailand is not moving anywhere; and worse, is in regression.

Ahmed points out that happiness is cruel as it is merely a promise that will never be achieved. She mentions that “hap” in “happiness” also means “chance” (Ahmed, 2010b, 22). Therefore, having happiness as a life goal will make our lives full of uncertainty; waiting for happiness to return generates anxiety, frustration and disappointment when it does not return. Moreover, with chance being an integrated part of happiness, what we actually receive may not always be what is promised (p.31). Ahmed also states that happiness is what we long for only when it is postponed; and the longer it is postponed, the more we will long for it (p.32-33). We wait for what we desire, but when we actually get it, it will no longer be our desired object; this is happiness. If happiness is what NCPO promised to the people, the power of this promise then relies on happiness being indefinitely postponed, so NCPO can use this as a reason to be in power, saying that it still has the duty to bring back happiness to Thai people as this goal still has not been achieved. Even though Thailand’s happiness index has continuously declined, happiness is still what people long for; this is the reason why many people still support NCPO. Faith and belief they have in NCPO reveal that adherence to the fantasy of happiness can nourish hope, and by this way, these people can live on amid hardships that obstruct them from happiness.

“Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” and Presentation of Bygone Siam

King Maha Vajiralongkorn or King Rama X has endorsed his personal agency along with public and private sectors to organize a vintage-themed festival called “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” at the Royal Plaza on the ground of Dusit Palace and Sanam Suea Pa during February 8 to March 11, 2018 in order to share happiness with his people. The festival was divided into three areas; the first was the Royal Plaza at Dusit Palace, where exhibitions and activities were held in order to present biographies and royal duties of King Rama V and King Rama IX. The second area was Sanam Suea Pa where there were selected stores from Royal family’s and other foundations, such as Silapacheep 904 Shop, Phufah Shop and stores from Friends in Need (of “Pa”) Volunteers Foundation, Royal Project and Thai Army Wives Association. For the last area, there were restaurants and stores of which around 30 stalls sold delectable ancient Thai cuisine. The concept of this area was to inherit Thai way of life under royal protection. This “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” event was both a fair and an exhibition where visitors could have fun while in the same time gained some knowledge about Thainess. This intention is clearly stated in the PR brochure:

People can come to the festival and have fun, be happy, and enjoy pleasant atmosphere that recalls history and strong bond between the monarchy, the nation and the people. They can also learn Thai way of life from the ancient days up to the present time as it is the identity of being Thai and Thai nation. Furthermore, they can contribute to a royal charity fund by shopping products from selected stores, along with buying raffle tickets, taking photographs and joining other activities. Revenue, without deduction of expenses, will be used for royal charity through “Volunteering, We Do Good by Heart” project to comfort people who suffer from disasters or other calamities around the country.

From the above description, it can be seen that “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” is not merely a winter festival or a typical fair that uses Thai culture as selling point to attract visitors, but it also plays an important part in creating an imagination of Siam from an elite perspective. In my analysis, I want to point out that Thainess that appears in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” festival is a phantasm of an unreal past. In *The Female Thermometer* (1995), Terry Castle explains that “phantasmagoria” is an illusion created by magic lantern, an early type of today’s projector; however, when used as a metaphor, phantasmagoria also means a fantasy from an inner thought projected in a concrete form. Phantasmagoria can be used as a metaphor to explain commodities that appear as fetish objects in capitalist world. Commodities are displayed in showcases as if they are alive and appear there, luring and attracting consumers, by themselves while the context of their productions is all erased. Images of displayed commodities are, therefore, not different from phantasmagoria in magic lantern show since the origins of what are seen are hidden in order

to make the images seem real. Using the concept of “phantasmagoria” to explain the imagery of bygone Siam in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” festival, this research aims to expose the relation between political and capitalist ideologies. Desire which propels capitalist system can also drive political ideology. Similar to the fantasy image of commodities that turns individuals into consumers, political imagination can direct social members to make certain decisions that go along with the state’s preferred values and ideologies, and thus, turns individuals into desirable citizens.

In *Phantasmatic Indochina*, Panivong Norindr (1996) says that Indochina which was colonized by France is an “elaborate myth” that the colonizer created; Indochina, therefore, is not real and just French colonial phantasm.² His proposal seems to contradict with general understanding about Indochina; those who oppose this idea may point out that Indochina does exist on geographical map or in travel memoirs. However, this claim that Indochina is a fiction reveals that facts about Indochina were selected, twisted and embellished in order to create a land that would reflect French colonizer’s desire in an official history account. Indochina is like a blank space for projecting Western colonizer’s imagination; and thus, just a fiction created to fulfill their desire³; for French colonizer, Indochina is what Norindr calls “a space of cultural production” (Ibid., p.2). Norindr cites as example Paul Claudel, a poet and diplomat, who has crafted Indochina into an officially elaborated fiction. In his work, he tells story about a peaceful, no obstacle, expedition to Indochina, and in this fantasy world, Westerners live harmoniously with the natives. What Claudel avoids to mention is the suffering the natives have to endure under French colonial system which includes famine, forced labour, epidemics and various disasters. Claudel’s travel memoir focuses on presenting Eastern exotic landscape, and the natives in this memoir are integrated as part of the exotic landscape or either as part of labour force in colonial trade system. Claudel’s work thus creates an imagery of Indochina as a peaceful and romantic land with an attempt to maintain this imagery by excluding politics out of it.⁴

“Indochina” as an elaborate fiction is clearly discussed in a chapter named “Representing Indochina.” Norindr uses an exhibition, *L’Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931*,

² Norindr explains that “‘Indochina’ is an elaborate fiction, a modern phantasmic assemblage invented during the heyday of French colonial hegemony in Southeast Asia.” and that “Indochina is a concept at the intersection of myth and phantasm, an imaginary structure and an idea that can be located, in Catherine Clement’s words, in the register of the phantasm, of the imaginary mise-en-scene, indeed of the dream.” (1996, p.1)

³ Norindr cites Michel de Certeau who has discussed colonizer’s historical writing; “De Certeau argues historical account articulate a vision or memory of other worlds as a blank space on which Western desire is written.” (p.2)

⁴ Norindr explains that “Advocates of French colonialism in Indochina wanted at all cost to preserve the image of an idyllic world untouched by political cataclysms” (Ibid., p.7).

as an example to study the French colonial phantasmatic. This *Exposition* is an exhibition of commodities and culture from different French colonies and where colonialism exposes itself. While enjoying exploring exotic things, visitors would also be instilled with colonial idea, which would lead to acceptance and endorsement for French colonialism. Norindr describes that there were various activities in the exhibition, such as riding a train to tour the place, visiting colonial village and exploring modern technologies and inventions. The exhibition, similar to an amusement park or a zoo, is where visitors can have fun while at the same time learn about colonial idea.

The organizers had a complete understanding and thorough knowledge of the public's expectations. They knew that an exhibit that would merely showcase colonial products would leave fairgoers largely unsatisfied. To lure them, they found it necessary to combine these didactic displays with more popular forms of diversions, the underlying aims of which were still to inform, educate, and seduce (Ibid., p.22).

Learning colonial idea, when propelled by desire, is not coercion but seduction.⁵ The *Exposition* was meticulously designed to enjoy visitors. So when they joined the fair, they could feel as if they had entered to the real colonies and could also imagine that they had become the colonizers themselves. The exhibition thus turns violent colonialism into something that is acceptable and worth supporting. The *Exposition* also fits in with Ahmed's concept that happiness attracts people to happy objects, or what they believe will bring them happiness. Therefore, happiness was used to instill colonial ideology in visitors.

The *Exposition* also exposes the relation between aesthetics and politics. Norindr points out that design plays an important part in kindling desire for colonialism and turning visitors into colonialism's supporters.

The desire for exotic and other sensual and cognitive experiences manifested itself in concrete fashion, in the design of the Palais d'Exposition, the decorative facade, and so on. This desire was impressed upon the imagination of these fairgoers by collapsing the aesthetic with the real in order to elicit support for French colonialism and, ultimately, to solicit a political endorsement (Ibid., p.17).

The above argument confirms that aesthetics is inseparable from politics. Norindr further uses Martin Heidegger's concept of "the conquest of the world as picture"⁶ to discuss the display of colonies in the exhibition. Following Heidegger, he argues that colonial world

⁵ Learning that has desire as a propelling force shows that when knowledge comes with love; that is, when one learns something by heart, knowledge one gains become intimate, not cold nor abstract.

⁶ Norindr summarizes Heidegger's concept as follows: "Heidegger considers 'the conquest of the world as picture' to be 'the fundamental event of modern age.' The world as picture refers to man's capacity to produce a structured image which 'secure, organizes, and articulates itself as a world view'" (Ibid., p.23).

in the *Exposition* is not a representation of the real colonies out there. On the contrary, the display of colonial world in the exhibition provides visitors with imagination about non-existent colonies. This concept of “the conquest of the world as picture” by Heidegger is also reflected in the replica of Angkor Wat in the *Exposition* which represents colonists as heroes who restore Angkor Wat from decay, and so France is the true inheritor of this magnificent culture.⁷

Concept of colonialism in Norindr’s work also exposes paradox of modernity. Walter Benjamin argues that modernity does not destroy magical charm of the modern world; in contrast, modern technology is used to bring back fantasy world; much in the same way as how *Exposition*, while displaying modern technology, also uses it to create colonial world that is full of colonizer’s dream and fantasy about colonies, as reflected in the replica of Angkor Wat. Touring *Exposition* is like sleepwalking in the colonizer’s dream which supports Benjamin’s notion that modernity can make the world magical again.

“Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” and Thainess Consumption

Norindr’s concept of colonialism can be applied to explain the presentation of “Thainess” in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End.” The festival is a vintage-themed fair where visitors can learn about Thainess while having fun. Its purpose is stated in the event’s PR brochure that says, “People can come to the festival and have fun, be happy, and enjoy pleasant atmosphere that recalls history... They can also learn Thai way of life from the ancient days up to the present time...”

“Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” was held at the Royal Plaza on the ground of Dusit Palace and Sanam Suea Pa with Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall in the background. On the left hand side was Dusit Palace; while on the right hand side was a scaled down replica of Vimanmek Mansion. The highlight of the festival was a full size replica of “Suphannahong” royal barge decorated with fountains and flowers at the center. Staffs in the fair all wore Thai traditional clothes. Apart from enjoying “Thai” vintage atmosphere and admiring exquisite Thai architecture, visitors can also join various activities, for example, wearing traditional clothes and taking photographs, visiting exhibition booths to learn more about Thai arts and cultures, touring Thailand’s first bank and post office, making DIY crafts, shopping products, watching shows or enjoying outdoor screening and tasting ancient Thai cuisine. While joining these activities, visitors can have fun and learn about Thainess in the same time.

“Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” uses Thainess as its selling point. As same as in

⁷ The replica of Angkor Wat in *Exposition* is an example of how colonists rebuild Angkor Wat to fulfill their desire; Angkor Wat was removed from its original context and rearranged within the context of colonialism.

commodity world of capitalism, the organizer uses design and display technology to create imagery of marvelous Thainess and attract visitors. For example, the highlight of the festival is a full size replica of “Suphannahong” royal barge decorated with fountains and flowers at the center with Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall at the back, Dusit Palace on the left and a replica of Vimanmek Mansion on the right. Siam in the past was magically beautiful and romantic, especially at night when decorated lights make this world of the past dazzling as if in dream. Visitors are impressed as can be seen in comments online; some say, “Let’s go there. It’s fun. You can stroll around taking photos with friends or take your parents or children there to change atmosphere.” “The festival is exquisitely beautiful. Common people like me have never seen something like this before.” “My dream comes true! Traveling back to the past is possible.” Siam in the past was charming and luring. This world of the bygone era presented in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” is similar to “Indochina” created by French colonizer’s imagination. Like Indochina which Norindr calls “the colonial phantasmatic,” the world of the bygone era in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” may be called “the national phantasmatic” as well. The imagery of grandiose and magical Thainess is created by concealing its origin or production, including design, display and labour behind the process. By obliterating its origin, arranged images of Thainess seem to appear in the festival by themselves, similar to phantasmagoria in magic lantern show or commodities displayed in showcases.⁸

Apart from presenting spectacles of Thainess to kindle desire in visitors, the festival also needs exotic and spectacular, not ordinary, Thainess as its selling point. Similar to *Exposition* that represents colonial village and images of the natives in different activities to provide something exotic and spectacular for its visitors, Thainess represented in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” is royal court culture that is rarely seen. For visitors who are commoners, visiting the festival is like stepping into the world of aristocrats or the upper class. Visitors, affected by exoticism, rarity and antiquity, then desire to consume or possess this Thainess. Cuisine is a distinct example of how the festival uses Thainess as selling point. “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” presents rare ancient dishes from royal court such as *Kesorn Lamchiak* (rolled sticky rice stuffed with coconut floss), *Khangkhao Pheuak* (fried stuffed taro), *Kanom Buang Boran* (old style Thai crispy pancake) and *Kanom Khao Sang Yod* (snack made from Sang Yod rice). Some visitors want to go tasting these ancient dishes as some say, “There are lots of foods in the festival; most are from Chitralada Vocational School. Savory dishes, desserts and drinks are all there to enjoy.” “I want to taste them all. So beautiful and

⁸ A phantasmagoric image is created by modern technologies; however, its production is erased in order to make it seem real. As same as phantasmagoria, Thainess found in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” is something we can see and touch even though it does not really exist.

seems worth visiting. Food looks delicious.” “Professionally organized. The best of the best. Foods are all delicious. Don’t know how they do that though. I want this again at the end of the year.”

Besides, “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” becomes a chance to wear traditional Thai costumes which is something that will not fit in daily life, so many people go to the festival for this purpose. These are some reactions: “Where did you guys find traditional clothes for men and women to wear to ‘Love and Warmth’ festival? We want to go there wearing traditional dress too. Thanks.” and “It’s real fun. I enjoy it very much [...] We can proudly wear traditional dress walking around city center, especially around historical areas.” Most of the visitors are middle-class from the capital who want to tangibly experience exotic ancient way of life; attracted by this desire to consume Thainess, they go to the festival and, without being aware, learn more about Thainess by that means.

Going to “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” seems to be like sleepwalking in Thai elite’s fantasy as the national culture presented here is the upper class’s culture which has its center in Bangkok. However, despite being an elite culture, “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” shows that this kind of culture is approachable through consuming or possessing commodities, for example, by taking photographs with “Suphannahong” royal barge which is the festival’s highlight, taking 3D photographs at Dusit Palace, taking vintage photographs in the studio, tasting ancient Thai food and dressing like courtiers. Visitors have a chance to attach themselves with objects or places that were once prohibited for commoners and mimic the elite’s lifestyles. “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” thus creates a distorted illusion that Thai society is a society with equality where there is no class discrimination. Presentations and displays of Thainess in form of commodities also affirm capitalist ideology which focuses on individualism, freedom and equality. Moreover, “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” as a vintage-themed festival is a satisfaction of the desire to ‘be Thai’ in the globalized world. Visiting the fair, therefore, offers a chance to travel through time and live in the fantasy world. This is reflected in some of the visitors’ comments, for example, “I want this festival to be held annually. I like it very much. The vibe is great and it is a chance to wear beautiful Thai clothes. Seeing everybody in traditional dress makes me feel like I can travel back to the ancient time.” “So enjoyable. It’s like traveling through time to the past.” “It’s such a lovely festival. I wore traditional dress as if I were in an ancient era.” “I went there yesterday. The festival was beautiful. I was enchanted by the vintage vibe and feel as if I were really in the ancient era. I had to tell myself to wake up when I came back.” Visitors are not merely spectators but they can be a part of this bygone world by joining various activities such as wearing Thai clothes, eating Thai food and learning Thai arts and handicrafts.

“Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” and Fantasy of Happiness

Same as NCPO’s song “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand,” “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” also uses happiness as political tool to drive Thai society. The festival is well-received as many people want to have this kind of festival again. Visitors also share their reviews on the internet, making “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” become popular in the public and attracting people from various places to come visit the festival. The media reports the success of “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End,” saying that there are more than million people who joined the festival. It also cites an official staff from His Majesty’s personal agency who says, “His Majesty has overseen the organization of this festival and is delighted to see that his people are happy and impressed by Thai way of life from the age of King Rama V to King Rama IX’s era, especially when they appreciate the bond between the monarchy and Thai people” (Khao Nai Phra Ratchasamnaks, 2018, Matichon Daily). The success of “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” shows that the objective of this festival, as stated in PR brochure that “[His Majesty] wants to make Thai people happy and to disseminate the beautiful Thai culture,” is achieved. This objective also reflects that happiness and Thainess are inseparable.

Visiting “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End,” which represents Thainess from the past era, creates happiness. Ahmed says, “If an object affects us in a good way with joy, then it is good for us [...] Whether something harms or helps us is matter of how we are affected by it” (Ahmed, 2010b, p.23). Happiness, which results from an attachment between an individual and an object, assigns meaning to the object as something good. Goodness, therefore, is not an innate quality of an object but a result of affective attachment that shapes our perception towards particular object. In “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End,” happiness creates an attachment between visitors and Thainess, convincing us to see Thainess as something good. This positive attitude towards Thainess, including its related signs such as the monarchy and the nation, is elicited after visitors have experienced and been impressed by Thainess represented in the festival, as reflected in these comments: “I am so impressed with this vintage vibe. Thainess is the most charming.” “Because of His Majesty’s kindness, Thai people who visit the festival are full of joy. Everybody is happy and full of smiles.” “What an impressive festival! People are kind and cheerful. All are united with their loyalty to the king and the nation. The atmosphere is beautiful and heartwarming. I am endlessly grateful to His Majesty. I want this festival to be held every year.” “This is an indescribable grace of His Majesty. He has ordered the organization of this festival. Going there really helps relieve my stress and makes me become happier.” These examples show that goodness is not an innate quality of Thainess. In contrast, its value and meaning come from an attachment between visitors and the environment, atmosphere, people and objects in the festival. Happiness and

joy brought about by the festival elicit pride in being Thai, love in the nation, along with respect and loyalty to the monarchy.

Although “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” represents Thainess from the bygone era, the purpose of this festival lies in the future as the past is recreated to give hope towards the future. Through visiting “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End,” visitors have a chance to experience the fantasy world of prosperous and peaceful Siam of the past, and this notion that “Siam was once great” will bring about hope about the great Siam in the future. Supamit Pitipat (2012), while discussing about community of memory, says that “Community of memory is not all about the past, but it connects past and future to us in the present.” Supamit has cited Bellah, et.al. who argue that “Community of memory that connects us to the past is the same community that gives us hope towards the future. It creates a meaningful context that helps connect the expectations of us and of those around us to the greatest expectation above all” (Quoted in Supamit p. 124). The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good.

Supamit’s argument on community of memory helps us understand how the concept of time works in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End.” Representing the past that creates expectation of happiness that will happen in the future, this vintage-themed winter festival is not different from NCPO’s “Bring Back Happiness to Thailand” as both have promise of happiness as the same theme. Susan Stewart (1993) says, “Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (p. 23). Stewart sees nostalgia as a form of fantasy since what we long for has never existed; nostalgia is thus an emotion without any real content. However, nostalgia has a power to create and drive community. What is important in “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” is, therefore, not the content but the aroused emotions; happiness from visiting the festival nourishes hope and unite people together.

The organization of “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End” exposes the crisis of happiness currently happening in Thailand. Happiness is a form of affective practice; having it as a goal will lead us to an act that we believe will bring us happiness. In “Love and Warmth at Winter’s End,” happiness is related with Thainess. The head of the state and government’s leader want to make Thai people happy by organizing the festival that represents Thainess of the bygone era. Thainess therefore leads to happiness, and as a happy object, it is valued as a good thing. The state then encourages people to adhere to this Thainess as it is virtuous and

will bring happiness to all of us. Happiness not only makes Thainess become valuable but it also defines Thainess as its source (happiness cause). Similar to NCPO's Twelve Values, traditional Thainess is what we should all practice because it will bring us happiness. The crisis of happiness happening in Thailand is a result of straying away from the right path; that is, Thai people are ignoring Thainess and other values that come with it, including pacifism, harmony, loyalty and respect to the nation, religion and monarchy. This crisis then solicits strict adherence to Thainess; its value and ideology are righteous and unquestionable because they will bring the desired happiness. Lack of happiness is not a result of defects in these value or ideology but it is because Thai people have not practiced or adhered to these values seriously enough. The crisis of happiness, therefore, urges us to return and adhere to the conventional Thainess greater than ever.⁹

Conclusion

The selected social phenomena like the song "Bring Back Happiness to Thailand" and the festival "Love and Warmth at Winter's End" are examples of the illusion or fantasy of happiness. Happiness that these 2 study cases provide is only a promise because if happiness is really brought back, the happy object—the thing that we desire because we believe it will bring us happiness—will no longer be desirable. The fantasy of Thainess makes it become what we desire. The happiness given by the government and the media is also only a fantasy. The "bring back happiness" policy, or the promise of happiness, does not return happiness to the people; in contrast, it makes us endure all unresolved hardships and social problems. Fantasy of happiness is what makes this unhappy state tolerable. Therefore, the vintage-themed fair like "Love and Warmth at Winter's End" plays an important part in political world for it can create this fantasy of happiness. Despite being only a shadow or phantasmagoria, the fantasy of happiness has a power to drive politics and society; it makes us believe that the society is moving forward, while in reality many people are stuck in "impasse"¹⁰ facing depression, desperation and dead-end situations, as can be seen from many suicide cases on the news. Suicide now happens almost every day to the point that we become accustomed to it as if it is part of our daily life. Since fantasy of happiness is a force existing in particular context and can disappear or be intensified, it is not surprising that "Love and Warmth at Winter's End" will be held annually or that NCPO has continuously produced new songs—all of this is to make sure that fantasy of happiness will remain in the society.

⁹ Ahmed discusses that "The demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them" (Ahmed, 2010b, p.7).

¹⁰ See more in Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*.

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