

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the social production of art in Thailand viewing art as an integral part of culture. Art plays a role in the creation and reflection of a world view and of economic, political and social systems, therefore it is a useful medium in which to study culture and the channels for diffusion of culture.

The research questions regarding the ways and extent that the agents in the network of art production enable or confine the art that is produced, meant initially a macro-structural approach was taken to outline the agents/actors. Royal and religious patrons, government agencies, corporate and banking sponsors, educational and cultural institutes, family networks, artist groups, dealers, curators, individual collectors, the media and the impact of tourism were identified at various levels; Bangkok, national, regional and international, and the movements between these levels, the interactions and processes have been discussed.

The thesis has examined the economic socio-political conditions of the 1980s and 1990s in Thailand and detailed the numerous ways in which art production has been supported and restricted via government policies, education, the ordering of commissions, the sponsoring of exhibitions and competitions with prizes of cash, travel, foreign study, assisting with funding for exhibitions, catalogues, purchase fees, sales, auctions,

inclusion in international exhibitions, tours, publications and general encouragement, exposure and direction. This reveals a complex and competitive environment where patronage and commoditisation (support and exchange) are key processes.

The theoretical background began linking art forms with cultural social theories of dominance, status, power, and the elite. The agendas of dominant groups, those that are socially positioned to chose, have been considered regarding art's role in legitimating or upholding political and class structures, according to theory formulated by Pierre Bourdieu. Theories of world power regarding wealth and colonial expansion, such as the World-system theories introduced the theme of 'core-periphery' or hegemonic power. These theories were considered on global and national levels; viewing Siam/Thailand as the receiver of foreign influences at various periods in the past and today, and also within the country, with Bangkok as the core, i.e. the centre of educational, economic, political power which draws from the provinces. From data presented in Chapter 5 we may conclude that a relatively small group of individuals in a rather closed circle dominate the production/patronage of art in Thailand. These involve a few large surviving businesses from the banking and corporate sector, government cultural bodies, judges on the committees of the main national art competitions (which overlap to a great extent), favoured artists from the central art institute and not more than three curators.

Chapter 3 has described how, at various times in Thai history, art has been used as a tool to project an image of the country deemed fitting by the power of the time, as a form of support for the ruling regime. Certain cultural elements have been supported and the ideology of the dominant group, a small group of elite, has played a considerable part in the creation and adoption of style, and image or identity on national, organisational and individual levels. Art has been used in displays of wealth and culture both outside and inside the country. Because culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience, the historical section outlined the stages of art's development, from very early folk art which expressed surroundings and was free of politics, to the 1998 situation. Patrons in the past have demanded religious or mythological subject matter, and references have been made to the Traiphum, the Buddhist hierarchical cosmology, which has been used as a symbolically and politically potent means to justify social inequality. More research is required into the specific contemporary uses of this symbolism.

International fairs at the turn of the century displayed Thai arts in attempts to portray an image of a 'civilised' nation. The 'exotic' image of the country was also captured and has been similarly exploited more recently in Thai government tourism campaigns. King Chulalongkorn's adoption of western culture is regarded as a defensive strategy against the colonial pressures and led the way for the introduction of European influences to Thai art and culture. In response to this

western cultural invasion, nationalist reactions by King Vajiravudh and the military dictatorships following World War II emphasised stability, continuity, and a revival of tradition. These themes were encouraged in government-sponsored art, aiming to show the world Thailand's 'precious values'. Foreign forces and aid entering Thailand during 1960-70 had a positive impact on art activities, with increasing support from the international cultural centres, the establishment of the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, and a greater demand for Thai art among foreigners. Foreign support, in the form of scholarships of cash prizes, international travel and study, presented Thai artists with new opportunities and stimulated the reproduction of foreign ideas, equipment and forms. As a reaction against the U.S. and Japanese presence, a return to traditional Thai values was advocated in the 1970s, the beginning of the neo-traditional art movement.

Economic development has fuelled the growth of banks and corporate power and their interest in art patronage via sponsorship of competitions and commissions with royal, religious and nationalistic themes, which enhance the prestige of the patron. Money-making and merit-making converge when business profits are spent on such meritorious projects as temple construction, restoration, and support for the production of Buddhist art. In this way, reputations as patriotic, morally-sound and responsible contributors to society can be built.

By the mid-eighties, still very few Thais were interested in art. However, subsequent economic rapid growth increased incomes, which led to rampant consumerism and materialism in society and also stimulated new customers in the art market. Seeking status through the purchase of luxury products, the new Thai 'art lovers' were from the rising Thai middle class, educated, sophisticated and urban. Within this audience, modern living has fostered a nostalgia for traditional culture and lost rural ways, another popular theme for some Thai artists.

Increasingly treated as a commodity in the developing capitalist market system, Thai art has taken on new interpretations as the artwork has moved from sacred or private spaces to public commercial contexts, fulfilling alternative decorative functions. The themes of many of these works express a certain recognisable 'Thainess' in the application of Buddhist themes and elements. The exploitation of traditional Thai art by the business world is shown clearly in examples such as paintings of temples used in television corporate advertising, the decoration of an American fast food restaurant in Bangkok with traditional Thai motifs, and religious mural paintings adorning bank headquarters. As market economics appear to operate in the art world, wealth and sources of funds play a significant part in the social production of art process. Rich Sino-Thais and their businesses have come to play leading roles in art patronage in Thailand in the eighties and nineties.

Market development has encouraged trading and dealing, and furthered commoditisation via increased flow and exchange. The establishment of prices in sales of artwork calls for value judgements and is therefore open to manipulation. Mediation by galleries between artists and buyers highlights the issues of expert knowledge, authenticity and exclusivity. As a commodity, art's varying levels of value relate to aesthetics, taste and status. The issue of the elite as style carriers and taste makers has been followed in this thesis.

It appears that as a result of differing patterns of art development, Thai bourgeois taste differs from the French taste researched by Bourdieu and outlined in Chapter 2. Art patronage in France shifted from religious institutions to secular patrons, such as the Medici family, centuries ago, thus French taste has been steadily built over a long period of investment in art, as a form of cultural capital. In the Thai situation, art's development has been more linear with royal and religious patrons followed by comparatively-recent corporate involvement. Although the means and forms of patronage have changed, the same messages appear to be reproduced, with no major break in style. Buddhist and royal themes persist in the corporate-sponsored art, serving to support continuity and national stability. In Thailand, the consensus is followed and art follows bureaucracy, politics and government, rather than having an independent voice.

One result of the development of the capitalist market model is a rise of individualism and the

independent artist. In the past, parents may have prayed their children would not become artists because of the impecunious existence, but in the competitive environment of the 1980s and early 1990s, a new status and new opportunities were created for Thai artists. From early unsigned work, we note the emergence of signed works and then the establishment of Thai artists with considerable personal reputation today. The creation of a profession provides people with the opportunity to make money, but it often means the sacrifice of spirit to accommodate demands of patrons and consumers in the market. In the Thai art case, this may include pandering to sponsors or collectors seeking decorative/entertaining art or to follow the safe, traditional, middle way.

At the same time, the growth of tourism as a result of Thai government 'Exotic' and 'Amazing' promotional campaigns has increased the interest in 'typical' Thai art. The taste of foreign tourists has made an impression on the Thai art market, attracted to this alternative to the homogenised global art scene. This increasingly impersonal international audience, perhaps unaware of ethnic background and ignorant of symbolic meanings, gives Thai art new and different meanings to new receivers. Therefore the producer-consumer relationship has double significance, in terms of both symbolic and economic exchange.

Had this paper been completed eight months earlier, as scheduled, the data, conclusion and projections would have been different, for during the last few months it has become very clear that, for now,

Thailand's boom is over. Once flowing sources of funding for art have dried up. The example of a previously-dominant and generous patron in the art world, the Bangkok Bank, declining to support a planned exhibition by well-known northern artists in January 1998, until persuaded by the endorsement and co-operation of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, is one indication of these changed times. Many of the interviews conducted before the middle of 1997 might yield different plans and visions if re-conducted today. Hence in some respects this research has already dated, but it is hoped that the broader view of this change has been encapsulated.

More research is needed to build on this initial effort. Study on the impact and effectiveness of art educational programmes in their various forms would be useful towards establishing a more receptive art audience. As the concept of art appreciation is relatively recent in Thailand, time is needed for its development which should naturally come about as the Thai middle class grows. This process can't be hurried, but it can be supported by the setting up of an infrastructure and funding for art education and criticism. It is acknowledged that Thai society does not traditionally display a 'critical' culture, in that confrontation and challenge to the hierarchy is avoided. This makes the development of factual and intellectual (art) criticism difficult and partly accounts for the lack of art critics in the country. The need to educate agents involved in the management, production, distribution and reception of art is recognised and being addressed to some extent by

the various seminars run by, for example; Toshiba and Silpakorn University, Project 304, Marsi Gallery, and About Café. There is also a need for introductory programmes and accessible information, such as small booklets, which can capture the interest of the uninitiated art viewer in the general public. The publication of large coffee table art books will not reach a wide audience and creates a significant point of manipulation, in terms of inclusion of artists and promotion of individual careers. Although art coverage in the media is quite wide with columns in daily Thai and English newspapers, more depth in art criticism articles is required. This could be achieved by the training of the media and critics. A greater flow of information through museums and libraries, facilitated by technology and the production and maintenance of quality internet web-sites for promoting Thai art, such as those managed by Singapore and San Francisco Art Galleries, may stimulate and broaden the Thai art world. Low attendance at exhibitions is a significant stumbling block for organisers of arts events who must research further into the public interests, to find ways to catch attention and draw people to primary art experiences. Projects like the *Huay Kwang* public performance art and the *Prachan Siew* (Crescent Moon) theatre group 'dial-up a drama,' attempt to take Thai art to the people, and organisers need to assess these efforts in exploring ways to build audiences.

With Thai government budget cuts and a general economic malaise, arts organisations need to become more

sophisticated and innovative about marketing and generating revenue sources. Imagination and creative effort need to be extended to the realities of survival. In the past, art was supported by philanthropy, but it is now insufficient to limit fund raising strategies to the solicitation of donations from wealthy individuals or organisations. Membership schemes and merchandising, such as mail orders for limited edition prints, posters, cards, T-shirts, presents, etc., the rental of gallery space as a private party setting, café food and fun activities should all be considered when planning - not as extras but integral parts of project operation and income generation. Focusing arts funding on marketing and public relations may be distasteful to some purists, but calls for the government to provide more funding for arts will fall on deaf ears during this period of austerity. The cash-strapped government bodies known for inefficiency and favouritism should be by-passed in the efforts to sustain Thai art. A comparison of the government spending on arts in relation to other areas (such as sports, defence etc.) may be useful.

Planners of art and cultural projects should give special thought to children and more research could be conducted on how young Thais today react to neo-traditional Thai art, what it means to them, what messages they infer, particularly from art in the new spaces such as fast food restaurants. A study of differential perceptions of art products by local and foreign consumers would be useful, as well as an analysis of Thai artwork in private and museum collections abroad.

Assuming that many local Thai previous-buyers of art will be limited in purchasing power in the near future, foreign/tourist buyers may become more dominant in the art market during the next few years. The economic decline has created a sub market of foreign buyers due to the swing in baht power. Analysis of gallery records may reveal useful information on sales of art to tourists, noting the differences between purchases for self and for gift (to kin, or friend/colleague). What allowances are made to fit the circumstances of the relationship? How do the prices vary? Research into tourist arts suggests buyers look for novelty or typicality e.g. in motifs, but familiarity in colours and colour combinations, forms and functions (Cohen, 1992). Study into the question of adaptation of art to perceived tastes and preferences of external public may be difficult to undertake, yet may provide interesting data. Customer preferences, such as the reported Japanese buyer inclination towards pastel colours and the apparent attraction of gold for banking and corporate institutions could be followed up and tested. Notwithstanding the environmental sculptures which have been commissioned by at least one large bank and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, paintings, as opposed to installations, performance etc., are apparently the preferred form of art for corporate buyers. Research into the impact of such preferences on the production of artworks would be valuable. New aesthetics and alternative colours and materials in particular spaces, such as the use of neon acrylic paints in the neo-traditional murals at Wat Buddhaphipa in

London raise questions regarding changes in symbolic meaning. Gold, with its traditional uses and symbolic allure conjuring the powerful, sacred and expensive, could be analysed regarding new meaning and impact on viewers in new locations such as hotel lobbies.

The scheduled auctioning of assets of the 56 failed finance companies in June 1998 includes a number of considerable art collections (SITCA Investments and Securities Plc, Finance One Plc, General Finance & Securities Plc, Premier Finance & Securities Plc, and United Finance Plc.) which were acquired during the early nineties boom period. These artworks could be usefully documented, and past purchase prices could be compared to the 1998 auction prices to reflect movements in the market and valuations. These collections could also be analysed for style preferences, themes, media and prices. Concerns that works by famous dead Thai artists and the best examples of contemporary Thai art may be bought by foreign collectors and end up in museums and galleries abroad may have raised the values of this 'national treasure' and stirred nationalistic feelings which could be investigated. The involvement of international art dealers, Christies, in these auctions may have the effect of bringing Thai art further into the world art market, which may effectively promote Thai art, Thai artists and the country.

A more detailed assessment of the Thai art market could be carried out with more in-depth interviews with a greater number of artists, patrons, dealers, tourists, collectors and other agents in the network. The

irrational nature of the market, reflected in the opening of five new galleries during the difficult economic period of September 1997 to March 1998, and the closing of two of the largest tourist hotel galleries, is a phenomenon which requires further explanation. Research should investigate what the new or the more successful galleries offer and monitor their performances, view ramifications for the location and character of the new large art museum projects planned by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the Rama IX Art Museum Foundation. The 'artwork purchase' experience needs to be explored in more depth. Buying art directly from the artist reduces 'hands' therefore suggests greater authenticity and lower cost, which is what the buyer is seeking. Further research into the modern role of the dealer in Thailand may be helpful, and more information is needed on the changing roles of women as art producers, distributors and purchasers.

A detailed review of competition judges, prizes and prize winners would supplement the initial data provided in this thesis. The impact of specific religious and royal occasions on the production of art, in terms of proportion of output and inclusion of specific motifs could be explored further.

Changes in art forms due to contemporary constraints could be studied. Mural painter Than Koot's disappointment at the destruction of his murals in the Montien Hotel following its refurbishment led him to recommend to his children that they paint murals for hotels on silk. In submitting concepts to international

exhibitions, Thai artists must consider cargo/transport fees and therefore materials and dimensions of planned artworks may be influencing factors in the final product.

Closer co-operation among Asian artists in the future, via more exchanges, will widen perspectives and intercultural understanding. Investigating the relationships of art, culture, society and economy in other places and periods could be undertaken using the framework of this thesis. Vietnam and Thailand received Western art training at approximately the same time, therefore it may be of interest to analyse and compare the Vietnamese situation, with its alternative economic system.

The adage that the best art is produced from difficult (economic) circumstances may be tested in Thailand in the next few years. This thesis has paid attention to the financial determinants of the content of the cultural product, art, while ideological factors have also been considered. The relationship of ideology and art is not one of exact replication; theories of ideology are not reductionist but are essential to analysis. By interpreting the works of art regarding the themes and content, the messages and ambiguities, the juxtaposition of old/traditional and new/modern symbols, the sacred and profane, and the new contexts, a greater understanding is forged. An in-depth semiotic analysis of Thai iconography, and how symbol systems are used to carry messages and are situated in defined historical contexts and specific social conditions, would increase understanding of how the content and message of art is produced, received, and

interpreted by viewers. The use of traditional forms such as sacred Buddha images and other religious symbols in modern commercial contexts such as banks, corporate showrooms and hotels requires further analysis. How has the symbol of the *garuda* (a mythical beast and vehicle of god Indra in Hindu mythology) been used to represent the monarch in Thailand and subsequently appropriated by banks, and with what effect?

Internationally, religion has been at the centre of recent attempts to isolate and define identity. References to currency speculator George Soros' Jewish background, made by Islamic Asian leaders facing economic crises, is one indication of the levels at which religious self-definition operates. Highlighting certain characteristics of Thai people such as their history, tradition and identity as 'exceptional' is a means of stimulating patriotism, which all countries encourage, but such a strategy can lead to ethnocentrism and a negative form of nationalism.

Thai government cultural revival campaigns, supported by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, have used Thai art to further the image of 'Thainess.' Repetitive traditional Buddhist themes and forms in corporate-sponsored Thai art today support the idea that 'to be Thai is to be Buddhist' and reassert the concepts of roots, heritage, unity and homogeneity, supporting the view of a unique Thai identity (*ekalak Thai*). Instead of defending and promoting national identity via history, culture and art, it would be more valuable in today's internationally-linked world to adopt a global vision

which situates the country's identity in the geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and study points in common. As cultural forms are hybrid and not fixed, we may explore how we are mixed with one another, rather than highlighting differences.

This investigation of the numerous determinants and mediators of cultural production, in this case art, does not seek to prove that they are always operative in the same way with the same force, but has intended to sensitise and increase awareness of the various factors involved in the process. Studying Thai art in a social and cultural context has been a valuable experience which has aided my attempts to explore and understand Thai culture and society.



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