

Abstract

The thesis is an attempt to understand one aspect of social transformations to consumer culture in Thailand by tracing the development of the notion of taste (or rot ni yom in Thai). The study concentrates on the processes through which taste has come to be perceived as an individual's ability to appreciate what is beautiful; as well as to identify one's social standing in society. The use and meaning of clothing serve as a case study.

The Thai word for taste was first coined 60 years ago. It emerged in the writings of Thai aristocrats to refer to an ability to appreciate the aesthetic value and the fine quality of things. During that time, members of the traditional elite group were in decline financially and their high social status was threatened by the new rich. Taste thus emerged as an attempt to maintain high status in society through knowledge of etiquettes, clothing, and other cultural practices. It replaced birth and merit as a mark of class distinction.

The expansion of industrial capitalist economy, the growth of democracy, and the changes in political power brought a new phase in the history of social transformations. This phase was marked by the ideology of liberty, equality and choice. The system of mass production made it possible to buy imitations of high fashion at a low price. Styles of fashion became much more diversified through the development of marketing and advertising.

Taste too became diversified and was no longer dominated by any particular class. As consumer culture began to set in, clothing became an expression of individual's choice and freedom. In contemporary Thai society, social relations are no longer based on face-to-face interaction. Taste, as expressed by consumption of clothing, serves as a social language to communicate messages about each individual, and his or her place in society.