

Thailand in the Discourse of Chinese Mass Media: Discourse of Ladyboys as a Discursive Tactic¹

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Abstract

Among all the Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is the most popular one in the Chinese mass media, especially the internet media. How is Thailand presented in Chinese mass media? Why does Chinese mass media shape Thailand in its specific way? These issues are to be discussed in this article. The article refers to Norman Fairclough's discourse analysis theory to analyze the coverage related to Thailand in Chinese media. The article is featured mainly by five aspects: (1) information about Thailand is mainly in the non-official or alternative (not mainstream) media; (2) except for some official documents and diplomatic information, almost all the exposure about Thailand is limited or related to travel columns; (3) ladyboys and Buddhism are the most important key words related to Thailand; (4) while Buddhism is only a void concept lacking enough interpretation or deep exploration, there is abundant content about ladyboys in Thailand; (5) the focus

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around the ladyboy topic is body/flesh. Considering the dominant ideology in China after 1949, the author argues it is actually a discursive tactic of comparatively weak media which, on the one hand, has to obey the dominant ideology and its related rules in that country, and, on the another hand, hopes to attract its readers to capture the power to break into the array of mainstream media. As a by-product, this tactic has helped to shape the stereotype of Thailand in the Chinese mass media discourse. From the analysis of the discourse of ladyboys, the author also provides insight into the Chinese journalistic expertise, and offers a tripolar interactional expertise model.

Introduction

During the Chinese Spring Festival in 2012, there was a blockbuster movie named *Lost in Thailand* which captured a great deal of attention in China and attracted more than 40 million people to go to the movie and the box-office revenues finally reached more than 10 billion Yuan. Up until now, it is the most successful domestic made movie in China in terms of the revenues.³ As a consequence, a lot of Chinese tourists are now crowding the islands and beaches of Thailand.⁴ What is worthy to mention about the movie is not the marketing success, but the stereotype of Thailand presented in it. In the movie, there is a very funny episode related to a Thailand stereotype. When one character, who is traveling with a tourist group in Thailand for the first time to pray for his sick mother, asks another character, a business man who has visited Thailand many times and knows more about Thailand, whether or not the pretty girl besides them in the elevator is a Ladyboy? The businessman answers with a

³ The data is cited from QQ website 21 March 2014 < <http://ent.qq.com/a/20130121/000087.htm> >.

⁴ See Han, “The hot movie *Lost in Thailand* pushed the Chinese tourists to go to Thailand”, 3 (in Chinese).

sneer: “Yes, she/he is.”⁵ And from now on every pretty girl you meet will be a ladyboy.” Though it is a taunt, it does display a stereotype of Thailand in China. Actually, in the view of a lot of Chinese, Thailand means ladyboys or alternatively a lot of sensual bodies.

Thailand is one of the most popular travel destinations for Chinese tourists. Though a lot of people visit Thailand every year, and a lot of business has been conducted between these two countries, the stereotype of Thailand in China is still prevalent. Almost every Chinese person will refer to “ladyboys” when they talk of Thailand, as if there is nothing but “ladyboys” in Thailand. Where does the stereotype come from? What is the original purpose and significance to shape such a stereotype? These issues will be discussed in this article.

In the first section I will discuss the special social atmosphere after 1949, when the People’s Republic of China, so called New China, was founded. After 1949, but before 1978, a lot of things were prohibited under the new regime; daily life was almost nothing but a political struggle. The topic of flesh or sex was almost a taboo for ordinary people, though people were still unable to reject sexual temptation. However, after China’s Reform and Opening in 1978, an obvious change, regarding people’s attitudes towards the so-called capitalist world, took place in the daily life of Chinese people, though the previous ideology was still dominant. After 1988, there even came fashion magazines, which once were thought as the representation of the life style of bourgeois. With the emergence and the growth of fashion magazines, life atmosphere was revived. During the 1990s, the situation changed even more profoundly than before, sometimes the flesh/pornographic topic became the most attractive one at some places, though it was still not a fully open and wildly accepted discourse.

In the second section of this article, I refer to Fairclough’s discourse analysis theory to analyze the media content related to Thailand. I have detected five features about Thailand: (1) information

⁵ People can not tell ‘he or she’ in Chinese and just rely on the context of the words. In Chinese, ‘he or she’ is pronounced the same as *ta*.

related to Thailand is mostly seen on non-official or minor media; (2) except for some official documents and diplomatic information, almost all the exposure about Thailand is limited or related to travel columns; (3) ladyboys and Buddhism are the most common key words related to Thailand; (4) in the mass media in China, Buddhism is insufficiently introduced and lacks deep exploration, but the introduction and reports about ladyboys are quite abundant; (5) the interest of the media in ladyboys focuses on flesh.

Based on these findings, I have made further analyses in the third section, and try to interpret the detected features in the discourse analysis frame. In fact, as non-official media, they are either new or weak, and yet have not had a position in the state media landscape. In order to pursue a higher status in the state media system, these media produced subtle flesh related content, and hope to satisfy the people's thirst, and thus bring about high circulation as a reward. So it can be said that these media use a discourse of flesh as a weapon to attack the media establishment, but at the same time, just like all the media practitioners at that time, they are clearly aware about the flesh or sex taboo, so they tactically resort to any related, but still safe, flesh content to attract the readers' attention. Ladyboys in Thailand is an ideal type. Though the content is related to flesh, even sex, the heroes are foreigners. The issues like that can be explained as 'a kind of knowledge about exotic foreign countries'. When this "immoral" content originates in a foreign country, the intent to introduce this content sometimes can be justified under the official ideology frame to expand people's view or to help to understand or feel the advantage of Socialism; thus covering the immoral thing with a moral coat. So, considering the process and the social environment of discourse, I conclude that the stereotype of Thailand is actually a matter of discursive tactic, which has been employed by any alternative (sometimes even marginal) media to compete for its position in the state media system.

What needs to be demonstrated here are the concepts of flesh and body. Though flesh is often the synonym with body, some researchers still distinguish flesh from body:

the more immediate association of flesh with smelly materiality (as opposed to the abstractedness and generalizability of the term “body”) and its plasticity (as opposed to the bulkiness of the body) make it a more accurate word to use in relation to transformation and change.⁶

That is still not sufficient for my purpose to distinguish flesh from body. The more profound reason lies in the Chinese traditional culture about body. In the Chinese language, flesh is very different from body, and the Chinese word of flesh is *routi* (fleshy body), and *shengti* is body. In Chinese, it can not be confused, not just because the different meaning they have in English. Chinese use the term body in a very different way compared with that of Westerners. On some occasions, the Chinese uses body to refer to health, some times referring to life. According to Taoism, the body can even be cultivated or fostered. Of course, when people say the cultivation of body (*yangsheng*), the meaning of body is absolutely different with that of Westerners. In these situations, body not only means flesh, but also includes mind, spirit, life, and life situations etc., and it can not be separated into parts. Something like the esthetics of body in Chinese has a different meaning compared with the original meaning in English, though sometimes they do share the same meaning. Sometimes when a Chinese person says somebody knows a lot about how to cultivate the body, they probably mean somebody knows a lot about how to calm his mind, though sometimes they do mean somebody knows a lot about how to shape the body. In another word, body in Chinese (*shengti*) is more abstract and complex than it is in English. However, the equation that *shengti* in Chinese equals body in English has been set up for a very long period; in order to minimize the confusion, from the word ‘body’ when the reader puts the word in a Chinese context, I intentionally use ‘flesh’ in this article. The term flesh in this article means the sensual and lively body, lacking of any spiritual dimensions, related to sex distinctively, and especially when people talk of any specific part of the body.

⁶ Detsi-Diamanti, “Toward the future of flesh: an introduction”, 4.

Social atmosphere in China after 1949

After the establishment of New China in 1949, socialism as the only official and legal ideology dominated and influenced the people's daily life. In order to remain consistent with socialist morality, and to create a new China, the new leaders reset a series of new moral and behavior codes for people's activities of all kinds. In the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976), things even got worse. It seemed, with a radical's view, that the so called New China must be all new. So the New China was to be above all a country free of the "four olds", namely, old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking. Thus all ties to China's feudal and backward past were to be severed.⁷ During that period, traditional culture or heritage, whether in material form or nonmaterial form, was almost totally swept out. Confucianism, the most typical old feudal thinking and the standing dominant ideology of old China, was criticized thoroughly, and replaced with Maoism finally.

Compared with the past decades, two dramatic changes took place in daily life during that period. First, the atmosphere of normal daily life disappeared. Politics was the only thing everyone should be involved with. At that time, everyone was involved in class struggle. Mao called upon people to conduct class struggle at anytime and anywhere. In Mao's saying, "class struggle should be talked every day every month and every year". In one word, people's whole daily life was full of political issues. The social atmosphere was so severe that every one was anxious about his or her class status, and deeply worried to become suddenly the enemy of people without any foreshadowing.

The consequence of that was a vacuum of the life world. Those once normal topics or behavior then became abnormal and should be abandoned, even criticized seriously. That what now looks so common, could be blamed as abnormal at that time. For illustration, in 1964, just before the Cultural Revolution, in the *People's Daily*, the Chinese Communist party newspaper, there was a heated discussion about whether the choice of clothes styles was trivial or not. The

⁷ Wu, *Chinese fashion from Mao to now*, 2.

discussion started in a peaceful tone; however, with the ferment of the topic, the discussion finally became a political struggle against those who chose special costume styles. After the discussion, people came to an “agreement” on costume style. The “enlightened” people thought that those who were inclined to special costume style were influenced by capitalist ideology, and should be punished, even banished.⁸ In a very radical essay, the author even claimed that those who like Western costume style were traitors and must be annihilated.⁹ The monopoly of ideology resulted in the absence of flesh topic in the public sphere, let alone sex. Under the name of revolution, all topics related to flesh were prohibited. The clothing and hair style were all simple and stereotyped. As a revolutionist, according to the moral standards of that time, no one should/needed to waste their time on consideration of what and how to wear, since the flesh was reduced into a tool for the revolution – in Mao’s saying: “body is the capital of the revolution”. Thus the esthetics of flesh was not allowed for the revolutionists, and any decoration for the body was not only unnecessary, but also damned. The Western reporters once used the term “grey ants” or “blue ants” to describe the appearance of Chinese at that time. This is mentioned here not because the problem of outlook, but the outlook actually is a reflex of the awareness of flesh – which part of body should be emphasized or which part of body should be concealed. The unified appearance, at that time, finally rejected the awareness of flesh. Flesh, as a normal esthetic problem, was banished from daily life. As a material concept, flesh or esthetics of flesh was relegated to the enemies’ world, namely, the life style of the bourgeoisie. Until 1976, though Mao was still enshrined in lots of situations, radical Maoism was no longer a part of the experience of daily life.¹⁰ But that only means class struggle has not been so prevalent in daily life, the taboo of the topic of flesh still stands there starkly in the public sphere.

⁸ Xinhua News Agency, “Citizens of Shanghai are in high zealous to discuss the resistance of odd dress”, 2 (in Chinese); Xinhua News Agency, “The wave of the culture revolution of the proletariat is sweeping and surging on the streets of the capital”, 1 (in Chinese).

⁹ Xinhua News Agency, “Westerns fashion and the traitor’s soul”, 6 (in Chinese).

¹⁰ Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China*, 182.

However, this was only one side of the coin. On the other side, people were trying their best to search for every minor piece of information about flesh secretly in their private time. Once I interviewed a colleague who was in his twenties in the 1980s. I asked: “Since the esthetics of flesh was banished, there was nothing related to be gotten in movies or the media or any literature, didn’t you feel bored?” He answered slyly:

No, we didn’t. Yes, it’s true, we can’t get flesh or sex related content easily as today, but we learned to appreciate any minor information in any literature or movie. For example, I liked to see the woman spies in movies. In order to highlight their evil essence, their images were always presented in an opposite way. They often wore careful make-up and in fit clothes, it made the spies looked very sexy. They brought sensual exciting into a boring film. So a lot of people liked to see the enemies, especially the beautiful woman enemies in movies. I would like to say the esthetics of flesh actually never disappeared in daily life at all.

Almost every Chinese person who was in their puberty during that period shared a similar experience. In a memoir, a writer described the situation when they were entering puberty during the 1970s. Though the thinking or imaging about maturing flesh was not allowed, the growing up students still had very strong interests to explore it at every chance – though the esthetic of flesh had been prohibited, the fascination of flesh was still surging under the calm surface. According to the special criteria at that time, someone’s flesh would be judged more charming than others, not because people really saw it and compared it with others directly, but there was rumors about the person (normally was about women) who had encountered immoral behavior, such as been gazed at or been touched by a gangster. Just along this minus clue, people would enjoy to imagine the ‘tainted flesh’, and even put their admiration or appreciation on that flesh, though they pretended ignorance.¹¹

¹¹ Zhai, “The difficult position in the puberty”, 507-529 (in Chinese).

Why did people violate the moral discipline to search for excitement from flesh under such high pressure? The answer can not be easily ascribed to the animal's instinct, namely, Freudian libido, though we can not deny it totally. There are profound reasons, especially the unique cultural environment, namely traditional culture tastes, that should be, at least partially, responsible. China has a very long history of appreciating flesh, such as the notorious esthetics of the bound feet of women. However, it is not the issue of this article. In this article I would like to emphasize that the fascination with flesh is propagated, though not communicated in the public sphere. It is really a very important facet of Chinese culture. As a special culture group, Chinese do not always put everything in formal or official form. People are convinced by a lot of things and ideas, which are spread wildly, but lack accurate and detailed official records. It often puzzles Westerners when they have not been accustomed to it, and they always wonder why the Chinese can understand each other when there is not any unified clear standard or formal regulation.¹² Yum's research has found that the Chinese have a stronger ability to grasp and understand vague information than other culture groups.¹³ The reason that is partially responsible for this phenomenon is that Chinese people have two communication channels, one is open and official, the other is private and informal, sometimes even secret. The fascination of flesh is the latter case. When the new government started to sweep away the old things, those material things, such as sculptures, books, temples, etc., namely, the products under the name of any official culture can be destroyed. But those underneath ideas and thoughts can not be swept out easily. They are communicated patently and do not have any trace in the official documents. The special communicate character of the Chinese made the esthetic tradition of flesh still alive, even under the high pressure.

As a result, the world is separated into two discrepant areas, namely, public and private; alternatively, the official and the folk. The folk culture often runs on its own tracks. That is why some old

¹² Smith, *Chinese characteristics*, 39-48 (in Chinese).

¹³ Yum, "The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and communication patterns in east Asia."

traditions are still alive, even after a revolution of several decades. Perry found that the Socialism in China is not a simple copy of the Soviets, even though once the new government put the latter as the prototype, sometimes even as the ‘sample’, nor is it a totally new one, even though the country had undergone a radical revolution.¹⁴ The ideology of New China is a very complex blended one, accommodating the incompatible parts in a compatible structure. So is the fascination of flesh. Having endured a long period of assault, the esthetics of flesh is still prevalent, though we have to admit that the form and way were changed.

Thailand in the Discourse of Chinese Media

The rise of mass media after 1978

During the Cultural Revolutionary period, the number of media outlets was limited. Broadcast and newspapers were all regulated directly by the Chinese Communist Party; propaganda for the revolution was the only purpose for the media. Magazines were the only somewhat non-political media people could obtain. In order to unite the thinking to ensure the revolution proceeded, many magazines were closed during that period. Before the Cultural Revolution (1965), there were 790 magazines in China, but the number declined dramatically to only 21 in 1970. Not until 1975 did the number of magazine come to rise.¹⁵ During the Cultural Revolutionary period, nothing but the revolutionary discourse can be expected in the media.

After a decade of prohibition against life related content and topics, there was a sudden prosperity of magazines when the ban was finally lifted. Not only the number of magazine rose rapidly, but also the circulation was very huge. In addition to flesh related content, sometimes an actress photo would be a very strong motivation for people to purchase a magazine and read it. Even though China has entered the Reform and Opening process, flesh related content is still

¹⁴ Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's revolutionary tradition*.

¹⁵ The data is cited from the national bureau of statistics of People's Republic of China. National Bureau of Statistics, *Chinese statistics yearbook* (in Chinese).

thought of as an untouched topic, though people have very strong interest in it.

At the end of the 1980s, there came a profusion of magazines which opened a new media era in China. During this period, there even came fashion magazines, such as *ELLE* and later *Cosmopolitan*. However, there was hesitation for a long period for the press to publish fashion magazines, as the director of *ELLE China*, Mr. Luo Zaotian who said: “Once we dared not even publish novels such as *Butterfly Dream*, how can we publish fashion books?”¹⁶ Everyone knew that not only fashion itself was not compatible with the dominant ideology, but also the content those magazines presented, especially the content about flesh, even the sexual images, was opposite to the revolutionary discourse which had been dominating Chinese media for a comparatively long time. No one could predict what would be the result after publishing.

However, these magazines achieved success. At the end of the 1990s, there were a lot of magazines and new media in China. The content was more “active” and “bolder” than before. With the emergence of the internet, it seemed any life topics would be presented in media except those very special and private topics.

After development for three to four decades, the media system in China multiplied and became complex. However complex, the media system in China can be roughly separated into two camps, one is the mainstream media, particularly those whose owner is the state and financially supported by the government; the other is the alternative media, especially many internet media, they have to survive by themselves.

Analysis frame

I refer to Norman Fairclough’s discourse analysis theory to analyze the exposure related to Thailand in the Chinese mass media. Fairclough’s theory is not only theoretical, but also methodological. For Fairclough, discourse not only reflects reality, but also constructs reality. So the discourse analysis can illuminate the power structure

¹⁶ Luo, “Yiwen Press comes to the world”, 703 (in Chinese).

and power struggle behind the discourse. Fairclough sets three related dimensions to construct his discourse analysis theory, namely, text, discursive practice and social practice, and the analysis is conducted respectively under these three dimensions.¹⁷

The first dimension is analysis of text, seven aspects of the texts will be analyzed, namely, vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, text structure, the force of utterances, the coherence of texts, and intertextuality of texts. The second dimension is the discursive practice, which involves processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, and the nature of these processes varies between different types of discourses according to social factors. The third dimension is the analysis about social practice. In this dimension, the researcher should focus on the ideology and hegemony of the society. In other words, the research should illuminate the kinds of power and power struggle related the discourse. (See figure 1)

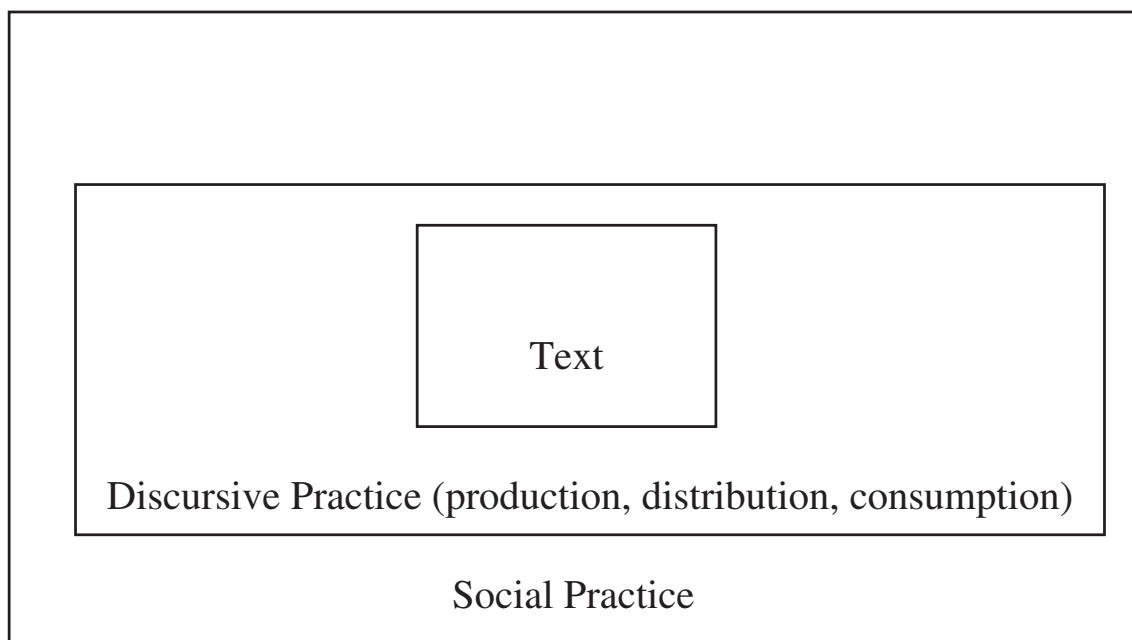


Figure 1 Three-dimensional conception of discourse¹⁸

¹⁷ Fairclough, *Discourse and social change*.

¹⁸ Fairclough, *Discourse and social change*, 73.

Chinese, as a language, is not a logical language like English, but an emotional language. There is a Chinese linguist who says that Chinese as a language always emphasizes comprehension, but often neglects analysis and logic.¹⁹ So, strict grammar analysis will be a difficult task for discourse analysis in Chinese, and what is more, sometimes even meaningless.

In order to grasp the accurate meaning or the sensing and feeling of the coverage and stories about Thailand in Chinese media, I will pay more attention to the integrated and comprehensive understanding of the content, while still not abandoning the discourse analysis frame. That means I will not analyze coverage according to those seven aspects of the texts strictly, especially the grammar, I will use the seven aspects in a somewhat flexible way, and the intertextuality and the force of utterance, besides the emotion or feeling in a story, will be the important aspects of my analysis.

The findings of the analysis

Compared with other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand is the most popular one in Chinese media. But the Thailand related content is mostly restricted to travel columns, except some official media.²⁰ The topics about Thailand are also limited – Buddhism and ladyboys are two key words of the coverage; but the content is all in magazines, journals, and websites. There were only two pieces regarding ladyboys in Thailand and four pieces regarding Buddhism in Thailand in all the Chinese important newspapers from 1949-2012.²¹

¹⁹ Cui, *Modern Chinese grammar: learning and research*, 69 (in Chinese).

²⁰ In the *People's Daily*, the content related to Thailand is almost all about politics and diplomacy. From 1949-2010, there is no coverage about ladyboys and Buddhism of Thailand. There was only one piece that referred to the leader of Thai Buddhism, claiming that Thailand does not need Falungong since there is very prosperous Buddhism in Thailand. See Xinhua News Agency. "Thailand doesn't need Falungong, said by a leader of Thailand Buddhism", 7 (in Chinese). Another piece informed about Chinese Buddhist Sarrira (Buddhist relics) to be accepted and enshrined in Thailand in order to congratulate the 75th birthday of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Sun, "Chinese Buddhist Sarrira arrived Thailand and prepared to be enshrined", 3 (in Chinese).

²¹ The result comes from the database of important Chinese newspapers.

The topics about ladyboys of Thailand emerged between the end of the 1980s and the first five years of the 1990s, with the emergence of fashion magazines. The essays were all in the magazines, especially the commercialized mass magazines, while the topic of Thai Buddhism appeared in the serious journals. Hence, Buddhism in Thailand almost became a void concept in the mass media. According to the opinion of ordinary people, it was either an academic topic of isolated scholars or the pursuit of fanatic Buddhists.

The topics about ladyboys can be separated into two periods, the 1990s and the 21st century. During the 1990s, the content about ladyboys can be considered as being serious and instructional. The vocabulary about Thailand was formal and serious. The history of ladyboys and sociological analysis were often the focuses of these articles. The words these articles applied were often formal and lacked strong sensual feeling, or it can be said the emoting in these articles was modest. Even if there was a photo with a ladyboy, the gesture and expression was conservative (See Figure 2). The force of utterance was somewhat strong. In these articles, the writer's role was as a teacher, they were telling or spreading some knowledge to the readers whom they were teaching or sermonizing to. Sometimes the writer even spoke in the tone of a command with privilege, due to their having seen or even touched a ladyboy – a very charming flesh. The genre of these essays is formal, sometimes even serious. Regarding the intertextuality, these articles are more like journal papers to introduce particular historical knowledge or societal phenomena. During this period, ladyboys can be described as a special societal phenomenon in Thailand, with special roots in Thailand history, while still being an issue related to human flesh.²²

²² There are a lot of articles around this issue. See Qiuguo, "I was watching ladyboys in Thailand" (in Chinese); Li, "Thailand's ladyboys" (in Chinese); Jiang, "The ladyboy industry" (in Chinese), etc.



Figure 2: The author of an article about ladyboys in Thailand from a magazine in the 1990s stands seriously besides a ladyboy.²³

After 2000, with the rise of the internet, ladyboys became a very popular topic on Chinese internet websites, whereas the topic almost disappeared from popular magazines. If entering ‘Thailand ladyboy’ in Chinese (泰国人妖) in *Google*, the number of Chinese web sites is 6,500,000, and if entering ‘Thailand’ in Chinese (泰国) in *Baidu*, the most popular Chinese search engine, there will automatically be two phrases, *the picture of a Thailand ladyboy* and *the election of queen of ladyboys in Thailand*, and these two phrases are the top two in the searching list.²⁴ In one word, ladyboys is the main topic about Thailand on China’s internet. In this period, the vocabulary of these articles is informal and sensual, they can induce very strong sensual feelings, and there are always pictures besides the articles. The gesture and expression is often casual and relaxed, sometimes the author is even shown touching the breast of a ladyboy (See Figure 3). The force of utterance is weak, the author often tries their best to appeal to the attention of the readers. The genre is not serious, especially some blogs.²⁵ The grammar of these articles is poor, and sentences are often

²³ The picture cited is from Qiuguo, “I was watching ladyboys in Thailand” (in Chinese).

²⁴ The search result was obtained on 20 May 2013.

²⁵ There are many websites or bloggers about this theme, it is almost unnecessary to illustrate any. Any one can find them easily.

in oral form;²⁶ alternatively, the author uses the daily speaking form as their articles intertextuality. In this period, ladyboys as a hot topic on the internet is not a history issue or societal phenomenon, but a very sensuous flesh issue. The discourse is so focused on flesh that there is nothing but the sensuous/charming flesh of a ladyboy. During this period, the equation that Thailand equals ladyboys, and ladyboys equals (special) flesh, has been set up. According to Lippman's definition of stereotype,²⁷ the equation has already become the stereotype of Thailand.



Figure 3: Two middle aged women are checking the breasts of a ladyboy.²⁸

Discourse of Ladyboys as a Discursive Tactic

After the 1990s, the marketing economy system was set up in China, and some media had to earn by themselves, while those still

²⁶ Though Chinese is not a strictly grammatical language, there is still a difference in grammar between formal writing and casual speaking.

²⁷ Lippman, *Public opinion*.

²⁸ The picture cited from <<http://club.history.sina.com.cn/thread-4033590-1-1.html?retcode=0&retcode=0>>.

belonging to the state could get funds from the government. The new media are often facing capital problems. They have to produce attractive content in order to have enough circulation to cover their cost. Even for those where their income mainly comes from advertising, they still need a considerable (if not huge) circulation. Without a fairly high circulation, no company will place their ads on that media. Though most media in China now is still owned by the state, the support, especially funding support, from the government is different. Those that can not get funds from the government have to earn by themselves. Thus how to attract audience becomes an urgency. In order to maintain the required circulation, the new or comparatively weak media often resorts to any attractive topics, even those that are immoral under the view of the dominant ideology.

The discourse of flesh is an option for these media. But until now, the flesh topic in China has not really been open, and several flesh related topics and behaviors, such as sex, are thought to be immoral, even opposite to the socialism discourse to include in the public media. During the 1960s, there was even severe criticism of the act of putting famous actress photos on the walls of the rest room of movie theatres, and the critics thought it was harmful to people's soul and polluted socialism morals.²⁹ Though the social atmosphere has changed a lot, some things are still not accepted by the official ideology, and will be criticized or punished. So to present any content related to flesh is somewhat of an adventure. That is why the important newspapers that normally have deep pockets are never involved in the ladyboy topic. In another word, they do not worry about money so seriously as the weak media. To say to present flesh related content is an adventure means that it needs sophistication of the journalists to find a balance between the two sets of pressures. It is actually a kind of expertise, which has often been neglected by communication scholars, of the journalists of those weak media. I interviewed several magazine journalists who worked during the 1980s-1990s who told me that the reason why they chose ladyboys in

²⁹ See Xinhua News Agency, "Citizens of Shanghai are in high zealous to discuss the resistance of odd dress", 6 (in Chinese).

Thailand as a topic was that it was the issue in Thailand. Since it is not a Chinese issue, it is a foreign issue, thus it can be justified for the purpose of expanding people's view, and would not be judged as moral or immoral. But the degree of exposure of the flesh of the ladyboy and the extent of the sensuous allure to be presented still needed to be thought carefully and to be operated tactically. In other word, the allure should be packaged in an acceptable way, or the outlook of the package should be decent. Whatever the outlook of package at any time, the allure of flesh must be the core. However, it is still an adventure at any time. Then it is reasonable to expect that when the weak media grew up strong enough, they would abandon this somewhat dishonorable and risqué topic. That also explains why ladyboy content is scarce in today's successful magazines.

Entering the 21st century, the discourse of flesh has been becoming more and more acceptable, while it is still an attractive topic, especially when it is intertwined with sex. A lot of weak media use it as a lure, especially internet media. With the rise of social media, or the so called "We media", ladyboys in Thailand have almost become the panacea to attract the attention of the audience. Almost every Southeast travel website presents ladyboys in Thailand, especially bloggers.

A website editor whom I interviewed explained to me why they would like to present ladyboy content again and again, despite the fact that there is nothing new but the different flesh of any specific ladyboy. He said it was just because the erotic atmosphere around the topic, and it would be immoral or prohibited if it was not under the name of ladyboys in Thailand. That means the discourse of ladyboys actually is a discursive tactic of the discourse of flesh in China. Nowadays, it has even manifested to some degree to some people. At many blogs, the readers complain about the author using ladyboys as a lure to attract the attention of the readers. But what is interesting is that although it is discerned by the audience, it still works because of the fascination of flesh.

Compared with the last decade, the authors and editors nowadays speak or present flesh more directly. Beauty or the charm of flesh is almost the only topic of the ladyboys; other facets of the ladyboys are

seldom concerned. Thus this finally reinforces the stereotype of Thailand again, and reduces the discourse of Thailand into the simple discourse of ladyboys.

Though the discourse of flesh now is acceptable by the people, the extent of exposure of flesh and the degree of describing the behavior related to flesh still has its own measurement. Though it is not a written regulation, journalists must know it clearly, and should interweave it into the journalistic ‘gut feeling’ – the concept I borrowed from Schultz;³⁰ otherwise, the pages will be deleted very soon by the regulator because they violate the moral standard. There is a very sharp difference between the professional news website, which often belongs to an established newspaper and operated by the staff of the newspaper, and the blogs. The bloggers are often bold at speaking about the flesh of the ladyboys, sometimes they even present sex related images directly. As a result, the pages are often soon deleted by monitors. Though the bloggers hope to attract audiences’ attention, the enduring time is short due to their lack of the professional gut feeling. At most, they are seen as a complement to the professional news websites. Based on their skillful balance between the official moral standard and the desire of the audience, those pages that are edited by journalists carefully can have a long existence period. As an illustration, in 2010, there was a piece of news circulated wildly on a website. It reported that a village officer from Guangdong province took a photo with a ladyboy and touched the breast of the ladyboy, and finally was expelled by the Chinese Communist Party. The news was cited by almost every news website. Until today, it can be easily found on the internet, and is still being transmitted by different websites. Actually, in terms of news value, this story has very small stakes since it happened a long time ago and the event is not important at all. The reason why the story is still alive on the internet is that it is a discourse of flesh, on one hand, and thus attracts the attention of the readers, and it is a legal flesh discourse under the name of anti-corruption, on the other hand, and thus must be safe and enduring for

³⁰ Schultz, “The journalistic gut feeling: journalistic doxa, news habitus and orthodox news values”, 194.

the website to present it. Once I asked a reader who had just read the news what was the really exciting point in this news and what was the purpose for him to read the news. He said, without any hesitation: “ladyboy!” He just desires to see how charming the flesh of a ladyboy is, never anything about the corruption of the village officer. It is these long life pages that form the stable stones of the enormous coverage of ladyboys online.

In terms of the discursive practice, we know only if the content is read by the readers, the meaning or significance can be achieved. Since the content about ladyboys on different websites or different blogs is often similar, one will doubt why the similar information can be consumed (if we can use the term consume) over and over. This should be attributed to the special communication mode of Chinese and what people hope to get from the discourse of flesh. For the Chinese, communication is not only for information, but also for the sense and feeling. This character of Chinese communication has been realized by many Asian communication scholars:

We feel; therefore we are. Through feeling, we realize our own existence and the coexistence of other human beings, indeed birds, animals, plants and all the myriad things in the universe. Since this feeling of interconnectedness is not merely a private emotion but a sense of fellowship that is intersubjectively confirmable, it is a commonly shareable value.³¹

This preponderance toward affection instead of cognition does not mean that Asians are not rational and do not rely on reason, but feelings and emotions are equally, or even more, valued as essential qualities in the Asian version of humanity and communication.³²

The function of flesh content presented in the media is to form an erotic atmosphere for people to immerse in. So even if there is nothing new in the information, if there is only a new ‘atmosphere’

³¹ Tu, “The context of dialogue: Globalization and diversity”, 86.

³² Miike, “Harmony without uniformity: an Asiatic worldview and its communicative implications”, 73.

that people can enter, they get excited – excited at different websites and different times, with subtle different feelings. That is why a lot of repeated information still attracts people to browse it.

For the professional journalists, these doxa are also interwoven into their journalistic gut feeling. That is why they will repeatedly report or transmitted nearly identical stories, which should be of no news value if they are put under the classical measurement of news worthiness. Hence, it could be said the journalist's gut feeling/expertise lets the ladyboy as a discourse of flesh be sustained in the Chinese media.

Conclusion

The discourse of flesh in China has never disappeared in the media since it has very strong attractive power. In order to maintain the survival of the new/weak media, and at the same time not to break the domain ideology, the journalists resort to the discourse of ladyboys, and use it as a discursive tactic of the discourse of flesh, which has finally helped shape the stereotype of Thailand.

Reich proposed journalism as bipolar interactional expertise, and suggested that experienced journalists specialize in interaction with their news sources on one hand and audiences on the other.³³ After analysis, this article suggests that experienced journalists in China not only specialize in these two aspects, but also specialize at negotiating with the dominant ideology and are sophisticated at alleviating the tension between the audiences' multiple desires and the dominant ideology. In order to have a space to satisfy the conflicted desires of the audience and still not violate the dominant ideology, journalists in China must have an accurate judgment or feeling to decide what to report and how to present it in the media. This can be described as a gut feeling – though this maybe not very accurate. Thus I conclude there is a tripolar journalistic expertise: the first is specialization on the news source, the second is on the audience, and the third is on the gut feeling. In China, sometimes the difference between a professional journalist and an amateur journalist, or so called citizen journalist, is

³³ Reich, "Journalism as bipolar interactional expertise".

just their gut feeling of the unwritten regulations or norms. Almost all the experienced journalists are experts at how to use some vague and subtle information to satisfy their audience desires, which is somewhat in conflict with the dominant ideology. They can find an exquisite balance point to finish their seemingly impossible task. Because of the tripolar expertise model of Chinese journalists, especially those from alternative media, Chinese media have a more colorful landscape than the Westerners can imagine; because of the tripolar expertise model of the China's journalists, the alternative media shape the stereotype of Thailand. In this sense, the alternative media can also have an impact on transnational issues. In the future, it is worthy to think more about the influence and the power of alternative media can have by any special discourse. According to the theory of Fairclough, it is the power of discourse that constructs the reality.

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