COVID-19 and language representation: reading non-fictional narratives of Thailand's COVID-19 infected

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Abstract

This study examines how COVID-19 was signified and represented during the first wave of the pandemic in Thailand through narratives of selected COVID-19-infected individuals, published between March and April 2021. These cases served as stark reminders to the Thai public about the dangers of COVID-19 and its ease of transmission. Simultaneously, they reflected how COVID-19 influenced social beliefs in Thailand. Using a new materialist reading approach, this paper analyzes the narratives of the first-wave COVID-19 cases, exploring how the meanings and functions of the virus were constructed and transformed. The findings suggest that COVID-19 is represented not merely as a physical disease but also as a signifier of fear and danger in Thai media. This representation served to amplify public concern and promote stronger societal collaboration in combating the pandemic.

Introduction

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 in the late 2019, the coronavirus has been taking an important role in determining social directions and lives of many around the globe. Many countries have implemented several measures and policies to fight against its pandemic. Sealing countries by closing borders and enforcing and restricting laws regarding social interactions have been among common practices. While ensuring the safety of people in the era of COVID-19 pandemic, the corresponding effects are surfacing. China and the UK, for example, implemented compulsory lockdowns on April 8, 2020, and on March 23, 2020,

respectively to counter the first wave of the COVID-19 (Leung et al., 2020). After that, there were significant differences both in terms of the effectiveness of the outbreak prevention and the social views and practices. According to Yu et. al (2021), China had quickly contained the COVID-19 spread within a few months while the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the UK had continued to increase. Such differences were claimed to be related to the policies and administrative orders, social-economic disparity and vulnerability, mobility and social distancing, the availability of healthcare facilities, climate and economic issues, the open data and privacy protection

policies, the difference of the levels of social distancing measures. At the same time, they also believed that there were impacts that had influenced social interactions and beyond and such impacts had been sustained by circulations of news as "an important way for citizens to obtain information and policies about the epidemic" (Yu et al., 2021, p. 36).

Inspired by this belief that calls for multifaceted analysis, this study attempts to explore how COVID-19 in its first wave has been signified and affected social beliefs in the Thai context through the non-fictional narratives of the selected COVID-19 infected, portrayed in Thai news in March and April 2021. Similar to China and the UK, the effects of the first wave COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand have been extended beyond healthcare systems and administrative policies. It has influenced social behaviors and mindsets of Thai people especially towards those associated with the coronavirus. The stories of those being free from COVID-19 share with us variety of representations of COVID-19 in minds of Thai people, both fear and relief combined. With this in mind, the study employs a new-materialist reading approach to grasp the nature of the impacts of the first wave COVID-19 pandemic in Thai news, highlighting how the COVID-19 in its first wave shapes the social interactions in Thailand as an active actor, and at the same time, is shaped by them.

The Nature of the COVID-19

Coronaviruses have been categorized in the Family Coronaviridae. It is 120-160 nanometers in size with positive Nucleic acids. According to Ben Hu et al. (2021), SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 is "a highly transmissible and pathogenic coronavirus that emerged in late 2019 and has caused a pandemic of acute respiratory disease" (p.

141). This is to say, the COVID-19 can infect many different animals and they can cause mild to severe respiratory infections in human.

Towards the end of 2019, the COVID-19 emerged in the city of Wuhan, China, and caused an outbreak of unusual viral pneumonia. Being highly transmissible, this virus has spread fast all over the world and has overwhelmingly surpassed SARS and MERS in terms of both the number of infected people and the spatial range of epidemic areas. The ongoing outbreak of COVID-19 has posed an extraordinary threat to global public health (Deng et al. 2020, Hui et al. 2020). Similar to patients with SARS and MERS, these patients showed symptoms of viral pneumonia, including fever, cough and chest discomfort, and in severe cases dyspnea and bilateral lung infiltration (Zhu et al. 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 in China reached an epidemic peak in February. According to Fisher and Heymann (2020), the total number of cases in China continued to rise sharply in early February 2020 at an average rate of more than 3,000 newly confirmed cases per day. To control COVID-19, China implemented unprecedentedly strict public health measures. The city of Wuhan was shut down on 23 January 2020, and all travel and transportation connecting the city was blocked. In the following couple of weeks, all outdoor activities and gatherings were restricted as well as public facilities were closed in most cities and in countryside.

Despite the declining trend in China, the international spread of COVID-19 accelerated from late February 2020. Large clusters of infection have been reported from an increasing number of countries, including Thailand. The high transmission efficiency of COVID-19 and the abundance of international travel enabled rapid worldwide spread of COVID-19. On 11 March 2020, the

WHO officially characterized the global COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. Since March 2020, while COVID-19 in China has become effectively controlled, the case numbers in Thailand have jumped sharply from 34 cases to 245 cases. Comparing to other countries in the United States and in Europe, the number of infected in Thailand seems to be low, yet the effects of it towards the social mindset among Thai people are not different.

The nurse scientist Ampaporn Yuanji (2020) proclaims that COVID-19 and its pandemic, regardless of the number of infected, influenced the lifestyles in Thailand due to faster communication platforms, development of mobility and other social activities. This is because the COVID-19 does not have any 100% accurate cures and vaccines and thus it causes confusion among Thai society. Because of this, even the infected has been confirmed as COVID-19 free, many still differentiate them as disgusting. This offers the point of departure of this paper to explore how COVID-19 and language are intertwined and formulated, resulting in the representations of COVID-19 in the selected Thai non-fictional stories.

New Materialist Reading and a Turn to Matter

To examine the representations of COVID-19, it is necessary to introduce changes in traditional reading approaches that centralize analysis of human-only characterizations and themes. To do so, the study proposes a turn to non-human as an actor or what Bergthaller et al. (2014) calls a material turn in which human actors and non-human actors are equally considered in literary analysis. As they affirm, it is essential to admit that no singular figure can stand out of the dense web of material relations where all beings are enmeshed (2014, p.37). This activates a turn to matter, or a material turn, which acknowledges the dynamics of matter in terms of multiplicity of meanings and possibilities and recognizes that time and space are nonlinear. Past, present, and future are emmeshed in one and so does space in which local and global, human and non-human cannot be segregated.

The material turn, therefore, rethinks humans as being far less sovereign than the humanist traditions have expressed. Rather, it insists that non-human matter has qualities that can participate in complex self-organization, reflexivity, consciousness and thus possesses capacity to act spontaneously. This is to say, non-human matter cannot be reduced as purely dependent on external determination. This insight can be summarized as matter possesses inter-acting agency, which is emergent and distributing rather than being the property of concrete, isolable entities. It matches what Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) call the new materialisms. The new materialisms see matter as entity, that manifests itself in distributed networks in which it is embedded. In doing so, the new materialists attempt to articulate consequences for the humanistic disciplines of selected major transformation that scientific knowledge of the world has undergone over the past decades. This includes complexity studies, systems biology, and cognitive sciences to name a few. As Coole and Frost (2010) explain, the new materialists are trying to bring the humanities out of their ignorance towards this development. This ignorance has been licensed by the linguistic idealism of absolute power of language which dominates anthropocentric readings.

To read the representations of the COVID-19, the study pursues this direction in which the COVID-19 is recognized as non-human actor who participates in making meaning and influencing social values and beliefs along with human characters. As Jane Bennett (2010) proclaims, it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces and forms, as these are encounters that are capable of chasing the fantasy of human mastery and highlighting the materiality of all in order to "expose a wider distribution of agency and reshape the self and its interests" (p. 122). This notion has also been supported by the concept of Agential Realism, coined by Karen Barad (2003). At the heart of agential realism is the ongoing activity that influences the dynamic nature of things. Barad names this activity as agential intra-action. Agential intra-action is a specific casual material enactment that may or may not involve humans and it is through such practice that the differential boundaries between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture, are established. As Barad asserts, "[r]eality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind- phenomena, but things-in-phenomena" (Barad, 2003, p. 817). Intra-action is a material-discursive entanglement that determines agency of entities and their ongoing flow of reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. Due to this, intra-action does not take place in space and time, but in making "spacetime" (Barad, 2003) itself. This process of making space, time and mattering happen at the same time, and thus, intra-action sustains "spacetimemattering" that represents the universe as being created by agentive activities in its becoming, reflecting on the reconfiguration of historical relations of exteriority, connectivity, and exclusion.

Consequently, it is unlikely possible to define entities according to given linguistic words, merely focusing on human characters. Rather, it is essential to examine their material-discursive practices and the ways in which they are constituted, since the dynamism in the practices is an agency that can determine human understanding. As a result, agential realism and its intra-action opens an opportunity for this new reading approach to challenge the power of humans as self-proclaimed masters of the earth and thus the dominance of traditional literary analysis.

As the selected non-fictional narratives undeniably reflect on social impacts of the first wave COVID-19 in Thailand, the study implements the new materialist reading that puts particularly focuses on the relationships between language and social power (Bouvier and Machin, 2018). With this theoretical lens, language is regarded as a tool to sustain, legitimize, and naturalize social power both in terms of legal and military systems and circulation of ideas and social values. Especially in today's world where online communication becomes one of the main platforms of communication, the use of language has been empowered to determine what to be "elite" texts and what to be believed. However, as Bouvier and Machin (2018) states, language in forms of texts may not be able to be a starting point of analysis. Instead, it is essential to investigate purposes and platforms of the texts and analyze how they are used for. The study is centralized with such insights and implement it to read the non-fictional stories of those infected with the first wave COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 and the Signifier of Fear and the Sense of Danger

On March 11, 2021, *PPTV HD 36* of Thailand broadcasted via YouTube a short

documentary news of Mr. Thongsuk Thongrath, the first case of Thailand's COVID-19 infected taxi driver. This 9-minute news was entitled in Thai "แท็กซี่ ติดโควิด รายแรกของไทย" or "the first COVID-19 infected taxi of Thailand" in English. The news began with the Thai government's announcement about Thai people being allowed to celebrate Songkarn festival in April 2021 amid the decreasing number of COVID-19 infected in Thailand. There, the story of Mr. Thongrath was used to portray public fear among Thai people at the time as an irony to the government's announcement of Thai space being safe enough for small gathering. In the news, Mr. Thongrath recalled the situation when he was admitted to the hospital. He expressed how the medical staff treated him as if he was going to die within 3 days.

"When I was transferred from waiting room to the hospital, [the medical staff] cleaned and disinfected all surfaces very seriously. After I saw it, I felt like Thailand was going to doomsday, like I was going to die in 3 days" (3:36-3:54).

Here, even if the existence of COVID-19 was not mentioned in his speech, it reflected on COVID-19 as an absolute danger. Considering together with the speech of the news anchor at the beginning of the news about how Thai space being safe, these images offered an irony of situation, rising a question whether it is safe to do so. Drawing from this, the COVID-19 depicted through Mr. Thongrath's experience is a tool to express a sense of caution, empowering the news agent's stance as an opposite of the expression conveyed by the Thai government.

Ampawan Yuanjai in her article "Covid-19 with Social Stigna" (2020) also supports this insight. According to Yuanjai,

"[a]fter infected by someone, that one is disgusted by all the people around oneself. The stigma of the cause of infection in society in his own mind has made the anxiety and nervousness to live in society" (p.91). This is to say, COVID-19 creates a stigma that differentiates those infected from the Thai society. The society does not consider the individualism in the infected, rather they focus on whether such person has been associated with COVID-19 or not.

Such expression, moreover, has been portrayed via the feature story of Narit Saktheera, published on March 31, 2021 in Matichon Online. In his exposition, he narrates that the number of COVID-19 infected has led to the increase of death, including those of medical teams. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Thai government to implement the state emergency in order to control the infections and sustain the belief in the Thai government and it's prime minister. Otherwise, it will cause unpredictable situations as in the state prison in Buriram where inmates broke out of the prison because of the COVID-19 outbreak in the prison that activates the sense of survival (Saktheera, 2021)

In his non-fictional story, Saktheera depicts the COVID-19 as the antagonist whom the Thai government must eliminate. All the policies are directed to the eradication of the existence of COVID-19 as the main factor of all uncontrollable situations. He surfaces the situations in the Burirum prison and blames it as an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here, the COVID-19 becomes an active actor in influencing the belief of Saktheera and directly sustains the sense of fear and danger of it. This also insists on how COVID-19 is not a passive actor. Rather its

unpredictable nature with no guarantee treatment makes Saktheera believe that the ability to control COVID-19 can make the situations better.

The COVID-19 as an active actor in activating fear and the sense of danger is also represented by BBC Thai under the topic "COVID-19: Experience of the COVID-19 infected in the Field Hospital", published in April 2021. This story focuses on the experience of Chaipipat in encountering COVID-19 treatment at Conventional Center in Chiang Mai in April 2021. Through his experience, it demonstrates how the COVID-19 patients have been put together in one place and do not have any choices of choosing the places to stay ("โควิด-19: เปิดบันทึก ประสบการณ์ผู้ป่วยในโรงพยาบาลสนาม", 2021).

It was good during the first days because there were a few COVID-19 infected patients. There were donations and clean toilets. However, more and more infected were put here. Medical staff were too few. There were 400 infected in one hall. The space was far from enough ("โค วิ ด -19: เปิ ด บันทึกประสบการณ์ผู้ป่วยในโรงพยาบาลสนาม", 2021).

Even if the provided place is better than he expected, it shows the differentiation that activates by the COVID-19. In this story, the treatment is to keep physical distancing between infected people, but it becomes an irony of situation when 400 COVID-19 infected were put together in one closed space. Here, it can be considered that they were kept in order to protect the rest of the communities from the danger in forms of the COVID-19.

This also corresponds to what Jarayingmonkol et al. (2021) insist that COVID-19 is a crucial factor in creating the sense of liminal, taking away the freedom one should have. In their research, they interviewed the COVID-19 infected students and what they found out is the increasing negativity among those infected. The infected were isolated, depressed, and lonely to the point that they did not know what was happening to them. All these effects are not the direct outcomes of the COVID-19 as the virus. Rather they have been originated from the social beliefs and the influences of COVID-19 as an active actor.

Conclusion

It is undoubted that COVID-19 as the severe virus contains several meanings that affect directly to how Thai people comprehend the situations, shaping their beliefs. As seen in this paper, the COVID-19 also involves in the politicization and polarization that create the sense of fear and danger among Thai community. Therefore, it is undeniable that COVID-19 is more than a deadly virus. When it relates to language and how humans attempt to understand it, it has power to shape human beliefs as much as how humans try to categorize it.

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