Northern Thai Youth and "Subcultural Capital" in Chiang Mai City

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บทคัดย่อ

การกลายเป็นเมืองอย่างรวดเร็วและการเปลี่ยนแปลงไปสู่สภาวะสมัย
ใหม่ในสังคมภาคเหนือของประเทศไทยในช่วง 2-3 ทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา ได้
ทำให้การอพยพเคลื่อนย้ายของคนหนุ่มสาวจากหมู่บ้านชนบทเข้าสู่เมืองก่อ
ตัวขึ้นอย่างกว้างขวาง ขณะที่การอพยพย้ายถิ่นได้นำพาเยาวชนคนหนุ่มสาว
ไทยไปสู่ความเป็นอิสระและการมีเสรีภาพที่เพิ่มมากขึ้น กระบวนการดังกล่าว
ก็ได้สร้างสำนึกแห่งความไร้ถิ่นฐานและสภาวะตัดขาดพลัดพรากที่มากขึ้นตาม
ไปด้วย ในขณะที่สำนึกชุมชนซึ่งถือเป็นรากฐานร่วมของชีวิตแบบหมู่บ้านใน
ชนบทกำลังถูกบั่นทอนลงอย่างช้าๆ หนุ่มสาวชาวเหนือจำนวนไม่น้อยกำลัง
ดิ้นรนแสวงหาทางเลือกแบบใหม่ๆ เกี่ยวกับความเป็นถิ่นฐานและสำนึกเกี่ยว
กับตัวตนในบริบทใหม่ของพื้นที่แบบเมือง จากงานศึกษาเชิงชาติพันธุ์วรรณ
นาราวๆ 18 เดือน บทความชิ้นนี้ศึกษาสำรวจการอุบัติขึ้นของวัฒนธรรมย่อย
ในกลุ่มวัยรุ่นในเมืองเชียงใหม่และพรรณนาให้เห็นถึงกระบวนการต่างๆ ที่
กลุ่มคนหนุ่มสาวเหล่านี้ประกอบสร้างอัตลักษณ์ผ่านขอบข่ายเชิงสัญลักษณ์
ต่างๆ ของบริโภคนิยม และ "ทุนวัฒนธรรมย่อย" บทความจะแสดงให้เห็นถึง
กระบวนการที่กลุ่มเยาวชนวัฒนธรรมย่อยซึ่งได้รับอิทธิพลจากกระแสวัฒนธรรม
โลก, หรือ "เด็กอินเตอร์" พยายามที่จะก่อร่างสร้าง "ตัวตนสมัยใหม่" ผ่าน
การประกอบสร้างขอบข่ายวัฒนธรรมย่อยและการจัดจำแนกแยกคนกลุ่มอื่น
ที่ดู "ล้าหลังไม่ทันสมัย" กลุ่มที่เรียกว่า "เด็กแซบ" ออกไป บทความจะชี้
ให้เห็นว่าคนหนุ่มสาวชาวเหนือในฐานะผู้กระทำทางสังคมสามารถสร้างสรรค์
สำนึกในถิ่นฐานและอัตลักษณ์วัยรุ่นที่แตกต่างขึ้นมาได้อย่างไร ณ จุดปะทะ
ประสานระหว่างวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นกับระบบทุนนิยมโลก

คำสำคัญ: คนหนุ่มสาวชาวเหนือ, ทุนวัฒนธรรมย่อย, อัตลักษณ์,
สภาวะสมัยใหม่

Abstract

Rapid urbanisation and modernisation in northern Thailand over the last few decades has led to the growing movement of young people from rural villages to the city. Whilst migration has led to increased freedom and independence for young Thais, it has also created a growing sense of displacement and disconnectedness. As the sense of community common to village life is slowly disintegrating, many northern Thai youth are searching for alternative forms of belonging and a definitive sense of self in new urban spaces. Based on 18 months of ethnographic research, this paper explores the emergence of various youth subcultural groups in Chiang Mai and illustrates how these young people construct an identity through symbolic boundaries, consumerism and "subcultural capital". In particular, it demonstrates how conspicuous globally-influenced youth subcultures, *dek inter*, attempt to form a 'modern' Self through the construction of subcultural boundaries and the categorisation of a rustic 'backward' Other, namely *dek saep*. Thus, this paper aims to show how young northern Thai people, as social actors, develop a sense of belonging and a distinctive youth identity at the intersection of global capitalism and local culture.

Keyword: Northern Thai Youth, Subcultural Capital, Identity, Modernity

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, Thailand has experienced rapid economic development. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, it has had one of the fastest growing economies in the world and was transformed from an agriculturally-oriented export country to an industrial-exporting country (Pasuk and Baker 1998). During this time, real income per capita doubled and consumerism flourished. Taking its lead from Bangkok, a conspicuous urban youth culture has emerged in Chiang Mai alongside a growing consumer culture. Various Thai media and businesses fostered by economic development have been crucial to youth cultural formation in the northern region. The modern Bangkok lifestyles and consumer commodities regularly portrayed in Thai soap operas and television commercials have led to far greater "imagined possibilities about the self" (Mills 1999, p. 127), encouraging many young people to migrate or commute from the rural village to the urban city.

Despite rapid urbanisation over the last few decades, the majority of northern Thai people still reside in rural and peri-urban areas. Statistics indicate that some seventy-five percent of people in the Chiang Mai district region reside in non-municipal areas (NSO 2003). Today, as northern Thai children reach their early teens, they are drawn to the city lights. Socio-economic transformation and educational expansion have also resulted in increased youth mobility as they commute into the city for either work or study. There are scores of dormitories in Chiang Mai city that cater for the regular inflow of students. Those who do reside in city dorms may only return to their home communities on weekends or during student semester breaks. This freedom of movement has been facilitated by the motorbike and improved public transport to which most Thais have access once they reach their teens. The process

of discovering the city and experiencing urban life may be seen as a rite of passage for young people as it marks youth independence. Whether through education, work or entertainment, the city enables young Thais to engage in activities beyond parental control. For many youth who do not have their own rooms in the city, one's place of residence now takes on the form of a "dormitory village" (Gray 1990) where they may only return to sleep. Virtually all other activities of young northern Thais take place in public social spaces, particularly in the city.

Whilst migration has led to increased freedom and independence, it typically creates a growing sense of displacement and disconnectedness. In northern Thailand, community boundaries have gradually been weakened by intense urbanisation, particularly since the 1980s. These boundaries have been further destabilised by globalisation, which has involved a growth in transportation and communication networks resulting in "space-time compression" (Harvey 1989, p. 241). For David Harvey, as the world shrinks with increasing speeds of travel and other material and ideational flows, we see a shift in subjectivity and a sense of reality itself. This argument rests on an idealised sense of a more grounded experiential reality for most prior to "post-modernity" (Harvey 1989, p. 241). One's sense of place in contemporary society is no longer fixed and localised. In the idealised past, one's identity was relatively stable and largely ascriptive in that it was more generally determined by the position one held in familial, occupational or nationalistic terms. In pre-modern northern Thailand, one's village community—bound by kinship ties, shared Buddhist and animistic beliefs, and local community groups—played a significant role in shaping one's sense of self.

As Thai people are experiencing greater mobility, induced by

accelerated urbanisation and modernisation, many simultaneously experience a greater sense of displacement and, thereby, anxiety (Tanabe 2000, p. 50). However, the rise of individualised patterns of consumption that have accompanied Thailand's socio-economic transformation offers the potential for some form of security as identity increasingly becomes a matter of choice, particularly for the new generation of middle-class Thais. For example, community-based groups derived from generic characteristics, such as the village, are now giving way to identity-based groups founded on selected characteristics. One's sense of self no longer stems from "the village" but from "signs of desired identity" (Kasian 2002), which is increasingly being sought through consumerism and the construction of new symbolic communities (Cohen 1985).

An important contribution anthropology has recently made to the study of young people is its interest in youth as cultural producers and consumers (Amit 2002; Baulch 2002; Caputo 1995; Wulff 1995). Nascent anthropological studies on youth are not only characterised by a concentration on youth cultural agency, but also include an interest "in how identities emerge in new cultural formations that creatively combine elements of global capitalism, transnationalism, and local culture" (Bucholtz 2002, p. 525).

Historically there has been little anthropological research on the cultural practices of young people. Studies in anthropology and other social sciences seeking to understand the social category of youth, and what it means to posit such a category in the first place, were influenced by a paradigm of socialisation and focused on adolescence as a life-cycle stage (Barry and Schlegel 1986; Fuchs 1976; Mead 1961; Whiting, Whiting and Longabaugh 1975). Such theories have been shaped by psychological models of childhood development which assume that young people need to

pass through a series of tenuous stages, including physical, emo-
tional, moral and intellectual development, before they can become
complete and rational adults (Bessant, Sercombe and Watts 1998;
James and Prout 1997).

Similarly, most studies on Thai youth have traditionally
focused on issues such as rites of passage (e.g. ordination as
a monk), gender socialisation, youth sexuality and courtship
practices (Lyttleton 2002; Warunee 2002; Whittaker 2002), all of
which underline youth as a transitional phase. Few studies have
explored the social and cultural practices of young Thai people and
Thai youth subjectivity in the context of Thailand's rapid economic
and social transformation.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork research in northern Thai-
land between 2002–04, this study shows how young Thai people
construct an identity and create a world of their own rather than how
they are shaped by adults. Consistent with recent anthropological
approaches to youth, I am interested in the way identities are
shaped at the intersection of global capitalism and local culture
(Maira and Soep 2005). In what follows, I examine the various
subcultural groups which have emerged in recent years in Chiang
Mai and explore the ways in which they compete for social status
within their own cultural hierarchy. In particular, I demonstrate how
many Chiang Mai youth have come to construct an undeveloped,
backward "Other" as a means for constructing their own developed,
modern "Self".

Subcultural Capital

I use the term "subculture" as employed by Sarah Thornton
in her influential book *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural
Capital*. For Thornton, the subcultures which come together to form

club cultures share "dress codes, dance styles, music genres and a catalogue of authorized and illicit rituals" (1997b:200). They may be seen as "*ad hoc communities* with fluid boundaries which may come together and dissolve in a single summer or endure for several years" (1997a:2). The subcultures to which I will refer may be similarly viewed *as ad hoc* communities which congregate on the basis of shared taste, style and social practices.

While I am interested in the way young Thai people come together to form subcultures, I am primarily interested in the social hierarchies established within and between these subcultures. Talcott Parsons claims youth adopt a different "order of prestige symbols" from adults because they cannot vie for occupational status (1964:94). Unlike adults whose sense of self-worth derives largely from their occupational work, Sarah Thornton argues that young people's self-esteem stems primarily from leisure (1995:102). Indeed as Pierre Bourdieu points out in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), "bourgeois adolescents" who are "economically privileged and (temporarily) excluded from the reality of economic power, sometimes express their distance from the bourgeois world which they cannot really appropriate by a refusal of complicity whose most refined expression is a propensity towards aesthetics and aestheticism" (1984:55). Taking Bourdieu's argument further, Thornton shows us how aesthetics associated with youth leisure have become important markers of distinction for youth within their own social milieu. Focussing on British clubbers and ravers, she demonstrates how subcultural distinctions act as a means by which young people jockey for social power and status in order to achieve a sense of self-worth (1995:163). Thornton argues that while scholars have explored distinctions between high and popular culture, the relation between cultural hierarchies and social

ones (Bourdieu 1984), and the symbolic resistance of the popular to "dominant" culture (Hall & Jefferson 1976), little attention has been given to the hierarchies *within* popular culture (Thornton 1995:7). In her ethnographic study of British club cultures, Thornton (1995) found that club cultures are filled with cultural hierarchies and reveals how clubbers demarcate "insider" and "outsider" groups.

One common distinction shared by youngsters who frequent London nightclubs or Chiang Mai malls is that between the "hip" and the "mainstream". Thornton's research, for example, explores the way in which youth use the activities and tastes of *other* young social groups as a defining measure of their own cultural worth. For example, she illustrates how clubbers and ravers define themselves in opposition to the mainstream which comprise of "teds and traceys" (who typically favour commercial and "unauthentic" music). Arguably, youth subcultures more easily characterise themselves by identifying a homogenous group to which they disapprove and don't belong. Thornton claims that the "social logic of these distinctions is such that it makes sense to discuss them as forms of subcultural capital or means by which young people negotiate and accumulate status within their own social worlds" (1995:163). She has thus developed the term "subcultural capital" to explain the *objectified* or *embodied* nature of these hierarchical distinctions formed within club cultures. For example, she points to haircuts and record collections as *objectified* forms of subcultural capital whilst being "in the know" or using current slang may be seen as *embodied* forms of subcultural capital (1995:11-12). Thornton sees subcultural capital as a "subspecies" of Bourdieu's "cultural capital". For Bourdieu (1984) "cultural capital" is the knowledge gained through education and social origin that grants one social status. Cultural capital plays an important role in a system of distinction whereby one's personal

taste is seen to correspond with one's upbringing, education and class. Unlike Bourdieu's cultural capital, Thornton suggests subcultural capital is not necessarily class-bound. She does not deny the significance of class but argues it does not correspond in any specific way to levels of youthful subcultural capital. In fact, she claims that class is actually clouded by subcultural distinctions. She attributes this to the fact that subcultural capital is found in leisure rather than through formal education.

Thornton's concept of subcultural capital is useful in understanding the social hierarchies that are formed within Thai youth culture. However, as we will see in the following, class still acts as an important measure of social distinction between groups among young Thai people. This is evident through the overt rural and urban divisions made by Thai youth, which in Thailand is often a strong signifier of class. Thus Bourdieu's "cultural capital" is still of particular relevance to social distinctions among Thai youth. For young Thais, one's status within the Thai youth hierarchy is determined by a combination of style, leisure activities and class.

Northern Thai Youth Subcultures

Conspicuous urban subcultures, influenced particularly by the west[1], largely appeared in northern Thailand around the early to mid-1990s. Dominated by males, the subcultures which I studied through participant observation or with which I came into regular contact during my fieldwork include *dek board/skate* (skateboarders), *dek Vespa* (Vespa scooter riders), *dek B Boy* (break-dancers), *dek* bike (BMX bike riders), *dek punk* (punks), and violent teenage gangs (*kaeng wairun*) (many of whom are labelled *dek saep*).[2] The list of subgroups extends beyond this and, of course, there are many youth who do not belong to an identifiable subculture. How-

ever, I chose to explore the most visible and popular youth groups in Chiang Mai as they help to illustrate the powerful influence consumerism has had over the formation of youth identities. Aside from the gangs, most of these subcultures are identified as simply *dek inter*[3] due to their borrowing from global[4] youth subcultures. In fact, this is what visibly differentiates them from *kaeng wairun*. Yet violent youth subcultures in Chiang Mai want to be "up-to-date" (*thansamai*) and "cool" (*thae*) in ways similar to their global counterparts, *dek inter*.
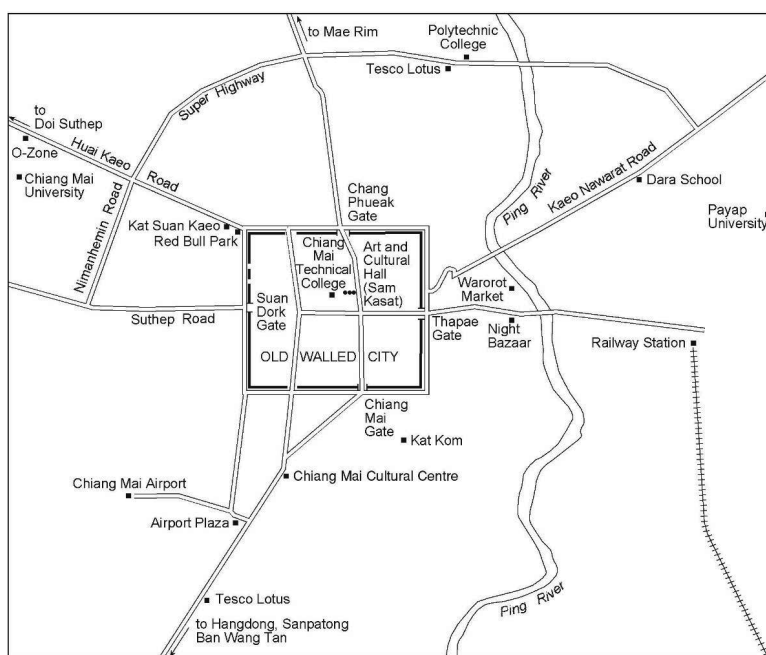
Map 1. Chiang Mai City

Most conspicuous globally-influenced youth subcultures in Chiang Mai are an urban middle-class phenomenon. This is in part because subcultural styles in Thailand have largely become commercial commodities to be purchased, the emphasis being on consumption and display. One thereby requires a certain degree of

money to be able to afford the commodities that signify subcultural identities. In other words, the majority of *inter* subcultures found in Chiang Mai's public realm of mass consumerism are far from poor marginalised youth. For example, in Chiang Mai hip hop and rap have been appropriated by young urban middle-class students who congregate and perform in modern air-conditioned shopping centres and touristy night markets. This is in marked contrast to the unemployed black rap/hip hop dancers of the inner-city ghettos in America where hip hop originated. I observed hybrid forms of cultural expression among Chiang Mai *B-boys* (break-dancers) including a combination of African-American rapper handshakes to the more traditional *wai* for greeting senior group members. This demonstrates young Thais actively adapting and fusing global cultural styles with local tradition. It also shows that the globalisation of youth cultural forms "is not a unidirectional and homogenising process, but a dual process of hybridisation" (Yamashita and Eades 2003, p. 6), or what Roland Robertson (1992) refers to as "glocalisation". A key distinguishing feature of the *inter* subcultures is the way they come together in one location to display and perform their different styles and associated practices to the public. Each Sunday night, market stalls are erected in the main tourist strip of Chiang Mai city in the surrounds of Thapae Gate (*Pratu Thapae*), the Three Kings monument (*Sam Kasat*), and the Art and Cultural Hall (see Map 1). The markets, which open from Sunday morning until eleven at night, specialize in local goods and handicrafts, attracting both foreign tourists and local Thais.

Conspicuous groups of teens generally congregate near the *Sam Kasat* monument. These spaces have become a new theatre of cultural expression for young urbanites. Indeed the lifestyles of northern Thai youth are now centred on the public sphere of

consumption as they increasingly exhibit their distinctive styles in busy market places and bustling shopping centres with the aim of being "seen" by large gatherings of their teen peers. This highlights the importance of performance and display in shaping young Thai people's sense of self. Each group has distinctive characteristics premised on demarcating a sense of belonging and, by the same token, a marker of difference.

Dek Vespa, who share a fervent passion for classic Italian Vespa scooters, frequently gather at *Sam Kasat* where their scooters can be seen parked and displayed alongside each other in various models, colours, and designs. The Vespa group with whom I became acquainted meet regularly at a Vespa garage near *Sam Kasat* during the day where they have their bikes maintained, altered or decorated (e.g., spray painted in different styles or colours). *Dek Vespa* were often described to me by teenagers as a "high class" (*hi-so*) group because Vespa scooters are expensive to buy and maintain. As one female informant (Am) pointed out: "Many girls like boys with Vespas because they break down so often the owner must be rich in order to afford the expensive repairs". Vespa scooters are often paraded in front of a *dek Vespa* hang-out such as an urban *dek inter* bar, where the owners commonly linger on their bikes in the hope of capturing female attention. *Dek Vespa* also have an opportunity to flaunt their scooters each year at a Vespa show which takes place every December over three days in the car park of one of the large Lotus supermarkets. However, exhibiting a Vespa is not the only precondition for claiming *dek Vespa* status. In order to belong to the Vespa group, one must dress appropriately; *Dek Vespa* typically wear T-shirts with Mod symbols and images (e.g., a Vespa scooter or English flag), long baggy shorts over boxer shorts conspicuously exposed at the waist, metal studded belts,

cropped canvas jackets, paisley bandanas wrapped around their head, and coloured Birkenstock sandals.

Another prominent group that assembles at *Sam Kasat* and Thapae Gate at the Sunday markets is *dek B boy*. The most common place in which *B boys* can now be sighted is in the park at *Sam Kasat* where the statues of the three kings are located. Groups of ten to fifteen teenagers take turns individually in performing their creative and often risky dance routines to western hip hop music played on a portable stereo system. Most *B boys* dress in designer active wear (especially Adidas and Nike) including loose sweat pants, long baggy shorts, parkers, large sweat shirts and singlets, sport shoes/ sneakers, bandanas, beanies, caps, and tennis wrist bands. Some wear bike helmets for challenging and potentially dangerous head spins.

Chiang Mai *B boys* (I met one B girl) also practise and perform their moves at the Chiang Mai Airport Plaza and Kat Suan Kaeo (see Map 1). Other members of conspicuous subcultures who congregate and perform in the vicinity of Chiang Mai Airport Plaza and Kat Suan Kaeo shopping complex include *dek* board and *dek* bike. In fact, in mid-2004 a skating park financed by Red Bull (*Krathing Daeng*), the brand of a popular energy drink, was established next to Kat Suan Kaeo for youth to perform "X-treme" sports. Of the six days a week the park was open, groups of *dek board*, *dek bike,* and *dek roller blade* collect at the skating ramp in the late afternoon and early evening after school (the park is open until nine at night). All of these groups have amicable relations with each other; however, they generally keep to their own clique. Each sub-group usually practise in small groups of four to five people who take turns in performing tricks as their peers and girlfriends perch themselves on tiered spectator benches observing and applauding them.

Like the Vespa group, the subcultures associated with "X-treme" sports are also considered to be " bit high class" (*hi-so noi*) due to the expensive imported skating or bike equipment and designer wear with which they have come to be associated. This generally includes large loose fitting T-shirts, loose jeans or cargo pants, oversize sneakers (preferably in American skater brands such as DC), and baseball caps. *Dek board* and *dek bike* dress similarly but were perceived to wear different types of sport shoes.

Another *inter* subcultural group known to gather at the Thapae Gate markets on Sundays are *dek punk*. I observed some punks regularly selling items such as handmade leather goods or artworks at these markets. They were usually accompanied by their punk friends who sat alongside on the road kerb as an exhibition of their own. Borrowing much of their style from British punks, which developed in the 1970s, the new found punk fashion of Chiang Mai typically comprises tight leather black pants, long-sleeved tops usu-ally in black displaying menacing images (e.g., skulls), tartan shirts, leather or denim jackets decorated with metal studs, black leather combat boots, studded wrist bands, brightly coloured Mohican hair styles, and body piercing. Chiang Mai punks are generally in their late teens or early twenties and several of the punks I met stemmed from the city's art school coterie. They often come together at rock concerts which play hard core, ska and Nu metal music, to name a few.

In sum, the different styles adopted by individual sub-groups are instrumental in establishing symbolic parameters and con-structing a specific subcultural identity. The *inter* sub-groups have friendly relations with one another and often congregate at similar bars and nightclubs in the city. They identify with each other based on their shared interest in *inter* styles. Although stylistic boundaries

are erected between each of these *inter* subcultural groups, their sense of self is most palpably defined against a generic category called *dek saep*, the denigrated "Other".

The formation of *Dek Saep*

Dek *saep* cannot be classified as a subculture but rather a social category or an imposed negative label against which the subcultures have come to define their identity. *Dek saep* is a slang word specific to northern Thai youth and carries little meaning outside northern Thailand. As noted, the word *dek* translates as child or kid and, as we have seen, is used as a prefix for most Thai youth groups. *Saep* is defined in the *Thai Royal Institute Dictionary* as: "to smart, to give pain, to sting, to be sore" (1999, p. 1231). Many informants also described *dek saep* as priao, meaning to be sour, which helps to further clarify the meaning of *dek saep*. Another idea emerged with this word: according to one young male (Tii), "*khi rot priao priao sing sing*" means to speedily manoeuvre a motorbike in and out of traffic, in other words, to ride recklessly. A couple of male informants (Bee and Than) suggest the word "*saep*" derives from the sound young boys create when they drag their shoes or motorbike stands along the road whilst riding their motorbikes. One young male (Nat) claims among his group *pai priao* is understood as "go look for a fight". Thus, in the context of northern Thai youth culture, the slang words saep or priao implies a kind of aggressive delinquency. As such, *dek saep* are typically associated with "delin-quent" (*antaphan)* youth gangs.

My investigations revealed that *dek saep* signifies more than delinquency among Chiang Mai youth. As most of those who are branded *dek saep* do not identify with this label and do not con-gregate on the basis of consciously shared styles, tastes or social

practices, they cannot be classified as a subculture like the various *dek inter*. Nevertheless, they are categorized by others through specific characteristics including sex, age, class, and style. Being male and teenager is the first defining feature of *dek saep*. Many of the teenagers I spoke to implied that being a *dek saep* is just a passing teen phase. This was revealed in comments such as "*dek saep* are just kids" or "*dek saep* don't know anything", emphasising their immaturity. A number of informants suggested *dek saep* are in their early teens roughly between the ages of twelve and sixteen years of age and that it was generally younger teenage girls between twelve and fourteen that are attracted to *dek saep* boys, whilst more mature girls aged sixteen to eighteen prefer *dek* board. The girlfriends of *dek saep* are referred to as *"skoi"* (teen slang without any derivative) and are seen as appendages to *dek saep* rather than as members of their group. During a conversation with two skateboarders, Ole and Keng, I asked: "Have you ever been a *dek saep*"? Ole's response was: "We must have been because most kids when they become teenagers are 'saep'…they're not city kids but usually kids from villages that go into the city to go drinking at a pub or nightclub". Ole's view was echoed by many of the teenagers with whom I spoke. There was a general conception that *dek saep* are rustic and "uncool" youth who commute into the city in search of fun or trouble.

Dek saep's association with immaturity and rural-urban commuting signals youth in transition in the context of age as well as in the context of Thailand's social and economic changes. The need for adolescents to develop a label for "delinquents" who commute from rural areas into the city is a reflection of the broader social changes young people have undergone since Thailand's economic transformation over the last few decades. Moreover, the

construction of *dek saep* identities illustrates youth cultural produc-
tion as young northern Thais negotiate and adapt to new cultural
circumstances.

Today northern Thai teenagers play a greater role in socialis-
ing themselves and their peers since socialisation by adults,
particularly through formal rites of passage, is diminishing. Unlike
pervasive childhood developmental discourses common to the
discipline of psychology, I do not focus on Thai youth as simply a
life stage in which they undergo specific physiological and psycho-
logical changes on their path to adulthood but rather on how they
make a transition to a more "mature" stage of youth culture. Within
the social world of northern Thai youth, this evolution frequently in-
volves the discovery of and engagement in urban, middle-class and
global youth cultural styles, which usually comes with increasing
exposure to the city. This is demonstrated in the following interview
with a 19-year-old male informant (Bo) who made a transition from
dek saep to *dek board* and eventually to *dek punk*:

> **Bo:** I used to dress like *dek saep* when I was younger
> [referring to when he was in his early teens] but we didn't
> know what *saep* meant then because kids don't know any
> better. Many kids don't even know they are saep. When
> I was a *dek saep* I used to get into fights all the time
> especially in the village [Ban Kat]. I was in a gang then of
> up to forty people and we would fight against gangs from
> other villages.
>
> **Anjalee:** What were your main reasons for fighting?
>
> **Bo:** You didn't have to have a reason. You just picked a
> fight with someone if you didn't like the look of them.
>
> **Anjalee:** What kind of person would they be?

Bo: All types, you'd take on anyone. Sometimes the person might be a show off, or someone that looks overly studious *(na baep dek rian kuen)*; sometimes it could be another *dek saep* who gets on your nerves.

Anjalee: What else did you do when you were a *dek saep*?

Bo: I used to ride bikes [motorbikes] around with my friends and we would often race at the 700-year park [large sports stadium near Chiang Mai city]. Other times we would just hang out at a friend's house in the village and drink whisky.

Anjalee: So when did you stop behaving like a *dek saep*?

Bo: When I moved to the city to study [Bo studies jewellery design at vocational college]. I stopped seeing all my friends from the village.

Anjalee: Has your life changed much since you moved to the city?

Bo: Yes. For example, [in the city] when you want to buy something sure enough you'll find it and you can go ahead and buy it. In the country *(chonabot)*, you can't buy any nice things or clothes. In the city wherever you walk, there are things for sale everywhere but around here [the village] there's nothing at all. They don't sell any clothes that I like. They don't have clothes that are stylish.

Despite Bo's confession that he once dressed and behaved like *dek saep*, he now expresses disapproval and indignation towards them. Bo claims *dek saep* are "out-of-control" trouble makers who ride their motorbikes noisily to show off. What seems to bother him

most, however, is the way they dress. When Bo was a *dek board* I asked if he would ever allow a *dek saep* into his group. He replied: "Only if they changed the way they dress". He went on to argue that in order for *dek saep* to become *dek inter* they would have to "modernize the way they dress" (taeng tua phatthana khuen).

Dek saep typically wear narrow-fitting jeans (usually Levis or Wrangler), tight fitting T-shirts (particularly in bright colours), Converse sneakers or thongs, and studs affixed onto any item of clothing. Other Chiang Mai subcultures make a determined effort to dress differently or in opposition to the style of *dek saep*. For example, Bo explained to me everything skaters wear must be big, including T-shirts, pants and even shoes. When I asked him why, he responded: "because if you wear things tight you look like *dek saep*". The common opinion among Chiang Mai youth that *dek saep* are somewhat lacking in taste is reinforced by the following comment by a young male, Tuen: "*Dek saep* take styles they like from different groups…for instance, some *dek saep* pierce their nose like *dek punk*, wear T-shirts like *dek Vespa* and pants like *dek board* ". One male teenager (Keng) claims punks were the first to sport studded belts but once *dek saep* started wearing them, punks ceased to wear them. Another male informant (Than) states simply: "*Dek saep* follow the fashion of city youth". As such, many teenagers outside of the *dek saep* scene denigrate *dek saep* because they supposedly lack modern authenticity. *Dek saep* are regularly accused of copying and adopting a hybrid of styles from a range of subcultures, of being unoriginal and, therefore, not "cool".

I interviewed several male teenagers who claimed to have made a progression from *dek saep* to *dek Vespa* and then to *dek skate*. The transition from one category to another may vary. As we saw above, Bo advanced from *dek saep* to *dek Vespa* and later

to *dek punk*. This suggests Chiang Mai subcultural groups are not static and closed social entities but fluid and changing. However, I failed to meet one person who made a shift from being a *dek inter* to *dek saep*. This was because *dek saep* was considered by most youth to be *"lo-so",* that is, low class, uncivilised, immature, etc. In other words, a transition from *dek inter* to *dek saep* would imply degeneration or a backward slide. Like Bo, rural youth in their early teens (such as *dek saep*) may not be able to improve their social status (or subcultural capital) until they have regular contact with city life (e.g., through education or work) and have the means to become bona fide consumers. This is made possible through pocket money from parents, casual or full-time employment, or engaging in illegal trade (i.e., casual sex work or selling drugs).

Although *dek saep* are often associated with violent youth gangs, members of gangs rarely identify with this label and frequently accuse members of rival gangs of being *dek saep*. Some gang youth proudly refer to themselves as *dek saep* due to their notoriety; however many of the gang youth I interviewed found the tag to be insulting and appeared equally determined to construct an identity in opposition to *dek saep* as *dek inter*. For example, one urban gang I came to know, called Wang Tan, wore mostly black clothing in contrast to the bright-coloured T-shirts and coloured converse sneakers typically sported by *dek saep*. A young male member of another gang, Kat Kom, stated that *dek saep* are: "wild (*thuean*), they look for trouble and are fashion conscious [although they are accused of copying fashion styles from other sub-groups]. Kat Kom are different...we wear second-hand tops, rarely wash our jeans because that worn look makes them look cooler, and we are forbidden by our leader to pick fights". The leader of the Wang Tan gang, Ding, also established strict group rules and regulations

as distinct from the "uncontrollable" and "immature" *dek saep* delinquent, including a "don't look for fights" rule. This does not mean one is forbidden from fighting but that one should only fight if another person provokes it; only *dek saep* are believed to search for fights without reason. These are some examples of how gangs have responded to labelling by others and how they, like other Chiang Mai subcultures, have come to define their own group identity against the negative social and cultural construct, *dek saep*.

What is apparent here is that a distinct hierarchy exists among the subcultural groups of Chiang Mai. The social and cultural distinctions within youth culture are an issue which, Thornton argues, few scholars have addressed. In her study of youth clubbers in Britain, she observed that "club cultures are riddled with cultural hierarchies" (1995:3). For British clubbers the mainstream is the denigrated Other in the same way *dek saep* is to the *inter* subcultures of Chiang Mai. Distinctions, Thornton maintains, are not simply affirmations of equal difference but rather claims to authority and superiority over others (1995:10).

Dek Saep as the *Other*

In some ways, *dek saep*'s immaturity may be equated with being dip (unripe), which is applied to young Thai males who fail to be ordained as a monk (Amara 1992, p. 73). *Dek saep* may be viewed as raw and unrefined like the unordained male; however, rather than becoming refined through spiritual immersion, they are seen as refined through cultural immersion. Images of the unrefined are depicted in young people's generalizations about *dek saep*. When informants reported that *dek saep* were mostly village or rural youth, it was often expressed derogatively. In many respects, *dek saep* may be seen as the equivalent to a "westie", a colloquial term

referring to someone who lives in the western suburbs of Sydney. However, as Diane Powell (1993, p. 2) points out, a "westie" has also been "invested with an abundance of negative associations to signify a social type, something akin to 'yobbo' or 'hoon'", defined in the Macquarie Concise Dictionary as a "loutish, aggressive or surly youth, foolish or silly person, especially one who is a show-off " (1998, p. 152). A "westie" is also someone characterised as "un-sophisticated and macho" (Powell 1993, p. 2). Both *dek saep* and "westies" pertain to people, particularly youth, who live in geograph-ic regions located far from the "civilized" city and are stereotyped accordingly. However, one need not actually live in the rural areas of Chiang Mai or western suburbs of Sydney to be labelled *dek saep* or "westie" but merely display the undesirable characteristics that have come to be associated with these regions. The corollary is that some youth, especially from wealthier households, who live in "dormitory" villages in rural areas spurn rustic rural values and be-come acculturated to modern, consumerist values of the city youth. One of my informants (Tik) noted: "Dek saep look dirty like rural kids". This prejudice against rural youth was further highlighted by another male informant (Diw) who comes from the city. He suggests *dek saep* are often those who do not know how to dress and are *dek ban nork* (country bumpkin kids). He says: "You can usually tell they are from the rural areas because of the way they dress and speak (which is usually with a thick northern Thai accent). They are like Lao people", laughs Diw, implying "backwardness".[5] Thus, for Diw, as for many Thais, the rural village is the antithesis of modernity. According to Richard Davis (1984), the northern Thai (*khon muang*), like other Thai people, are obsessed with presenting themselves as being "civilized" (*caroen*). He notes that speeches by district and provincial officials urging peasants to participate in development programmes always refer to the importance of civilizing the villages

and the city. Whilst this attitude has undoubtedly been intensified through westernization, Davis adds that even in ancient Thailand (nineteenth century) all beauty and civilization were seen to flow from the city to filter down to the villages. "It is because rustics are less civilised than townspeople that they once had to yield right of way when they crossed paths with a person from 'within the walls'." (Davis 1984, p. 83).[6]

Consistent with these enduring attitudes, rural youth today are often considered to be unfashionable and not "up-to-date" (*thansamai*) or "cool" (*thae*) like their urban counterparts. *Dek saep* has come to represent what is not modern. In fact, when comparing *dek saep* to urban subcultures such as *dek board*, a set of binary oppositions becomes apparent whereby *dek saep* has come to represent the "rural", "rustic" and "backward" whilst *dek board* signify the "urban", "global" and the "modern". The suggestion that *dek saep* are from rural areas and *dek board* are more *inter* is illustrative of this. *Dek saep* are also distinctively "local" in that the word *"saep"* is, as explained earlier, a unique creation of northern Thai youth unlike the "urban" subcultural groups whose names are more "glocalized" as they are adopted directly from the west but slightly altered in a local Thai context.

The "global" versus "local" distinction (or "centre" versus "periphery") between *dek saep* and the *inter* youth groups is further manifested in hierarchies of language and action. A number of informants reported to me that *dek saep* generally speak the northern Thai dialect (*kam muang*) whereas the *inter* subcultures such as *dek board* often speak central Thai amongst each other. *Dek saep* are also associated with Asian forms of popular culture, including Chinese, Japanese and particularly Thai film and music (e.g., the age-old mainstream rock bands, Lo-So and Carabao).

Dek inter, on the other hand, are linked with western youth cultural forms such as hip hop music. One young male (Than) explained: "*Dek saep* aren't really into western music and movies because they don't understand them". Many of my less-educated male informants (who would be characteristically labelled *dek saep*) admitted they cannot follow western films or music as they do not have the English skills necessary to interpret them. These males were similarly less likely to engage in online chatrooms, a pastime particularly popular among a broad range of Thai youth, as many claimed they did not possess the basic computer literacy or typing skills required for this activity. The implication here is that *dek saep* were somewhat less educated than the *inter* subcultures. Their limited literacy skills, therefore, excluded them from participating in some "modern" youth social practices. This demonstrates that whilst Thornton's subcultural capital, which is largely accessed through leisure, is integral in defining one's youth status, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and its emphasis on education still plays an important role within Thai youth culture. Thornton argues that subcultural capital obscures class background as "it has long been defined as extra-curricular, as knowledge one cannot learn in school" (1995:13). This is where subcultural capital and Bourdieu's cultural capital differ; the latter places more emphasis on education as a source of cultural knowledge. My observations of Thai youth suggest that formal education can to some extent limit one's access to specific youth cultural entertainment and practices (e.g. Western music, film and internet chat) thus affecting their status amongst youth. The rural/urban division that informs the *dek saep* and *dek inter* categories is interlinked with ones education and ultimately class. Hence, Thornton's concept of subcultural capital does not correlate entirely with my study of Thai youth subcultures in terms of the variables of distinction. Nevertheless, it provides a framework for understanding

the ways in which young Thai compete for status within their own social milieu.

In general, most of the gang members I interviewed, who would typically be categorized as *dek saep* by others, were vocational college students. It was often suggested that members of the *inter* subcultures studied at higher levels of education such as university. While the odd punk or *dek board* I met studied at university, I found the educational disparities between subcultural groups to be exaggerated by most of the teenagers with whom I spoke, as approximately 80 per cent of the *dek inter* I interviewed were studying or had studied at a vocational college. The distinction was more of an ideological one; its real purpose was to construct the "Other" as different in order to define one's "Self". Constructing *dek saep* as less educated once again contributed to the image of *dek saep* as "undeveloped" (or unrefined) and the *inter* subcultures as "developed". The act of stereotyping is, as Michael Herzfeld (1997, p. 157) explains, "reductive, and, as such, it marks the absence of some presumably desirable property in its object. It is therefore a discursive weapon of power. It does something, and something very insidious: it actively deprives the 'other' of a certain property…". In reality, these conspicuous subcultures share a great deal in common: most are young male students roughly in the same age group whose lives are centred on the city (mainly for school or entertainment) despite coming from peri-urban areas or provinces outside of Chiang Mai. The sense of anonymity specific to urban spaces makes it essential for youth to create difference. In order to stand out from the urban crowd, many young males are turning to style-based subcultures as a means for shaping an identity and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In Thailand rapid urbanisation and modernisation have gener-ated new forms of sociality and expressions of agency among Thai youth. One's identity may now be chosen from the world's cultural supermarket rather than ascribed by one's village community. It is evident through young Thai people's changing lifestyles and consumer practices that Thai youth are increasingly influenced by a global youth culture. However, global youth styles are charged with new significance in a local Thai context through "glocalisation". Youth are neither passive receptors of global culture, nor of adult culture (as implied by models of childhood development). In con-temporary Chiang Mai, youth now play a greater role in socialising each other due to the waning influence of adults and kin and are searching for a sense of self and belonging in urban subcultures rather than in a village context. Like Thornton's British club cultures, they accumulate social status (or subcultural capital) and a sense of self-worth through leisure and consumption rather than occu-pational work. However, the ways in which Thai youth compete for social power and status within their social world is historically and culturally specific. This article shows how the hierarchical distinc-tions established by youth in Chiang Mai are significantly influenced by rural/urban divisions and an overwhelming desire to be modern. The majority of youth subcultures examined comprise mostly young middle-class males who have migrated to the city from peri-urban areas or other provinces or commute regularly from the village to city for study, work or leisure. Despite their commonalities, *dek inter* attempt to differentiate themselves by explicitly shaping their identity against *dek saep*, the denigrated "other". By constructing the "other" as rustic, uncivilized, and unfashionable, *dek inter* more easily define themselves as modern and thae. It is through the

"othering" of youth subcultures that many young people create their identity. Through this process of boundary marking, young Thais are establishing a world of their own with distinct social meanings.

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Endnotes

1
    By "western" and the "west" I refer mainly to the United States and the United Kingdom where popular contemporary youth subcultures largely originated. For example, Punk developed out of London during the mid-1970s and Hip Hop emerged from New York City in the early 1970s (Brake 1985).

2
    Dek is the Thai word for child or kid. While most of the urban subcultures are a relatively recent phenomenon in northern Thailand, the formation of violent teenage gangs can be found to date back to the 1950s in Thailand, as evidenced by films such as "2499 Antapan Krong Muang", also known as

"Dang Bireley's and Young Gangsters", a 1997 Thai film about young Thai gangsters growing up in the 1950s.

3   Inter is a colloquial Thai word deriving from the English word "international". Craig Reynolds claims that "any product with an "inter" (intoe) brand name that therefore smacks of foreignness is highly desirable, even if it is made in Thailand" (Reynolds 2002, p. 313).

4   Whilst globalisation has become somewhat synonymous with Americanisation my use of the term "global" incorporates Japanese culture as recent studies demonstrate that "globalisation happens in, and not only by, the U.S." (Maira and Soep 2005, p. xxviii; see also Schuerkens 2003 on non-western globalisation).

5   While processes of modernity have been transforming Thailand for over a century, it is a more recent trajectory for Thailand's neighbouring country Laos. Tanabe and Keyes (2002) note that even into the 1990s, most of the Lao population were still involved primarily in subsistence production. Hence, the stereotype of Lao people as "backward".

6   Some towns or cities (*muang*) were enclosed by a protective wall (*wiang*), as was Chiang Mai.