



## Bio-power, medical gaze and negotiation: Narrative experiences of anti-aging practices among Thai women



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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aimed to investigate anti-aging practices among Thai women and was conducted using an ethnographic approach. More specifically, the research methods included narrative interviews of participants, in-depth interviews with key informants, participant observation, and document analysis. Triangulation through multiple research data sources and methods was used for data validation purposes. Foucault's theory of bio-power inspired the inquiry and analytical process. The key findings from this study were: (1) the senses of body-self were both positive and negative, including media of happiness and good-spirit, inferiority complexes and worries, changes of the blood and circulatory system, unwanted/undesirable appearance, and reduction in passion and sexual attractiveness; (2) the anti-aging praxis of women involves dominant medical discourse operating a series of diverse knowledge practices. Those have become a truth regime embodied into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of women. The discourse practices of anti-aging were health, beauty, and lifestyle choices. However, women have fluidity of self as an agency to negotiate with those discourse practices fixed to life contexts. This study revealed the subjective experiences of aging bodies as a sense of body-self and diversity of anti-aging practices reproduce discourse practices to regulate women bodies as bio-power and to increase awareness of narrative experiences of women attempting to understand the agency of women in multiple anti-aging practices in various contexts.

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### Introduction

Western biomedicine has created anti-aging technology, which contributes to the advancement of knowledge that has evolved into anti-aging medicine. The aging body of women is believed to be in decline, deficient, and deviant from the body of the ideal woman, both in internal and external dimensional images, and inconsistent with the standard features on the body of a young girl. Youthfulness has become the norm of medical discourses, which has

generated a corpus of knowledge about the management of the body and aging (Mykytyn, 2010). In addition, the socio-cultural construction of femininity considers value based on physical attractiveness and youth. Therefore, aging moves women away from these cultural ideas (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). Information on the popular culture of products and services against aging through marketing and advertising channels, such as food supplementary products and cosmetics, also classifies aging body features compared to a youthful body. Accordingly, an aging body is not desirable. Most women in the world feel threatened and are pulled into the cycle of consumption of anti-aging goods and services which takes some advantage from effeminacy. Several studies, Chan, Stampfer, Giovannucci,

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Gann, Ma, & Wilkinson (as cited in Mehlman, Binstock, Juengst, Ponsaran, & Whitehouse, 2004) reveal that women using anti-aging medical technology, goods and services experienced both physically and mentally positive and negative effects, including the risks of physical harm and inefficient treatment as well as economic loss.

However, there is little research on women's narrative experiences on the practices of anti-aging body management in Thailand. Therefore, the researcher saw the issue of anti-aging as very challenging to investigate and looked for answers with an aim to understanding women in the context of the Thai society. The objectives of this research were to investigate the subjective experiences of aging bodies as senses of body-self and the anti-aging practices of women in Thai society.

### Discursive Practices

#### Aging Body

According to Foucault, the body is viewed not only as the receiver of discourses, but also as the social construction of discourses (Wiersma, 2007). Biomedicine uses the basis of a biological paradigm, to view the body. Therefore, the aging body, from the viewpoint of the biomedical paradigm, is a body of deterioration or defect. For this reason, senility and aging are considered "deficient", "incompetent", or "deteriorating". Biomedicine has made senility a process that causes biomedicalization. The body in marketing and advertising is a body that does not grow old. Anti-aging has been defined diversely, which determines the types of strategies and differences between anti-aging efforts. This includes slowing down aging, stopping aging, and reversing and maintaining the youthfulness process. Other definitions stress having a longer life as an example of anti-aging in the movement of the society (Binstock, 2004, p. 292). The medical institutions and the institutes of marketing and advertising of products and services have created a corpus of knowledge and practices on the aging body to be a body tied to both health and beauty.

#### Bio-power

Foucault's concept of bio-power, or power over life and death is that the technique uses power to manage the body and to make individuals follow discipline.

#### Medical Gaze

Under Foucault's notion, medical gaze considers the human as a docile body. The body is viewed as a mechanism in which problems can be fixed.

### Research Methodology

This research study involved a qualitative research design. The research participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: females aged between 35 and 59 years old, middle class, having active anti-aging body management, and consenting to giving information. The research participants were recruited from specific areas using the snowball technique—a public youth center, medical service areas, and product and service consumer areas. The research method included narrative

interviews with nine middle-aged women using active anti-aging body management, in-depth interviews with key informants (two medical professionals, two yoga instructors, two owners of goods and services, and one owner of a beauty salon), participant observations in one public youth center, three anti-aging products and services marketing and advertising areas, and documentary analysis. The participant observations took place in the field over the 10 months from August 2012 to May 2013. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board at Mahidol University. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were applied to all research participants and key informants. Informed consent under the ethical operations of the study was conducted with all the research participants and key informants. Data were analyzed using narrative analysis and thematic content analysis. Reflections disclosing the experiences among the researcher and research participants were included as "intersubjectivity."

### Research Findings

The narrative interviews with the nine research participants who shared subjective experiences about their senses of body-self occurring during the transition stage, covered a wide variety of aspects as follows:

#### Senses of Body-self: Positive Perception

Although the women were getting older, they had a good sense of their internal and external bodies. They perceived a youthful external body are as a medium connected to good internal emotion and mind.

#### Senses of body-self as the medium of happiness and good spirit

Some women mentioned that they did not feel aging internally and externally and that their bodies were not older and had not changed much from what they were at a young age. Even outer clothes had not changed according to age. They thought they were usually in a good mood, full of fun, and cheerful. Some women said that they did not feel any changes and they were happy and not stressed, with a good mood from inside, which caused them to not look old.

*"I am satisfied with myself that I look good and am not very old. I have played sports until now when I am 57–58. Changes called "gold age" did not happen at all. I am myself, cheerful and fresh."*

(Meaw, a research participant)

#### Senses of Body-self: Negative Perceptions

Many women did not accept their aging bodies. They thought about and felt bad with their aging bodies both externally and internally.

#### Senses of body-self as reckless—no body control or self care

Women tend to value themselves with regard to their external image from social expectation. Women not only look at their own body image, but they also stare at those of

other women. Aging signs indicate a lack of self-care of both health and beauty.

*"Wrinkles are caused by negligence. Now I understand why children at present take care of themselves from a young age. In the past, I did not care. Perhaps it was because I had good skin. Most people thought I looked good, but I did not care about that. I remember when my elder sister always warned me."*

(Nuan, a research participant)

*"If a woman does not take care of herself, she will become old very fast. If we become old, it will be very difficult to get back. Some women hardly notice, without taking care of themselves, that they have already become old."*

(Nadia, a research participant)

### **Senses of body-self as inferiority complexes and worries**

Most women often have a feeling inside against aging signs which happen to the body. Some aging signs on the body can be covered with no difficulty, but some cannot easily be repaired, covered, or removed. The aging signs women perceive occurring to their body cause some mental feelings which are expressed as an inferiority complex and worry.

*"The reason I need to see a doctor. I would say that what I don't like most on my face is that I have so many bags under my eyes, which is truly my inferiority complex."*

(Nuan, a research participant)

*"What I am worried about is that when taking a photo, my arms are the first things to be seen. I can't completely hide them. Moreover, I like wearing short sleeves, sleeveless, vests or something like that. Sometimes, I like wearing a T-shirt. I don't want my arms to look big."*

(Luk, a research participant)

### **Senses of body-self as changes to the blood and circulation system**

When women get older and there are some internal and external aging signs, they feel that it is related to the blood system. The blood system changing can affect aging signs. Women understand that the blood system contains the residue of waste products and about the conditions of blood circulation.

*"Donating blood allows blood to be transfused and new blood creation, making the skin healthy and glowing."*

(Nong, a research participant)

*"The circulatory system is poor causing the face to look older than the actual age, right? The whole body is then degenerated."*

(Pom, a research participant)

The senses of body-self of women about blood circulation are similar to the knowledge on anti-aging of biomedicine. For example, medicine associated with beauty, skin care, and the face has a corpus of knowledge

about anti-aging, in which hormones are associated with the aging process. This is applied in Thai traditional medicine which explains the aging process as when the blood system is driven slowly, it is necessary to stimulate blood circulation, drive the waste out and purify the blood, causing no waste to be left to affect the external skin which is then glowing and does not look old.

*"Actually, if we were of our parents' generation, when entering menopause, we would just let it pass, just get hot and cold. But if that hormone is reduced, some problems would occur, such as aging, wrinkles in the skin, emotion, and ambition."*

(A male doctor of clinical medicine on facial beauty and skin care and anti-aging medicine, a key informant)

*"In Thai medical science, theories about women and women's blood system which causes a radiant face always mention blood purification or something like that. In blood purification, herbs of the sour group stimulate blood circulation and drive waste out."*

(A female manufacturer of cosmetics products and the owner of an institute of applied Thai traditional medical cosmetics, a key informant)

### **Senses of body-self as unwanted/undesirable appearance**

Aging body signs from degeneration by biological processes of women getting older until entering middle age make the image of this group of women noticeably different from young people, including image, face, skin, and body shape.

*"The buttocks are sagging. The face is not tight. The body has changed. I feel that they follow gravity. I call this "awkward". When I was a girl, I had a long torso, arms and legs."*

(Nadia, a research participant)

*"I don't want to have wrinkles. I know I like to raise my eyebrows and use my face to express my suspicion. I notice that there are wrinkles on my forehead."*

(Luk, a research participant)

### **Senses of body-self as a reduction in passion and sexual attractiveness**

Women said that as they got older, their image and body changed, making them not interesting to their partner or husband anymore.

*"My husband has made me feel that I am not very good, although I have a lot of self-confidence."*

(Nadia, a research participant)

*"I am also afraid that in menopause, women are easily frustrated, causing the husband to become bored. I don't want my husband to get bored with me. I then try everything such as doing exercise by going dancing."*

(Oh, a research participant)

## Anti-aging Practices

The group of women who decided to use non-surgical medical treatment technology under the supervision of an expert doctor for their body treatment included some research participants—Nuan (alias) and Fern (alias) who performed the following practices:

**Nuan: Medical technology is the final answer:** Nuan is a single Thai woman aged 52 living in a hospital dormitory. She came from another province but has been living in Bangkok for about 32 years. She graduated with a Master's degree. She works as a nurse holding a supervisory position. She is a bit portly, has fair skin, and a working woman's personality.

Nuan recalled various methods from her own experiences that she never thought that she would need to use medical technology body treatment methods that are so painful. But when she got older with facial wrinkles, she thought it necessary to use this painful technology. If not, she would look even older with more wrinkles. She thought that the medical technology like Botox and filler injection was a satisfactory method for her. She admitted that even though she used various methods of buying self-care products and services, she gave importance to the constant skin and facial nourishing medical technologies conducted by a doctor and anti-aging treatments.

**Fern: Never, ever stop using anti-aging medical technology:** Fern, A Thai woman aged 40, originally from another province, works as a secretary for a foreign company. Her extra job is as an English tutor. She graduated abroad with a master's degree. She is married with one son living in a townhouse.

Fern recalled her youth and at working age she had various skin problems. Therefore, she had to go to a medical clinic. She has used various types of medical technologies constantly and continuously. She thought that even though using medical technology would be painful, it was necessary in the same way as other health care matters like dentistry.

She thought that she would carry on using medical technologies non-stop. *“Never enough, I want to get more and better. I am not satisfied at this point, but also realize that I should do a bit less.”* Medical technology is a method with a more obvious result than other kinds of body management.

The narrative experiences of women whose anti-aging practices used non-surgical medical technology were as follows:

### Various experimental methods, but non-practicable methods

*“I concluded from all my experiences from learning by myself plus knowledge from the text books. Exercise is the best, only if we do it regularly. We will be young, healthy, and active. But that's what we didn't do.”*

### Detecting skin abnormalities that need to be fixed using medical technology

*“Because they told me I have a dry skin problem, they asked me to have a skin test and to see the results of how bad my wrinkles were, what percentage of my face was sagging ... which will increase as I grow older.”*

### Searching for deficiency of undesirable external aging signs according to expert officers prior to seeing doctor

*“I would initially asked the salesperson and they would let me wait to see the doctor to ask for all my questions. There were numerous files introducing the products with pictures. If it was a machine, then we could see from the machine how it goes before and after this person, that person. If we have more queries, like can I do it at this age, then the doctor would be the one who explained further.”*

### Fixing aging skin, facial wrinkles, and deep cheeks with popular, painful and dangerous medical technologies as per doctor's recommendation. “Botox and fillers injections”

*“She demonstrated that even she herself had done it. She showed me her picture before and after she had the injection that her face had tightened up so well. Then she showed me her aunt's pictures, she actually did it for all her family members.”*

### Eliminating defects and undesirable aging all over the face using a wide variety of medical technologies

*“... I tried them all, whatever they tried to sell to me. I took all. Just couldn't remember which one first.”*

### Experimenting new innovative techniques that are not formally approved by doctors

*“... At the beginning I did not buy it. It was scary. So, I kept saying no for a year. She would give examples of many famous people who had this injected. Even the doctor herself also has it injected. The reason why I did it was because the doctor also did it. She said she has studied a lot about it before she had it done.”*

### “Lift-up sagging facial deformation” using advanced medical technology, more painful and invasive

Currently, a facelift to fix sagging not only involves skin tightening, but also making the face slender to reform it to its former youthfulness. The evolutionary development of medical technology with face lifts and having surgery, using medical technology, is now available with a variety of techniques, such as Ulthera, Thermage, V-shape facial lifting, and etc.

*“Lately I underwent the V-shape facelift, a little while after a Botox injection. But this time, about a month or two back, was a bit painful, but not so much. What was really painful was the anesthetic injection. It was not 100% effective as it was only on the skin layer. If it went underneath the skin, it was still painful. During the sewing, it did not hurt so much, but right after the anesthetic effect was gone, then it was so painful ... bruised so black and blue.”*

### Negotiation

**Maew** (alias) is one of the women who focused on the body management method by a practice of self care both through exercises and yoga. She has life experiences of practicing exercise continuously.

**Maew**, is aged 58 and single and graduated with a bachelor's degree, grew up in a rural area outside Bangkok. She lives alone in a townhouse close to the school where she taught in the area where the public youth center, Siripattana (alias) is located. The narrative of life experiences of Maew who stressed self-practice by exercise and negotiating with anti-aging medical discourse follow:

#### **Pioneering in exercise**

Maew has been interested in exercise since she was a young girl. When she was a new teacher, she had a chance to attend a PE development training course and was given a certificate. Maew therefore has knowledge and skills and thus tries to encourage people to join an aerobics exercise group in a public area.

*"That's about 20 years back. There was no public sport ground. No one knew how to dance, it was not so popular. I trained my friends step-by-step starting from 5–6 people. There was no Bangkok sports playground like today."*

#### **Finding solutions to barriers to exercise**

Maew found some obstacles in practicing exercises both in the past and present, internally and externally. In the past, when public exercise was not popular and there was no policy of building public sport grounds, it was even harder for her to find a venue for exercise and she was even hindered in using the facility for group exercise. At present, she faces a problem from inside her body, but she always tries to modify the posture, both in aerobics and yoga to suit herself and never gives up exercising.

*"For me I know the rhythm, and do not jump. We have to know our capability and should not jump when others are jumping. I would just kick. Yoga is good and strong, but I know that we should know how to do it. In the beginning, I did not know and failed, I was injured with tendon inflammation. First, I forced it too much so there was a lot of tension, but now I just go to a massage."*

#### **Discipline, fitness and humorous personality as a routine**

At present, although retired prematurely, Maew continues to exercise on a daily basis starting with cycling in the morning in front of her townhouse. After doing the daily routine, she leaves home for aerobics at the public sport ground near her house every evening as she has done for the last 20 years. She does yoga every Saturday and Sunday consistently. All these activities, together with her lifestyle working as an elementary teacher with children creating recreational activities and self exposure to the children without being shy, and having fun at the Boy Scout camps, she therefore has a pleasant personality from her long career of over 30 years.

#### **Having the medium of a pleasant mood—medical technology treatment not required**

As she got older, she perceived that she had a pleasant mood, did not look old with unchanged body shape or dressing style. As she is always in a good mood, this makes her look younger than her actual age compared with those at the same age as her.

*"I will not go through any operation if it is not necessary, like facial surgery, because when you meet someone you know, they would notice the change and it looks funny rather than beautiful. So, I don't want to go through that. People should be as they age, not resisting it."*

## **Discussion**

The gender of femininity is defined by society as proclaimed by Beauvoir (2010) "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Femininity is a social construction rather than biological given. In Thai society, value is given to body beauty with youthful features (Phakdeephason, 2009). Bodies with identifiable signs of aging are grouped as the elderly and are devalued in society. At present, aging women have more negative senses of body-self and try to manipulate their body appearance in different ways to be socially acceptable. According to Foucault, power in the modern era is called bio-power which controls the thoughts and actions of people in society. However, these are not visible as hierarchical power relations, but rather are seen in the form of diffusing not necessarily coming from the top down or from the bottom up (Prachakul, 2004, as cited in Ganjanapan, 2009).

Such power is associated with us as forcing ourselves in docile bodies. The bio-power will be related to the regime of truth, that is, we dictate our own self without seeing that power because we recognize that perception which is under one truth of biomedical power operations through the disciplined power of biomedicine such as the normalization technique and the classification technique: 1) The technology of Normalization is a practice of the discipline power of biomedicine acting on the female body. The women will be examined for aging body abnormalities including the skin, face, and body through various devices and technologies; 2) Classification is the operation of power in the corpus of knowledge on the anti-aging discourse of biomedicine acting on the women's body through information from experts in areas such as medical clinics or beauty institutions. This also includes information on the products and services through marketing and advertising targeting a woman's body as well. There is also a classification of youthful and aging bodies such as a young face is defined from the use of medical technology to lift-up and tighten up the face shape. Medical technology, fillers, and Botox injections, using laser therapy, radio waves, and ultra sound therapy have set a body definition for the use of medical technologies to help prevent and nourish the skin from aging, including glowing skin with an aura, clear and shining, and firm skin. In contrast, aging skin features blotchy aging spots, loose pores, wrinkles, and sagging at certain spots.

Under Foucault's notion, medical gaze considers the human as a docile body. The body is viewed as a mechanism in which problems can be fixed. The medical professions have always been developing and inventing methods to control people's daily life from birth to death. Medical institutions conduct surveillance and control from an unequal structural power relationship. Medical

gaze is an important tool in controlling the human body resulting in docile bodies (Foucault, 1980). However, Foucault also has a view that a human or an individual has freedom of choice and self-determination as the actor as well—"where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). From the findings of this study, the narrative experience of Maew reflects her identity as an agency negotiating the use of medical treatment technology against aging. She selected the method of body care by practicing self-discipline exercise consistently for many years.

## Conclusion

Women's bodies are targeted by the power networks of knowledge and truth under various sets of knowledge/discourses and practices to resist aging through medical institutions and popular culture products and services in society, which lead women to practice anti-aging body management. Those diverse anti-aging practices are reproducing discursive practices to regulate women to follow discipline as bio-power. The results of this study are useful for establishing policy based on understanding femininity for the empowerment of women and to avoid them being victims seeking anti-aging practices. Women should have opportunities to study critically the information and see the pros and cons of each method before deciding how to manipulate their body.

## Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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