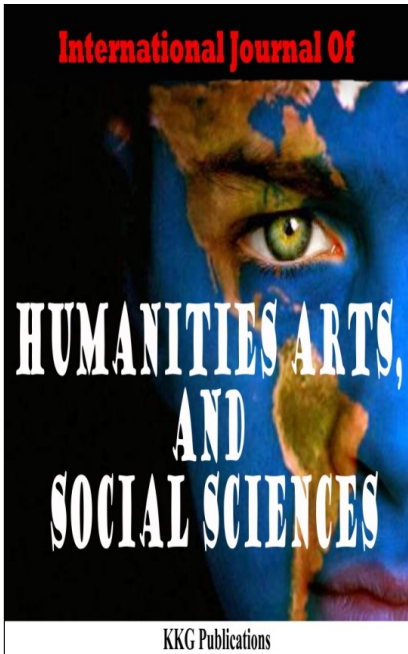


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## “TUK-TUK THAILAND”: A HIGH-STAKES MISSION FOR MISS UNIVERSE THAILAND 2015?

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**Abstract.** Being favorable to the judges of the Miss Universe Thailand Pageant and Thai media, Ms. Aniporn Chalermburanawong was honorably and gracefully crowned Miss Universe Thailand in July 2015. A few months later, the beauty queen was blasted with huge criticism on her disgraceful image of Tuk-Tuk Thailand, the plastic outfit designed by the inspiration of the Thai tricycle cab, which she expected to be a major highlight of the national costume contest of the Miss Universe 2015 Contest held in Las Vegas, the United States. The author of this article has paid close attention to the incident critically reported on the Internet and has carefully analyzed existing issues by drawing crucial information from some pieces of online news and other related discussions. The concept of gender and popular culture are employed for data analysis. The result of the national costume contest unavoidably made Ms. Chalermburanawong a sex object of beauty. At some certain level, it demystifies the sex myth created by the signification of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand image and also directs the Thai society to explore a critical meaning of Thai popular culture.

### INTRODUCTION

Apparently, the Miss Universe Pageant has become a social institution that has a huge influence on the definition of feminine beauty, with a number of rules fostered to define the body shape of beauty queens who have honorably been selected to represent their own countries. It seems like all female participants of the beauty contest have voluntarily agreed to identify themselves as sexual products for this type of business while taking this opportunity to promote their countries under restricted terms and conditions required by the beauty business owner. One beneficial point that can be expected from the beauty contest is the bloom of the tourism industry. Therefore, to comply with the idea, the national costume contest has been considered one of the most colorful parts of the event.

Thailand is considered one of the most successful countries in promoting the national costume on the stage of the beauty pageant. According to a personal interview with Ms. Saengdeun Manwong (Danai, 2013). The Thailand's first-ever national costume winner was honored in 1969 and this splendid achievement had encouraged the Thai government to develop efficient tourism policies for the country. At the same time, the honored national costume had reflected the most admired culture of Thai ladies, particularly in traditional Thai clothing and dressing. At present, the memorable clothing image has become the Thai cultural identity on the stage of the beauty contest (Editorial Staff, 2013).

After Ms. Manwong's triumph in the beauty pageant, whose national costume was inspired by the high-class Thai dancing art costume, Thailand had been honored in this stage for another five times, in which the first four times had been described in the Editorial journal Local Society (Editorial Staff, 2013) and the research work of Danai (2013). Back in 1988, Ms. Porntip Nakhirunkanok was crowned Miss Universe with her winning national costume inspired by Queen Sirikit's royal clothing styles. In 2005, Ms. Chananporn Rosjan was confirmed as the winner of the national costume contest imitated from the traditional Thai dress famously preferred by female dignitaries in the Ayothaya period. In 2008, Ms. Kawintra Photijak had sparkled with her winning national costume designed under the "Spirit of Fighting" concept inspired by the Thai martial arts. In 2010, Ms. Fonthip Watcharatrakul was also honored with the best national costume inspired by the elegant look of the Thai elephant, considered the national animal empowered by the monarch. Similarly, in 2015, the beauty contest was held in Las Vegas and Thailand had restated its accomplishment with Ms. Aniporn Chalermburanawong's national costume developed under the "Tuk-Tuk Thailand" concept (Letgotoadventure, 2015). Ms. Chalermburanawong was also qualified to the final ten contestants, considered the first time in twenty-seven years after the splendid reputation of Ms. Porntip Nakhirunkanok. The Tuk-Tuk Thailand themed costume had been designed by

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the iconic Tuk-Tuk, the traditional Thai three-wheeled motorized rickshaw preferred mostly by foreign tourists. Actually, Tuk-Tuk was initially imported from Japan in 1960 to substitute the use of the human-powered tricycle (Phaka, 2015). Tuk-Tuk had later become famous and was considered one of the iconic

presenters of Thailand. However, Ms. Chalermburanawong's triumph in "Tuk-Tuk Thailand" in the national costume contest of the Miss Universe 2015 has provoked controversy in the Thai society.

**FIGURE 1**  
Miss Universe Thailand Winning the Best National Costume (Daily MGR Online, 2015)



**FIGURE 2**  
Tuk-Tuk Thailand Modeled by Ms. Aniporn Chalermburanawong (Daily MGR Online, 2015)



## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a research project titled Development of Design Process of Thai National Costume for International Presentation conducted by Danai (2013) and the article named "Nattayamalee", the National Costume in the journal Local Society (Editorial Staff, 2013), the first five national costumes winners

were determined and developed with the quality of design and exquisiteness. Admittedly, Ms. Manwong's honored national costume was brought from the model advertised on the public relations poster published to promote traditional Thai cultures. Ms. Nakhirunkanok's elegant costume was developed by Mrs. Lamyong Boonyarattaphan, a reputed senior clothing designer

for several renowned clothes shops in Thailand. The winning national dress of Ms. Rosjan was exquisitely designed by Mr. Theeraphan Jancharoen, a well-known designer specializing in the development and design of Thai textile guaranteed by several honorable awards. Meanwhile, the awarded costumes of Ms. Photijak, Ms. Watcharatrakul, and Ms. Chalermburanawong were neatly designed and made by Mr. Sathapat Moolma, Mr. Palin Apinyakul, and Mr. Hirankrit Pattaraboriboonkul, respectively. Nevertheless, the only outstanding difference among the award-honored national costumes is the inspiration of genuine Thai culture and arts. Obviously, the first five awarded costumes were produced based on the signature of Thai identity. In contrast, the Tuk-Tuk Thailand outfit was catalyzed by the fame of the middle-class transportation vehicle. The costume was successfully made by the mixture of quality plastic and chromium (Daily MGR Online, 2015).

It is understood that the difference of clothing concept causes huge criticism for the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume, particularly in various types of social network. Some negative comments were partly aimed at Ms. Chalermburanawong, who presented this controversial outfit. Prior to the 2015 contest, Dr. Panadda Wongphudee, who was crowned Miss Thailand 2000, had offered some productive feedbacks towards this costume via her Instagram, confirming that the national costume of the beauty pageant should be made from Thai textile to represent the Thai identity, especially since the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume is quite insufficient in terms of elegance and beauty and the model's legs were too slim to match up with the design of the outfit (ASTV Manager Online, 2015).

Additionally, the website ASTV Manager Online (2015) reported that a massive number of people had slammed the idea of presenting the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume in the beauty contest and Ms. Chalermburanawong would surely have no way to escape the fact that people wanted her to be involved in the disgrace. Many bad comments and exaggerated challenges were made by those who extremely disliked the outfit. The website also reported that the CSI LA, the popular American webpage, had assessed the meaning of words used in comments towards the Tuk-Tuk Thailand outfit. It was obvious that many American slangs related to the cab, for instance, bus and yellow cab, were used to express scornful feelings and emotions, particularly since they implied the status of prostitute or easy women. One outstanding comment was "Extremely! CSI LA Page points out 'Tuk-Tuk Thailand' signifies the image of slut" (Kapook, n.d.). This could clearly explain their understanding on the model of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume, although the comment was dubiously produced to protect the dignity of Thai ladies, particularly in the USA's beauty pageant.

Although the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume was honored for being the best national dress in the Miss Universe 2015, Mr. Suchart Sawadisri, the Thai national artist of the field of art created language in 2011, had commented in his Facebook that the judges were all blind for admiring this tasteless costume. Moreover, he implicitly denounced Ms. Chalermburanawong by calling her a "Miss Tuk-Tuk", adding that she was a victim of the Thailand's prolonged political crisis towards the contemporary Thai society. Additionally, the national artist had blasted Ms. Chalermburanawong for lacking intellectual depth to continue with the one-on-one interview session (MGR Online, 2015; Thairath Publishing Version, 2015).

According to the above-mentioned aspects on the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume and Ms. Aniporn Chalermburanawong reported on the Internet, the beauty queen was the first to confront with several negative reactions both before and after the contest. However, as the effective period of the Miss Universe Thailand winner was going to end, Ms. Chalermburanawong was not managed to show any response to those acrid comments at all. She only concentrated on what she had to do to cope effectively with several issues in the changing society, especially since she was a representative of the country who was honored to be part of the beauty contest. This article focuses on two major issues, including the status of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand and the influence and impact caused by the Tuk-Tuk Thailand. As part of the goal to create broader comprehension on the Thai national costume towards the contemporary Thai society appeared in the cyber world, the Tuk-Tuk Thailand has obviously been considered the product of popular culture regarding its existence in the craze of today's online media. The idea had come to an awareness of Mr. Pattaraboriboonkul (TUK TUK: "The State" identity, Thai identity, December 21, 2015 (Daily MGR Online, 2015), the designer of this controversial costume, who was inspired by the outfit pattern of Iron Man, the famous fictional superhero from the Hollywood sci-fi action movie produced by Marvel Entertainment, Kevin Feige (Producer), and Shane Black (Director). Another significant point to talk about is the gender role of Ms. Chalermburanawong, ranging from strong influences to possible impacts caused by the Tuk-Tuk Thailand, who was honorably selected to represent Thailand in the Miss Universe 2015.

This article is influenced by the thesis named "Cosplay Culture" among Thai Youth achieved by Haroanpoke (2014), explaining the uniqueness and popularity of imitating the dressing styles of comic heroes and heroines, particularly the Japanese ones, preferred mostly by Thai teenagers. This is admittedly considered the fad of popular culture. One of the essential discussions in the thesis is about the meaning of popular culture

through different dimensions of dressing styles driven by the wearers' passionate desire for and genuine identification with the characters seen in animation films and online games. The idea is applied as a fundamental principle in this study, supported by suggestions and comments provided by Leavy and Trier-Bieniek (2014) who productively give remarkable insights towards the meanings of gender and popular culture appeared in their written masterpiece named *Gender & Pop Culture*.

Another notable thesis on the comprehension of identity communication via clothing styles is *The Revelation on Identity through Traditional Costume of the Thai Song in Phunphin District, Surat Thani Province* achieved by Vatviroj (2009). She had studied the existence of Thai Songs and their changing popularity through time for people living in the central region and Surat Thani province of Thailand since 1957. From the essence of the said study, the author of this article has determined to apply the strategy of identity communication via various dressing styles, considered one of the admired cultures among Thai people. However, in this article, the major content has conversely focused on the beauty queen who represented her own country in the event of beauty pageant launched for commercial purposes. This international contest has been promoted before the arrival of the millennium and has continued to exist in the realm of the digital world.

## METHODOLOGY

The key tool employed in this study is textual analysis. The data gathered included news, photographs and related articles about the above mentioned controversy in journals, on the Internet, and from Facebook statuses, from the middle of the year 2015 to early 2016. The related news clips on Youtube, especially those with presentation of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand themed costume in minute detail provided explicit and beneficial information for this study's analytical procedures.

To achieve the objective of this study, the author makes use of the concept of gender and popular culture for data analysis. The main discussion of this study, as stated above, focuses on two major issues, namely the status of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand and its influence and impact especially on Ms. Aniporn Chalermburanawong as a woman modeling the controversial outfit.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Culture is meaningful in the sense of individuality. To understand popular culture in certain extents, Strinati (2004) had pointed out that Any attempt to define popular culture inevitably involves its analysis and evaluation. This notion has been applied for the evaluation of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand phenomenon sparked on the stage of the Miss Universe 2015, with a special

emphasis on the core idea of what had been existing. As it is concerned with popular culture, many points of view have been created by people in the society. The appropriateness of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume and Ms. Aniporn Chalermburanawong has been evaluated collectively at the same time.

The triumph of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume also unveiled the acceptance and appreciation of many people in the Thai society, despite of a tremendous amount of negative and scornful feedbacks. Judging from the majority of Thai people, a national costume must be inspired by unique and exquisite designs that can elegantly present the value of Thai culture and the major part of the costume should be tailored with Thai silk clothes. As defined by Haroanpoke (2014), Leavy and Trier-Bieniek (2014), popular culture is totally different from mainstream or high cultures and the victorious costume has distorted the meaning of high culture. The design of the controversial outfit was created to foster the fashion of popular culture, especially since it was inspired by the popularity of the middle-class transportation vehicle. Equipped with plastic and chromium materials, this national costume was totally scant of Thai value. The outfit became even worse when it was announced the best national costume comparing to the Thailand's five national costumes previously honored in the similar event. This should be recognized as the new chapter of the Thai national costume influenced by the fad of popular culture while Ms. Chalermburanawong should be considered the one who plays the most vital role for making this happen.

Following the accomplishment of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume, Ms. Chalermburanawong was blasted with many negative comments, particularly in the view of sexuality and the image of slut. The American slangs seen in those comments should be reconsidered. Meanwhile, Ms. Chalermburanawong should mutually take responsibility in demystifying a sex myth conceived by those who provocatively provided bad comments. At the same time, the beauty queen has been expected to build greater image for the Thai tricycle cab to be recognized worldwide, which can drive growth for the tourism industry of the country. However, it is believed that the previously mentioned denouncement of "Miss Tuk-Tuk" stated by the national artist Mr. Suchart Sawadisri will benefit the gorgeous lady since she is appointed as the Thailand's cultural ambassador to promote the popularity of Tuk-Tuk cab.

Considering Ms. Chalermburanawong's gender role when she performed the act of riding the Tuk-Tuk, Brown (2011, pp. 12) mentioned that "[It], suggesting that whoever has mastered the machine, male or female, has also mastered power, privilege, and individuality", which was excerpt from the book named *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and*



Popular Culture. It reflects the powerful acts of a heroine appearing in several action films, for example, the portrayal of Lara Croft, the famous female character in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Lawrence Gordon*, Lloyd Levin (Producers) and Jan de Bont (Director), who rides a motorcycle aggressively to prove her superiority.

However, the beauty queen had continued to promote Thailand via the fame of Tuk-Tuk in terms of economic and tourism growth. Obviously, the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume, in this context, will promote the dignity and responsibility of the gorgeous lady in leading the society to the international stage. Despite of her stunning beauty and excellent intelligence, she is supposed to fall victim to the sexual product under the influence of consumerism.

Regarding the Miss Universe 2015, Thailand had proposed the Tuk-Tuk Thailand as the themed national costume to reflect the Revelation of Thai Identity concept that thoroughly breaks all rules and promotes the colorful sensation on stage. Apart from the creativity in clothing designs, it is essential for the country to promote the dignity and identity of Thai ladies. It is agreed that the five national costumes previously honored in the similar beauty contest were created with greater quality designs that truly reflected the essence of Thai cultures (Danai, 2013). The Tuk-Tuk Thailand theme only unveiled the influence of capitalism and consumerism. The attributes of swiftness, activeness, and liveliness of Tuk-Tuk cab can also foster the benefits obtained from the tourism business and modern Thai ladies, represented by Ms. Chalermburanawong, are anticipated to possess those favorable attributes.

The abovementioned identity communication strategies have influenced several people in having the awareness on Thai national costumes. Specified in the study "The Thai Song" conducted by Vatviroj (2009), the targeted group of people were relocated people living in Surat Thani's Phunphin District who collectively admired their ethnic costumes. Strategically, the revealing of identity, both among themselves within their community and to others outside their community, can be conducted through these costumes. However, the Tuk-Tuk Thailand costume does not seem to foster the admired value of Thai culture and, moreover, it tends to rely mainly on modern technology. It certainly reflects the appreciation of technological gadgets, the Internet in particular, that can provide greater knowledge in evaluating Thai culture and identity at large, without being

obliged to a particular norm of culture fostered by a certain group of people in the society.

## CONCLUSION

Evaluative comments towards the Tuk-Tuk Thailand seen on the Internet are produced based on the craze of popular culture. Although the controversial outfit was announced the best national costume and it was expected to drive growth for local tourism, it can never compare to the valuable designs of the previous five honored national costumes.

The Tuk-Tuk Thailand theme was proposed to break down the rules of Thai national costumes. Judging from the post-modern concept proposed by Wongsingthong (2004, p. 745), the Tuk-Tuk Thailand dress, considered the product of popular culture, has not pursued the requirements of the Thai national costume in the sense of high culture at all. Significantly, the Tuk-Tuk Thailand phenomenon reveals that culture is meaningful in the sense of individuality.

The existence of the Tuk-Tuk Thailand concept has directly put several influences on Ms. Chalermburanawong, particularly her beauty image and expected gender role. An upper part of her good-looking body was significantly transformed into a vehicular machine requiring the ability and responsibility to lead the Thai society to the desirable directions while creating cultural and tourism benefits for the country.

However, Ms. Chalermburanawong should take responsibility in demystifying a sex myth conceived by those who provocatively provided bad comments and she has also fallen victim to the sexual product. Admittedly, her reputation and controversial outfit can relieve the tension brought on by a political crisis in contemporary Thai society (Chaopraya News, 2015).

Still, many Thai people have admired her and give her positive encouragement as she is appointed as a cultural ambassador to promote Thai tourism. The gorgeous lady has managed to endure her responsibilities as if she were a trader to express herself clearly. Finally, it can be concluded that the online media and social network have huge influence in determining the social status of this Thai beauty queen.

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