Enmeshment Aesthetics: Social Media, Mobility, and Materiality in Chiang Mai, Thailand

KASIDIT PHIKROHKIT

University of California, Irvine, USA

ABSTRACT

This article contextualizes and situates the city of Chiang Mai in Thailand as a social media-oriented site for imagining oneself as part of *global* Thailand and for partaking in the cosmopolitan petit bourgeois consumer culture. Café-hopping for social media content production purposes is that trendy phenomenon in Chiang Mai that intersects with the emergence of enmeshment aesthetics in Chiang Mai's consumption spaces. This enmeshment aesthetics offers a lens through which identity formation and the pursuit of mobility can be understood in relation to the acts of moving in spaces and forming relations with different objects. Here, social media plays a key role in facilitating and concretizing this phenomenon that blurs the modern national, cultural, socio-economic, spatial, and even ontological boundaries. Within such blurring, new kinds of identity and modes of engaging with objects, others, and spaces have yet to be investigated more deeply. Weaving together Thai studies, media studies, new materialism, and urban studies, this article seeks to illustrate that social media and its intersubjective dimension have been utilized in order to perform and reaffirm a social media user's imagined selfhood. Ultimately, this phenomenon exposes the ways in which the perceptual and material properties of objects and spaces become a pivot for constituting a desired self-image and visualizing it through the eyes of social media.

Keywords: enmeshment aesthetics, Chiang Mai, social media, materiality, mobility

INTRODUCTION

If one were to imagine oneself in Chiang Mai – the biggest city and a well-known tourist destination in northern Thailand – one can go on Instagram and search for #ChiangMai. One would find images of people strolling around gorgeous flower farms, people drinking matcha green tea in a Japan-inspired tea house, people eating chocolate croissants in a surreal Disney-like French patisserie, and campers making drip coffee with a breath-taking view of Mae Kampong village. These images on Instagram of aesthetically inviting cafés, coffee houses, restaurants, and social media landmarks with diverse landscapes and cross-cultural elements are the current prominent visualities of Chiang Mai.

As one of the online image-making sites, Instagram is a social media platform that allows its users to use still and moving images as forms of storytelling about individuals (the users) and the objects or spaces in their backgrounds. Looking at #ChiangMai on Instagram, images of the designs and landscapes of Chiang Mai's consumption spaces usually come up. These images reveal that the deliberate designs and features of these spaces are intentional about their appeal to the senses and their invocation of a desire to photograph oneself in such places and share the images as social media posts. If one keeps scrolling down #ChiangMai on Instagram, one will notice an act of crafting what Erving Goffman (1959) calls "personal mise-en-scène" where social media users' images feature their bodies against the field or a backdrop of their surrounding natural, cultural, and social settings.

As of the late 2010s, Chiang Mai has emerged as a social media-oriented site for imagining oneself as part of *global* Thailand, and for worlding – the art of being global (Bui 2021, 60). This worlding phenomenon is situated in what this article calls 'enmeshment aesthetics,' defined as the intentional and material embodiment of cosmopolitanism in consumption spaces that capitalize on the sensible dimensions of objects, foodways, and spatial designs. In this embodiment, the art of being global is done through forming relationalities between oneself, the intended aesthetics of a place, and the objects of consumption that altogether create the desired mise-en-scène. Despite seeming like a personal matter or endeavor, the question is whether these newly formed relationalities are to be kept secret or publicized to others.

The use of social media such as Instagram and Facebook has become associated with this phenomenon of enmeshment aesthetics, especially as it relates to the prominent café-hopping culture of Chiang Mai. The common scenes of people hopping between different cafés and consumption spaces with high quality cameras to document their daily activities for social media audiences reflect how Chiang Mai has grown into a "vast landscape of visual social media culture" (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020). Indeed, Chiang Mai has materialized into a landscape of semiotics that are meant to be felt and captured for social media.

With such a noticeable phenomenon, enmeshment aesthetics and café-hopping for social media offer a critical lens to understand Chiang Mai and Thailand in the 21st century. This intersection of media studies, area studies, place-making, and the metaphysics of media technologies has appeared to be an emerging trend within Southeast Asian media studies. The circulations of cultural elements, knowledge, and new relations between places and human practices speak to the global turn (Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017) where restricted boundaries of nation-states and academic disciplines no longer suffice to capture the complexity of transnational, transcultural, and global phenomena.

Through textual and aesthetic analysis with cultural studies perspectives, this article aims to weave together these interconnected aspects to understand the current trajectory of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The first part of the paper tracks the genealogy of aesthetics as a concept and contextualizes Chiang Mai's enmeshment aesthetics. The second part explores the intertwining of historical and sociocultural dimensions of enmeshment aesthetics in Chiang Mai as an international tourist destination with a particular focus on the emerging local middle-class population and their pursuit of global mobility. The last part theorizes this social media visual culture as it pertains to the materiality of enmeshment aesthetics. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that enmeshment aesthetics is a new phenomenon that pushes toward future studies and understandings of people's engagements with identity formation, urban developments, and world-shaping technologies.

AESTHETIC THEORY AND ENMESHMENT AESTHETICS

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "aesthetic" as an adjective is synonymous with the words "beautiful" or "pleasing in appearance." When an object is described as "aesthetic," it usually means that the object triggers a sense of pleasure and satisfaction in the person perceiving and looking at the object. As a noun, aesthetics is used to refer to an "approach to [study] what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight" (Merriam-Webster 2023).

Aesthetics philosopher James Shelley argues that the term "aesthetics" was introduced into the philosophical lexicon in the 18th century where it has since widely referred to as "judgments, attitudes, experiences, qualities, objects, and values" (Shelley 2013, 246). As a large body of works, the study of aesthetics expands across different disciplines from the arts to philosophy, and to cultural studies and literature. Accordingly, there are many thinkers who have come to be associated with the concept of aesthetics, such as Plato, Aristotle, Arthur Schopenhauer, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, and Theodor Adorno to name a few. These thinkers' works span a wide range of aesthetic landscapes from music to paintings. What these thinkers seem to agree upon is that aesthetics is contingent on ontological and epistemological contexts. That is to say, there is both a specificity and universality of knowing within aesthetic considerations that must be determined by the senses.

Alexander Baumgarten first adopted the term "aesthetics [as] the science of knowledge acquired through the senses" (Giovannelli 2012, 2). In Baumgarten's poetic use of the concept, aesthetics resembles the Greek word "aisthetikos" meaning "of the sense perception" (ibid). In forging the connection between sense perception and knowledge, Aristotle argued that humans' desire for knowledge begins with the "natural delight we take in sense perception" (Curran 2012, 24). In the entanglement between knowledge, sense perception, and sensual pleasures, Immanuel Kant emerged as one of the key figures in the philosophy of aesthetics. Kant presupposed that when one finds an object beautiful or aesthetic, one consequently seeks to pronounce that aesthetic judgment out onto the world and expects the same affirmation from others (Kant 2001, 7, 5: 212-213).. Kant famously said "[one] judges not merely for [oneself], but for everyone" (ibid.). In this spirit, aesthetics is not only a subjective experience, but also one that is highly intersubjective whereby one comes to be oriented (Ahmed 2006) toward the (aesthetic) world with objects and others.

When the presence of others comes to play a role in aesthetic judgments, aesthetics becomes a matter of socially mediated taste. Although taste denotes one of the human senses, it also refers to a broader schema of one's appreciation and dis-appreciation according to society's social narratives. Philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer articulates that a study of taste "requires consideration of … the determinants of culture" (Korsmeyer 2013, 257). She points out here the role of social conventions that determine one's dislike or liking of certain sensible objects. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) hence becomes an important reminder that taste is not only "linked with pleasure and displeasure" (Korsmeyer 2013, 257), but also acts as a "marker of class" (Bourdieu 1984, 2). In this Bourdieusian sense, aesthetics is truly what "[bridges] a subjective judgment with a consensus judgment" (Anderson and Peña-Guzmán 2022).

Through the framing of enmeshment aesthetics, the paper intentionally puts aesthetics together with the conception of enmeshment to intervene in the study of globalization and glocalization. Prominent global studies scholars Manfred B. Steger and Paul James use the term "enmesh" to illustrate the idea of glocalization where "the global is always dialectically enmeshed in the local (and vice-versa)" (Steger and James 2020, 4). Steger and James contend that glocalization reflects globalization's "homogenization tendencies that co-exist and interact with local dynamics" which favors the "expressions of cultural diversification and hybridization" (ibid.). Thinking with Steger and James, to enmesh is to entangle and hybridize. An English scholar known for their works on object-oriented ontology Timothy Morton similarly uses the term "mesh" to illustrate "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things" (Morton 2010, 29).

Adopting Morton's usage of the term and putting it in conversation with Steger and James' use of enmeshment, this paper proposes that enmeshment aesthetics encompasses the intentionality and materiality of visual and material culture that, when entangled with peoples as agents, lead to the rise

of multiplicities, in-betweenness, and hybridity that destabilize any national, cultural, spatial, and ontological boundaries. Enmeshment aesthetics, therefore, stages an event where objects or spaces with different sociocultural and historical elements clash and enter the meaning (re)making stage. In short, enmeshment aesthetics makes visible how humans are aesthetic beings who intentionally orientate themselves toward the phenomenal world, by which they are themselves "open [for] a new page of aesthetics: a page that remains blank" (Sasaki 2010, x).

Bringing Chiang Mai back into the conversation, the overt mixing of Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and European cultural elements and visualities becomes enmeshment aesthetics. Not only that enmeshment aesthetics in Chiang Mai is growing, but it is also a matter of contesting aesthetic judgments. When an imitation of the Hachiko monument originally located in front of the world-famous Shibuya crossing in Tokyo, Japan was installed along with an imitation of a Japanese subway station entrance at Think Park (a Japan-inspired shopping district located in Chiang Mai's Nimmanhemin area), it sparked critical conversations in Thailand about this overt Japanization (Thairath Plus 2022). Such overt Japanization gave rise to the locals' concerns about the fleeting of the local Lanna, i.e., northern Thai, in newly constructed environments or "texture" (Fuhrmann 2018) of Chiang Mai. In recognizing this tension, the paper acknowledges how urban-built forms and consumption spaces reflect both the coming of global influences and the preservation of the local memories of the place tied to its lingering visualities of the past. Nonetheless, the question that lies within this tension is one of authenticity and genealogy at the heart of the ethnic and national identity.

Following prominent Thai studies scholar Thongchai Winichakul in his discussion of Michel Foucault's method of genealogy (2019), many Thai scholars tend to fall back into producing knowledge that assumes a pre-existing, ostensibly authentic, and nationalist construction of Thailand or a dominant ethnic group. The prominent narrative that Thailand has never been colonized – perpetuated in Thailand's K-12 education system – has hindered critical reflections on the sociocultural history of Thailand and upholds the myth of the prehistoric existence of Thailand and pure Thainess untouched by its non-Thai counterparts.

Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2002) coined the term "crypto-colonialism" to capture the hidden conditions of coloniality in the foundation of the modern Thai nation-state where a dominant ethnic group of Siamese elites adopted the colonial West's creation of a modern nation-state. The current image of Thai national identity is created through the work of cultural hegemony and the Thainization of the ethnic others in the region. Crypto-colonialism along with Peter A. Jackson's description of Thailand as a "semi-colonial" country (2005) both complicate the authenticity of Thainess and resurface the erasure and marginalization of diverse ethnic identities present in the periphery of Bangkok, such as the Khon Maueng/Lanna people in the north, the Malayu/Peranakan people in the

south, as well as other prominent diasporic communities in Thailand, namely Chinese, Shan, Persian, South Asian, and Vietnamese communities.

These semi-colonial and crypto-colonial conditions put Thailand and its peoples in an in-between position where the nation is open to adopting the cultural elements of other cultures while the diverse ethnic locals grapple with preserving their identities. Such conditions arguably give rise to the co-existence of competing cultures from within and beyond the locality of Thailand whereby Thailand has "a long history of borrowing and appropriating other forms" (Ferguson 2010, 228) of cultures. Within Thailand, the current generations of non-Siamese and diasporic ethnic groups, like the Khon Maung of northern Thailand, have grown up with the sensible lingering of their otherness whereby they see the need to hold on to their distinct identities that are yet marginal to the Bangkokian image of Thainess. Thus, the discussion on retaining the Lanna aesthetics of Chiang Mai in response to the recent Japanization reflects the contemporary struggle arising from the history of Chiang Mai as a periphery to the cores of Bangkok and Thailand as a crypto- and semi-colonial state.

In situating enmeshment aesthetics in the context of Chiang Mai, recognizing these unique historical conditions is critical to follow Winichakul in dismantling the tendency to fall into producing other knowledge that assumes a pre-existing and untouched national or ethnic identity. The article thus understands enmeshment aesthetics as that which deconstructs the assumption of authenticity and pureness of national, cultural, and ethnic constructs.

In this view, the pervasiveness of Americanization (Talamayan 2019), the increase in diasporic media (Gordon 2019), the glocalization of popular culture (Aberin et al. 2021), the transnational exchanges and linkages in national cinemas (Espeña 2021), and the social media-driven enmeshment aesthetics in Chiang Mai expose the relevance of complex inter-Asian and global contacts in Southeast Asian media studies. This not only carries the potential for understanding how Southeast Asia and its engagements with all forms of media are imbricated with global connectivity and the circulation of cultural elements across spaces and bodies but also allows its scholars to critically view the region's sense of place while recognizing its complex histories and coloniality.

MATERIALITY, URBANITY, AND SPACE-MAKING

In using enmeshment aesthetics as a point of departure, the article understands that textual and aesthetic analyses of social media images (discussed in the upcoming sections) point further to what Sarah Ahmed coins "queer phenomenology" (2006). Ahmed groundbreakingly illustrates how we, as human beings, come to know and experience the world through orientations toward objects and other people. The ways in which objects and other bodies come to exist in our perceptual (aesthetic) horizon

determine how we move, orient ourselves, and form relationalities with them. In the same vein, new materialism and the materiality turn in the humanities and social sciences have pointed to theories such as Assemblage Theory and Affect Theory that foreground the entanglement between matter/meaning and human/non-human in the larger ecologies of things. This turn marks a new shift that focuses on how the physical and non-physical attributes of objects or people allow them to perceive and make sense of one another relationally. The turn also emphasizes the materiality of non-human things that constantly inform a human's process of being.

Hence, framing enmeshment aesthetics as a practice that entangles national and cultural semiotics, an emphasis has to be put on its material dimension in the world of perception. Influenced by the works of theorists such as Manuel De Landa, Bruno Latour, and Karen Barad, the materiality and assemblage turn offer much insight into the interdependence of human actors and their larger relational ontologies and ecologies with non-human objects and non-human others (including material and nonmaterial beings). Without shifting away from the focus on social media, weaving together enmeshment aesthetics and the materiality and new materialism turn leads to a theorization of social media visual culture that acknowledges how what goes into social media content has a purpose and intentionality behind it.

Social media, as a recent 21st-century phenomenon, are the extension of the bodies of their users. It is where their users' sense of self materializes in a supplementing realm with a supplementing set of audiences, viewers, and followers. Instagram, one of the most prominent social media photo-sharing/image-making platforms, aspires to be "an authentic and safe space for inspiration and expression" (Instagram 2023) – signifying the platform's ambition for "aesthetic visual communication" (Manovich 2017) and the "redesigning [of] practices, cultural institutions, and material spaces" (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020).

As one lives with social media in the 21st century, one has learned to become aware of the materiality of things, objects, and others. The act of photographing a space, a place, and placing a body against such a backdrop reflects an awareness of the intersubjective dimension of social media. Social media owners, i.e., content creators, position themselves as subjects that move through the world, and at the same time, position themselves as objects of the gazes of social media. When social media users share an image of themselves with objects of consumption or with an aesthetic landscape, they are pronouncing their aesthetic judgment intended to reach their social media audiences. Enmeshment aesthetics, as what makes visible the clashes of cultures, offers not only a global sophisticated aesthetic judgment but also signifies exposure to foreign objects and places beyond what is already familiar locally.

Once enmeshment aesthetics concentrates on particular areas of Chiang Mai more than others, certain

neighborhoods become spaces known for social media visual culture. Nimmanhemin, now the nightlife and entertainment district of Chiang Mai, located on one of the busiest intersections of the city, is known for a concentration of chic cafés, restaurants, bars, shopping centers, and social landmarks that feature elements of hybridized Western and Asian aesthetics. This district houses One Nimman, an Italy-inspired shopping complex, and ThinkPark where the imitations of a Japanese subway station entrance and a Hachiko monument have been installed.

As of mid-2023, a section of what used to be a poorly maintained and dirty Mae Kha canal that runs along the Chiang Mai inner city has transformed itself into a new tourist spot with food stalls and shops resembling the Otaru canal northeast of Sapporo, Japan, but with a twist of colorful Lanna-style lanterns that were placed for the 2022 local Yipeng festival. Like Nimmanhemin and the Mae Kha canal, Chang Moi, a historical alley connecting Chiang Mai's inner city to its historic Chinatown, has recently received a large interest from young locals and tourists. Here, they can embark on a photo-taking adventure by crossing the alley in front of Chiang Mai's iconic rattan store near by a 1990s-themed Millilit café and Brewginning – Chiang Mai's famous coffee shop with hybrid Chinese-Northern Thai aesthetics.

Due to the richness of enmeshment in these areas, Chiang Mai locals intentionally visit these spaces of consumption in order to identify with and embody the spaces' intended conceptual slogans or gimmicks. Thus, Chiang Mai's café-hopping for social media and its resulting enmeshment aesthetics point to this new materialist and ontological turn that the Southeast Asian media studies scholars have yet to explore in detail. Combining with the region's complex historical and postcolonial conditions at times of rapid global interconnectedness, this turn toward how people, objects, and spaces inform one another's relational ontologies offers new lenses through which to view the intersections of identity formation, placemaking, and new media technologies.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the main subjects of the photos position themselves as the main objects in the mise-en-scène of the photographs that they share on social media. In these images, the enmeshment aesthetic elements in the background and around the subjects help to craft the subject's intended visual storyline.

These images feature Chiang Mai's Mae Kha canal and Think Park where the enmeshment of the local Chiang Mai and East Asian (Japan and South Korea mainly) aesthetics have become the city's prominent social media landscapes. An accumulated collection of these images in the online world comes to direct the current images of Chiang Mai as a place product for tourists, visitors, and even the locals themselves. Due to the author's formative years growing up in Chiang Mai and witnessing its changing visual social media trends, it became noticeable that Chiang Mai's current visualities are of enmeshment aesthetics, especially the cultural elements of Japan and South Korea. Arguably, this

phenomenon has shaped the place-making of Chiang Mai and stimulated the consumers to identify Chiang Mai in terms of "consumer goods and positive product images" (Porananond 2016, 90). Not only are Chiang Mai's current product images of Japanese and Korean aesthetics, they are also of affordable, accessible, and Internet-famous consumption spaces.
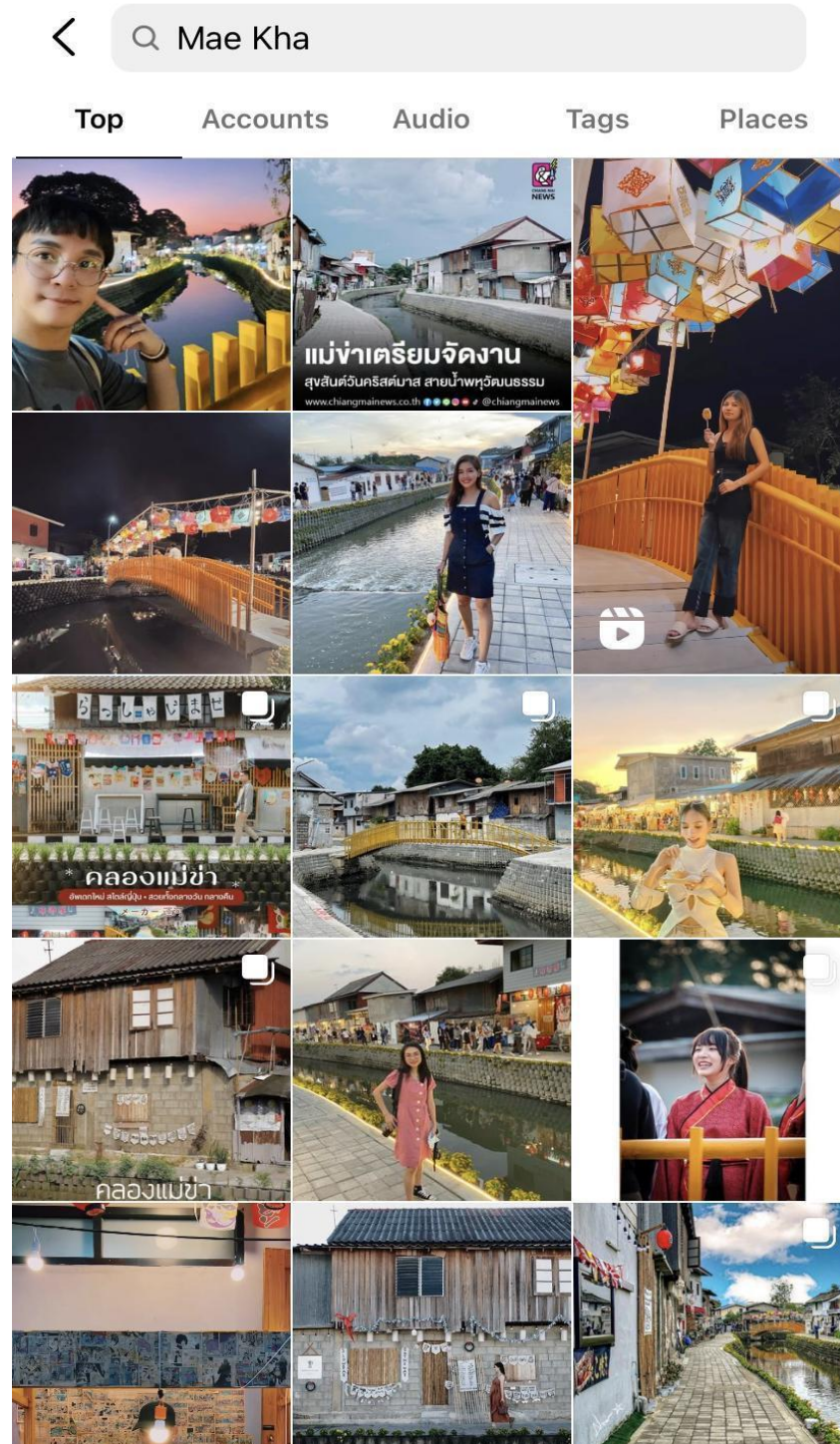

Figure 1: Mae Kha Stream with its Otaru canal-inspired aesthetics. Source: Instagram.

The next section will perform critical textual and aesthetic analyses of social media images and contextualize them within Thai tourism studies, the materiality turn, and object–oriented ontology.
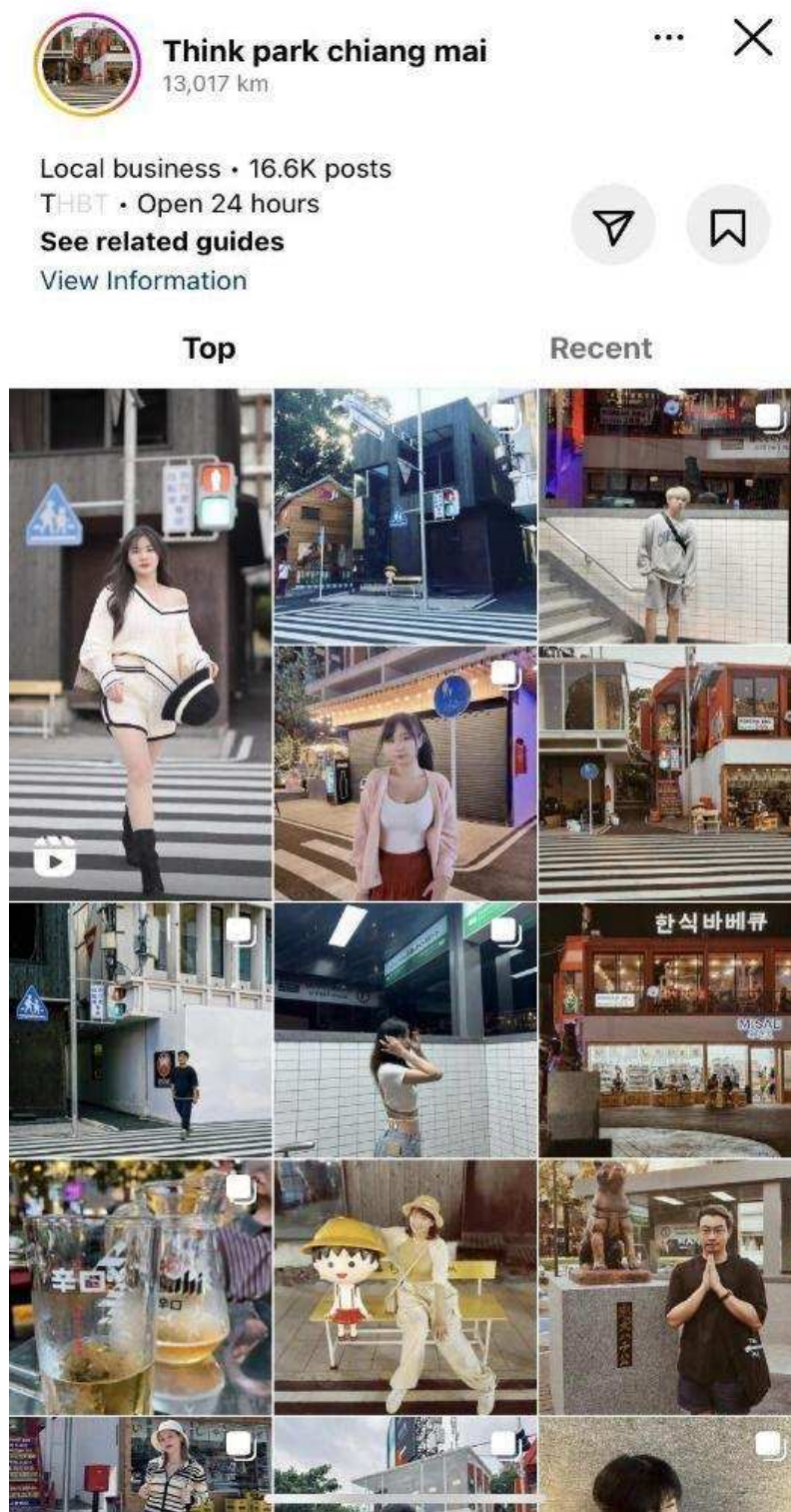

Figure 2: Think Park Chiang Mai with its Japan and South Korea elements. Source: Instagram.

COSMOPOLITANISM, TOURISM, AND MOBILITY

According to a 2021 dataset by *Chiang Mai We Care* เชียงใหม่ ฉันจะดูแลเธอ, there are roughly 2,700 cafés in the province of Chiang Mai. In the heart of Chiang Mai city alone, there are already approximately 1,000 cafés. With these numbers, it would take years to complete a café-hopping project of the 2,700 cafés (considering that many more cafés will open and others close in the meantime). While these numbers reflect the overt café and coffee culture of the city in recent years, it is important to note that coffee and the presence of cafés have long existed in Chiang Mai. Starting in 1974, Chiang Mai became the first province in Thailand to start growing Arabica coffee as part of an initiative to eradicate opium plantations in the high mountain areas of Northern Thailand (Chiang Mai We Care 2021). Since then, the consumption of coffee has increased in Chiang Mai and in Thailand in general, and Chiang Mai has now become the province with the most coffee-related businesses in Thailand (ibid.). With such many cafés throughout the province, the rise of competition between cafés has led to rapid openings and closings. The ones that tend to survive and sustain their customer base have an exceptional quality of specialty coffee or are hard-to-compete with social media aesthetics. The visual aspect of cafés is a trendy element that many new cafés in Chiang Mai aspire to execute well.

As cafés with unique and eye-catching aesthetics grow in number, café-hopping for social media content production purposes is a phenomenon in Chiang Mai that began in the mid-2010s. This time period is significant because it marks the beginning of a push of café culture and enmeshment aesthetics in Chiang Mai. This phenomenon concerns the exponential influx of international Asian and domestic tourists who come to Chiang Mai with social media technologies to capture their experiences while traveling. As a world-renowned destination for cultural tourism, the presence of international tourists has long been established in Chiang Mai. However, over the last decade, middle- and upper-middle-class tourists from within Asia with their eyes toward aesthetics and affordability have dominated Chiang Mai's tourism industry. With the influx of tourists and social media, the city has increased its consumption and hospitality businesses that cater to the different palates and tastes of its visitors. The phenomenon turns Chiang Mai into a place where spatial, cultural, and socio-economic mobility is visualized through coenesthetic experiences in consumption spaces, especially in cafés.

Cafés are first and foremost places where the consumption of foods and drinks to sustain the bodies happens. They are also places where the choices of what people consume and the deliberate designs of the spaces come to embody intended social meanings and represent the tastes and aesthetic judgments of the café goers. Hence, the different variety of foods, drinks, and design choices offered by different cafés determine who comes to such spaces. While cafés with humble aesthetics and European-style menus with simple coffee choices dominated Chiang Mai's early café scenes, the newer cafés with social media-worthy aesthetics and diverse beverage menus corresponding to the more adventurous tastes of recent younger tourists have attracted a much larger customer base. The

point here is that the constant presence of both international and domestic tourists in Chiang Mai has influenced how consumption businesses thrive better and how certain foods, drinks, and spatial designs have become popular markers of tourist mobility and lifestyle. As Chiang Mai's local urban middle class grew up witnessing these tourist-oriented developments in urban Chiang Mai and its accessible consumer culture, these individuals arguably aspire to partake in the same lifestyle. Hence, what affirms such aspiration and participation in this tourist mobility is the noticeable increase in locally owned cafés with non-Thai enmeshment aesthetics intended for social media content production.
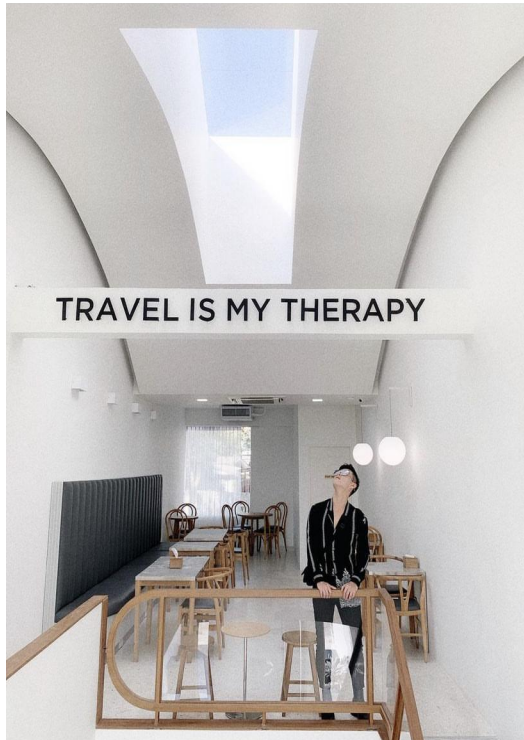

Figures 3 and 4: Transit Number 8's slogan TRAVEL IS MY THERAPY. Source: Instagram.

Figures 3 and 4 feature two public posts by social media users who took photographs of themselves with the slogan 'Travel is my therapy,' which is part of the intentional decorative design inside Chiang Mai's Internet-famous Transit Number 8 café. In the mise-en-scène of these two photos, the subjects appear in full body against Transit Number 8's backdrop of a modern minimalist architecture that illuminates the contrasting black and wooden furniture. The slogan 'Travel is my therapy' is positioned at the center of both photographs where both subjects look up to it. As a visual storytelling, these two photos communicate to their viewers the aesthetic judgment of the accounts' owners. By positioning themselves as subjects in these photos, they portray a sense of individualism through their chosen style of clothing and their staged body as immersed in the intended interior design of the café. Upon gazing at the slogan they communicate to their social media audience their affinity with it and that travel is *their* therapy. The slogan is written in English rather than in Thai, signifying the café owners'

global outlook. Thus, what is clear is the café's targeted niche group of café-hoppers and consumers who possess substantial knowledge of the English language and who are part of a socioeconomic class where 'travel is therapy' is a common desire.

As public social media posts, these two photos are part of the current image of Transit Number 8's intended 'airport-like' aesthetics. This deliberate design inspired by the local owners' love for international traveling (Dsignsomething.com, n.d.) allows the consumers to identify with the slogan, which then creates a sense of contentment with the café's designs. This contentment is therefore intentionally captured and turned into a social media post for their audiences.
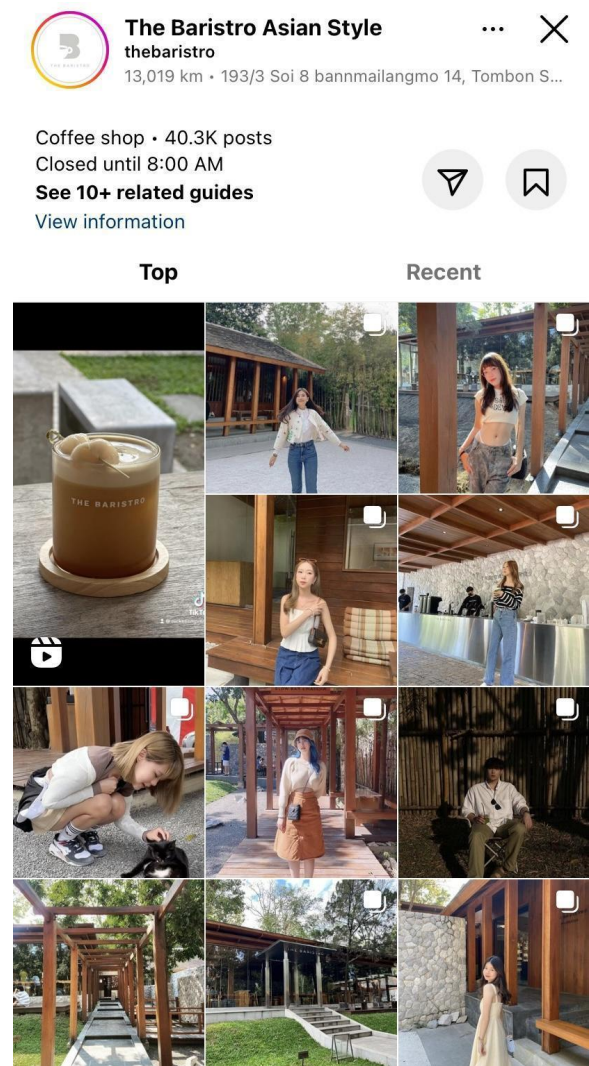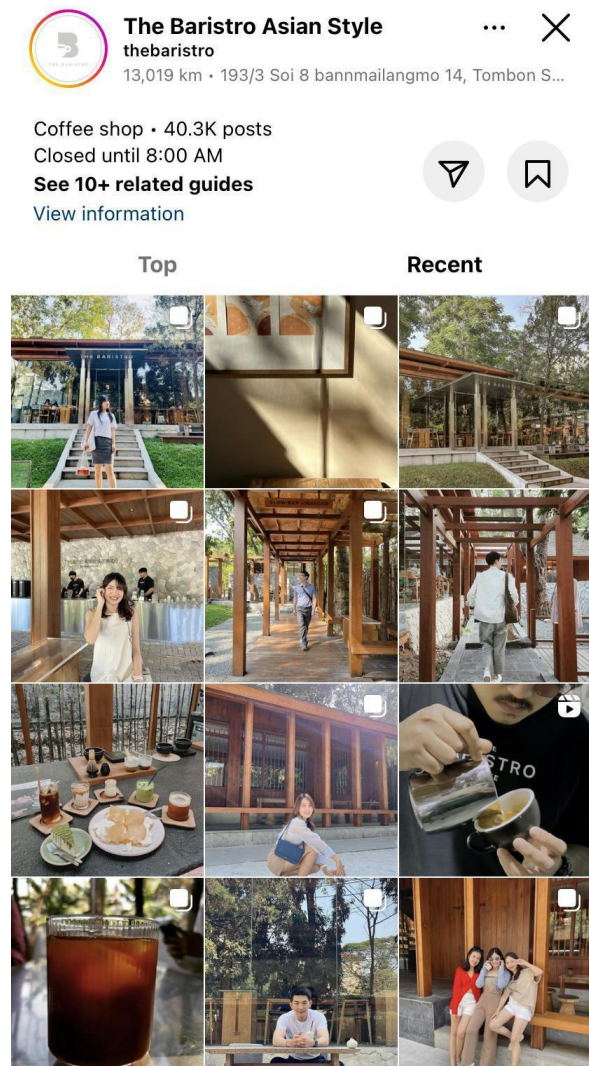
Figures 5 and 6: The Baristro Asian Style (source: Instagram)

Like Transit No. 8, The Baristro Asian Style is another successful café in Chiang Mai that reflects middle-class consumption of enmeshment aesthetics. Having grown up with a family business centered

around tourism in Chiang Mai, Tor Thanit – an owner of the Baristro cafés with different locations throughout Chiang Mai – is inspired to demonstrate that aesthetically pleasing cafés can serve good coffee (The Cloud 2021). Through utilizing distinctly different and aesthetically inviting architectural designs in all of his cafés, Thanit is able to create highly affective spaces aimed not only as co-working spaces for young professionals with 'good' coffee but also for photo-taking opportunities. It intentionally enmeshes the local Lanna and East Asian aesthetics along with its high-quality coffee beans and western-style bakeries with a Thai twist to attract a wide range of customers (The Cloud 2021). In Thanit's other Baristro cafés, he similarly emphasizes the aesthetic dimension to attract a niche group of consumers – those who look for good quality coffee beverages and social media-worthy aesthetics (ของดีเชียงใหม่ KhonDeeChiangMai, Official 2021).

These aforementioned cafés reflect the owners' exposure to international travels and a middle-class work-life balance where 'good' coffee and 'aesthetic' working spaces are desired. These spaces make visible the invitation to their customers to form relationships with their objects of consumption and the designs of the cafés. This intentionality reflected in the choices of objects, spaces, and cultural elements offers an aesthetic experience that is already part of Chiang Mai's historical conditions as a tourist destination. Chiang Mai's tourism has long been world-renowned and materialized in the forms of affordable and accessible consumption and hospitality venues. Indeed, the whole province is now a hub of aesthetics-oriented petit bourgeois consumerism.

The influx of global tourists has been prominent in Chiang Mai, but its dynamics started to change in the early 2010s when tourists from around Asia, especially China, came to dominate the tourist scenes in Chiang Mai. Among Chinese tourists, Chiang Mai is known for being "a place of Wenyi Xiaozi (cultured youth, petit bourgeoisie) and has gained popularity among Chinese middle-class urbanites" (Gao et al. 2022). This phenomenon can be traced back to when the Chinese film blockbuster *Lost in Thailand* (Zheng 2012) turned Thailand into the number one most-visited country by Chinese tourists – making up over 26% of Thailand's international tourist arrivals in the late 2010s (Gao et al. 2022, 4). This film gave Chiang Mai a wide presence of Chinese tourists (Mostafanezhad and Promburom 2018) who have come to fuel Chiang Mai and Thailand's growing affordable petit bourgeois middle-class consumer culture. In the study of outbound Chinese tourists in Chiang Mai, Gao et al. (2022) argue that "a strong aesthetic dimension" (11-12) of Chiang Mai comes from its onsite affordable and accessible pursuit of personal pleasures.

The influx of Chinese tourists with a passion for petit bourgeois consumption and mobile technologies (Gao et al. 2022) led to a massive increase in Chiang Mai's aesthetic and tourist-oriented restaurants, cafés, spas, hotels, sightseeing programs, and shopping areas. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic that cut Chinese tourists' access to Thailand, domestic Thai tourists along with Korean and Japanese ones have since continued this demand for affordable and aesthetics-oriented consumption.

Chiang Mai, in this sense, has always responded to and depended on the presence, desires, and gazes of its domestic and international tourists as it navigates its role as a consumption hub. Hence, the place-making of Chiang Mai has always included the orientations of human agents to the ecologies of things human and non-human in the locality of Chiang Mai, which often generates the place-product images of the city. Not only that the local entrepreneurs have since invested in a tourist-oriented consumer culture, but the affordability and accessibility of Chiang Mai have also promoted what tourism studies call the 'performance turn.'

According to cultural geographer Jonas Larsen and tourism sociologist John Urry (2011), the performance turn in tourism studies emphasizes how "tourists experience places in multi-sensuous ways" (1112). Tourism is not a matter of passive inhabitation of a place, but it is rather an active orientation and immersion of oneself into an ostensibly foreign space. One is not just looking and seeing but is constantly grappling with noises, scents, touches, and affects that shape the responses of their bodies to such stimuli. That is to say, the materiality of a place as experienced through bodily perception is key to the performance turn in tourism.

The term 'performance' is critical in tourism studies as it offers a paradigm shift where tourist destinations have become "materially and symbolically staged" (Larsen and Urry 2011, 1112). It is here that the performance turn and the use of aesthetics bring to light how tourist mobility is about utilizing sensible objects and spaces to create a sense of being able to move across boundaries of space and social identities. To be a tourist is first and foremost to form new identity-based relations with objects and spaces, including unfamiliar sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc. Hence, social media is such prominent tool for capturing and publicizing such performances and embodiment of tourist mobility. The rise of social media visual culture along with the increase of consumption spaces in Chiang Mai reflects how the materiality of objects and spaces are intertwined with the performances of selfhood both in the online and offline world. Vlogging, blogging, photographing, and posting about oneself immersing in the materiality of Chiang Mai are thus acts to "corporeally stage social relations and inscribe presence into the 'atmosphere' of place and the moment" (Larsen 2005 in Larsen and Urry 2011, 1114).

The performance turn provides a further articulation of the rise of enmeshment aesthetics where relational ontologies between bodies, objects, and spaces take shape within these social media- and tourist-oriented consumption spaces. This turn in tourism studies is particularly useful in understanding Chiang Mai and Thailand's world-renowned tourism industry and how it has shaped the art of tourist mobility – where individuals' performance of the tourist role marks movements across national and cultural restrictions. The next section brings together this understanding of the entanglement between the performance turn and the 21st-century use of social media for negotiating this tourist mobility.

PERFORMING MOBILITY, SUBJECT-OBJECT RELATIONS, AND SUPPLEMENT

As mentioned in the previous section, what remains a subject of exploration in the increase of tourist-oriented consumption spaces in Chiang Mai is the locals' aspiration for performing tourist mobility. Being able to mobilize across different social, class, cultural, and national boundaries can be understood as an affirmation of an individualist self – a "global self" (Bui 2019) to be exact. Much like the aesthetics of Transit Number 8 and The Baristro Asian Style, the fact that different national and cultural elements clash together to create a sense of enmeshment aesthetics is a way to visualize tourist mobility. In the case of Chiang Mai, it seems that this global selfhood is heavily imagined through personal consumption of foreign/non-Thai objects, foodways, semiotics, and cosmopolitan aesthetics in cafés, restaurants, and social media landmarks. East Asian foods and Western bakeries in non-Thai-looking spaces become the embodiment of tourist mobility. While this embodiment makes clear how enmeshment aesthetics become materialized through objects of consumption in urban Chiang Mai, it also sheds light on the fluid subject-object identity of its consumers.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1956), French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre discusses in the section "The Look" how one exists as an object to be looked at by others. Sartre argues that this realization of oneself as an object of others' gazes gives rise to one's self-reflective consciousness where one becomes self-aware through the act of being looked at. Frantz Fanon, through his phenomenological account of being a black person in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), points to how the gazes of others "fix" and put him in relation to them. This experience of being a subject for oneself and an object of others points toward Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh" (1968) whereby as a visible being, we both see and are seen. As we participate in the same perceptual world as others, Merleau-Ponty points out how one's two hands can touch and be touched (2013), illustrating the fluid co-existence of body-subject and body-object identity. Emphasizing the role of the look in Sartrean existentialism and Fanon and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the article contends that social media allows and forces its users to operate as both an object of others' perception and as their own auteur – in a sense that they make deliberate artistic and aesthetic choices for their desired mise-en-scène.

As fluid agents that are both a subject and an object, social media users who café-hop in Chiang Mai rely on this ambiguity of the body and the inhabited spaces to form subjectivity and selfhood. Figure 7 illustrates a social media post from แฟนพาเที่ยว/My Life My Travel Facebook page where the content features "7 คาเฟ่เชียงใหม่ สวยทุกที่ ชิคทุกร้าน มุมถ่ายรูปคือปัง" (transl.: *7 beautiful and chic Chiang Mai cafés with fabulous photo-taking spots*). The significance of the language used in this social media post with over 3.7 thousand likes, two thousand shares, and 129 comments is that the aesthetically pleasing quality of these seven consumption spaces is instagrammable and worth-taking-photos-of. The post re-affirms the trend of intentionally immersing oneself in the materiality of objects and spaces by which the

enmeshment aesthetics of Thai and non-Thai elements offer a sense of tourist mobility that social media can capture.
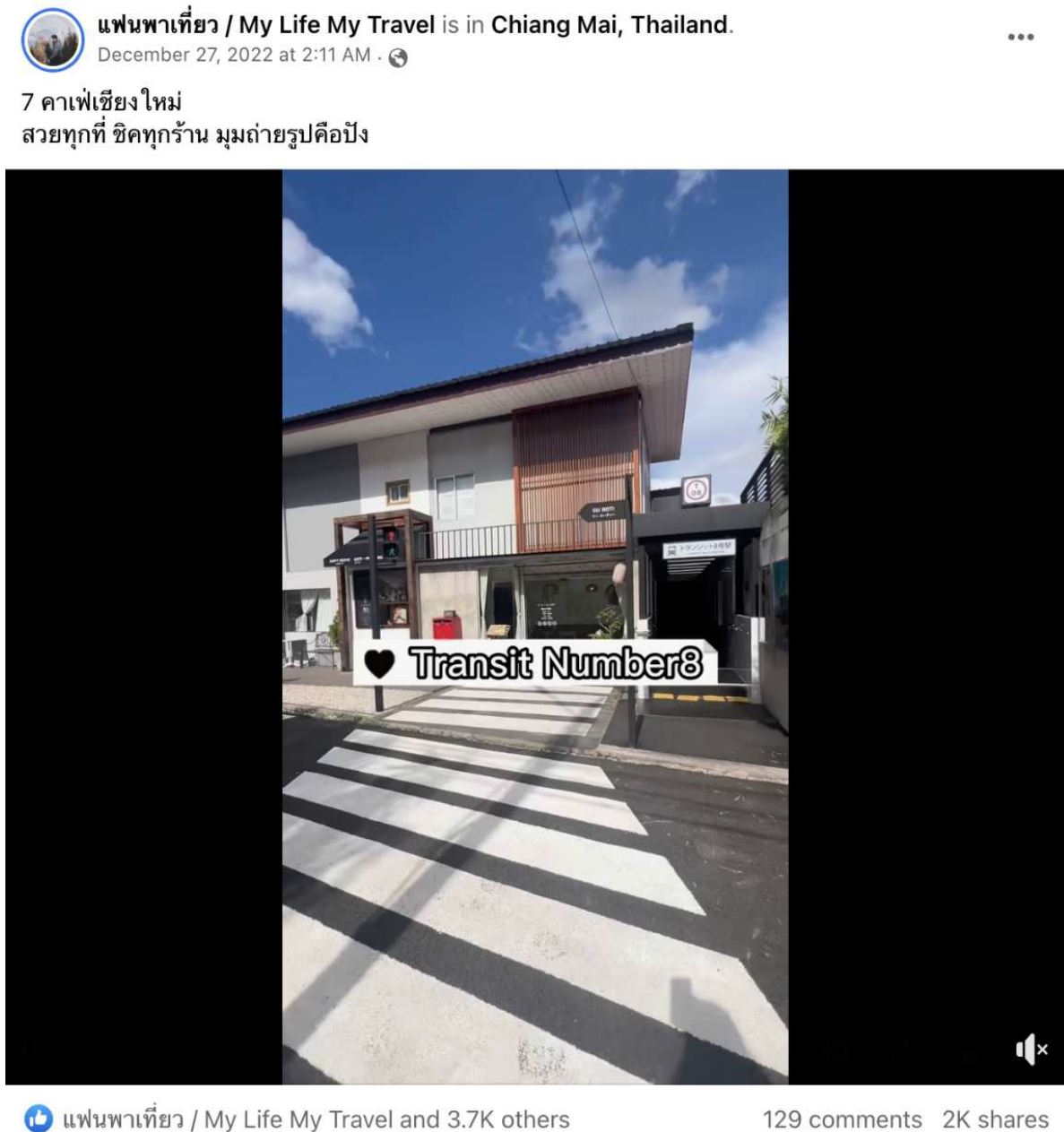

แฟนพาเที่ยว / My Life My Travel is in **Chiang Mai, Thailand**.
December 27, 2022 at 2:11 AM ·

7 คาเฟ่เชียงใหม่
สวยทุกที่ ชิคทุกร้าน มุมถ่ายรูปคือปัง

♥ Transit Number8

แฟนพาเที่ยว / My Life My Travel and 3.7K others　　129 comments　2K shares

Figure 7: "7 beautiful and chic cafés in Chiang Mai with great photographic spots."
Source: แฟนพาเที่ยว **/ My Life My Travel Facebook page.**

Young middle-class Chiang Mai locals grew up with tourist-oriented developments in their city. These individuals, like the owners of Transit Number 8 and The Baristro Asian Style, now possess the means to partake in Chiang Mai's service and hospitality industries as entrepreneurs and perform the role of tourists in and outside of Chiang Mai. Ironically, COVID-19 came at a time when both the tourists and

these local middle- and upper-class individuals' ability to perform tourist mobility became disrupted. Chiang Mai was left with barely any international tourists and Thais could hardly travel domestically or internationally.

Tourists' abilities to move and consume in different spaces and cultures combined with the positioning of East Asia and Western countries as models of modernity and "material progress" (Chou-Shulin 2010, 287), arguably constitute an understanding of class distinctions among the young middle-class individuals in Thailand. To perform the role of a tourist is to exude a marker of monetary wealth for leisure and travel. Being able to travel is to mobilize across different landscapes of cultures, linguistics, and nation-states. Mobilizing across these differences is, therefore, to be recognized globally as an agential citizen of the world who possesses the social and cultural capital required for achieving tourist mobility.

Disrupted by COVID-19, this anxiety to perform tourist mobility takes a turn where the social media visual culture fuels domestic tourism, but with an overt rise of East Asian- and European-inspired spaces of consumption to substitute the restricted ability to move outside of Thailand. In the years 2020 and 2021 prior to the reopening of Thailand to international travelers, domestic Thai tourists greatly partook in the café-hopping culture, frequenting especially those cafés with the aesthetics of European and East Asian elements that give an image of traveling abroad without actually leaving Thailand.

Figure 8 shows a review post of Jinju, an orange plantation farm in Chiang Mai, by a Chiang Mai-based photographer and social media personnel โตเต๋ (Totay). The post is from Totay's public Facebook page โตเต๋ไปไหน (transl.: *Where is Totay going?*). As the name suggests, this Facebook page features visualities of tourist mobility, traveling, and consumerism. Through reviewing Chiang Mai's social media landmarks, cafés, and instagrammable tourist destinations, Totay utilizes the aesthetic and the multi-sensible dimensions of these places through professionally edited photographs of himself and his partner to create a social media narrative around traveling and consumption. In his review of Jinju orange farm, Totay describes this place as "สวนส้มฟีลเกาหลีบรรยากาศดี" (transl.: *an orange farm with a good Korea-like atmosphere*). This sentiment toward "เหมือนอยู่เกาหลีมากๆ" (transl.: *feels like you are in Korea*) speaks directly to the desired mobility to take on the role of a tourist in times of travel restrictions and limited financial means. The fact that this farm allows imagining oneself in Korea while still being in Chiang Mai illustrates the ways in which the affordability and accessibility of Chiang Mai allow the transcendence of limited financial means and COVID-19 concerns.

Totay's post features a collection of aesthetically pleasing photographs where he and his partner are the main subjects of these photographs' mise-en-scènes. Whether positioning themselves in front of a little white cottage or inside a tent with a majestic view of lush orange trees and mountains in the

background, Totay and his partner craft a narrative of indulgence in a picturesque landscape. This set of photographs combined with the contentment with the Koreanness of the place allows this post to exude a sense of enmeshment aesthetics in Chiang Mai and connect to the young local middle-class' desire to partake in this tourist mobility that Totay invites them to join. This enmeshment of Koreanness with the local northern Thai locality turns Jinju farm into a site for performing a tourist role in Chiang Mai's affordable and accessible locality.

Figure 8: A review of Jinju the Orange Farm. Source: Facebook page โต๋เต๋ไปไหน**.**

Totay's aesthetic photographs and attitude toward the place's foreignness reaffirm Chiang Mai's current social media visual culture where non-Thai elements are greatly embraced and enmeshed with

the locally bound landscapes that complicate the sense of locality and globality. This in-betweenness and hybridity is currently what Thai social media influencers, photographers, and café hoppers have come to embrace since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, many small businesses in Chiang Mai have picked up on this momentum and have catered to this desire for enmeshment aesthetics in consumption and hospitality venues that all capitalize on bringing a sense of tourist mobility back to Chiang Mai. This again allows Chiang Mai to emerge as a place product for performing tourist mobility specifically through place-hopping for social media content purposes. This mobility is thus a reflection of what theorist Stephanie D. Clare articulates as a "perception of the world – and especially of spatiality – [that] is tied to this sense of being able to move through, in, and with the world" (Clare 2019, xxvi).

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the "supplement" (1998), this collective fascination and consumption of enmeshment aesthetics in affordable and accessible Chiang Mai serve as a supplement for the ability to move outside of Chiang Mai's locality and to partake in global consumerism. These consumption spaces with overt European and East Asian-inspired elements become the supplements for global tourism. It is this supplement quality of Chiang Mai that reveals how the materiality of objects and spaces through eating, drinking, and inhabiting a space becomes a driving force for the current social media visual culture when one pays a visit to Chiang Mai. Café-hopping for social media is a way to affirm not only one's disrupted sense of individualized lifestyle but also to seek global self-recognition at the affordable and accessible local level. Hence, this social media usage, in turn, pushes Chiang Mai's becoming a social media assemblage of enmeshed national, cultural, and spatial boundaries.

Chiang Mai, as a social media phenomenon, is ultimately layered with historical conditions that allow the city to embrace a vast landscape of cultures and aesthetics, as well as for the city to become one of Thailand's prominent hubs for performing global tourist mobility through social media. Hence, the growing scenes of cafés, restaurants, and social media landmarks with intended enmeshment aesthetics exhibit the subjective and phenomenological experiences situated within the materiality and intentionality of built forms, spaces, and objects of consumption.

CONCLUSION

The current social media phenomenon of Chiang Mai lies at the intersection of Thailand's sociocultural and historical conditioning as a cosmopolitan consumption hub, the pervasiveness of visual social media culture, and social media users' relational sense of being in the world. This paper has mapped out how social media, mobility, and materiality have come to form a unique visual storytelling practice

that centers on Chiang Mai's growing café-hopping for social media content. Social media thus plays a key role in giving rise to a (re)imagination of identity and mobility based on intersubjectivity and relations with objects, spaces, and others.

As an internationally recognized tourist destination, Chiang Mai has shaped the locals' aspiration toward globally recognized selfhood that embodies cosmopolitanism, individualism, and petit bourgeois consumerism. Combined with the impacts of the past COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of aesthetically enmeshed cafés, restaurants, and social media landmarks reflect the anxiety toward not being able to partake in this global individualist consumerist culture.

Even in this post-pandemic stage, the café-hopping for social media content culture in Chiang Mai has continued to embrace the enmeshment of national and cultural elements as a supplementing mode of performing global tourist mobility in a much more affordable and accessible manner. This results in the growth and increase in spaces of consumption that capitalize on the designs and semiotics of non-Thainess and foreignness.

Utilizing the power of social media, capturing and sharing such performance of global tourist mobility in the online world becomes a common practice that transcends any financial and spatial disruptions. In constantly thinking about designing a personal mise-en-scène in intended social media images with enmeshment aesthetics, one relies on societal meaning-making to construct intentional relations with certain objects and spaces. Having to constantly alternate between the role of a subject acting as a personal auteur and the society's object of social perception, social media destabilizes the restricted social and ontological boundaries, which leads to new modes of going beyond space, place, and time where one is currently situated.

Importantly, this current social media phenomenon in urban-growing Chiang Mai reveals the ways in which media technologies act as a modern tool for shaping the sense of self and a place's materiality as a hub of global tourist consumption. This inseparability between people's pursuit of desired self-image and mobility as they participate in the perceptual world with other people and objects will always remain relevant in Southeast Asian media studies. The field will likely encounter more of this intentional meshing and blurring of modern social constructs and boundaries as long as people utilize media technologies to (re)imagine identities and to (re)negotiate their place in the world. Ultimately, social media and other mediums of representing a human's worlding will need to be understood as a necessary instrument for materializing new ways of being in the world that intersect with the enmeshment of the available national, cultural, regional, socio-economic, and ontological domains.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KASIDIT "GUNN" PHIKROHKIT received his BA with Honors in Critical Global Studies from Pitzer College, a member of the Claremont Colleges, USA. Entering graduate school right after undergraduate studies, he is currently a Ph.D. student in Global Studies and pursuing graduate emphases in Critical Theory, Film and Media Studies, and Visual Studies at the University of California, Irvine, USA. His research interests include Buddhist metaphysics, phenomenology, Thai sociocultural history, and queer visual and material culture. His current project theorizes the existential feelings and relations that drive the production and consumption of Thai pop culture.

✉: kphikroh@uci.edu