

Proof of Better Life: Performances of the Rich on Social Media Amid the Pandemic in Thailand

By Rubkwan Thammaboosadee

Abstract

In 2020, youths and students organised a series of protests across Thailand asking for democratic reform. However, the arrival of the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic restricted public gatherings. Online spaces and social media became a more significant stage for individuals to project their voices amid the health crisis and the political and economic crisis. Although the online space indicated fragmentary 'proof of better life,' as many people were forced to stay in shelter, I argue in this paper that the performance of 'proof of better life' is layered by social and class status in Thai society. While many people from the working class died on the street due to poor public health management, queued for food donations, and begged for cash handouts from the state, there were a handful of examples of proof of a normal, better, happy, wealthy life staged on social media by Thai elites and celebrities. This paper elaborates on the performance of the affluent in Thailand on social media to demonstrate how social distancing and lockdown schemes during the pandemic intensified class isolation. Not only do online spaces act as echo chambers allowing affluent people to exercise their superior capital isolation, but, this paper suggests, online space also allows for the emergence of class confrontation.

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"The pandemic did not choose a class. It, really, happens for everyone" (Vogue Thailand).¹ This statement was coined by a Thai princess, Sirivannavari in June, 2021 when the severity of the pandemic escalated in Thailand. In Thailand, in 2020 and 2021, we saw many sick and dead from the coronavirus, including the rich. During the lockdown regulations, I was living with my elderly mother. Feeling insecure about the unknown virus was a challenge, as I had no idea when we would be getting the vaccine. As a university lecturer, I was exhausted from the shift to online teaching. However, I was middle-class with a secure income and a long-term career contract, living in a detached house on the outskirts of Bangkok, so I could say that I was far from being in trouble financially or in terms of job stability at the time. Covid-19 affected us all in many ways, but certainly not equally.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I asked myself how we can archive, position, understand, and transfer the turbulence and messiness that occurred. Is there actually such a thing as the 'new normal'? Not because I do not admit that swift changes were happening in our lives, but instead, I wonder if there is such a thing as 'normal' and how we can define 'new' in this despairing time. For me, the term 'new normal' is problematic, as we only consider how our daily routines changed in particular ways. Online teaching was new to me during lockdown. Zoom meetings were introduced to many of us for the first time. Nevertheless, is it fair to say online teaching was normal when many students did not have the

¹ The interview was in Thai and the quote is translated by the author. The quoted statement appears at 00:21:28.

resources to access online classrooms? What if the 'new' in 'new normal' means higher debt to pay for people who lost their jobs and increased stress from online learning? What if 'normal' means many people losing their shelter and dignity to survive amid economic disparity? What if 'new normal' means only the top 10% of the most affluent people in the country continue accumulating resources, and capital continues to govern every dimension of our lives?

Wealth in Thailand has long been limited to the upper class and business tycoons. In 2016, data showed that Thailand's top 10% held 79.9% of the total wealth (Credit Suisse 148). Kevin Hewison insightfully demonstrates in the article *Crazy Rich Thais: Thailand's Capitalist Class, 1980-2019*, how the wealth of Thailand's upper class has continued to grow over the past four decades (13-14). With rising poverty during the pandemic, in any field of study, I believe it is a critical time to bring the matter of class struggle and inequality to the table and unpack the cultural and socio-economic tensions that the pandemic has highlighted. While the scholarly work discussing economic inequality and class divisions in Thailand is fruitful in the fields of economics and political economy, work addressing the cultural aspects of how the unfair economic structure is subtly maintained are somewhat limited. For this reason, in this paper I use performance studies as a lens through which to explore cultural performance on social media staged by Thai public figures and celebrities, to reveal the dispersed bodies and classifications during the pandemic. I ultimately argue that, as physical sites became increasingly limited during the pandemic, performance on social media animated the upper class in Thai society to perform their superiority in three ways: performing a 'good time,' performing a 'hard time,' and performing 'kindness.' These three sorts of performance by the affluent were not isolated from each other, but rather worked together to perpetuate and, arguably, extend class

divisions by offering positive visuals and emotions, giving audiences a chance to escape from their despair. Meanwhile, they also projected the suffering they were confronted with, portraying an illusion that the gap between classes was flattened to the same terrain. When asked about their privilege, the act of performing kindness in the form of donation played a role in justifying their superior status as heroes of society.

WHY PERFORMANCE MATTERS

Taking performance studies as the framework to read this phenomenon, I look at these events as performance not in the sense of a scene that is completed in itself. Informed by Diana Taylor's words in *The archive and the repertoire*, I position these events as “an act of transfer” when bodies act as a means to archive and transmit memory in a specific cultural circumstance (82). Rachel Bowditch, and Pegge Vissicaro put: “Performing bodies become environments of memory for witnessing, transmitting, and understanding the true memory of a given community” (8). Interrogating the performance of a ‘proof of better life’ curated within bodies of the rich is essential, as the poorer life of working-class and poor people might be replaced in the cultural memory of the pandemic. Instead of focusing only on what the body of the wealthy contains and carries, by investigating scenes of inequality, I argue that the performance of the online body of the rich reflects and projects emptiness, lacking, and absence in the bodies of others who cannot achieve that kind of abundance. As well as the bodies and texts that were performed, I am interested in unpacking how collective emotions were articulated. As suggested in Sara Ahmed's prominent work *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, feelings are not objects but rather processes, the effects of which work at the boundary between the subject and surrounding context: “Attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become

invested in particular structures” (12). Thus, I consider how the emotions performed publicly within each event – such as happiness, sadness, gratitude, shame, and anger – were invested with meaning by both celebrities and audiences to either maintain or challenge class divisions in society.

ONLINE PLATFORMS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has great potential to champion neoliberal consumerism and individualism. Nevertheless, it is evident in Thailand that, since 2020, social media has been a vital platform which has radically and collectively infused political change in young protestors (Ebbighausen). Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Clubhouse, and Telegram were the primary tools which enabled people to project their voices and challenge the dictatorial regime. For this reason, social media can be seen not as an empty stage with a static function or one-sided positive or negative impacts, but rather as a social space interrelating with the offline world’s socio-political context. Wendy Chun observes that the subject, in the digital age of the twenty-first century, has shifted from 'we' to 'you', from collectivity to subjectivity (21). However, the independence of selfhood does not exist in a vacuum, it is instead evaluated and judged by social norms.

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand in 2020 and 2021, the Thai government escalated restrictions by banning public gatherings, including street protests and daily activities. The state implemented a ‘work from home’ scheme, online learning, and takeaway only food. It closed bars, cafes, gyms, and parks. The closure of these sectors greatly diminished people's physical interactions. Amid rising stress on personal finances and fear of the virus, the state supported and compensated workers and businesses only a minimal amount. At the peak of the virus,

the state could not provide effective vaccines to citizens, while permitting mRNA vaccines to be commercialised by private hospitals, which sold them on online shopping platforms for around 100 EUR for two doses (Setboonsarng and Sriring).

Online platforms consumed our daily lives even more than before the pandemic. We were not able to feel or see others as before. Schools and universities are not just classrooms, and workplaces are not just meeting rooms. They are social spaces where people connect and socialise. A street vendor is not just a place to buy takeaways, but part of workers' lives, where they interact with strangers who share the same work hours. Hence, I propose that the greater extent of isolation amplified and magnified the performance on social media of many wealthy online users, especially public figures and celebrities staging their presence – a proof of better life – albeit in a way individually dispersed and scattered. They could stay in their own curated spaces as long as they wished. They could feel at ease, ignoring the societal problems happening on the streets. In other words, being ignorant amid conflict was even more possible for the upper class when they were physically isolated.

In exploring the matters covered in this paper, I accumulate information mainly from online materials such as, YouTube channels, trends on Twitter, and online articles published in 2020-2021. However, by limiting the timeframe of material discussed, I do not perceive the issues as isolated cases happened only during the pandemic. I unfold the matters as a way to expose societal inequality that have long been dominating the country, and still ongoing. I position myself as a researcher as well as a member of the audience, who both observed and experienced the cultural performances. It is important to note that my agency and body are not isolated from the articulation in this paper. My body acts as a site that remembers and archives what happened in the society and transmits it to

this writing. My conversations with students and friends, my feelings and experiences during uncertain moments, and my cultural memory as a member of society are intentionally embraced in this writing.

Regarding the cases selected for discussion in this paper, I do not intend to criticise those concerned personally or individually. On the contrary, I aim to draw on cases which harnessed public attention broadly in order to magnify, exemplify and reveal a pattern of performance manifested by the affluent at the most challenging time for the country. While I am aware that many other non-public figures, including my friends and colleagues, presented ‘proof of a better life’ on social media during the pandemic, I perceive these projections as one possible way for an individual to navigate the chaos.

Unlike unknown individuals, celebrities are in the spotlight getting a great deal of public attention. Jim McGuigan elaborates on the concept of the neoliberal self, formulated from the logic of competitiveness and consumption under the umbrella of ‘being cool’, in which celebrities play a significant role, saying: “Today, it is impossible to talk of an ideal self without mentioning the role of the celebrity, larger-than-life figures to be admired and maybe even emulated: in an old-fashioned term, functional as role models of aspiration” (133). Hence, this paper focuses on people who were well-known public figures. I aim to point out how people who hold superior financial and cultural capital, with large audiences and public attention at hand, chose to project performances of ‘proof of better life’ during the pandemic.

PERFORMING ‘GOOD TIME’

The subject matter of this paper initially came to my attention due to a famous Thai travel YouTuber known as Mint, who has almost two million followers on her travel channel *I Roam Alone*. In 2020, *I Roam*

Alone was a highly ranked travel channels that garnered an enormous profit (Techasriamornrat).² On 24 May 2021, Mint posted content in her a regular upbeat vlog style. She was travelling on a business class flight to the United States to get an mRNA Covid-19 vaccination which was unavailable in Thailand at the time. While Covid-19 cases were ramping up in the country due to the deadly Delta variant, Mint, along with several other affluent celebrities, posted on their social media that they had flown to the USA for a vaccination-tourism trip (รวมดาราคนดัง). Despite the typical style of her optimistic and lively presentation, certain lines she said towards the end became controversial when she summed up her feelings towards the trip saying (my translation):

Being in a place where we can hear a language that is not ours, and looking at both sides of an unfamiliar road were something that I had always done in the previous years until I forgot how special it was. Being here today is a very special feeling. [With a smiling face] I think the only good thing about Covid-19 is to make us see the value of what we have, and see the extraordinary in the ordinary. (I Roam Alone 00:12:24)

It is understandable that her intention for the statement was to point out that the pandemic has revealed what kind of – probably better – life she had before. Nevertheless, many disagreeing comments were posted on this clip, which became viral. For instance, one comment said, “there is never a good thing about Covid-19.” It made them realise how unequal they were. Another said (my translation), “the good thing you mentioned, I can't see. Because I'm not rich and I can't fly to America. My father lost his job. My family has to be in quarantine. The ordinary that you see is the suffering that my family is battling.” Many viewers claimed that Mint had

² The channel earns 28.57 million Baht for income, and 16.46 million Baht for profit.

deleted negative comments from the post. Mint later apologised, saying that she only meant to highlight how memorable the trip was for her. She later mentioned that she was aware that her lost opportunity to travel to foreign countries could not compare to the damage and loss happening to others.

The reason I raise this matter is not because of the intention of the content itself, not Mint as an individual case, but the clashes of emotions between Mint and the audiences brought this performance of a better life into the discussion. While Mint projected her cheerful and happy personal moments publicly, emotions such as rage and anger expressed by audiences, speak about how people 'feel' the great inequality in society when watching her content. Many of Mint's followers commented defending her intentions, and claimed that the furious commenters were being too sensitive by interpreting her meaning in such a negative way. If the audience was too sensitive to her optimistic words, as claimed, the question is: why so?

At around the same time, many Thai celebrities with YouTube channels were posting positive vibes about their luxurious lifestyles. On 20 June 2021, a millionaire couple known as Rita and Korn uploaded a clip about the first trip for their baby on a private jet to a beach city in Thailand (Ritakorn). They were concerned about whether the baby could travel on the jet safely, and projected positive vibes on their vlog about their holiday trip. The clip had at least one million views. While I saw a few comments criticising their ignorant gestures during the pandemic, those comments, including mine, disappeared within 10 minutes. What is left now are only positive comments.

Later, I discussed these matters with students in my online class, posing this simple question:

Me: Aren't they (the rich) allowed to be happy?

Student: Everyone is allowed to be happy, but it was hard to accept that there were people permitted to proudly present to our eyes that they have such a better life while many were dying on the streets, literally.

During 2020-2021 in Thailand, many people without adequate support, who fell into economic difficulties due to the Thai government's lockdown restrictions, queued up on the streets to get free food from the rich who wished to donate. Many workers missed out on the means-tested cash benefits offered by the government (ช้อยยศ). A few people committed suicide (Pongpipat). One took rat poison in front of the Ministry of Finance to get the attention of the state (MorningNewsTV3). When the Delta variant appeared, and the public health system became overloaded, many Covid-19 patients died in their homes since they could not get to hospital (ยังนำหวง!). In July 2021, my good friend's mother passed away due to the virus. She could not get vaccinated and had to continue working in a cramped market to raise money to pay the increasing debts of her family. This is how lives were going for many people in the offline world.

Neoliberal logic governs how we perform on social media, as merchandise, selling our cool lifestyles and turning our routines into content and product. Undoubtedly, this kind of content from Thai society has been common on YouTube for a long time. YouTubers, vloggers, and celebrities, not only in Thailand, have always staged presentations of their superiority. Although the phenomenon is not new, amid the pandemic, the inequality in access to basic needs was exposed, and I insist that the gestures of the affluent, arrogantly performed on social media, suggest strong isolation and class division. The digital platforms enabled the privileged to continue exercising their superior statuses amid some of the most desperate moments the country had seen. It dramatically highlighted how unequal people were in their ability to confront the situation.

PERFORMING A 'HARD TIME'

Social media not only allows 'proof of better life' to be performed. It is also a stage where suffering can be shown. Digital bodies could easily screen off, neglect, or ignore the physical suffering in the offline world. On 20 August 2021, in a *Vogue* interview on directions for the fashion industry during a pandemic, a Thai princess, Sirivannavari, a member of one of the most affluent royal families in the world (The World's Richest Royals), suggested how 'we' could get through the pandemic together:

Nobody wants this pandemic to happen.

And it's not just our country alone. It's not just a fashion group.

And the pandemic did not choose a class. It, really, happens for everyone.

...

Everyone is having a hard time.

Even I have a hard time.

But I believe that everyone has to be happy.

Everyone has to live with it.

And how does everyone step out to empower everyone?

I believe everything will get better.

We can be sad but don't be too long! [Encouraging]

The world is not yet broken.

We have to keep working (Vogue Thailand 00:21:06 – 00:21:36, 00:22:16-00:22:47).³

Although the interview on YouTube was not open for public comments, suddenly, after *Vogue* launched the clip, the statement "Ying eng kor lam

³ Transcribed and translated by the author.

bark” in Thai or translated as “even I [the princess] am having a hard time” went viral and was listed on the top trending on Twitter in Thailand. It became a meme, a Facebook profile frame that many users posted to mock the statement. Some might say the performance of the princess could be read as an encouraging or empowering gesture, but the statement that she had a hard time created arguments in a society in which many needy people could hardly survive a day. On one hand, the statement suggested emphatic feelings acknowledging that everyone was facing hard times. On the other hand, the statement signalled how struggles had been applied to people in the country in an equal manner. Reacting to the statement on 24 August 2021, a Twitter account posted a clip of a man shared by a TikTok user sitting on the sidewalk begging a passer-by to buy his snacks, crying badly. The user put the caption with the viral hashtag (my translation): “Look at this princess, if you never have to prostrate to anyone asking for money in your life, don't call it a hard time” (SgwannabeS).

Not only a supreme wealthy public figure like the princess, Lydia Sarunrat, a wealthy popular singer and actress, was another case who subtly displayed hard times. She took action on her Instagram, which had more than 4 million followers, on 8 April 2021, amidst the rising death toll from the Delta variant. She posted a short clip of her previous holiday, in a bikini, walking leisurely in the sea. In the caption, she mentioned that she had had to abandon 30 flight tickets for her holiday due to Covid: “Time to cancel all trips during Songkran holidays! Stay home and stay safe guys! Goodbye sea, sand, sun for the safety of everyone #Covid19” (Lydiasarunsat).

Even though she mentioned that, for her, it was just missing a holiday trip, while others could not visit their hometowns during the holiday, she did choose to express her ‘hard time’ of ditching 30 plane

tickets and not being able to enjoy the sun and seaside. This public act highlights how different scales of 'hard time' were sometimes acknowledged by the rich, but greatly distanced from those below them in society.

This phenomenon reminds me of the article *Facing Poverty with Rich Girl Habits* by Suki Kim, who wrote about her experience going from being rich in South Korea to living in Queens, USA. She tried hard to adjust to a new society, mentioning that she had to take public transport for the first time. She found it hard to live without having a chauffeur or maids. She added: "I found it humiliating to wheel our dirty clothes to a bleak place called Laundromat."

This kind of public voice making gestures toward the hard times that the wealthy confront are somehow authentic. They probably have no intention to indicate their superiority. Their sufferings are relative to their current privileged status, and those struggles are real for them. However, this sort of exhibition of authenticity in their feelings of suffering is problematic, as it repeatedly educates society that even rich people struggle. This is potentially insidious and conceals class struggles, by implying that each of us has to deal with our own sorts of suffering.

Practising empathy and care remains viable in the 21st century, but neoliberal logic often exploits the concept to protect an individualistic mindset and conceal the structural problems that cannot be fixed by empathy alone. Andrea Lobb proposed:

An explicit cultivation of empathy (as neoliberal technique) can be seen to be capable of forging an alliance with wider power structures that reproduce, rather than mitigate, forms of social and economic inequality. For this reason, we should regard with caution claims that more empathy will magically rescue us from the worst ravages of neoliberalism—at least, to the extent that neoliberalism

succeeds in co-opting the value of empathy to its own ends.... We need to be aware of the vulnerability of the concept to such neoliberal hijacking. (596)

The fact is, the togetherness encouraged by the princess's statement is situated in unfair and unequal resources, where those who are public figures with superior capital, resources and voices perform a 'hard time' on the ruins of despair among the people below. When the princess encouraged people to 'be happy' it enacted self-management lessons as if everyone was holding similar resources to deal with the crisis. Projecting empathy to justify their distinct, if not superior, hard times can also be seen in the statement of Lydia Sarunrat, who was well aware of her privilege by indicating other bodies who could not return to their hometowns after she whined to the public about dozens of wasted plane tickets for her holiday trips. Also, Mint, the travel YouTuber, insisted that her missed opportunities for travelling were not comparable to those who lost their jobs. I contend that, in these cases, if we call these acts empathy, they are potentially insidious and used as a tool to reproduce inequality by allowing the class division to be addressed but remain tangled. Privilege is visibly and proudly located, as if both positions of difference in class were unrelated. More importantly, those expressing this arguable empathy do not challenge, or even tweak, the unfair structural power.

How, then, do the rich take this? How do they perform that they care for society?

PERFORMING 'KINDNESS'

While many wealthy celebrities in the spotlight performed 'good times', and some 'hard times,' from their fine bubbles, many used social media as a stage to perform 'kindness' by donating.

Back to my discussion with a student on how some Thai celebrities acted ignorantly amid the crisis:

Me: Do you think these rich people are blinded to what is happening around them?

Student: It is far from not knowing. They are rich and should have a TV at their house to watch the news, but they know their script, donating! That would let them navigate the crisis as a hero!

I am not arguing here that donation is meaningless. Donations potentially heal and help people in need during any crisis. However, in Thai society, we have been paralysed in a loop of donation for a long time, and it plays a crucial role in avoiding structural changes. For example, every day at 8 pm, for more than 50 years, we have seen the royal family donating money to poor communities (Royal Office). During the pandemic, when there were criticisms of any celebrity who acted ignorantly, their fans would protect them with comments such as, "you know what, she or he has already donated much money."

Amid the pandemic, many Thai celebrities posted photos on their social media as evidence of the money they had donated. For instance, a famous actress, Chompoo Araya, donated 2 million Baht (55,000 euros) to a hospital. Another billionaire YouTuber couple, Pok and Markie, donated 1 million Baht (เปิดลิสต์จำนวนเงินหลัง"เหล่าศิลปิน-ดารา"บริจาคสู้ Covid-19). These generous gestures by the rich were circulated across social media. However, these people never raised their voices for those who lack resources due to the economic structure that does not allow them to rise out of poverty, let alone use their voices to politically criticise the government's poor management of the public health crisis. Instead, playing the role of a hero is always preferable.

The cracks in Thai society were made even more visible. We could see news presenting sick people dying on the streets, and the poor queuing for free food, relying on a minimum wage of 300 baht (8 euros) per day (สุดหดหู่!ติดโควิดนอนตายกลางถนน). Meanwhile, a few people could toss a million Baht as a donation and disseminate their kindness through social media. These donations allowed the wealthy to fabricate, perform, and transfer the cultural memory of the pandemic, portraying themselves as a giver who cares about society (because they can afford to do so) rather than an ignorant, selfish millionaire.

The potential to perform kindness during the crisis resonates with a scene from the film *Parasite* (00:56:36-00:56:46), in which a character says that his master is “rich but still nice”, and his wife argues that their master is able to be nice because she is rich. In an interview about the film, Song Kang-ho, the lead actor, elaborated, saying: “When you're rich, it's much easier to be generous, and that translates to being nice. When you're less affluent, even if you want to be generous, it's very difficult” (Pollard).

Although donations continued throughout the crisis, this does not mean the public reception in Thailand was submissive. On 22 December 2021, when the Delta variant seemed to be slowing down, a rock singer, Toon-Bodyslam, announced a new event in which he would run a marathon to raise money to donate to 109 children who could not afford to pay for high school (ย้อนดราม่า “ตูน บอดี้สแลม”). Although he had done this kind of campaign several times before, for almost a decade, publicly supported by the government, his announcement was controversial during the crisis. The hashtag "Pee Toon Wing Tam Mai?" which translates as 'why does Toon have to run?' went viral on the internet, as many in the young generation now see this kind of action does not, and cannot, lead to structural change. The criticism questions a more significant problem of society, instead of directly attacking the rock star's actions. It challenges

the exclusion of public services and welfare, arguing that basic educational opportunities should be accessible to everyone instead of relying on donations from the wealthy. Young people urge celebrities to use their resources to promote structural reform and welfare for all. Basic needs and rights that depend on donations perpetuate inequality.

While Toon's donation campaign in 2021 was visibly controversial, on 22 October 2022, a famous actor known as Tono Phakin reproduced a similar donation campaign, but more extravagantly, called *One Man and the River* (One Man and the River). He swam across the Mekong River showing his athletic bravery in this charity event to raise money for medical staff at two local hospitals. During the event, apparently, there were several medical and safety staff who had to guard him in the river along his risky journey to guarantee his security. Similar to Toon, he received a wave of fuss and criticism from the public on social media calling the star to instead use his voice to amplify the need for public reforms, not donations. In spite of criticism, it should be noted that his action was remarkably in the spotlight. Many media broadcasted and live-streamed his move as if it was a national event. This phenomenon notably manifests how the act of performing kindness by celebrities has become even more performative with curated storytelling and spectacles. The reproduction of performative bodies of these public figures in donation events makes visible the ways in which they can enact their heroic shows regardless of online criticism, crucially crystalising the great distance between classes and bodies. The arrangement allows people with more capital to perform kindness, based on their privilege, leaving the people below living with no dignity, begging for help, and being grateful to the wealthy donors.

INEQUALITY, BODY, AND THE WOUND OF ABSENCE

Stigma is a form of classificatory violence ‘from above’ which devalues people, places and communities. (Tyler 27)

As demonstrated, there were three stages of performing ‘proof of better life’ for the rich in Thai society during the pandemic: performance of ‘good time,’ ‘hard time,’ and ‘kindness.’ These are ways in which performance influences cultural memory, above texts or other narratives. The bodies and gestures were not only shown by the wealthy performers themselves but also embodied, a form of invisible stigma in their less affluent spectators. Neoliberal rationalities, focusing on turning human lives into lifelong self-invested projects, leave scars on people who fail to follow the rule of capital accumulation to survive. In *Stigma, The Machinery of Inequality*, Imogen Tyler insightfully portrays the crucial role stigma plays historically in perpetuating inequality through shame, guilt and the absence of dignity. Tyler suggests:

Stigma was crafted to tutor the public into believing that people living in poverty had chosen their fates, and how the disenfranchisement and distress which have followed in the wake of cuts to social provision were deserved: a consequence of people's poor behaviours, indiscipline and shamelessness. (28)

A study in Thailand shows, not surprisingly, that low-income people were affected most severely by the pandemic. An interview article by Kritsada Subpawanthanakun called “Pandemic hits the poor harder, setting them far behind as the country reopens” summarises a study by the Centre for Research on Inequality and Social Policy on the impact of Covid-19 on the issue of inequality, by directly targeting low-income groups. It reveals that during the 2020-2021 coronavirus pandemic, low-income groups spent

nearly 90 percent of their total resources on food, utilities and travel, costs which could hardly be reduced. Low-income groups had to sell their assets to pay for expenses like cars and motorcycles, which are considered the economic capital for an occupation. Moreover, there were increased borrowing debts. This makes the impact long-lasting and difficult to recover from (Subpawanthanakun).

Linking the idea of stigma to the performance of ‘proof of a better life’ on social media, these public acts by the wealthy may not explicitly or directly create stigma for needy people, and, on the surface, such performance could be read as caring or selfless. However, I argue that these performances implicitly create stigma for the poor by confirming that they live in a state of absence of resources, power, and voice. Performing ‘good time,’ highlights the great distance between the classes, showing an affluent lifestyle to be a farfetched fantasy for the many families having difficulty feeding their children. Performing a ‘hard time,’ while claiming a hard time was to be expected for everyone during the pandemic, can be read as it being the responsibility of everyone, even the poor, to deal with their lives by managing their resources. This conceals problems such as how a daily-waged worker can survive when they have to quarantine. Finally, performing ‘kindness’ requires the space to exercise such kindness, while the poor have few choices but to play the game of being grateful to generous donors, due to their need for resources. These gestures and performances by the upper class implicitly inflict stigma on the poor by creating a wound of absence. Such absence highlights that poverty is normal, as much as any classification is normal. Hence, it gradually suppresses people’s dignity, nudging them to submit to the unfair conditions and internalise the causes of poverty.

These performances of wealth work at the level of the cultural politics of emotion. This alludes to Ahmed’s articulation of national shame,

which often promotes reconciliation without healing the past: “The expression of shame is a political action, which is not yet finished, as it depends on how it gets ‘taken up’. Shame, in other words, does not require responsible action, but it also does not prevent it” (120). It is intriguing that, given the class divisions and inequality in Thai society, the wealthy rather arrogantly express their better lifestyles and do not reach the point of shame about the superiority they hold. They, at the same time, demonstrate how much better a life they have and show their relative hardship. They play the role of the hero, helping society whenever they want. However, responsible actions that address the root causes of societal problems are never touched. Thus, these performances of better lives expose a fault in our social structure that urgently needs to be fixed.

To conclude, while wealthy public figures in Thailand visibly exercised their privileged status on social media, these performances were not one-way, with audiences quiet and submissive. Most of the cases described went viral because of the reactions from the audience, who did not submit to them. Social media allowed wealthy and popular performers to curate their superior lives amid the pandemic, when the offline reality of the country was in turmoil, in a hopeful turn, social media also generated conversations, confrontations, and arguments on class struggle and politics, which had not been in the spotlight before, even during the democratic reform protests of 2020. Hence, I find it necessary to position these cases together, archive the performed digital bodies, and perceive these events as an act of transfer. I suggest that, even for people in a state of absence of resources, performance can be turned into an act of confrontation, rather than positioning ourselves as a submissive audience. As well as archiving the performances of the rich, it is essential to archive the reception, anger, rage, sadness, and venting that accompanied them. Finally, I propose that the cultural perpetuation of class division and

inequality emerges in our lives in very subtle ways through intangible spaces such as digital platforms. The next question is: how bad must it be before we call it a stigma? Do we have to wait until we feel physically dehumanised or exploited until we acknowledge it? If we do not have wounds on our bodies, or if we are not amidst the greatest struggle, how can we record, amplify, and transfer the entangled conflicts of class struggle and inequality to others?

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