

Beware of the Giant Monster and Its Minions: How Schoolgirls Negotiate Sexual Subjectivities in a Conservative School Climate in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among a group of schoolgirls in urban Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, this paper explores various strategies in which the school and its allies operate to control, regulate, and suppress the sexual subjectivities of teenage girls. Focusing on schoolgirls' agencies, the paper also discusses various tactics they deploy in order to appropriate, negotiate, and challenge the school's efforts as reflected through their cultural and sexual practices in a daily life. This paper seeks deeper understandings of Thai teenage girl's sexual agency and the ways they struggle to achieve a certain level of sexual autonomy within the school compound in the context of contemporary northern Thai society. In developing successful school-based sexuality education as well as HIV and STI prevention programs, greater respect to schoolgirls as active cultural agents is recommended; and their active participation in the process of program development, implementation and evaluation is therefore advised.

Keywords

Schoolgirls; sexuality; popular culture; ethnography; Thailand

Introduction

In the globalizing city of Chiang Mai, increased exposure to capitalism, media, popular culture and urban lifestyles have led to dramatic changes in young people's cultural and sexual practices in everyday life. Chiang Mai teenagers have gained more authority over the everyday construction of their lives through their engagement with global popular culture, urban space and consumerism (Cohen, 2006, 2009).

From time to time, youth subculture lifestyles have been labeled by mainstream discourse as a social ill or as deviant. Youth subculture and lifestyles are frequently demonized by conservative media for being aggressive, mindless and immoral (Bucholtz, 2002; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Willis, 1977; Wulff, 1995). In northern Thailand, new expressions of youth subculture such as ways of dressing, speaking and changing sexual norms regarding sex between unmarried youth that challenge conventional Thai values and traditions are portrayed as 'non-Thai', leading to public concern and even to moral panic (Cohen, 2006, 2009; Fongkaew, 1995). Public attention is particularly directed towards youth

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sexual identity formation and how this is expressed, especially among female teenagers. Schools teach young Thai women to deny their sexual desires and affections and that they are not supposed to know about sex. In other words, northern Thai schoolgirls have been socially constructed to be innocent virgins, who are gentle and proper (Fongkaew, Wongpanarak, Fongkaew & Lertmallikaporn, 2007). There are various ways in which the Thai state and social institutions have operated to control, regulate, and suppress young Thai female sexuality in order to uphold these conventional values and (assumed) traditions as well as keep Thai teens away from 'inappropriate' sexual behaviors and ideas that were presumably imported from Western countries (Cohen, 2006).

Previous studies of youth culture have also tended to see young people as victims of modernity, urbanization and consumerism while failing to give attention to their individual agency (Bucholtz, 2002; Fongkaew, 1995). In contrast the progression of modern capitalism has led to the development of a more individualistic sense of sexual self (Giddens, 1992): including modern Thai society, where forces of globalization are playing a significant role in restructuring and diversifying young women's concepts of gender and sexuality. The global flow of capital and culture liberates young women by asserting their agencies, mainly through consumption patterns. And despite the fact that young women are still governed by institutionalized hegemony regarding gender and sexuality that tends to restrict their sexual options, many young women do no longer take these conservative prescriptions of female gender and sexuality for granted or accept them uncritically. Rather, they challenge and dispute authoritative discourses which constrain them (Thaweessit, 2000). In terms of romantic practices, Thai teenage girls are able to take ownership of their sexuality by redefining meanings of love and pleasure, and by dating boy/girlfriends on their own terms. They often have liberal ideas about being active in their sexuality, seeing it as a commodity that links beauty with power. Teenage girls have to redefine their sexuality despite being continuously exposed to the sexuality discourse of the modest girl reproduced continuously by families and schools. They creatively play with these contradictory norms and values, showing that they are able to manage diverse and often contradictory concepts, thoughts and behaviors taken from various discourses in society (Sornchai, 2004). Teenage girls also use social media to display their bodies and express their sexuality, actively reinterpreting contesting discourses on femininity and feminine sexuality that are shaped by the state, consumer values, and the media as well as by young women's individualized discourses in patriarchal society (Samakkeekarom, Boonmongkon & Jantong, 2008).

Effective gender-sensitive sexuality education as well as HIV and STI prevention programs should take these transformations of female gender and sexuality in modern Thai society into consideration. It is suggested that more studies are needed to explain youth lifestyles in the modern context (Boonmongkon, Jaranasri, Limsumphan & Thanaisawanyangkoon, 2000, p. 11), including the ways young women struggle to reconcile traditional beliefs with surrounding modernization, globalization, consumerism and changing sexual norms (Marddent, 2007). It is important to acknowledge and recognize young people as cultural producers rather than as passive and vulnerable recipients of culture (Bucholtz, 1995; Cohen, 2009; Wulff, 1995), as studies have shown that young women are able to assert their 'agency' and find ways to negotiate and challenge traditional forms of femininity (Amit-Talai, 1995; McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Thaweessit, 2000). Schools can play an important role in creating an environment that is more favorable to the promotion of youth sexual health. Young people should be provided an opportunity to be involved in school-based sexuality education as well as HIV and STI prevention program development, implementation and evaluation (Fongkaew, Fongkaew & Suchaxaya, 2007).

Michel de Certeau (1984) noted that while ordinary people may be constrained by a dominant cultural order, they adapt this situation to their own ends. Taking this into account, this paper will use De Certeau's idea of 'strategy' and 'tactic.' On the one hand, there are the various 'strategies' via which the Thai state tries to forge and construct a desired sexual identity and morality among schoolgirls, focusing on the school system and allied institutions. On the other hand, there are the diverse 'tactics' schoolgirls deploy in everyday life to compromise, negotiate or resist those dominant control powers. This approach pays attention to the agencies of schoolgirls and illuminates the processes and ways via which their sexual subjectivities emerge, creatively combining elements of local culture and of global capitalism in the age of transnationalism (Bucholtz, 2002). This paper pursues better understandings of the ways that schoolgirls actively seek to create their own sexual subjectivities that they perceive, experience, and practice through engaging with global popular culture, urbanization and consumerism in the context of urban Chiang Mai.

The scope of this study is to explore the ways schoolgirls negotiate and resist the controlling powers that are operated through the school and allied institutions within the school compound. Viewing schoolgirls as active cultural agents, the paper does not discuss psychological approaches, socialization theories or epidemiology-inspired views that see young women as innocent and vulnerable victims of sexual exploitation, drug abuse, gangster violence, bullying, aggressive behaviors, etc.

Methodology: Doing the Ethnographic Study among Schoolgirls

This ethnographic study was carried out in a school located in Chiang Mai. After submitting an official letter from The Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University to the school administration, approval was obtained and preliminary fieldwork was carried out from June 2009 to March 2010. During this period, the researcher served as a volunteer teacher for one academic year, which resulted in a unique chance to observe the school environment from the inside and to create a good rapport with fellow teachers and other relevant actors such as school security personnel and members of the Volunteer Student Inspectors (VSI) team (discussed below). At the end of this period, a group of thirteen schoolgirls who had been enrolled in the researcher's class volunteered to be key informants for the consequent study. The data on which this paper is based were collected during the preliminary ten-month period of teaching and from April 2010 to September 2011 when the main fieldwork was conducted, while the key informants were studying in high school.

After preliminary fieldwork was completed and key informants were identified, the method of participant observation was used when the researcher transformed his status from outsider to insider by shifting position from being the girls' teacher to becoming a member of their social group. The fact that the researcher was openly gay and relatively young (early thirties) provided an advantage in gaining access to the lives of these girls and their parents and becoming friends with them. The researcher gained the privilege of entering into their private spaces such as their homes, bedrooms and dormitories. Having two younger sisters the same age as the participants gave the researcher a familiarity with the specialized language, lifestyle, fashion and other trends of this distinct group. The group members called the researcher 'mommy' (*khun mae*) and allowed him to accompany them to several places both inside and outside school settings. He was also included into their social media 'secret groups,' where they shared confidential stories seen exclusively by group members, and frequently went out with the group of girls to entertainment venues around the city of

Chiang Mai. Applying participant observation techniques and becoming an insider was helpful in observing and understanding what was going on within the group.

The era of globalization has provided ideas and concepts for the emergence of the ethnographic research which defines its objects of study through several different modes or techniques (Marcus, 1995). A mixture of research methods was used in this study in order to collect the most accurate data possible. In addition to participant observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with all participants as well as with other relevant persons. All in-depth interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed.

In order to conduct the study following ethical principles, the research protocol was approved by the Research Ethic Review Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Chiang Mai University. Prior to fieldwork, consent was obtained from all participants after the purpose and process of the study were explained to them. All research participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned instead of their real names. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from participating in this study at any time without consequence.

For the Sake of Good Intentions: School Strategies to Control Schoolgirls' Sexuality

The school aimed to teach young girls to conform to an idealized female youth sexual identity, called the '*well-behaved women*' (*kunlasatree*). The *kunlasatree* has been defined as proficient and sophisticated in household duties; graceful, pleasant, yet unassuming in her appearance and social manners; and conservative in her sexuality (Taywaditep, Coleman & Dumronggittigule, 1997). This basic ideal type is the basis of how the school attempts to shape its female students' sense of gendered self: sex in relation to (good) women is precious; it should not be squandered, but it should be kept and maintained for life after marriage. Even in marriage, a 'good woman' does not truly need or ask for sex; basically only men and 'bad women' (including prostitutes) enjoy sex. Below is discussed how the school strategically implements its attempts at shaping girls' sexualities according to the *kunlasatree* model.

In order to internalize new students' sense of pride to become sons/daughters of the school, the school authority sought to anchor the great reputation and history of the school in various ways. The school museum exhibits the school's antique treasures that represent the school's long history, the great contributions of the school and its alumni to Chiang Mai and Thai society, as well as a directory of important and famous persons related to the school. Every student is required to attend a ritual to devote themselves to be good sons/daughters of the school in front of a statue of a royal historical figure who named the school and is acknowledged as the royal father of the school. A fragment of a speech once given by this royal figure, encouraging students to be honest, trustworthy and obtain well habits, is acknowledged as the school slogan and is constantly reproduced and circulated everywhere. Similar to other Thai schools, there is a daily national anthem ritual consisting of paying respect to the national anthem and the Thai flag, followed by Buddhist chanting. The morning activity ends with a session in which school officials deliver announcements including daily information updates, emphasizing school regulations and the ways model students should behave in order to honor the school's great reputation. Occasionally,

students who won competitions or received awards are praised as being good sons/daughters of the school in front of the entire audience.

The school vision, mission and goals are stated to every student highlighting that—together with the provision of educational quality—the school prioritizes the development of the morality, ethics and proper attitudes of its students. These characteristics are stressed so that the students could become valuable contributors to society in the future. Around the school area, several signs and billboards presenting awards and certificates that the school received are on display to publicize the school's quality. Series of decorated boards were also erected honoring students who served as 'good role models' by winning competitions, receiving awards or having particular outstanding qualifications. Quotes and short interview transcripts explain how they behaved in order to become such excellent students. Big billboards displayed at the school entrance emphasize appropriate school uniforms and state that every student was considered a son or daughter of the school. Wearing the school uniform appropriately is linked to the promotion of a sense of pride in being part of the school. Once a month, a special session is organized for students in a particular grade at the main auditorium. In order to respond to school objectives that aim to improve morality and ethics as well as create proper attitude and characteristics among students, a variety of activities are organized each month such as religious talks by well-known monks and guidance sessions by alumni who pursued their studies in prestigious universities.

The school developed various disciplines in order to regulate the student's time and activities. Prior to every first academic semester, an orientation session for new students and parents is held. The 'handbook for students and parents' is distributed as the guideline which students are obliged to strictly follow. A study timetable details that students are expected to arrive at school before 7.50 a.m. to attend the morning national anthem ritual. Eight classes are scheduled from Monday to Thursday between 08.30 and 16.30, while there are five classes on Friday in order to spare the afternoon for students to attend practical classes according to their particular interests such as sports, music, community services, or paramilitary training (*ror dor*). Therefore, from 7.50 to 16.30, the student's activities are strictly controlled by the school timetable. Aside from break times, students are not supposed to be found outside classrooms.

Pictures, information and regulations about how to wear the school uniform properly are also elaborated in the handbook. For female students, wearing the proper school uniform according to the school's detailed regulations is strictly enforced. Makeup and accessories such as necklaces, rings, earrings, or fingernail polish are not allowed. Any modification to the hair that makes the hair look unnatural, such as thinning, curling and coloring, is forbidden. Female students who wear their hair long are required to tie it properly with a white ribbon. Nails have to remain short and be clipped regularly. Adaptations of the school uniform, such as wearing sandals or jeans in combination with the uniform shirt, are prohibited. Outside the school, students are required to present themselves wearing proper clothing in line with the *kunlasatree*-model, and to refrain from wearing clothes deemed too fashionable or too sexy.

Every student is given 100 behavior marks at the beginning of the first academic semester. Those who are judged by school authorities to deviate from school regulations have their behavior marks cut according to a list provided in the student handbook. Students whose behavior marks are reduced by more than forty points are considered to be defiled, leading to a negative effect on their profile. Teachers and other school administration staff have the authority to punish students according to five levels of severity: warning, parole, cutting

down behavior marks, forced participation in behavioral change activities, and transferring to another educational institution.

According to the handbook, student misbehaviors are categorized in three levels: high, moderate and low. A high level of misconduct refers to any behavior that creates serious disrepute to the school and overall society, leads to severe negative impact on social morality and discipline, or violates criminal law. Moderate level misbehavior includes any actions which could cause or lead to serious harm to the public. Low level misdemeanors include individual behaviors which are considered inappropriate. Misconduct related to sex is categorized in both the high and the moderate levels, with a punishment of 40 marks. Carrying weapons would lead to a 60 mark deduction, whereas drug abuse and committing bodily harm to others is of the same severity as sexual offenses (40 marks). Every teacher is given the authority to cut down student's behavior marks and can inform parents regarding their child's misbehavior and consequent punishment.

School regulations to enforce the hegemonic stereotype of the *kunlasatree* on female students and to control the formation of their sexual subjectivity may be compared to Foucault's (1977) model of panopticon to illustrate the systematic arrangements of surveillance over individuals. The panopticon, a new structure for prisons, allowed guards to watch prisoners continuously. From a tower in the center of a ring of cells, one or two guards could constantly monitor those inside the cells. This also meant that individuals in the cells were always aware of being watched by those in the tower. The prospect of being constantly under scrutiny would discourage bad behavior. The model of panopticon fundamentally altered the function and efficiency of prisons and eventually society (Khosravi, 2008). The model of panopticon can be used as a metaphor for the systematic operation of the school's control mechanisms. The students thus have to control themselves while facing the possibility that they are under constant surveillance and under threat of immediate punishment for any wrongdoing.

The school is well known for, and very proud of, its student fostering system. Close collaboration among its stakeholders is a key to this perceived success. In each class, teachers are required to visit the homes or dormitories of the students who they are assigned to supervise, in order to observe and systematically document details of their lives. This includes whether negative factors were found nearby where they live which could possibly lead students to have risky behaviors, such as proximity to nightlife spots or slums. Other related information, such as financial hardship in the family or any history of misdemeanors, is also recorded and reported.

School librarians and related officials also played an active role in monitoring the ways students utilize facilities in the school. Students are offered a range of facilities for their entertainment during free time. Various kinds of books and magazines as well as computers with internet connection are available in the main library. Televisions are installed around the school compound. A mini-theatre room was also opened for students. However, all facilities provided were carefully designed so that teachers and other responsible officials are able to monitor whether students used them in appropriate ways. Books and magazines available in the library were chosen and approved by school librarians. Televisions were installed in public spaces only. Computer monitors are turned to the public area and students are required to log in to the internet using their own username and password, so that responsible officials could check what kind of information or websites they access. Regarding activities in the mini-theater, a list of approved movies is made available by librarian teachers. A control room is located at the back of the theater which also serves as

the librarian's office so that DVD players and other devices, as well as the students' behavior while in the theater, could be closely monitored.

The SAD (Student Activity Division) is the main administrative sector in charge of organizing extra-curricular activities, and is also responsible for monitoring and promoting positive behavioral change among students. The previous name of the SAD was the Student Governing Division (SGD). The SGD was perceived by students as being a strictly disciplinarian institution. Teachers who ran the former SGD were perceived among students as having fearful characteristics, as they were often seen holding sticks in their hands around the school area and longing to punish any students who misbehaved. Therefore, the school administrative board decided to change its name from SGD to SAD in order to create a student-friendly image and shift its priorities from student behavior control to organizing extra-curricular activities.

Despite being run under a new name and modified image, teachers who were part of SAD were still feared among students. One of these teachers, for instance, was referred to as 'Mr. Barber'. He usually had scissors with him at all times, and if he found any students wearing an inappropriate hairstyle, he cut that student's hair right at the scene.

In terms of the physical environment of the school, iron and cement fences were built around its territory to protect and divide school space from the outside. Normally, only one entrance is open during school hours. This entrance is closely monitored by a school security guard. The SAD office building is also located at the school entrance. Wide glass windows were installed in this building so that teachers or other responsible officials could keep an eye on the situation outside. Blind spots around the school compound, such as toilets, isolated areas behind the school and some deserted buildings, were carefully redesigned and remodeled in order to prevent students from using these spaces for behaviors deemed inappropriate such as smoking, fighting or having sex. A toilet front wall was remodeled and made lower, with the upper part replaced by flowerpots. Several areas where students had previously been caught engaging in forbidden behaviors were either cleared or more closely inspected. More than forty surveillance cameras were installed around the school area so that SAD teachers and other responsible officials could keep their eyes on what was going on around the school. The SAD office was turned into a control room. In addition to security purposes, surveillance cameras also served as tools to inspect students and to prevent them from misbehaving or doing anything against school regulations.

Although surveillance cameras effectively assisted SAD and other related officials in inspecting and recording video to be used as evidence, the fixed position of the cameras was found to be a limitation, as they couldn't follow students all the time. SAD teachers were aware of the tactics students used to evade being monitored, especially when they were in locations where no SAD teachers or related officials were around. Therefore, a group of volunteer students was formed, called Volunteer Student Inspectors (VSI), in order to work closely with SAD. VSIs consisted of twenty volunteer students and their networks. A group of senior VSIs was responsible to recruit younger students to join the team. New members were trained by the senior VSI, who were then expected to serve as trainers for new VSIs from younger generations. Members of the VSI team were taught to dedicate themselves to public service, act according to school regulations and serve as good role models for fellow students. After participating in training sessions they are assigned to serve as the right hand of SAD in various public service duties. One of the important missions of VSIs is inspecting and spying on their fellow students, both inside and outside the school, and informing SAD

teachers if they find students who misbehave. As a senior female VSI stated in an in-depth interview:

Our assigned duties are, firstly, monitor the situation around school and make sure everything is going normally. Secondly, inspect whether our friends behave or act according to school regulations. We give them warnings if they tend to misbehave. Thirdly, if we see anyone is doing anything wrong, we jot down his/her name and inform SAD teachers.

VSI stated that they were very proud of this mission, both because they realized that they could help their friends to behave and act according to the school regulations, and because their devotion ensured that the school's great reputation could be well preserved. VSI are required to arrive at school earlier than other students. They have a short morning meeting regarding their daily working plans. Check-up forms are distributed to each member. While on duty, they wear an armband that identifies them as VSI. The school area is broken down into ten zones that VSIs check systematically to make sure that the situation is normal and also to ensure that no student skips the national anthem morning ritual. VSIs are also assigned to check male and female toilets regularly, according to their gender.

During the morning national anthem ritual, VSIs also play an active role, together with class teachers and SAD, to approach and identify their friends who were found to have done anything against school regulations. As a senior female VSI and junior male VSI explained in an in-depth interview:

Senior Female VSI: *We walk into the row and scan if any male students do not have an appropriate short hair cut. For female students, we check for accessories, ribbons and whether they have hairstyles that are against the rules such as coloring or thinning. Then, we take them out to gather in separate groups. After that, the SAD teachers will come and cut their hair.*

Junior Male VSI: *In winter, we also seize jackets.*

Researcher: *Because they wear fashionable jackets rather than school jackets?*

Junior Male VSI: *Yes, we seize them and collect them. Some students hide their jackets but we can take them anyway. We check inside their school bags.*

Researcher: *Could anyone escape from VSI inspection so far?*

Senior Female VSI: *They usually hide in the toilets. So we order junior VSIs to follow them into the toilets and take them.*

Apart from verbal VSI reports, concrete evidence such as photographs and video clips were used to identify misbehaving students. Informal networks among other students were established to cooperate with VSI to inspect their friends. VSIs and their informal networks played an important role in searching for evidence. Social media spaces were also monitored, especially for sexual issues such as posting of intimate or pornographic pictures, but also for other behaviors the school disapproved of, such as going out to nightclubs. Once, the researcher made the mistake of posting some photographs of a group of key informants on Facebook while they were with their boyfriends in a nightclub. They called the researcher the next morning asking him to delete all pictures, to prevent them from getting caught. One of the SAD teachers showed the researcher photographs of a schoolgirl posing in sexy ways in her school uniform. These pictures were uploaded on a social media website using her personal account. After being caught, she was investigated by SAD. Her parents were informed about what their daughter had done. Although she was not directly

sentenced by the school, the social pressure created by the incident among fellow students led her to resign from the school in the end.

From in-depth interviews, VSI members expressed pride and felt honored serving as VSIs. Apart from the certificates they received for being 'devoted students', they were acknowledged by teachers as good role models. As two senior female VSIs expressed in an in-depth interview:

I am so proud (of serving as a VSI). I have been a good role model for my friends. I have followed school regulations strictly. I want my friends to act according to what I have done. I also warn them if it looks like they are going to do anything wrong.

I am so proud and impressed in many aspects of being a VSI. We have good teamwork. We are the team that helps our school to progress further to a higher level.

In summary, this section described the school's efforts to enforce a hegemonic identity among students, through effective collaboration of the school's SAD with VSIs and other working partners. Similar to Foucault's (1977) design for a prison, the school developed various ways to conduct surveillance, to discipline students and to regulate and punish them. Students were manipulated, shaped, and trained; they became docile so that they could be subjected, transformed and improved for the ultimate formation of the hegemonic stereotype of *kunlasatree*. However, de Certeau (1984) stated that such measures to control and shape behavior can never be perfect; such strategies are likely to be challenged by the subordinated groups' tactics that constantly compromise, negotiate or render aspects of the strategy obsolete. It is to these tactics that the paper now turns.

Let Us Create Our Own Selves: Schoolgirls' Tactics towards Sexual Autonomy

Opposed to the school's strategies, the schoolgirls employed tactics for achieving a certain level of sexual autonomy. Their tactical practices lacked a specific location of action and were carried out through improvisation, utilizing the typical advantages of subordinated groups (de Certeau, 1988). The first tactic that schoolgirls used to subvert the school's authority was the use of coded and secret language. The SAD apparatus of control, including the office and its mechanisms of surveillance, were described as '*the giant monster*' by the schoolgirls. The VSI members were called '*giant monster minions*'. Teachers and officials were also described according to certain characteristics or to their physical similarity to characters in popular series or movies. For instance, a particularly short teacher was called '*hobbit*' after a character from *The Lord of the Rings*. '*Giant buffalo faggot*' was the name given to a big-boned teacher who was considered by informants to be gay. Spoonerisms and abbreviations were also systematically used to avoid comprehension by outsiders in order to facilitate communication and understanding within the schoolgirls' group. These language tricks were used when the group referred to issues related to sex, while gossiping about someone nearby, to provide friends with warnings when SAD teachers approached, or when communicating in social media and websites.

Schoolgirls responded to the time restrictions imposed by the school with tactics as well. Instead of entering school on time every morning, the group members usually gathered at a

convenience store next to the school. They assembled in order to enter school as a larger group so that SAD or responsible teachers who were monitoring students at the school entrance would not notice the group members who were in breach of school regulations. This tactic was especially effective when covering for someone who had a 'wrong' hairstyle or a forbidden enhancement to her uniform: she would walk in the middle of the group, physically covered by surrounding friends.

When key informants arrived at school late and had to record their arrival time in a computer, they planned to enter as a pair. When being monitored closely by a VSI, one of them would distract the VSI while the other girl intentionally put the student ID numbers of other students into the computer rather than their own, avoiding subtracting of behavioral marks. Some schoolgirls intentionally entered school after the morning national anthem ritual around 09.00 a.m. because there was only one school security guard or teacher on duty. The reduced number of staff ensured that the schoolgirls would likely escape punishment.

Within the strictly controlled and thoroughly inspected territory of the school, homosexual relationships among female students were easier to pursue than sexual affairs with boys; as a result, female students expressed intimacy with other girls widely within the school compound. Eight out of the 13 key informants reported having homosexual experiences in the school setting. This phenomenon is a reminder that youth sexuality, especially among female teenagers, is fluid and membership of sexual or gender categories often temporal and contested. In contrast to conventional characteristics, certain female students who identified themselves as a '*tom*', (masculine-oriented lesbian) did not perform as or regard themselves as having a full-time masculine identity; at the same time, female students who had sexual relationships with *toms* did not consider themselves to be a '*dee*' (feminine-oriented lesbian). They engaged in intimate relationships with other female students without consequences for their gendered or sexual identity; their sexual identities thus constantly shifted according to particular contexts (Sinnott, 2004). Some of the students identified themselves simply as women. While they may have had relationships with *toms* in school, when they were out of the school setting some informants also established additional, more casual relationships with male teenagers who were called '*gig*' (often translated as 'friends with sexual benefits').

Key informants who were in homosexual relationships revealed that they also had sexual attraction towards men, but within the context of their families and school they preferred having relationships with members of the same gender at this particular time in order to avoid social and familial problems. Key informants explained the advantages of having same-sex relationships: to their knowledge, despite some teachers being aware of their sexual relationships, homosexual relationships had never been caught or punished by the school authorities. It is likely that such relationships were not taken seriously; some of the girls also did not consider sex with a fellow female as 'getting laid' (*sia tua*) because it could not result in pregnancy. Another advantage was that they could go out with their lovers as 'close friends' without any suspicion from parents and teachers. While in school, a couple could express certain forms of intimacy such as touching, hugging and holding hands without being suspect. One key informant used to bring her girlfriend to stay at her place for months while her parents believed that they were only friends.

The consumption of popular culture also played an important role in tactics to resist and subvert the school's conservative sexual regime. Cultural consumption is a form of agency, in that consumption constitutes choice in using, buying, wearing and expressing sexual or gendered identity in order to actively negotiate or resist dominant sexual discourses (Friske,

1989). In a study among school girls in Canada, Amit-Talai (1995) found that schoolgirls with similar sexual identities tended to express a joint youth style through the consumption of particular commodities as significant ingredients of their self-expression. Indeed, the popular culture consumption among the schoolgirls in this study expressed and promoted a sexual identity that they desired but which was in confrontation with the *kunlasatree* norms defined and pushed by the school. Four out of 13 key informants who identified themselves as *tom* expressed their masculinity by wearing elastic wristbands to tightly fasten and flatten their breasts in order to resemble a male chest. Dissatisfied with the school rule forcing them to wear skirts, they instead wore the school sport uniform with sport pants almost every school day. Hairstyle was another of the identifying icons of being *tom*, with a preference among them to wear it short to resemble a boy. Although short hair and hair trimming was forbidden for female students, all *tom* informants still maintained their short haircut. Initially, they were caught and punished by SAD teachers; but after a while they came up with a solution by wearing a wig with long hair to avoid punishment. Even though teachers were aware that they were wearing sport uniforms and wigs, no penalty was given since, technically, the fact that they had long hair (even though it was a wig) and wore the school uniform (even it was a sports outfit) were still considered to be in line with school policy. As one female SAD teacher reported:

I can see that sexually deviant female students wear sport uniforms everyday while others wear skirts...sometimes I can't stand the way they behave but I don't know what to do [because the sport uniform is also considered a school uniform]. They have their short haircuts, which are inappropriate, but they wear wigs. I know because their friends told me.

Informants who identified as *dees* and heterosexual females viewed their school uniforms as old-fashioned and uncool. The girls applied tactics to make their school uniform look 'cooler', such as shortening their skirts, wearing necklaces, earrings, and colored contact lenses as well as clipping or coloring their hair. The schoolgirls were fully aware that these practices were against the school rules and that they could be caught and punished by SAD or VSIs.

Amit-Talai (1995) found that young people use friendships to constitute their social identity through accommodation, confrontation, or evasion of adults. Friendships among key informants were indeed a key factor that assisted them in escaping the scrutiny of school authorities in various ways. They consulted with each other how to choose those colored contact lenses that looked most natural, and how to apply makeup that wasn't too obvious. When any of the group members dyed strings of their hair, they helped each other to come up with various tricks to tie their hair in order to hide the colored portion of their hair. When SAD or VSI members were approaching, they helped each other escape inspection and punishment.

Technology, especially smart phones and social networks, was also used as a tool to avoid and subvert the school's sexual and gendered regime. School authorities found it difficult to reach into their students' online worlds because students used their own internet network via personal smart phones. Being aware of online monitoring, secret groups were created on social media applications and websites that were only accessible to group members. Nicknames for particular persons, spoonerisms and abbreviations were used for safety reasons. Social networks, therefore, provided the girls some space with a certain level of freedom for them to share secret stories, including sexual fantasies and sexual experiences.

On particular occasions, certain types of social activities and forms of cultural consumption were practiced in order to tactically make use of certain exceptions of school ideological power. The three-month summer school vacation was another great opportunity for them to make use of the pause in the school's regime and regulations. They would, for example, do more ear piercings at the beginning of the holidays since they knew that the piercings would be healed before the next semester. Some girls took 'forbidden' hairstyles and dyed their hair in the colors they desired. Two informants underwent plastic surgery on their noses during school vacation as they would have sufficient time to recover, enabling them to enter the next semester with a newly shaped nose. Two schoolgirls attended local supermodel contests. One key informant won a local beauty contest. After being crowned a beauty queen she became a well-known student in school, and a huge billboard congratulating her on her success was displayed in front of the school. She was frequently acknowledged and invited to show up and represent the school in various school-organized events. On graduation day, she was presented with a certification for outstanding student who preserves the school's reputation, to the delight of the friends in her social group who teased her that they "*just saw [her] running away from being chased by SAD, but now [she has] become an outstanding student*".

As mentioned above, one of the parts of the school uniform was a white ribbon that the schoolgirls had to use to tie their hair. After their graduation ritual, all key informants lampooned this practice by tying their hair with overly huge ribbons in an act to make fun of this school regulation.

Conclusion: Rethinking Schoolgirls' Sexualities

This paper has shown that schoolgirls are not passive victims of a hegemonic conservative school regime, but active cultural agents who constantly evade, negotiate and resist the power imposed on them by dominant forces. They are able to use the cultural resources available around them, taken from global popular culture, local urban culture and the consumer society. Fiske, following de Certeau's idea, states that "popular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. Popular culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it stems from within, from below, not from above. Popular culture is the art of making up with what the system provides" (de Certeau, 1984 cited in Fiske, 1989, p. 25). This paper illustrates this. Although the girls could never entirely escape from the school sexual and gendered regime, they used their consumption and appropriation of popular culture as a site of struggle with the powerful conventional sexual and gender discourse, using a number of popular tactics through which schoolgirls made use to cope with, resist, and evade these forces. The schoolgirls in this study showed an ability to creatively modify the resources made available to them. In some instances, such as the use of longhair wigs or school uniforms, their cultural consumption can serve the girls' contestation of the dominant power, depending on how they are used and how these uses are interpreted in the school context.

To understand female youth sexuality in modern Thai society, the anthropological approach of youth culture has been primarily concerned with how the researcher can experience the way schoolgirls, as cultural agents, actively construct their sexual identity and express their sexual selves within diverse social contexts and dominant sexual discourses in their everyday life. The findings of this study proved that the attitude toward youth sexuality that labels youth as victims of modernization, urbanization, and consumerism, and as challenging moral standards and traditional Thai values, are out-of-date. Such attitudes are clearly influenced by imaginary, nostalgic and essentialist values idealized in nationalist

ideologies, values which hold limited meaning for most contemporary Thai youth (Bucholtz, 2002; Cohen, 2006, 2009). Through modernization, urbanization and consumption, it was obvious that schoolgirls are able to assert their agency and to find ways to negotiate and challenge traditional forms of femininity that they encounter in their day-to-day lives (Thaweessit, 2000), as well as the model of 'well-behaved women' (*kunlasatree*) within the school compound.

This paper has shown that schoolgirls have their own ability to negotiate, appropriate, transform or reproduce their gendered and sexual subjectivities to meet their own goals, as reflected through their cultural and sexual practices in daily life. The subtle ways in which ordinary people "poach" the property of others and adapt it to their own ends is a central feature of everyday life (de Certeau, 1988). While the school regulations play a critical role in the process of sexual and gender socialization, schoolgirls are able to compromise and resist this for their own ends. Teenage girls' cultural and sexual practices in everyday life therefore become a significant sphere where female youth 'actors' maintain their ability to define who they are in their own terms.

Studying schoolgirls' sexualities in this manner resulted in deeper understandings about the transformation that has recently emerged and developed. Apart from its contribution to theories of repression and resistance in schools, this study suggests that greater respect should be given to youth agencies in developing successful school-based sexuality education as well as HIV and STI prevention programs in the context of contemporary northern Thai society. Moreover, rather than employing a controlling approach, schools should provide a respectful atmosphere and create a supportive environment to the promotion of youth sexual health. A working method emphasizing equal partnership between schoolgirls, the school and other key stakeholders is advised for the process of more effective sexual health program development, implementation and evaluation in order to reduce conflicts and resistance.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge The Royal Golden Jubilee Ph.D. Program for providing financial support throughout this study. I would like to express my deep gratitude to my dissertation advisory committees; Dr. Wasan Panyagaew, Assist. Prof. Dr. Pinkaew Laungaramsri, Dr. Apinya Fuengfusakul and Prof. Dr. Katherine Bowie for their brilliant intellectual guidance and support. I greatly appreciate invaluable comments and suggestions by Prof. Dr. Craig Reynolds, Dr. Tyrell Haberkorn, Dr. Jan Willem de Lind van Wijngaarden, and two anonymous reviewers. Special thanks also to Mr. Anthony Irwin for kindly proofreading this paper. Most importantly, I am grateful to all research participants for sharing their experiences and allowing me to be a part of their lives.

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