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Bus Paintings in Thailand: A Post-Modern Urban Art Form in Comparative Perspective

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Studies of paintings on motorized vehicles are rare. Existing studies indicate that such paintings play a role in national identity politics or serve as means of representation of an alternative national history. This article deals with the origins and execution of airbrush paintings on charter tour coaches in Thailand, and with the sources and styles of the motifs represented on them. The paintings are produced in a hybridized process, involving artwork and computerization; they are thus a post-modern art form, which is not strictly classifiable into modernist categories of art, craft, or decoration. The sources, styles, and motifs of the paintings reflect global influences: They are highly heterogeneous, deriving primarily from contemporary Western or Japanese popular cultures or from Thai or Chinese 'traditional' painting. The bus-owners' motivations for the choice of motifs are primarily aesthetic and social rather than religious or political. Thai bus paintings can thus be seen as a globalized, post-modern art form, with most of the motifs just being pleasing symbols, without external reference.

Keywords: Airbrush Painting; Bus Paintings; Globalization; Post-Modern Art; Thai Popular Culture

Studien über Malereien auf motorisierten Fahrzeugen sind selten. Vorhandene Studien zeigen, dass solche Malereien eine Rolle in nationaler Identitätspolitik spielen oder als Mittel zur Darstellung einer alternativen nationalen Geschichte dienen. Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit den Ursprüngen und der Realisierung von Airbrush-Malereien auf Charter-Bussen in Thailand und mit den Quellen und Stilen der Motive, die auf diesen dargestellt sind. Die Malereien werden in einem hybriden Prozess entwickelt, der Kunstwerk und Computerisierung vereint, und können deshalb als postmoderne Kunstform bezeichnet werden, die nicht klar modernen Kategorien wie Kunst, Handwerk oder Dekoration zuordenbar ist. Die Quellen, Stile und Motive der Malereien spiegeln globale Einflüsse wider: sie sind äußerst heterogen und beziehen sich vor allem auf zeitgenössische westliche oder japanische Populärkultur oder auf thailändische oder chinesische „traditionelle“ Malerei. Die Beweggründe der Buseigentümer für die Wahl der Motive sind eher ästhetische und soziale als religiöse oder politische. Thailändische Bus-Malereien können deshalb als globalisierte, postmoderne Kunstform gesehen werden, in der die meisten Motive ansprechende Symbole ohne externe Bezüge darstellen.

Schlagworte: Airbrush-Malerei; Bus-Malereien; Globalisierung; Postmoderne Kunst; Thailändische Populärkultur

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Introduction

Paintings on vehicles have been described as “moving art” (“Truck Art”, 2013) as well as a “vital form of contemporary urban folklore” (Meñez, 1988, p. 38). The best-known examples of that art form are the colorful paintings covering Pakistani trucks (“Decorative Truck”, 2011; Sökefeld, 2008) and Philippine jeepneys (Meñez, 1988). But such paintings can also be found on buses in Suriname (Laughlin, 2009), in Panama (Szok, 2008), in some cities in India (Chattopadhyay, 2009), and in Thailand. In the past, paintings have also been common on Argentina’s *colectivos* and on Maltese buses, but the custom disappeared with the modernization of the bus fleets. In Western Europe and the United States, buses and trucks are also occasionally painted (“40 Creative Painted”, 2009; Harris & Harris, 1988), but such paintings serve predominantly as advertisements for particular products², whereas in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean they are not primarily meant as promotional devices.

Though an attraction for visitors, and amply illustrated on the Internet, paintings on vehicles have aroused little interest among social scientists and art historians, except for a few studies of Philippine jeepneys (Güss & Tuason, 2008; Meñez, 1988) and Pakistani trucks (Elias, 2003; Rich & Khan, 1980; Schmid, 2000; Sökefeld, 2008). The paintings on Thai buses, which have in recent years proliferated in a plethora of colorful shapes, have attracted the attention of journalists (Biggs, 2013; Le Febre, 2010), but have not yet been systematically examined. In this article, I will deal with their emergence, execution, and the variety of their sources, styles, and motifs as a unique globalized, post-modern phenomenon, significantly different from the stylistically more homogeneous decorations on Pakistani trucks and Philippine jeepneys, as well as from the contemporary commercialized folk crafts of Thailand (Cohen, 2000).

Lizardo and Skiles (2008) state that “a key feature of industrial and post-industrial societies consists of the formally organized production and market based dissemination of cultural goods that were previously produced and procured in more informal folk and community contexts” (p. 485). This led to a “rise of mass-produced ‘media cultures’ – at concurrently national and global scales – disseminated by new technologies of mass communication” (Lizardo & Skiles, 2008, p. 485). I show in this article that, ironically, these same mass media cultural products provided the styles and motifs on

2 See e.g. the paintings on German trucks on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXgHKo7fwwI>

most of the paintings that are deployed on Thai buses, in order to individualize those impersonal vehicles. The decorations serve to publicly display their individuality among the mass of unmarked vehicles on the road, and hence endow distinction on their owners. By having their buses decorated with figurative representations, the owners provided the incentive for the rise of a new, hybridized art form in Thailand.

Literature Review

Painted vehicles can be found in a number of countries. However, there are differences among them in the extent of variety of their painting styles, and in the nature and diversity of depicted motifs. One can hardly talk of a 'style' in the case of the vehicle paintings in Western countries because these are a relatively rare and sporadic phenomenon, serving predominantly as advertisements. The paintings on Philippine jeepneys, Pakistani trucks, and the *wilde bussen* (lit. wild buses) in Suriname's capital Paramaribo are produced in fairly uniform, locally developed styles, though within each style, motifs may vary widely. Thus, Pakistani trucks feature diverse figurative motifs, such as "screaming tigers, flower arrangements, mosques, roaring trains, barnyard roosters, jet aircraft, peacocks, *Buraq* (the mythical human-headed horse that carried the Prophet Mohammad on his journey to Jerusalem) figures, and panoramic views of Kashmir" (Rich & Khan, 1980, p. 257). A more recent study adds to this list "movie heroes, portraits of women and landscapes", and comments with regard to the latter that "with all these lakes, forests, mountains and small huts [they] resemble more an imaginary Switzerland than any Pakistani landscape" (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 176). Elias (2003) offers a classification of motifs on Pakistani trucks, ranging from romanticized village landscapes, beautiful women, and elements from modern life (such as political figures) to talismanic and religious objects. Pakistani trucks also exhibit Koranic inscriptions on their fronts or sides (Sökefeld, 2008, pp. 182, 185, 186). According to the website *TwistedSifter*, there is a difference in signification between the front and back of the truck: "Unlike the front of the truck, which largely features powerful religious material, the back is whimsical (often humorous) and predominantly has motifs from modern life" ("Decorative Truck", 2011).

Sökefeld (2008, p. 177) distinguished three styles of Pakistani truck paintings by focusing on the differences in the prominence and choice of figurative motifs. Referring to famous cities, they are named *Pindi* (short for *Rawalpindi*), *Havelian*, and *Peshawari* style. The sides of trucks in the long-established *Pindi* style “carry one row of figurative paintings” (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 177). In contrast, “the *Havelian* style never makes use of human portraits [while] *Peshawari* style is almost minimalist. Here, figurative paintings on the truck sides are reduced to small miniatures, framed by ornaments”; that style also “never makes use of images of humans” (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 190). According to Sökefeld, the “*Havelian* and especially *Peshawari* styles can be interpreted as a kind of Islamization of truck art” (p. 190). He concludes that

truck art with the ornamental minimalism of the Peshawari style, on the one hand, and the increased lavishness of Pindi style, including the popularity of portraits of unveiled women . . . on the other, can be considered as a site of the struggle between a new Islamic orthodoxy and popular culture (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 190).

This argument puts the process of change in Pakistani truck art squarely into the field of Pakistani identity politics.

In the past, Philippine jeepneys also featured mainly “paintings of rural scenes – waterfalls, trees, flowers and birds” (Meñez, 1988, p. 38). More recently, a comparative study of decorated jeepneys in Manila and Davao found that “Manila jeepneys featured more decorations . . . concerned with religion, identity and Western commercialism, while Davao jeepneys featured more political and civic themes” (Güss & Tuason, 2008, p. 211). De Sousa Bastos (2008), commenting on that study, perceives the jeepney paintings as “a semiotic device which carries social suggestions and promotes personal actions and goals” (p. 237).

Paramaribo’s *wilde bussen* feature “a mobile pantheon of very different culture-heroes” (Laughlin, 2010), ranging from pop culture icons, such as Bollywood stars and Hollywood starlets, to political figures, such as Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, and even Saddam Hussein. Laughlin (2010) sees “an alternative nation-story [to the hegemonic one], [rendering] alternative insights into how contemporary Surinamese understand and imagine themselves” in the Paramaribo *wilde bussen* paintings.

As limited as they are, these studies raise some important comparative issues regarding the recent proliferation of bus paintings in Thailand: Has a distinct painting style (or distinguishable sub-styles) emerged in Thailand? Do the paintings have religious or

magical significance? Do they relate to Thai identity politics or express resistance to the hegemonic Thai nation-story? Or do the paintings only express the aesthetic preferences and individual aspirations of the owners of the buses? I relate to these questions in the conclusion. Before turning to an analysis of the body of paintings on the buses, it is, however, necessary to find out about the painters and the procedures of the painting process.

The Painting Process

In the non-Western world, the vehicles that get painted mostly belong to the older, relatively low stratum of the transport vehicle stock or to the informal sector of the transportation system. The Manila jeepneys were initially US Army jeeps, left over from World War II, which were adapted for public transportation. In Pakistan, in the past “the highways were almost exclusively plied by old Bedford trucks produced under license in Pakistan” (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 177; see also Rich & Khan, 1980). Though newer brands of trucks were added more recently, “the Bedfords will continue to dominate the roads for years to come” (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 177). The Paramaribo *wilde bussen* are privately owned minibuses (Laughlin, 2010). These vehicles are not considered ‘modern’ means of transport, which is also indicated by the fact that in Argentina and Malta, the painting of buses was discontinued with the modernization of their fleets.

In Thailand, three types of buses can be distinguished: buses of the national bus company plying formally regulated interurban lines, which are uniformly painted white and blue, without much additional decoration; buses plying the urban lines in Bangkok, many of which carry conspicuous, colorful advertisements (but no paintings); and charter tour coaches, run by often small, privately owned companies. There are an estimated 5,000 such coaches in Thailand (Chinmaneevong, 2013), serving primarily the domestic tourism market. Bigger charter tour companies have their coaches painted in uniform, mostly non-figurative designs. By the middle of the first decade of the new millennium, figurative paintings began to appear on buses owned by smaller charter tour operators. The novelty soon became a fashion: Presently there are hundreds of often richly decorated tour buses plying the country’s roads.

Despite their ‘modern’ appearance, the majority of these buses are reassembled, renovated, and refitted old vehicles. Similar to Pakistan, where a “considerable craft

economy has evolved around the trucks . . . which to a great extent involves recycling” (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 176), in Thailand, the refitting of old buses takes place in tens of mostly small workshops, but two big bus manufacturers also engage in the refitting business. Most of the workshops are located in two geographical centers: in Nakhon Phathom province, about 60 kilometers west of Bangkok, and in Nakhon Ratchasima province, about 260 kilometers northeast of the capital. Many of the refitted buses are decorated by paintings, executed by specialist ‘airbrush painters’.

I have visited several refitting enterprises in both areas and interviewed three managers as well as three airbrush artists regarding the emergence and development of bus paintings in Thailand, the sources and choice of motifs, and the manner of execution of the paintings. There was considerable agreement among the respondents on the basic traits of these processes. The following account is based on those interviews.

Unlike in Pakistan, where the team of workers assembling the trucks includes a “specialist who paints the images and other non-specialists who paint ornaments and other non-figurative parts of the decoration” (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 177), the airbrush painters in Thailand are predominantly freelancers, working for several workshops on demand; but some also possess their own, small refitting workshops. There are about 20 airbrush artists in Thailand. Some have an academic background in fine arts and all work with a team of three to five assistants.

The execution of a bus painting is a relatively expensive affair. At present, prices for the decoration of a bus range from THB 35,000 to THB 100,000 (approximately USD 1,200 to USD 3,450), according to the size and complexity of the design. The process starts with a meeting between the airbrush artist and the owner of the vehicle. In some instances, the owner supplies the artist with a picture or sketch of the desired bus painting. In others, the artist shows the owner his ‘portfolio’ of drawings and photos to choose the designs for his or her bus.

The owners’ motives to invest considerable sums in decorating their buses are difficult to determine. They seem to be driven by a mix of aesthetic, social, and business motives, but the choice is sometimes quite arbitrary: In one instance, for example, the choice was made by the young son of the owner who insisted that two animated cars from the film *Cars*, released by Disney in 2006, be depicted on his father’s refitted bus.

Informants report that the owners’ principal motives in choosing paintings for their buses are aesthetic. They want their buses to look nice or beautiful (*suay*) and compete

with one another regarding their attractiveness. But the informants also pointed out that charter tours' clients prefer to rent a beautifully adorned bus; business considerations thus might accompany the purely aesthetic ones.

The painters distinguish two basic painting techniques: 'freehand' and 'stickers'. In the former, older technique, the painter would paint the design directly upon the bus ('freehand'). In the latter, more recent one, the chosen painting is put on a computer, enlarged to the desired size, and cut by a plotter onto an adhesive stencil ('sticker'). The painters either do this by themselves or employ a computer plotter operator to cut the stencils for them. The stencils are then applied to the surface of the bus and the painting is airbrushed onto the outline. The whole process takes about eight days. The use of stencils simplified and expedited the painting process but made for some repetition of motifs on several buses. However, the identically stenciled motifs may be colored differently, according to the taste of the airbrush artist. Some charter tour companies have their coaches decorated with the same or similar paintings, which endow them with a shared identity.

Between late 2010 and early 2013, I have photographed figurative representations on almost 150 buses, which I encountered primarily in seaside resorts popular with Thai tourists, at Buddhist temples, at tourist attractions, and at gas stations. I made more than 300 photographs of whole bus sides or of individual figurative paintings. I have excluded non-figuratively decorated buses and those painted only with orchids or other flowers from the study. The following discussion is based on those materials. Just as jeepneys or trucks have been used as the unit of analysis by other researchers, so buses (rather than individual paintings) were chosen as the unit of analysis in the present context.

Sources, Styles, and Motifs

In contrast to the painted vehicles in Pakistan or the Philippines, there is no stylistic uniformity in the Thai bus paintings. As a first step to deal with this heterogeneity, I made a distinction between comprehensively and discretely painted buses.

Like the Pakistani trucks or Philippine jeepneys, some older non-air conditioned buses were completely covered by paintings, often applied 'freehand' upon the sur-

face of the bus. The comprehensive coverage is achieved by a complex combination of figurative representations and non-figurative ornaments, seamlessly mixing styles and cultural motifs. One such bus features a stylized, pipe-smoking American Indian on the upper right corner, and a ghost-like ogre on the lower left corner of its side (Photo 1); on another, an American bald eagle is combined with a Chinese dragon (Photo 2). Comprehensive painting became an expensive affair over the years; at present, few buses are painted like this. Consequently, their number is relatively small with only six of the buses in my collection belonging to this category.

Newer, air-conditioned buses are generally discretely painted; mostly featuring identical, airbrushed paintings on both sides, while the rest of the vehicle is left blank. In the past, an additional painting was in some instances added on the back of the vehicle, but the authorities have prohibited this, since it might distract other drivers. Unlike the Pakistani trucks, the front of the buses is generally left unadorned. The motifs on such buses usually share a uniform style; however, on a few of them, the various figures are executed in divergent styles.

The name and phone number of the tour company is usually printed in large letters on the sides of the buses but does not constitute part of the decorative design. The painter sometimes inserts his 'tag' and phone number in small letters at the bottom of the painting.

While the painters enjoy great freedom in the choice of motifs, there are some limitations. The authorities have prohibited the depiction of female nudity, even on mythological figures, and the placing of a Buddha image on a bus side is considered inappropriate.

The bus paintings are based on a variety of sources in different styles, but adapted, rearranged, or ornamented according to the taste of the painter or his customers. To start the analysis of the paintings, it is therefore necessary to identify the sources from which the styles and specific motifs were drawn.

I have identified four major sources of the paintings on discretely painted buses: American popular culture, Japanese/Korean popular culture, Thai 'traditional' culture, and Chinese 'traditional' culture. Paintings based on these four sources are found on 107 (74 percent) of the 145 buses in my collection.³

³ The remaining 26 percent of the buses include the six comprehensively painted buses and buses painted in different, predominantly naturalistic styles, from various, mostly hard to identify sources; I will discuss them below.



PHOTO 1: Smoking Indian and ghost-like monster on a comprehensively painted bus (2012)

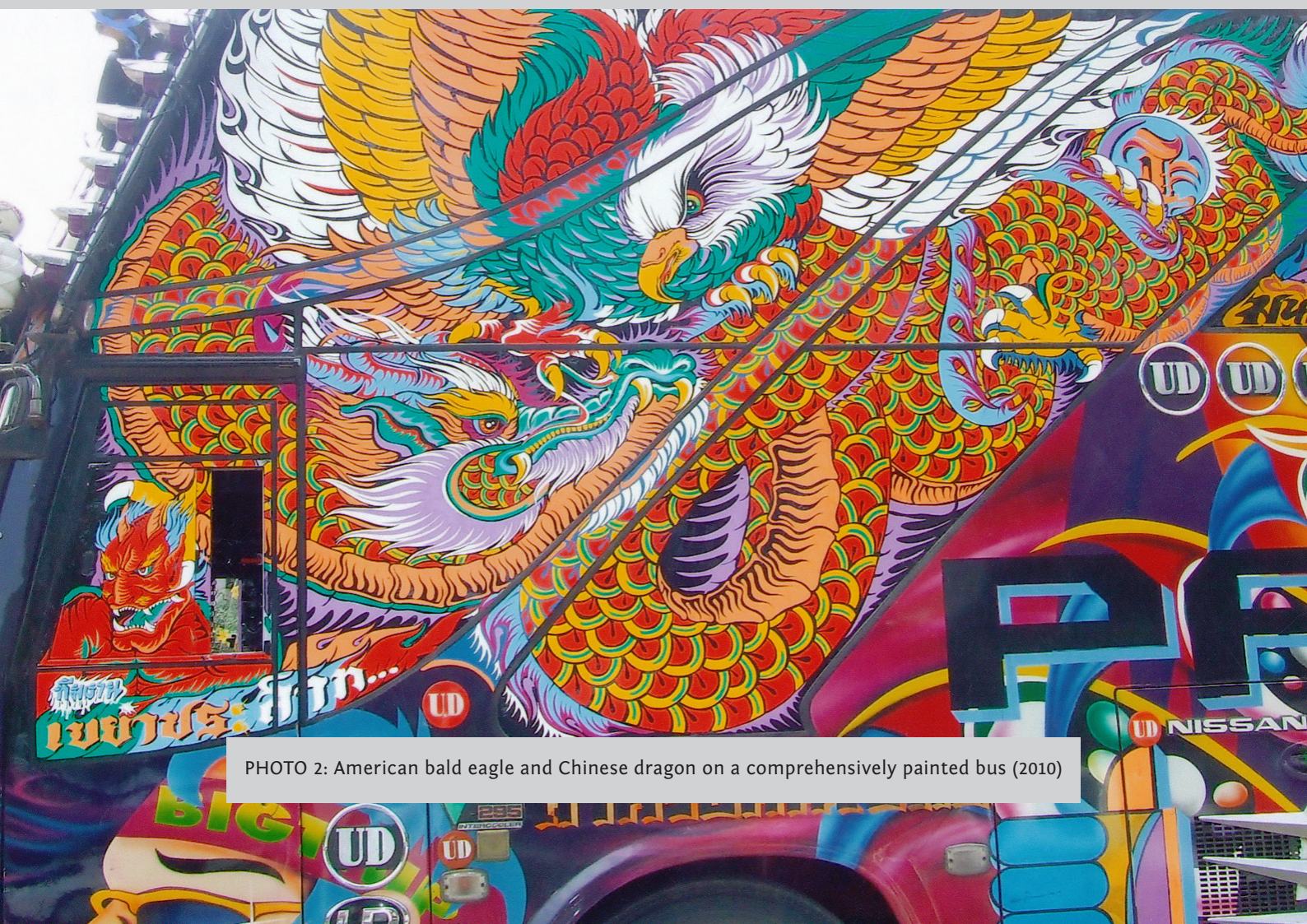


PHOTO 2: American bald eagle and Chinese dragon on a comprehensively painted bus (2010)



PHOTO 3: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (2012)



PHOTO 4: Rock musicians (2012)



PHOTO 5: The Scott Nipper Sacramento Rock Meeting Group (2012)



PHOTO 6: Skateboarding boys (2012)



PHOTO 7: "Red Indian" riding mustang (2012)



PHOTO 8: Female anime guitarists (2012)



PHOTO 9: Female anime character (2011)



PHOTO 10: God Rama on chariot (2011)



PHOTO 11: A pair of *nagas* shooting fire balls from Mekong river (2011)



PHOTO 12: The legendary battle between the Thai King and the Burmese Crown Prince at Don Chedi (2013)



PHOTO 13: Chinese dragon (2011)



PHOTO 14: Chinese cranes (2010)



PHOTO 15: Chinese opera characters (2012)



PHOTO 16: Pandas (2011)

American popular culture was the most frequent source of motifs, found on about 40 buses. Several distinct styles can be distinguished within this source. The most easily recognizable and most numerous is the distinct animated cartoons style, pioneered by Walt Disney. It is found on 15 buses in my collection. Anthropomorphic animal characters, such as Mickey Mouse, predominate, but more comprehensive representations, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs from Disney's 1937 film (Photo 3), can also be found. Spider-Man, a popular American comic book (and film) character, was depicted on two buses.

On several buses, various American rock bands were depicted in cartoon style. One painting blends three such bands, Deadsy (a Californian synth rock band), the Distillers (a punk rock band), and Blink 182 (a rock band) (Photo 4). Another carries on its sides a cartoon-like depiction of the Scott Nipper Sacramento Rock Meeting Group (Photo 5) and on its back a realistic portrait of Scott Nipper himself.

A group of break dancers is featured on one bus, on another a pack of skateboarding boys (Photo 6). The caricatured figures on these buses make exaggerated animated movements and wear pugnacious facial expressions. A painting on one bus depicts the airbrushing process itself in a similar style.

A single bus features an American Western motif – Native Americans riding wildly on unsaddled mustangs (Photo 7) – a reflection of the considerable popularity that Native Americans and cowboys enjoy in contemporary Thailand (Cohen, 2008, pp. 181–223).

Japanese/Korean popular culture was the second most frequent source of motifs, found on 35 buses in my collection. The style of all these paintings is based on Japanese or Korean manga comics or *anime* (the Japanese abbreviation for “animation”) television series and video games. While virtually all depicted figures manifest the distinctive bodily proportions and facial features of the anime characters, such as big, expressive eyes and small mouths (Photos 8 and 9), I could not identify individual members of the cast or particular episodes on which the various figures were based. One important difference between Japanese-style paintings and those derived from American popular culture stood out: Both are gendered, but in opposite directions. There is a marked predominance of female characters on the former, with 19 buses painted in the Japanese/Korean anime style presenting only females against three with males only (the rest included both, male and female characters). On the latter,

there is a marked predominance of males. On 19 of the buses painted in American popular styles only males appear, as opposed to a single bus with females only (the rest had either both or no human figures at all). Thus, American popular culture often seems to appeal to painters or bus owners for its celebration of male super heroes while Japanese/Korean popular culture seems to appeal for its expressions of feminine charm.

Thai 'traditional' painting was the third most frequent source of the motifs, found on 21 buses in my collection. Approximately three quarters of these were decorated with Thai mythical motifs, such as the god Rama driven on a chariot, a scene from the epic Ramakien (the Thai version of the Indian Ramayana) (Photo 10), two *nak* (*naga*) serpents shooting fireballs from the Mekong river at the end of the *pansa* retreat (Buddhist lent) (Cohen, 2007) (Photo 11), *thewada* (heavenly beings), *yak* (*yaksha*) gate guardians, and similar mythic characters. One bus was adorned by characters from the works of the Thai poet Sunthorn Phu (1786-1855), another with the famous scene of the legendary battle on elephants' backs between the Siamese King Naresuan and the Burmese Crown Prince, reenacted every year during the Memorial Fair at Don Chedi in Suphanburi province (Photo 12). There were a few paintings of Thai female dancers and of Thai children, but remarkably, purely Buddhist themes were absent, save for a depiction of the pair of *stupas* (pagodas) of the Phra Doi Tung Temple on top of *Doi* (mountain) Tung in northern Thailand and Wat Arun (see below). However, the owner of a small tour company showed me a small picture of the Buddhist temple in which she worships that she had depicted above the other paintings on one of her buses.

Chinese 'traditional' painting was the least frequent source of the paintings, appearing on only 11 buses. The most common motifs were the Chinese dragon (Photo 13) and the Chinese crane, a symbol of longevity (Photo 14). A few buses were decorated with stylized paintings of predominantly male Chinese children, while one featured several Chinese opera characters (Photo 15).

The sources of the motifs on the remaining discretely painted buses are hard to determine. About 20 of them feature more or less naturalistically painted animals, birds, and sea life, which might have been copied from photos, advertisements, and other printed sources. Several of the depicted animal species are of some significance in the context of Thai tourism. Polar bears and penguins, found on two buses, seem to signify the cold polar world, which many Thai people desire to experience



PHOTO 17: Powerboat racing (2013)



PHOTO 18: Astronaut (2013)

(see e.g. Cohen, 2010. p. 157). However, they could also be a metaphor of the pleasant air-conditioned cool within the bus, in contrast to the oppressive heat prevailing outside. The elephants, dolphins, and pandas (Photo 16) found on several buses, are leading animal tourist attractions in Thailand.⁴ And lastly, the fairly numerous scenes of sea life, some of them imitating the batik paintings found on popular souvenirs, and of powerboats upon waves (Photo 17) obviously foreshadow the diverse delights of seaside vacationing.

A few paintings on the buses feature some well-known tourist landmarks of Thailand, such as the Khmer-style Wat Arun temple on the western bank of the Chao Phraya river in Bangkok or the so-called “Bridge on the River Kwai”, in Kanchanaburi province in western Thailand, made famous by a film by the same name; while one bus features the twin Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Finally, paintings on a few buses conjure up the space age, depicting the sun and the planets, and, in one case, an astronaut (Photo 18).

Conclusion

The preceding detailed presentation was not intended to create a gallery of Thai air-brush art, but rather to enable us to draw some theoretical and comparative conclusions regarding the distinctive traits of the body of Thai bus paintings.

In contrast to paintings on vehicles in the other countries discussed above, the bus paintings in Thailand do not display a characteristic local style. Rather, as the preceding discussion amply demonstrates, they are marked by a considerable heterogeneity of styles and motifs, taken from many parts of the world, and primarily from the two globally leading popular cultures, the American and the Japanese. This indicates that, taken as a whole, Thai bus paintings are a globalized art form, expressing openness to the immensely diverse choice of styles and motifs, which became easily accessible on the Internet. In that respect, the Thai body of bus paintings differs radically from the paintings on Philippine, Pakistani, and Latin American vehicles, which are more uniform in style, even though some novel motifs were gradually added to the more traditional ones in Suriname and to some extent also in Pakistan.

4 The panda is native to China but one pair is kept on loan in the Chiang Mai Zoo (Cohen, 2010).

Again in contrast to those other countries, the paintings on Thai buses do not carry a message, whether religious or political. Unlike, for example, the religious invocations on Pakistani trucks (Sökefeld, 2008, p. 176), there are no protective symbols included in the Thai paintings. Even mythical themes do not seem to play a magical protective role, as do Buddha images on the coach cabin's panel board or amulets and magic tattoos (Cummings, 2012) often worn by drivers or passengers. Buddha images as decorations on bus sides would probably be seen as sacrilegious rather than protective. Furthermore, unlike the paintings on the *wilde bussen* of Paramaribo, the paintings on Thai buses do not relate to Thai identity politics. While some Thai bus paintings refer to tourist attractions, such as sea life, iconic animals, and some popular landmarks, the great majority are endowed with a post-modern character, as enjoyable, surface decorations, devoid of symbolic meaning – signs without reference. In that respect, they reflect a wider trend in Thai popular culture, where alien symbols, such as the Christian cross or Muslim half moon, are often adopted as ornaments (especially on earrings), decoupled of their religious significations.

The production of the Thai bus paintings is a process consisting of clients' preferences, the skills of the airbrush artists, styles and motifs taken from the Internet, and computer technology used to cut the images on stencils. The process is thus a post-modern hybrid of different types of activities, which cannot be unequivocally classified into such modernist categories as 'art', 'craft' or 'decoration'. In contrast, the painting of vehicles is a relatively simple folk art in the other non-Western countries discussed above.

Most of the motifs on the Thai bus paintings are chosen from the impersonal, contemporary mass popular culture and applied to impersonal vehicles; however, by fiat of such choice, the combination of distinct motifs on particular buses bestows upon those vehicles, and by extension, on their owners, a mark of individual distinction, while up-lifting those popular cultural products to the level of 'artwork'. I suggest that it is the achievement of such distinction, in a context of invidious comparison between the paintings by both owners and clients that constitutes the driving force motivating the owners of tour companies to incur considerable expenses in painting their buses. However, in order to substantiate this suggestion, a systematic study of Thai tour companies, which is beyond the means at my disposal, needs to be conducted.

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