INTRODUCTION

Whilst new products arrive with a fanfare, their domestication goes unnoticed. The electronic rice cooker, for example, is now a ubiquitous and mundane object for almost all Thai families. The excitement that accompanied this product’s debut, the thrill of those early performances, where function played second fiddle and the product took centre stage, is already fading from the memories of the minority who witnessed them.

One such magical moment is beautifully brought to life in Wong Kar Wai’s movie “In the Mood for Love” 1. It is 1962 and the various residents of a Hong Kong guesthouse are readying themselves for their communal dinner, a quotidian ritual that is about to be transformed by the introduction of an object of wonder; an electronic rice cooker. In this narrative electronic rice cookers seem to play a pivotal role in drawing two couples together and set in motion the complex stories of love, adultery and estrangement that play out in the remainder of the film.

In our study, rice cookers drew fifty-five young Thai people into conversation with their peers, their parents and their grandparents (see 2 for a more detailed description of this project). In a reversal of the dramatic logic of “In the Mood for Love”, few if any recalled those moments when the product first entered their lives. Yet almost all had stories to tell from the far longer period in which the product wove itself into the fabric of their everyday.

Is it not odd then that so much of design’s rhetoric and energy is directed towards those early moments of product epiphany rather than the subsequent movement from novelty to equipment? Shifting attention to this latter phase suggests questions that might, in some small way, help to reset design.

COOKING RICE

“If you wanted to eat rice, say, at six o’clock in the morning, you’d have to wake up at four to get the charcoal stove going, then you had to match the right amount between rice and water, then put it on the stove. The amounts of rice and water were very important. If you put in too little water the rice wouldn’t cook or cooked but not well and became too hard to eat. If you put in too much water, the rice would come out wet, porridge-like. You also had to look after it while it was cooking, and pour away excess water. People who had never done it before or weren’t skilful, their rice might turn out to be ‘three kings rice’.”

(70-year-old grandmother in conversation with her granddaughter)

“Nowadays, our lives are always in a rush. We have to compete with time. Whatever we do, we have to do it the quickest way, using as little time as possible, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to compete with others. (Electronic) rice cookers do make kitchen work more convenient and much more time-efficient. Because with rice cookers, we only put in rice and water then press
the switch to make it work. When the rice is done, the switch will change colour and it will switch to warm mode without burning the rice. While the rice is cooking, we can go and prepare other things without having to keep constant watch or pouring the excess water or shaking the pan like the traditional method.”

(48-year-old mother and businesswoman in conversation with her son)

The above quotations serve to introduce our theme; the social practice of cooking rice and the technological innovation that transformed it. Whilst traditional methods are recalled as complicated, time consuming and requiring specific skills, using the electronic rice cooker is described as easy, convenient and time saving. Moreover, these quotations are also indicative of a more general trend in our findings. That is, the use of the rice cooker as a way of talking about the past, or rather perhaps, talking about the present in the mirror of the past. In fact, through their stories about rice cookers, we heard what the participants thought about themselves, their society and the world around them. In the following discussion, we briefly consider a small selection of exemplar stories, stories that led us to revisit our own understanding of the social meaning of design.

POOM: THE STORY OF LOVE

“Poom is the person I chose to talk to about the rice cooker. Poom’s rice cooker is an electronic one. Its black and shaped like a tube with a foldable lid. It has got really nice curves. Though Poom did not buy this rice cooker himself – he got it for free – he likes it a lot. […] Compared to other newer models with loads of functions, he found his rice cooker much simpler to use. […] Poom also said that it was particularly great that he could hug it as he walked to set it on the table. The outer pot doesn’t get too hot and its round shape is very huggable.”

(Poom a 19-year-old student, told by his friend. Emphasis by authors)

Many of the students began their stories by describing the rice cooker of their conversation partner. Yet, in the above case the physical description segued into a discussion of Poom’s relationship with his appliance. The choice of the word ‘hug’ is of particular interest here. ‘Hug’ is normally an act that expresses closeness and affection. We hug each other for comfort, to console and to offer support at times of stress or crisis. The child hugs her cuddly teddy bear. We rarely hear of people hugging their electrical appliances in the way suggested above. Poom was not the only person who showed affection towards his rice cooker. May, a 20-year-old student, told her friend how their family rice cooker was given a name. Her story was not simply about the appliance but also about her relationship with her mother and their memories of helping each other in the kitchen.

Even though electronic products like these are mass-produced without intended sentimental value, they can accrue uniqueness in the lives of individuals. Moreover, once bedded in, objects play a significant role in making everyday life more reassuring. Adrian Forty argues that this personal accommodation is founded upon the ‘naturalisation’ of products. Each new product is initially alien to us. Yet it must also be, in part at least, familiar to us. To be accepted in the first place requires products to seem natural despite their novelty and difference. Forty comments:

“… successful design is like alchemy: it fuses together disparate ideas from different origins, so that the form of the completed product seems to embody
only a single idea, which comes across as so familiar that we find ourselves supposing it to be exactly what we ourselves had always thought”\(^3\).

In the process of familiarisation, of making this or that object blend into our everyday world, we often take for granted the ideas embodied in it. Ideas in this case are not simply the product’s colour or form, weight or texture but something much more profound to it existence. As Forty reminds us, “the capacity of design to create form occurs only through the conjunction between ideology and material factors. If either is absent, the union cannot take place”\(^4\). In our everyday design practice, we hardly pause to consider the ideas that we help to ‘naturalise’ or the broader socio-cultural framework in which we work and within which our work always and only makes sense.

/AH MA/: THE STORY OF LOSS

“Since I was little, I would hear /ah ma/ (grandmother in Chinese) called out ‘/muay ho leaw/ – the porridge is ready –’ /muay/ means rice porridge in Chinese. /ah ma/ believes that to make porridge one must boil the water before putting in the twice-rinsed jasmine rice. She prefers rice porridge to steamed rice. … /ah ma/ does not quite like the rice cooker. She said it changed the taste and the smell of the rice. Furthermore, she does not feel comfortable with electrical appliances. She always says that they have made people lazy and that laziness lead to evil acts.” (/ah ma/ an 81-year-old grandmother, told by her grandson)

/ah ma/ was the only one of fifty-five cases who openly disapproved of the electronic rice cookers. We could all too easily view /ah ma/ as “conservative” or “technophobic” and, as a result, see her as different from other grandmothers who took pride in their mastery of the latest digital cooker. Yet both grandmothers’ comments are essentially about skills, in /ah ma/’s case the loss of personal skills. Her way of cooking rice could not be accommodated by the electronic rice cooker or was not noticed or given importance by its designers or manufacturers.

Electronic rice cookers have replaced myriad regional and personal variations of method with a uniform means of preparation. As they moved from the domain of everyday practice into the realm of memory the details of these so-called traditional ways began to fade. Tips and techniques that were passed on from mothers to daughters about how to make perfect rice lost importance. The old saying “only if a girl is able to cook perfect rice, is she worth taking as a daughter-in-law” became drained of meaning.

/ah ma/’s account also chimed with others who, though not openly hostile to the appliance, questioned present lifestyles implied by it by contrasting them with nostalgic pictures of the past.

“Because of the rice cooker, my mom felt that her life became much more convenient with lots more spare time. But sometimes she could not help feeling that it was all too convenient, and that she didn’t feel like working. […] I think it did affect our ways of living. We can see that people in the past tended to be more relaxed, calmer and helped each other. Personal interaction was based on close-ties and honesty, which – like cooking the rice in the traditional way – needs patience. Nowadays our ways of living are characterized by great haste and competitiveness. The will to win leaves people without much concern about morality. Personal interaction is
superficial and not really honest ... like cooking rice it’s all about convenience.”

(49-year-old mother in conversation with her 19-year-old son)

This is unsurprising, perhaps, when one considers the product historically⁴. The domestication of the rice cooker took place amidst profound and rapid transformations of everyday life in post-war Thailand as the introduction of consumer capitalism ruptured existing socio-cultural structures and meanings⁵. As elsewhere, the everyday began to beat to the rhythm of the commodity rather than that of the social relations that preceded it, in the Thai context a distinctive form of bureaucratic and paternalistic capitalism run through with feudal relations and rural social practices⁶.

Yet the transformation was and is messy, contradictory and incomplete. Raymond Williams usefully introduced the idea of two cultural impulses that ebb and flow at times of social change: the residual – which harks back seeking comfort in the known – and the emerging – which peers forward to a seductive but unnerving future⁷. It seems as if the rice cooker embodies something of each and it is this dialectic that might explain the tendency of people to look back through the product. Why the rice cooker and not say, the automobile?

We are beginning to suspect that the symbolic significance of rice and various culturally specific roles of rice and its preparation in Thai culture might attract the anxieties of modernity and triggers for nostalgia to this particular product. But that is a different story for another day.

PAM: THE STORY OF ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

“After Pam’s parents passed away, cooking rice became Pam’s responsibility using the rice cooker her mom had brought. She had no idea why her mom chose this particular rice cooker. She knew, however, that despite it getting rather old, she’d never want to change for a new one. It had become part of her everyday life, “I probably wouldn’t know how much rice and water I should put in with the new rice cooker anyway”. Pam’s rice cooker is rather big due to her once large family. At times when her mom was still alive, she told me that her mom cooked everyday at least two times a day. This really portrayed how happy her family must have been. But once her mother and father passed away in an accident, the portrait changed. The four brothers and sisters now only have each other. Pam went on to say that now they cooked less than twice a week because each had more responsibilities. They had to work to see themselves through university, each of them finish work at different times so there’s no longer a reason to cook rice and make food. [...] Sometimes she wished to have a small rice cooker, enough for one or two people so that she didn’t have to eat out. She believed that cooking your own food at home conveys much more family warmth”.

(Pam a 22-year-old student, told and reflected by her friend)

Pam’s story – playing out as it does against a backdrop of urban loneliness – is one of the most moving from the collection. It reminds us that products can and very often do ‘live’ through personal and interpersonal changes, move between places, settle in new contexts, accruing both new and nuanced meaning and value as they do so. Seen against the rhythm of contemporary life with its incessant creation and disposal of new goods, this story, with its alternative message of longevity and attachment is a good place from which to begin to consider design.
The recent period has seen a transformation of design discourse, theory and practice. On the one hand, other fields and disciplines have ‘discovered design’ and sought to harness its peculiar strengths for their own benefit. Thus the design MFA is described as the new MBA and design is championed by the business community as a machine for innovation. On the other, design has looked beyond its traditional orbit and attempted to identify and appropriate new methods, approaches and theory with which to renew its project. Consequently, ideas from anthropology, the social sciences and the humanities, have all become part of design’s currency. Arguably, these two trends have coincided in the currently hegemonic approach known as human-centred design.

At the risk of oversimplification, this approach uses abridged versions of the longitudinal tools from the above fields as a way of uncovering unmet human needs. These needs – real or otherwise – or as they are often called “consumer insights” and “design opportunities” then form the basis of design and concept development, leading ultimately to new products and services. Whilst sympathising with the socio-cultural emphasis of this approach we also regard it as problematic as, firstly, it tends to reduce the complexity of human experience to a terrain for potential commodification and, secondly, it tends to instrumentalise design and narrow its relationships to both industry and culture.

Each of the above stories contains opportunities for design, for example: emphasising the affordance of hugability; factoring in references to traditional processes; ‘enriching’ products with images or voices of lost loved ones. But might the rush to innovate – the logic of the commodity – blind us to more nuanced readings? Listened to carefully our stories suggest themes that, whilst having little operational value in the highly constrained world of design practice, are nevertheless implicit in the ‘background’ against which design activity unfolds. The first is longevity and it encourages us to expand the time frame of our concerns and urges us to respond to the complex and interrelated rhythms of people’s everyday lives rather than those of capital. The second is resonance and it encourages us to pay closer attention to the unpredictable ways in which design work changes the intricate network of relationships that comprise the everyday. The third is ideology and it reminds us that along with our own, our client’s and our user’s intentions, powerful socio-economic forces shape and give meaning to products and their various roles in everyday life (as they do to design itself); that what appears natural, obvious and fixed often masks the contingent, provisional and historical.

Richard Buchanan argues that “products are arguments about how we should live our lives”. And perhaps that is where we should begin the process of resetting design, by asking ourselves, as a community of designers and educators, how does what we do help shape the ways in which others live their lives?
REFERENCES

1. In the Mood for Love 2000
2. Tangsantikul & Power 2007
3. Forty 1995, p221
4. Forty ibid
5. As elsewhere, the development of consumer capitalism in Thailand entailed the optimisation of the movement of goods and services, accompanied by rapid urbanisation, the adoption of new forms of housing and family structures, the extension of automobile ownership and mass transportation, the appearance of new arenas for consumption, the rapid growth of communication media (see Askew 2002 for a more detailed description of these changes, and Lefebvre 2004 for the impact of these changes on the structure, rhythm and meaning of everyday life). Interestingly, this period also heralds the tentative beginnings of design education and practice in the country.
7. Lefebvre 2004, pp. 51-56
8. Williams
9. Our own trajectory has been greatly influenced by human-centred discourse and practice and we continue to contribute to its development in educational and professional terms. Nevertheless, we feel it important to maintain a critical relationship with the project and certain trends within it.
10. Buchanan 2001

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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