

“Made in Japan: A Social History of Japanese Electronic Rice Cookers in Thailand.”

Proceeding of The International Design Congress-IASDR 2005 (2005IDC) Taiwan, by Nigel Power 1-4 Nov 2005.

Abstract

In Thai Culture, rice is important as staple, ritual and symbol. For hundreds of years the cooking of rice changed little in term of fuel, method and utensils. In the mid-twentieth century however, the electronic rice cooker was imported from Japan and over a number of years supplanted traditional methods of cooking rice. Today the electronic rice cooker is a ubiquitous appliance, visible at home, restaurant and street food stall.

This paper outlines a social history of the electronic rice cooker in Thailand. It does so on three levels. Firstly, the electronic rice cooker tends to be taken for granted both in everyday life and in academic studies. This, however, makes it an interesting subject of study, not least because of the ways in which this originally Japanese product has become domesticated in Thailand. The study, therefore, addresses the question why and how the electronic rice cooker became part of the fabric of everyday life in Thailand. Secondly, this study adds a non-western perspective to the growing body of research on the biography of objects. Thirdly, it offers a contribution to discussions about the interplay between industrial design and Asian culture.

We discuss the use of ‘cultural biographies of objects’ as a framework for making sense of data gathered from archival research. This framework allows us to examine the story of Japanese electronic rice cookers in Thailand from different perspectives and encourages a multi-layered product narrative to emerge. In this way, the chronological story of the Japanese electric rice cooker—from invention and importation to local production and use—is unpacked into smaller chapters, each with different leading protagonists. These include: the transformation of the meaning of the product along the continuum of time, the shaping of its form in relation to new technologies and cultural practices and, above all, how the story of Japanese electronic rice cookers reflects Japanese identity as it is represented and received in Thai society

