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**Title:**

The Promise and the Threat: a Socio-Semiotic Study of Modernity & Everyday Life in Thailand

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**Abstract**

Working *into* and *out from* a single 1964 advertising image, we map aspects of the interplay of modernity and everyday life in Thailand. The image—an illustration of an eroticized woman surrounded by a halo of novel electrical products—is taken from a popular daily newspaper. A cursory analysis would reveal a picture that is rather typical of Thai promotional material from this period and—not surprisingly given the economic and cultural influence of the United States—would also produce tropes and figures common to advertising more generally at this time. Our interests here, however, lie less in the general significance of this image (and others like it), but in its specificity: that is, what it might disclose about a series of profound and rapid economic, political and cultural transformations that were remaking Thai society at this time. Our period (1957-72) is characterized by complex and contradictory socio-economic developments. On the one hand, there was an opening out onto the modern world through the creation of a liberal market economy and the encouragement of a culture of consumption. This strategy brought with it a radically different urbanized everyday life and the emergence of new social actors and subjectivities: women, youth, the urban middle classes and its other, the urban proletariat, all appear at this time and take on growing significance. On the other, there is military dictatorship, authoritarian and repressive social policy and the promotion of non-negotiable narratives of tradition, values and culture. Our hypotheses are: 1) that evidence of these contradictory and conflicting mythologies—mythologies of progress and tradition, change and convention, freedom and control—might register in the ubiquitous, mundane and largely overlooked semiotic materials of the period; and, 2) that this might provide insight into the changing rhythms and textures of everyday life that are lost in the broad-brush stroke histories of the period. In this paper, therefore, we introduce and discuss a socio-semiotic study that—beginning from a single image—proceeds dialectically through a careful synthesis of visual analysis and historical research.