

Diluted Beauty – an explanation.

In any context, delving into the unknown depths of foreign tides is disillusioning. The contrast of a culture you have known since birth and a culture thrust upon you for the first time over the space of a few seconds, is unparalleled. As a foreigner, there is much to learn and even more to forget, in order to fit in. During my year in Thailand, I was met with a land of astounding beauty and a level of kindness that I was not aware existed, there is nowhere else on Earth that has a place so tender in my heart. However, I would vouch that it is impossible to succumb to a new world of culture in such a vast sense, and not witness some of its hidden darkness.

There are a few aspects of Thai culture that struck me as odd, backwards or, to be frank, disgusting. But one that will remain in my mind for as long as it remains intact, is the perception of dark skin in Thai and East Asian culture. It took a few weeks for my awareness of this to really sink in, for at first, the sheer novelty of being a white person in rural Thailand blinded my ego. It wasn't until I was given a tour of my new home, Phana, that I was finally invited into the dark truth of colourism in my own community.

Lawrence Whiting, an elderly resident of Phana for over forty years, guided me around the birthplace of his wife, Pensi. He spoke with me in a way that I had become unused to; blunt and uncompromising to the truth. The majority of Thai people in my town, although kind to the core, seemed to naturally avoid sensitive topics with an air of ease and a smile that read as *'I'm going to pretend this conversation isn't happening, let's move on'*. So it did come as a shock to me to learn that everything was not as idyllic as it seemed.

Lawrence explained to me that the dark-skinned residents of my town are traditionally depicted as labourers, ploughing the fields until nightfall to earn enough for their family to live. Whereas the light-skinned residents were seen as virtuous, rich enough to stay indoors and avoid the sunlight.

Therefore, over time this perception of class became intertwined with that of skin colour. Lawrence went on to say that this is most likely a cultural wives-tale, as in reality, the dark-skinned residents of Phana are descendants of enslaved people brought to the area hundreds of years ago from Laos.

According to him, the prejudice placed on dark skinned members of my wider community was prescribed by the paler citizens as a class system between the owner and the owned, many years before. Unfortunately, there were many other labels that came along with being dark in Thailand; such

as poor, stupid and ugly. It is clear that there is some sort of link between the modern perception of brown skin and the perceptions of those slaves as 'lesser'. Which, although a lot more subtle, still reigns over the beauty standards of modern Thailand and most of Asia.

I began noticing the adoration placed on pale skin more and more as the weeks went on. I remember scouring the shelves of a supermarket to find a moisturiser without bleaching agents mixed in, before having to leave empty handed. I remember noticing how my Thai friends' mobile phones automatically made their skin paler when taking a picture, showing how intrinsic the disdain to dark skin goes in East Asian culture; as it is imputed directly into their technology. Therefore, however sad it was, it wasn't shocking to discover that even my youngest students felt a sense of aesthetic inferiority to my skin colour. A young girl in my Prathom 1 class (around six or seven years old), took hold of my arm and told me in Thai that my skin was beautiful and hers was ugly.

It was the first time that I'd seen a young child so openly influenced by the media's presentation of beauty and it made me sick to my stomach. I vividly remember trying to scramble together enough Thai to tell her that her skin was beautiful and that I wished I had skin like her, but it seemed like she couldn't comprehend what I was saying, because she said "no, teacher", laughed and ran back to her friends.

This pattern reoccurred so many times that I've lost count. But there was one particular moment that inspired me to create this film. Just before naptime in my Thursday school, a kindergarten for babies and toddlers, a Thai teacher asked me to read the English part of a storybook while she read the Thai. The story was an ordinary tale of a beautiful princess who had to overcome some issue to find her true love, but the book seemed to enjoy describing the beauty of her pale skin and blue eyes in detail. There was a mixed girl in my class that day, who appeared at face value to be more white than Thai, the Thai teacher praised her beauty every single time it was brought up in the book. She was the princess, while all the other boys and girls simply sat and watched on, visibly sad that they didn't match the criteria.

Every Thursday I would watch the teacher swaddle the little girl who appeared white, called Emi, and ask her and all of the other little ones whether Emi was beautiful. To which they would all reply 'suay mak!', which is very beautiful in Thai. It was beyond sad to watch these innocent babies be conditioned to have a love for white skin and features over their own from such a young age. I tried to my utmost to tell all of my children they were beautiful, but I was only there one day out of five per week.

'Wink White by Nid' is a bleaching salon in Phana, where you can go and purchase bleaching creams and ointments. If you search it on YouTube, one of the first videos to appear shows a mother bleaching her five or six year old daughter's skin while she sucks on a lollypop. She asks if the cream smells, with no concern for the fact that she is bleaching the skin of a child without a care in the world for the child's self image.

As one can imagine, this atmosphere of negativity becomes all the more real when it affects one of your own. One of the Thailand volunteers from this year is half Angolan, and she herself has beautiful dark skin. One day while teaching, a young student of hers was explaining how she was ugly because of her dark skin. The volunteer, obviously wanting to spread the self-love over their dark skin told her that it was beautiful. Her host, who was also a teacher, overheard. She told the volunteer that she was wrong, and that dark skin meant you were 'ugly' and 'stupid'.

As unbelievable as it sounds, this kind of discrimination is still rife in Thai culture and it lingers in all aspects of media, beauty and the ways in which Thai people view themselves. The majority of my friends from Phana, Thailand and other countries in Asia all say that they have considered or taken part in skin lightening at some point in their lives. It's an issue so widespread and normalised that there are channels on YouTube such as 'Neon White' that show the 'positive' effects of skin bleaching in 'before and after' videos.

The key message of the piece that I have created is to demonstrate to anybody watching how important it is to show all children that they are beautiful, as otherwise this cultural trait and outward colourism will continue be passed on as though it is a hereditary gene. It exists as a warning to future volunteers and as a totem for anyone from my community that may glimpse upon it. Not as an opposition to their culture, which I have grown to believe is something that I cannot call 'wrong' as it is not my culture to label; but as a show of adversity to anybody who tells them that they are less than.

Global Industry Analysts published a report in June 2017, showing how the skin lightening market is estimated to be a \$31.2 billion industry by the year 2024. However, there is hope in Thai publications such as 'TAN Magazine'; who are working to show brown bodies in the positive, warm and proud format that they deserve.