

# EVERYDAY PRODUCT, EVERYDAY LIVES: REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANINGS OF THE ELECTRONIC RICE COOKER IN EVERYDAY THAI SOCIAL PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the relationship between design and everyday life by considering fifty-five Thai people's stories about a ubiquitous domestic product, the electronic rice cooker. Since its invention in Japan in the 1950s, the electronic rice cooker has changed the way in which the vast majority of Thai people cook rice. Notably, complicated and time-consuming traditional processes have been replaced by the much more convenient automatic switch. With the arrival of the new generation of computerized and multifunctional rice cookers, the onward march of technology would, at first sight, seem inexorable. The findings, however, uncover meanings and voices about social practices that occur in everyday life but are rarely heard or attended to; voices and stories that may, otherwise, be lost forever. Studying a mundane object from the perspective of everyday life allows us to bring to light role and meanings of design objects which go beyond their use or exchange value. The changes that design brings are not limited to product form or process of use, but also to the ways in which one perceives one's self, one's society and one's world.

KEYWORDS: design, everyday life, Thailand

## I. INTRODUCTION

When a young daughter asked her mother — a forty-seven year-old housewife who originated in the northern part of Thailand — to talk about a rice cooker, her mother was puzzled; “Why would you be interested?” she replied in a tone of voice that suggested that the subject was not worth the time to talk about. According to the mother, although she had had quite a few rice cookers in her life none of them had left any significant memory. It became clear later in her story that as a young child in the north she had always been more fond of /kao neaw/ (glutinous rice) rather than /kao suay/ (steamed rice). Traditionally, these two types of rice require different methods of cooking. According to the mother, the traditional method used to cook glutinous rice was much easier than the traditional way of preparing steamed rice.

As the daughter continued her questioning, however, it was astonishing to find that despite the mother's initial disinterest in the subject of the rice cooker, she had recently bought two rice cookers; a simple one-click version and a more complex digital rice cooker. On a daily basis she would use the more compact digital appliance. Had the daughter given up at the outset of their conversation, we would never have learnt about this nor discovered that, although her digital rice cooker was able to make all kinds of rice dishes and non-rice savoury dishes (as well as baking cakes) in her everyday life the mother never 'used' her rice cooker in any other way than cooking steamed rice. Until today, she continues to cook glutinous rice using the traditional method.

This 47-year-old mother's initial reaction was not unusual among the fifty-five informants in our research. Many even expressed surprised to find out afterwards that, contrary to their initial expectations, they 'did' have something to say about the rice cooker. This reaction also reflected a more general bewilderment when people learn about our interest in such a ubiquitous and seemingly uninteresting domestic appliance. To a certain extent this did not surprise us. That Thai people in general should react with indifference to the rice cooker accentuate its status as an everyday object. To many, putting rice and water in the pot then pressing the 'on' switch seems only a 'natural' part of modern life; there are other things to think about, problems to solve, things to do; a myriad more significant things than cooking rice. Yet in a way, that the electronic rice cooker — rather than some other technological artefact — became part of the fabric of everyday life in Thailand was in itself quite exceptional. Elsewhere we have argued that this was because the rice cooker was not simply adopted but also culturally redefined into Thai society and ways of living. We also examined the how this process of redefinition took place through the 'construction' of the product in terms of its physical form and representations of it in advertising (Tangsantikul & Power 2005).

What was lacking in our previous work, which we hope to address in this paper, were the 'voices' of people who actually 'use' the product; in other words, the actual relationships between design object and people's everyday life. Michel De Certeau argued that without the study of this 'second production', we would never really get more than a fleeting and partial of lived everyday lives (De Certeau 1988) Thus De Certeau's work was particularly useful to our study as it provided a broad intellectual framework within which we sought to uncover the meanings of the object that went beyond their use or exchange value. Another theorist whose ideas chimed with our work as it unfolded was Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1958). Lefebvre's work was particularly interesting in relation to the ongoing co-existence of the modern and residual.

## 2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

One of us first became interested in the rice cooker while undertaking a graduate degree in England. As a young Thai woman from Bangkok, it was a genuine surprise to come across European classmates and friends cooking steamed rice without an electric rice cooker. To understand this astonishment, one might, on the one hand, blame personal ignorance of different cultures. On the other hand, however, it is also necessary to take a range of Thailand specific factors into account. This year was 1996. Almost every Thai family owned at least one rice cooker and a significant number, two or more. The rice cooker had, by then, already lost its role as a marker of wealth and status disappeared into the domestic background; its presence was simply taken for granted.

Nearly ten years have passed since then. But lessons learned about the impact of different cultural settings on the meaning of the same object remain as relevant as always. This is one of a number of other values that we both share as designers and design educators. We emphasize the role of culture in every design class we teach. We also encourage non-design students to pay attention to the role of design in their everyday environments and, through this, to learn to see the interest and value in other seemingly insignificant things that populate their lives. This we are able to do through a General Education course — Design and Everyday Life (DEL) — that is open to all undergraduate students at Chulalongkorn University (where one of us works as a lecturer and the other as invited speaker). In the second semester of 2007 sixty DEL students were given the assignment to 'talk' to someone they knew about their own rice cooker. As part of the briefing for this task, students were provided with a research protocol and research case studies. Out of this sixty, five did not properly follow the protocol, making further analysis impossible. These stories were dropped from the study. The remaining fifty-five stories provided valuable — though admittedly partial — insights to the everyday lives of a group of Thai people.

### 3. THE INFORMANTS

According to the assignment, the students were given freedom to talk to anyone they wished. Thirty-nine students chose women as their informants in comparison to only fifteen students who chose to talk to men (in one case the student talked to a group of university students who lived in the hall of residence and their gender was not recorded). The difference in number between women and male informant was noted as it could, potentially, signify social expectation about gender roles. It therefore caught our eye when a student who chose to talk to her father, a fifty-five year-old civil servant, stressed that, "Father cooked for three daughters. He was excellent both as a father and a househusband". Similarly, another student who chose a final year male student as her informant declared, "He was born in a family where the men are good cooks and very attentive in selecting the best ingredients". In comparison, other students who talked to their mothers or grandmothers or another female relatives, would just say that, "She is a really good a cook".

Based on their main roles in the stories, we found that the informants can be divided into three generations: the son and daughter generation, the parents generation and the grandparents generation. The informants in the son and daughter generation were less than forty years old with the majority falling in the early twenties range. The number of students who chose to interview their peers could explain this. Most of the informants had no firsthand experience of cooking rice in the traditional ways. They often referred to the experience of others, mainly their mothers or other female relatives, to show their appreciation towards electronic rice cooker.

Unlike the sons and daughters, the parents generation — especially the women — had often experienced cooking rice without the rice cooker. The informants in this group ranged in age from their early forties to sixty-five years old with the majority falling between forty five and fifty five years old. The grandparents generation, all of whom were women, had all cooked rice without the help of rice cookers. Their ages ranged from sixty-five to eighty-one years old.

### 4. DISCUSSION

Following in the footsteps of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, our aim was to bring to light the role and meanings of design objects in people's everyday practice (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). But rather than letting the informants chose their objects, we asked specifically that they talked about the electronic rice cooker. This was so that we could compare and contrast similarities and differences in the views of people of various ages, genders and professions towards one single object. Based on our findings, we suggest that design objects operate on three levels within people's everyday life: self, society and

world. It is important to note, however, that these levels are not discrete but are nested and reciprocally constituted and exhibit complex and dynamic interrelationships. The idea of self, for example, forms the basis or the smallest unit, a starting point, drawing upon which one perceives the society as well as the world.

#### 4.1 SELF

In reading the informants' stories, we could not help feeling that we have, somehow, come to know them personally. In saying this we make no claims for ecological validity nor wish to imply the closeness between research and subject that emerges from longitudinal ethnographic studies. Nevertheless we would argue that these stories did allow us glimpses of the informants everyday experiences and disclose some sense of who they are, how they think and what they like. We understand that the pictures we developed are only 'snapshots' of infinitely more complex lives. In analyzing their stories we are not in anyway trying to portray their characters. Rather we only hope to demonstrate the various connections between a technological artefact and everyday life that go beyond form and process of use.

In our previous paper, we examine the relationship between electronic rice cookers' various forms and their meanings, largely from the way the objects look (Tangsantikul & Power 2005). Among other things, we noted that the physical appearance of electronic rice cookers since the 1940s were determined not purely by technological factors but also, if not more so, by meanings. As such the appearance of the most common rice cooker retains the look of its antecedents from fifty years ago rather than its contemporary descendents the digital rice cookers.

In the current investigation, informants were asked to talk freely about their rice cookers without any pre-defined structure. It is interesting to note then that the issue of form appeared as one of the key themes. The description of the physical object, however, was not seen as an end in itself. Rather it acted as a bridge to something else.

"I chose to talk to Poom about his rice cooker. It is an electronic rice cooker. It is black and shaped like a tube with a foldable lid, and got really nice curves. Though Poom did not buy this rice cooker himself — he got it for free; he liked 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* and walked to set it on the table. The outer pot was not hot and its round *shape is very huggable.*" (Poom a 19-year-old male student, emphasis added by the authors)

In most cases since the students mainly relied on text to convey their informants' stories, it was not uncommon that their stories began with a description of the rice cooker in question. Yet, in Poom's case

the description of the physical form was a way into the story of Poom's relationship with his rice cooker. 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 as the child hugs his or her cuddly teddy bear. We rarely hear of anyone hugging their electrical appliances, be they a television, food processor or refrigerator.

In another story, an informant used the word *cradle*, a term similar to hug but with even more gentle and protective connotations to describe the way she carried her rice cooker.

"Our rice cooker is simply an electronic one, its design is probably just like any other rice cookers used in other families. It might not be as distinctive as others which made /tid tid/ sound when the rice is done. Though our family rice cooker might seem plain, it is different because ... it has a name. My mom and I often called it /kra tik/ (a water container) that's because of its form. *When we cradle it*, it is definitely a /kra tik/. Besides, it's because of my mom. She thought that the word /mor hung kao/ (a rice cooker) was far too long, calling it /kra tik/ was much more convenience. I supposed my mom is rather a conservative person, anything that seems complicated or requires a lot of changes on her part she tends to just avoid it. Since I have to help out in the kitchen from time to time, I got used to call it /kra tik/ too."  
(May a 20-year-old female student, emphasis added by the authors)

Another interesting aspect of May's story is that her rice cooker has a name. One might argue that it is not particularly unusual for people to give names to their objects. But when people do so, it is often because they have formed some special personal attachment to their objects (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). Rice cookers are, of course, mass-produced consumer products. This means that there are potentially millions of identical or very similar rice cookers to May's in use. Yet although /kra tik/ is plain and mundane, naming it transforms its status from an anonymous commodity to 'our' rice cooker. Moreover, naming it enhances its role in the interpersonal routines and daily rituals that weave the fabric of family life. Using /kra tik/ to cook the rice connected May to her mother and to the other family members. /kra tik/ was not just any rice cooker after all, as May pointed out herself.

In the above stories, through words and actions, both informants found a way to personalize their rice cookers. Their attempts to differentiate their rice cookers might be seen as a form of resistance against 'sameness' governed by mass-culture.

/khun yai/ and /ah ma/

Perhaps among the three generations of informants, the stories we looked forward to the most were from the grandparents generation. The reasons for this might well be subjective (one of us is an English

person in whose home culture the rice cooker remains something of a novelty product and the other, although being Thai, was born in Bangkok when the rice cooker was already ubiquitous). There is something particularly interesting about looking into past worlds and we were, given our interest in this modern product, intrigued to discover the thoughts of a generation who had lived through its introduction and domestication. Furthermore, we were particularly interested to discover something of this generation's views about the transition from traditional to modern methods of cooking rice. As Alan Kay founder of Apple computer repeatedly commented "Only people born before a technology is invented think of it as technology. Everyone else considers it part of the environment".

Among fifty-five informants, we only had six stories that were told from the grandparents generations' point of view. All tended to agree that rice cooker brought convenience to their everyday life. Nevertheless their agreements do not necessary lead to same implication.

"My /khun yai/ (maternal grandmother) is now in her eighties. She is the most appropriate person to tell us the story of rice cookers because through her life she has had no less than 10 rice cookers. This was not because she broke them but because nearly every festive season, her sons or daughters or their children as well as nieces and nephews would buy her a rice cooker, one equipped with newer technical functions than the previous ones making it even more convenient. /khun yai/ therefore changed her rice cookers very often. Even so she doesn't mind. She isn't afraid that they will be too difficult to use or beyond her ability since she regards herself as an up-to-date elder who always catches up with what's going on in the world. [...] At present, she found her most favorite rice cooker. She even joked that since she was born, this one was the best rice cooker of all. Her present rice cooker is very modern with its square shape, very compact and cute. It has a pre-cooked timing programme so one does not need to wake up early in the morning to cook rice. Furthermore, it can cook porridge rice, steam rice, glutinous rice and all kinds of rice dishes including baking cakes. 'It is THIS fab, it would be such a shame for anyone not to like it'

(/khun yai/ Toey an 80 year old grandmother)

"Since I was little, I would hear /ah ma/ (maternal or paternal grandmother in Chinese) called out "/muay ho leaw/ ("the porridge is ready" in Chinese). /ah ma/ believes that making 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 rice cookers. She said it changes the taste and the smell of the rice. Furthermore, she does not feel comfortable with electrical appliances. She always says that they made people lazy and that laziness is the lead to evil."

(/ah ma/ an 81-year-old grandmother)

Even though both grandmothers are from the same generation, their attitudes towards modern technologies are noticeably different. To analyse the causes of differences in their views is perhaps beyond the capacity of this paper. What concerns us here however is that both stories are cases where objects — in our case the rice cooker — were again used as symbols of differentiation. This time, the issue is one of self-awareness. Eighty year old /khun yai/ used the technical advancement of the digital rice cooker to tell us about herself. In doing so, she differentiated herself from normal social perception of elderly people in Thailand. It is interesting to see that qualities of the product, in this case the perceived difficulty and complexity were used to leverage status to the person who mastered them. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton noted that in classic sociology objects become symbol of status because they were rare, expensive, aged (antique) or made fashionable by an elite. Given the above discussion perhaps mastery might emerge as a candidate status giver (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981).

In reading /ah ma/'s story carefully, we found that skills and mastery also play a significant role in her rejection of rice cookers. We can see that /ah ma/ is rather proud of the way she cooked her rice porridge to perfection; she knew that the water must be boiled first and only then that the rice should be put in. This was her 'way of practice', one which the electronic rice cooker could not accommodate, or had not been seen as important by its designers or manufacturers. Either way, as the rice cooker did not save her much time in making her favorite rice dish, she had no reason to change her habit of cooking.

/ah ma/'s denial of the electronic rice cooker is also a criticism of the larger system to which it belongs, the modern way of living. It is one of many other cases which, based upon one's perception of oneself, the informants used the rice cooker as a bridge to reflect further on modern society and social interaction.

## 4.2 SOCIETY

Regardless of the differences in generation, almost all informants agree that cooking rice with traditional methods was complicated, time-consuming, unreliable and unsafe. The following 17-year-old male student for example wrote:

"My mom told me that even around 20-30 years ago, in some households people would still cook rice using the traditional methods. Some used a stoneware pot with a charcoal-cooking stove, while the others, a little bit more modern, would use an aluminum pot. The method, which relied on measuring the right amount of water and rice through to boiling and timing to the perfection, was solely about skills. I myself once had a chance to cook rice with this method when I was doing military training in camp. But because I've never done it before and the pot did not have a scale to tell me how much rice and water I should put in, we had to build our own cooking stove and tried to control the strength of heat – which was incredibly difficult. Our rice came out 'soooo' tasty and edible. This means that people in the past



must be really skillful.

(17-year-old male student)

When we noted earlier that most of the informants in the son and daughter generation did not have first-hand experience cooking rice without a rice cooker in their everyday lives, we also included the above story. Other young informants said that they had experienced the difficulty of cooking rice without a rice cooker but only in the non-everyday sense. In the above case, this 17-year-old male student was in the camp as part of his military training, a unique and short-lived occurrence. The experience, however, had taught him, as well as others, to appreciate not just the rice cooker, but the traditional skills needed to cook rice well.

In the parents generation, many informants, particularly women, had endured the hardship of cooking rice when they were young. They thus tended to agree that the rice cooker suited the always-in-a-hurry lifestyle of contemporary times.

“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 life more convenient. It really helps with the kitchen work, just put in the rice and water and press the switch ... ”

(48-year-old mother and businesswoman)

While this 48-year-old mother and businesswoman simply made a connection between rice cooker and hasty ways of living, there are other responses which carried traces of doubt about the convenience brought about by the electronic rice cooker. These views echoed /ah ma's criticism noted above. Among those expressing this view, a handful of comments were stronger than the rest.

“Nowadays, everything seems so easy. Just put in the rice and the water then press the switch, there comes the rice. This might be the reason why in the old day people had much more patience and were much calmer. Personal interaction then was much more genuine and volunteered, in comparison to our modern day where people are quick-tempered, always in a rush and dishonest”

(46-year-old mother and housewife)

“Because of the rice cookers, my mom felt that her life became much more convenient with lots more spare time. But sometimes she could not help feeling that it's 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 — like cooking the rice in the traditional way — it needed 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 ... it's like cooking rice that relied mainly on convenience."

(49-year-old mother)

Again we noted that the mundane everyday acts such as cooking were seen as somehow representative of the society which they belonged to. According to the above stories, we could almost equate cooking rice with an electronic rice cooker with modernity; and using traditional methods with ideas about Thai life in pre-modernity. If the rice cooker is an object that belongs to the present, to the modern world, it is interesting to see that talking about it brings up the past. We probably all know that the invention of rice cooker led to the replacement of traditional ways of cooking rice. However, without listening to these stories we probably would not know that the rather than simply disappearing, traditional methods have assumed a different status as wistful memories and nostalgic symbols of the past.

Other social issues the informants reflected upon were family 'quality time', social interaction around meals, living in isolation, as well as social views about women and children. Lack of space means that we will not discuss these further at this time. Nevertheless, we would like to continue down the track that deals with traditional methods because this enables us to open up a discussion about the relationship between the rice cooker and the traditional skills and, in turn, touch upon the issue of gender.

Cooking rice then

Throughout our findings, we noted that one of if not the key emerging themes is to do with skills. If having the skills to master modern equipment helps to determine one's status today, mastering the skills to make perfect rice was what determined one's status in the past. This is of course especially the case with regard to women. One informant, a grandmother of seventy, remembered the common saying when she was a young girl: "Only if a girl is able to cook perfect rice, is she worth taking as a daughter-in-law".

The same grandmother went on to detail the process:

"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 too little water the rice wouldn't cook or cooked but not well and became too hard to eat. If you put too much water, the rice would come out really wet, even become porridge-like. You also had to look after it while it was cooking, to pour away excess water. People who had never done it before or weren't skillful, their rice might turn out to be 'the three kings rice'."

(/khun yai/ Benya a 70-year-old grandmother)

We learnt from other similar stories that 'the three kings rice' referred to rice that came out in three layers: the upper uncooked, the middle just cooked and the lower over cooked. In comparison, the electronic rice cooker was a much more reliable way for cooking rice. This, in turn, meant that nowadays anyone could cook rice.

/khun yai/ Toey also explained in detail the way that she cooked rice when she was young as well as stories she heard from her mother:

"In your great grandmothers time, that must be nearly a hundred years ago, they used a earthenware pot with ears on either side [...] while cooking the rice on the charcoal stove they would stir the rice continuously so that all the rice got cooked through and they would pour away any excess water. Once the rice was cooked, they'd put it in a cone-shape container made of bamboo and by moving this container around they'd get rid of any left over water. Then they would grill the rice on a very low heat or what they'd call /dong/ the rice. According to your great grandmother's recipe, this traditional method of cooking rice would make the rice really fragrant. The secret was that she would put in pandan leaves while stirring the rice in the earthenware pot."

(/khun yai/ Toey a 80-year-old grandmother)

Another grandmother, /khun ya/ (paternal grandmother) Mali had another secret:

"My grandmother told me that to cook rice, one would need a metal pot, a flat mesh and a thin cloth. The method was rather complicated. The water must be boiled before one put in the well-rinsed rice. You then left it until the rice got thicken, then took the pot off the heat, poured the rice through the mesh while splashing with cold water. At this point, one would take about a handful of rice each in turn and rub them against the mesh while kept splashing cold water from time to time. Repeat this process until all the rice became shinny, after that rinse well with cold water and gently sprinkle the rice with jasmine water. Then prepared the thin cloth in the steaming pot, put the rice in and steamed through."

(/khun ya/ Mali a 65-year-old grandmother)

As it is moved from the domain of everyday practice into the realm of memory the details of this so called traditional way began to fade. Readers might well have noticed that throughout our paper, we have used the term traditional methods rather than method. This is because from people's stories we discovered that there were many ways to cook rice. While /khun yai/ Benya emphasized on the right ratio between rice and water, /khun yai/ Toey and /khun ya/ Mali had different special techniques and processes, especially the way to make cooked rice even more fragrant. Although we know that people nowadays sometimes put special kinds of flowers in to the rice cooker to add colour to the rice, none of our informants mentioned this or any other special techniques with their electronic rice cooker. We also found that in the past, people used all kinds of special utensils to cook rice such as frying pans, bamboo and even cloth (one informant mentioned using socks to cook rice in).

“According to my granny, her everyday life rice cookers came in various shapes and forms. When she was young, she used both frying pan and pot to cook rice. At that point nothing else mattered to her so long that the rice was cooked. But most of the time, the method she used regularly, and presumably her most favorite method, was cooking rice in the frying pan. It was comparatively easy and convenient in her area. My grandmother was from the southern part of Thailand. She lived upcountry far away from the city. The locals used logs as a fuel and its smoke tended to blacken the bottom of the pan or the pot. Part of the reasons she preferred the pan was that she didn't have to scrub it bottom afterwards. [...] besides, when using the frying pan, my granny said she did not have to keep checking the water level and pour excess water away like when she used the pot. She could use that time to read books or to work on other chores to save time. Another reason was because it could cook much bigger quantity of rice. In those days, there were seven of them in the family so she needed to cook enough rice for seven people. [...] my grandmother also told me that in the past when cooking rice, one had to keep listening to the sound of the boiling water, when it became quiet then one would check if the rice was done. If it was done then you began to clear off the heat. But if it wasn't, you'd have to /dong/ the rice until it's ready. There's no way you can tell from just looking at the pan. ...”

(/khun ya/ Tung a 65-year-old grandmother)

## 4.3 WORLD

In the model we are developing, the concept of one's world is perhaps the hardest to define. In the sense in which we use it, the world is not necessarily physical but can be an abstract locus of meaning. We borrow the idea from de Certeau who explained how through reading, one moves into another place, the author's world, “This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another persons property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient. Renters make comparable changes in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories ...” (de Certeau 1988). We found that this idea helped us to make sense of Pam's story about her rice cooker.

“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)

Even though Pam lives in the present, her mind regularly went back in time — to her world in the past — whenever she saw, used or talked about the rice cooker her mom had bought. This is different from the notion of nostalgia, which we discussed earlier, in that this world did exist in Pam's life. When we learned about her past we were transported into her 'rented apartment', yet ours was not the same as hers. We made sense of it with our own experience. Pam also leapt into a possible world when she saw and imagined a new compact rice cooker; she was thinking about how it would be nice to cook and eat in with her family.

This possible world is, perhaps, where the messages and promises of advertising circulate. In fact, a number of informants mentioned how their lives might be different if they were to own a different/new rice cooker.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper we move our long-term research into the social history of electronic rice cookers in Thailand into another phase (for further information refer to Tangasantikul & Power 2005). We examine the idea of 'second production', that is the production created by users as they 'make' or 'use' the rice cooker (de Certeau, 1988). In particular, we are interested in the role that rice cookers play in Thai people's everyday lives in order to complete our understanding of its social history. In this paper, the main questions we set out to explore concerned the changes that electronic rice cookers have brought to everyday life. To this end, we note the following. Firstly, in terms of use, electronic rice cookers came to replace traditional ways of cooking rice, notably steamed rice. In itself, this fact might seem obvious, however it brings with it further implications. The replacement did not cause the traditional methods to completely disappear from people's everyday life; rather they shifted into a different and much abbreviated form in most people's understanding. One result of this process is that the details of these methods faded away except for the dwindling group of people who have experienced them directly. At the same time, with the rice cooker, cooking rice became a homogenised and a less significant task in everyday life. The previous status that would accrue from cooking perfect rice disappeared with the traditional methods. Rather, skills to master complicated appliances became status symbols instead. The fact that the digital rice cooker is now designed to cook all kinds of rice dishes — with tips and techniques developed and given by the

manufacturers rather than passed on from mothers to daughters — is a poignant echo of the rich and varied ways in everyday practices reproduced themselves in the past.

Secondly, in ideological terms, the domestication of electronic rice cooker within Thai everyday life separated social history — in people's minds at least — into two eras; the traditional era before the electronic rice cooker, and the modern era heralded by its appearance. That some informants saw the former as a better, gentler and kinder place appears to reflect the comfort provided by romanticized accounts of the past during unsettling times. Whilst we recognize that this issue requires further investigation we would like to note the following interesting dichotomy. Romantic views of the past and the metaphoric transfer between cooking rice traditionally and desired social values tended to occur in the contributions of younger informants who had not had to carry out the laborious and time consuming procedures necessary. The admittedly small number of elderly women who had, tended to focus on the difficulties associated with traditional methods and the positive contribution that this new technology made to their lives.

Finally, our work reveals the rich, varied and personally significant roles that everyday products play in everyday lives. Our informant's stories dramatized the ways in which rice cookers became woven into the fabric of domestic life, symbolized relationships, triggered memories and mediated social interaction and quotidian transactions. We noted how people formed emotional and sometimes sentimental attachments to their rice cookers, how rice cookers served as mirrors in which to comment on the present by reflecting on an arguably mythologised past. We saw how talking about this ubiquitous product provided glimpses into a range of Thai people's everyday lives.

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