

# Reinventing Sexual Identities: Thai Gay Men<sup>1</sup>'s Pursuit of Social Acceptance

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## Abstract

This paper presents an analytical investigation of Thailand's gender normative homosexuals' refashioning of their sexual identities. It is intended to examine how the emergence of modern homosexual identities in Thailand could be a resulted of the interplay between Western discourses of sexuality and Thai sex/gender system<sup>2</sup>. Although *gay* is often seen as a cultural import from the West, its application in Thai contexts reveals the hybridisation of the Thai sex/gender system and Western discourses of sexuality. Thai homosexual men's adoption of *gay* and subsequently *chairakchai*<sup>3</sup> underscores their constant redefinition and reconstruction of their sexual identities within Thai heteronormative frameworks.

**Keywords:** communication for sexual diversity, global queering, heteronormativity

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอการศึกษาเชิงวิเคราะห์เกี่ยวกับกระบวนการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศของกลุ่มคนรักเพศเดียวกันที่มีการแสดงออกทางเพศสภาพแบบปรกติ โดยมุ่งศึกษาว่า การปรากฏขึ้นของอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศของคนรักเพศเดียวกันสมัยใหม่อาจเป็นผลสืบเนื่องจากปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างวาทกรรมตะวันตกเรื่องเพศวิถีและ แบบ

<sup>1</sup>Gay men here refer to masculine identified homosexual men whose gender expressions are in contradiction to those of feminine identified male to female transgenders, colloquially known as *kathoey* in Thailand.

<sup>2</sup>Borrowed from Gayle Rubin (1975), the use of *sex/gender system* is intended to highlight the lack of clear distinction of sex, gender and sexuality in Thai society.

<sup>3</sup>The romanisation of Thai words in this paper follows the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS), published by the Royal Institute of Thailand (1999). The RTGS does not include diacritics, which phonetically indicate the variation in vowels and tones. The transliteration of Thai names, preferentially adopted by Thai individuals remains unaltered. The exception is also extended to certain Thai words, having been extensively used by other scholars such as *kathoey*, *gay*, *tom*, *dee*, rather than *kathoei*, *ke*, *thom*, *di*, according to the RTGS. The Thai grammatical rule, regarding the differentiation of plural nouns in Thai language is also maintained in this paper. For example, *kathoey* can be taken as both singular and plural in Thai depending on immediate contexts.

แผนทางเพศ / เพศสภาพของไทยได้อย่างไร ถึงแม้คำว่า เกย์ มักถูกมองว่าเป็นวัฒนธรรมตะวันตกเรื่องเพศวิถี แต่การปรับใช้ในบริบทของไทย ได้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงการผสมผสานระหว่างแบบแผนทางเพศ / เพศสภาพของไทย และวาทกรรมตะวันตกเรื่องเพศวิถี การเลือกใช้คำว่า เกย์ และ ชายรักชาย ของชาวไทยรักเพศเดียวกัน สะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความพยายามอย่างต่อเนื่องที่จะนิยามตัวตนใหม่ และการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศใหม่ภายใต้กรอบแนวคิดทางสังคมที่ยังคงให้ความสำคัญกับความรักต่างเพศ

**คำสำคัญ:** การสื่อสารเพื่อความหลากหลายทางเพศ โลกาภิวัตน์ควีเยร์ บรรทัดฐานรักต่างเพศ

## Introduction

This paper first examines Denis Altman's discussion of global queering and his critics in order to position the emergence of modern homosexual identities in Thailand in relation to the globalised Western queer<sup>4</sup> culture. Second, it presents a historical and semantic analysis of the traditional Thai model of gender and sexual transgression, *kathoey*, and recent terminologies for exclusive homosexual identities such as *gay* and *chairakchai*. The etymological investigation of both *kathoey* and *gay* identities focuses on their relevant positions in the Thai sex/gender system. This study on the linguistic conception of homosexual identities in Thai language highlights Thais' cultural and intellectual engagement with Western conception of sexuality, particularly Thai gay men who are positioning themselves around this international image of gayness since its first Thai public appearance in the 1960s.

This study reveals substantial divergences between the gayness understood in the West and the *gay* identity with which many Thai homosexuals have identified themselves. It also suggests that the identification with the global gay identity bears double-edged results. On the one hand, it empowers and reaffirms Thai gay men's masculine privileges. On the other hand, the identification with Western *gay* identity brings unnecessary attention to those whose homosexuality has *come out* in the open and problematises the social validity of same-sex relations in Thailand.

<sup>4</sup> Although *queer* academically refers to non-conforming and politically critical ideologies, the word *queer* here is simply used as a synonymous reference to *gay*.

## Deconstructing Global Queering

Compared to its southern neighbouring countries, such as Singapore or Malaysia, where homosexual relations are legally punishable, Thailand appears to be the most liberal place for sexual minorities in the region. The increasing visibility of LGBT<sup>5</sup> people in the public domain is usually thought of as reflecting Thais' openness and social tolerance towards these socially sexual 'deviants.' Thai male to female transgenders, locally known as *kathoey*, have long been a subject of fascination by Westerners and Thais alike (Sinnott 2004: 28). Their involvement in local communities is often interpreted by international homosexual visitors as showing Thais' acceptance of *kathoey* and Thailand as an exceptional place where homosexuality has a respected cultural place (Storer 1999, p. 7; Matzner, 2002, p. 1; Jackson and Sullivan, 1999, p. 4).

The proliferation of entertainment venues and services catering exclusively for gay men during Thailand's rapid economic growth between 1980s and early 1990s to some extent affirms Thailand's global reputation as 'a gay paradise' (Jackson, 1999c, p. 226; Matzner, 1998, p. 1, Storer, 1999, p. 7). The globalisation of marketing capitalism and Western cultural influence have not only opened up opportunities for many men and women from rural and collective communities to explore their sexuality in urban and individualistic cities but also instigated what Dennis Altman has termed *global queering*, or the emergence of newly sexual identities in Asia and non-Western societies (1996, p. 1). This internationalisation of modern homosexual identities, according to Altman (1996, p. 1.), can be held accountable for the proliferation of gay venues, businesses, and organisations throughout the emerging Asian economies.

The commercialisation of air travel industries has also made the international travel more affordable, contributing to the significant growth of tourist industries in non-Western societies. The proliferation of gay venues during the 1990s in Thai cities can be argued as a direct response to not only increasing demands of gay tourists and foreign expatriates but also a growing number of local patrons who identified with the global gay concept. At least in Bangkok, the first generation of gay bars and night clubs along Silom Road<sup>6</sup> were said to be frequented by young Thai Western educated gay men who had had first-hand experience of Western gay lifestyles abroad.

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<sup>5</sup> LGBT is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

<sup>6</sup> Silom, a busy commercial road in Central Bangkok, is also known for its vibrant nightlife. Numerous bars and nightclubs are clustered around tiny *Soi* or alleys along the road. Silom is considered world-famous not only for its notorious Soi Phatphong where female pole dancers and fake Rolex watches are available, but also for its Silom Soi 2 where DJ Station, a renowned gay dancing club, is located. Further discussion on the role of Silom as a Thai gay establishment can be found in Pichet Suypan (2002)

The development of communication technology such as the Internet has significantly contributed to the establishment of on-line gay and lesbian communities, providing a virtual space for networking between not only local LGBT members but also their Western counterparts. Particularly in neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, where homosexual communities are subject to strict legal control of expressions, the Internet has become a main channel for communication between local and international LGBT communities.

The transnational media have also played a crucial role in marketising this new imagining of 'modern homosexuality' across the world. The Stonewall riot in New York in 1969, according to Altman (1996, p.2), "has become internationally known as a symbol of a new stage of gay-self affirmation, symbolised in the recent British film, *Stonewall*. The 'macho' gay man of the 1970s, the 'lipstick lesbian' of the 1990s, are a global phenomenon, thanks to the ability of mass media to market particular American lifestyles and appearances." Altman (1996) also stresses that "American books, films, magazines and fashion continue to define contemporary gay and lesbian meanings for most of the world."

Another major factor contributing to Altman's notion of 'global queering' in Asia is the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This deadly virus not only highlighted Asian-Pacific communities' necessity to review their public health policies, but also brought the issue of sexuality, formerly unspeakable under the traditional and colonial discourses in many countries, to the centre stage. That is, the epidemic has caused an immense panic throughout the region as well as a huge pressure on governments to foster sex education campaigns of 'proper' sexual behaviours and safe sex practices to prevent the spread of the virus. This has inevitably demystified taboos of public discussions of sex and sexuality and shed light on the existence of socially 'deviant' or 'unnatural' sexual practices and preferences. Likewise, the epidemic has also virtually constructed a sense of community among Western and non-Western gay men in experiencing the HIV virus and AIDS related diseases. This perhaps helps build up networks of gay men who are working on the HIV/AIDS, in turn the 'Western notion of how to be gay' is unwittingly disseminated by circulated materials and guidelines throughout gay organisations in Asia (1996, p.p. 4-7).

Forces of globalisation have undeniably played a crucial part in the emergence of contemporary homosexual identities in Asia, but Altman's 'global queering' is severely criticised for being 'too simplistic' as his conjecture of globalised gayness seems to 'equate gay culture with homogeneous consumer culture' (Binnie, 2004, p. 70). Ethnographic research on Southeast Asian gay

men, for example, Boellstorff (2005, p. 82), Garcia (1996, p. xiii), Manalansan (2003, p. viii) suggests that gay-identified men in Indonesia, the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora in New York, respectively, are not passively taking up the Western style *gay* identity, but rather contesting and rearticulating their definitions of *gay* identities.

Regarding his argument on the influence of a globalising capitalist economy over the internationalisation of modern homosexual identities in Asia, Altman's notion of global queering runs the risk of reproducing the myth of universal gay identities, transcending the multi-facets of political and cultural differences, albeit, to some extent, that he recognises the possibility of Western gay identities' hybridisation in non-west contexts. Altman (1996, p.p. 3-4) asserts that:

There is a growing 'modern' homosexuality, which is producing lesbian bars and gay gyms in the wake of an expanding global capitalism. But these changes are more uneven and more related to cultural traditions than might seem at first apparent. As homosexual movements develop in non-Western countries they will, in turn, develop identities and lifestyles different to those from which they originally drew their inspiration.

Despite Altman's attempt to accommodate the potential hybridisation between global queer and local eroticised identities, contextual multiplicities of Asian lesbian and gay communities are still being rendered as inauthentic. Altman's global queering imposes an imbalance of structural power relations between Western homosexuals as the 'originals' and their Asian counterparts as the 'imitators.' In a response to Altman's *Global Queering*, Fran Martin (1996, p.1) remarks that:

Altman's article assumes that the incursion of literature or imagery produced in the US, Australia and Europe into "other" parts of the world means that "a very Western notion of how to be homosexuals" is swallowed whole and easily digested by women and men in those other cultures who then begin to exhibit the symptoms of the "global gay/lesbian": you see an American-produced poster in Pillarbox Red at Watson's and BAM, you're a "global lipstick lesbian". This account assumes that it is always only the "American" side of the exchange that holds the power; that the "other side" will never return to seriously disrupt "our" assumptions and forms (might this be one of the attractions of such an account...?)

Altman's discussion of the "global queering" phenomenon ambiguously implies that gay and lesbian identities in Asia have recently emerged as a direct corollary of globalisation in the 1990s. However, "gay and lesbian Asia," according to Jackson (1999a, p. 363, 2001, p. 3), is not a recent social phenomenon but rather had appeared pretty much the same time as their Western counterparts. Jackson argues that visible gay, lesbian, and transgender cultures emerged in Bangkok several decades before the Internet era, and the word *gay* was being used as a 'self-identificatory label' by homosexually-active men in the city some years before the Stonewall riots in New York City (1999a, p. 363).

Jackson (2001, p. 7) urges researchers writing on Asian queer identities to deconstruct the Euro-centric knowledge and "to incorporate an awareness of specificity of historical Asian forms of gender/sex difference-those existed before the identities now labelled "gay" and "lesbian," with an appreciation that, despite being labelled with borrowed English terms, contemporary Asian identities often represent quite different forms of gendered eroticism and eroticised genders from those that exist in the West."

Jackson (1999a, p. 362) concludes that "the Thai construction of gay identity is a distinctive formation in which gender and sexuality remain integrally bound and so cannot be reduced to Western understandings of 'gayness' or 'gay identity'."

Jackson's comment is echoed by other critics of global queering theory. Megan Sinnott (2004) whose research on *tom* and *dee*<sup>7</sup>, Thai equivalent identities for lesbianism, reveals that the term lesbian is heavily resisted among *tom* and *dee* due to its sexual and homosexual connotations in Thai heteronormative discourses (2004, p. 29). Sinnott suggests that Altman's transnational model of global queering fails to recognise "the very different dynamics of male and female homosexual subcultures and identities" (2004, p. 33). It is imperative, according to Sinnott (2004, p. 39), to understand that the new identities such as *gay*, *tom*, and *dee* are neither Western imports nor traditional categories, but rather hybridised "products of intense cultural interaction and exchange are simultaneously unquestionably Thai." In other words, while recognising the English and Western origins, the newly eroticised identities have been adopted and interpreted in relation to the Thai sex/gender system.

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<sup>7</sup> *Tom* and *dee* are Thai gender labels for lesbians. *Tom*, supposedly derived from 'tomboy' in English, refers to a masculine or butch lesbian while *dee*, short for 'lady' in English, refers to gender normative homosexual woman.



Unlike *tom* and *dee*, Thai gay men are fully aware of their transnational connection (2004, p. 29). Borthwick's study of a gay group in a rural village of Ban Coh reveals that villagers prefer the label *gay* to *kathoey* because it is 'fashionable' (1999, p. 70). Storer (1999, p. 6) argues that the incorporation of multiple homosexual identities such as *gay*, *gay king*, and *gay queen* into the Thai vernacular system lacks coherency as *gay* means different things to different people. Storer (1999) adds that "for some, *gay* has been used as a label for 'modern' and 'egalitarian' homosexuality through a process of stigma transformation; for others, the word has become a euphemism for men who are homosexually penetrated" (p. 6). Jillana Enteen's ethnographic research shows that there is a resistance to the universal identification of *gay* by some of her interviewees who have had homosexual relations with other men (1998, p. 5). The deploying of the alternative self-chosen label of *yingrakyong* by *Anjaree*, a Thai lesbian group, in the mid-1980s and the resistance to lesbian and gay identities by Thai homosexual men and women recapitulates the suggestion by Jackson (2003, p. 1) that the "Thai case study provides a counter-example to the presumption that modernity and globalisation necessarily led to an international homogenisation of sexual cultures."

The idea of global queer identities can be argued to encourage an international alliance of LGBT communities to undertake their common struggles for human rights and HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns (Jackson, 2001, p. 8). However, the notion that transnational gayness is an extension of Western influence can provoke anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments in many non-Western countries which still remain religious and conservative. Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the former Malaysian Prime Minister, infamously associated homosexuality with Western neo-imperialism in his speech at the United Nations in 1991 (*The Nation*, July 20, 1997, cited in Sinnott, 2004, p. 25). Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe reportedly warned gays and lesbians to stay away from his country (*Aarm*, 1999, p. 260, cited in *ibid.*). On February 21, 2009 in Chiangmai<sup>8</sup>, Thailand, organisers of the Chiangmai Gay Pride parade had to cancel the event after tensions with a local group called, *Rak Chiang Mai '51*<sup>9</sup> (lit. Love Chiangmai '51) flared up since the group accused the gay pride as inappropriate for Chiangmai's renowned cultural heritage (*Prachatai*, February 22, 2009<sup>10</sup>).

<sup>8</sup> Chiangmai is the biggest city in the Northern region of Thailand. Having been the economical and educational centre of the region, Chiangmai's gay scenes are said to be the third biggest in the country after Bangkok and Phatthaya, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> 51 is the abbreviation for 2551, the Buddhist Era (B.E.) Year of 2551. In Thailand, years are officially counted in the Buddhist era that is 543 years greater than the Christian era.

<sup>10</sup> Full coverage of the event can be retrieved from [http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/page2.php?mod=mod\\_ptcms&ID=15648&Key=HilightNews](http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/page2.php?mod=mod_ptcms&ID=15648&Key=HilightNews).

Whilst Altman's notion of global queering is criticised for its Western (American) hegemonic conception, the emergence of transnational *gay* identity in non-Western societies unwittingly brings attention to the integration of Western sexual discourse into local sex/gender paradigms. In Thailand, the co-existence of both local *kathoe*y and transnational *gay* identities exemplifies the suggestion that the adoption of globalised terms for homosexuality does not necessarily erase the traditional ones, but rather adds a new set of meanings into existing discourses. The hybridisation between old and new sex/gender paradigms to some extent explains why the word *gay* means different things to different people. The interchangeability between *kathoe*y and *gay* in the Thai vernacular system also reveals the confusion between pervasive terms for homosexuality in Thai popular discourses.

### Positioning *Kathoe*y in the Thai Sex/Gender System

*Kathoe*y has long been the indigenous Thai label for non-normative sex/gender categories while the label *gay*, which firstly emerged in the Thai press in 1965, represents exclusive normative masculine-identified homosexuals. Before investigating how the newly sexual label *gay* is understood in Thai contexts, it is imperative to explore Thailand's traditional non-normative sex/gender category of *kathoe*y which predates the identity *gay*.

The Royal Institute (*Ratchabanditayasathan*) Thai language dictionary<sup>11</sup> (1999) defines *kathoe*y as "a person who has both male and female genitals; a person whose mind and behaviour are the opposite of their sex." The dictionary also defines *kathoe*y as a condition of certain fruit which contains infertile or undeveloped seeds, i.e. *lamyai kathoe*y (lit. infertile longan). In other words, *kathoe*y etymologically denotes 1) non-normative sex/gender categories i.e. hermaphroditism and transgenderism, and 2) non-reproductivity in living beings. However, *kathoe*y is often differentiated into two categories: 1) *kathoe*y *thae* (lit. genuine *kathoe*y) or hermaphrodites, 2) *kathoe*y *thiam* (lit. pseudo *kathoe*y) or transgenders. It should be noted that there can be both male and female *kathoe*y according to the Royal Institute Dictionary, but *kathoe*y has later become an umbrella term for gender and sexual transgression in men in the contemporary usage.

Based on a Northern Thai folklore version of the creation story, called *pathamamulamuli*, Rosalind Morris (1994, p. 19) describes the Thai traditional

<sup>11</sup> The 1999 edition of the Royal Institute's Dictionary can be accessed online at <http://rirs3.royin.go.th/dictionary.asp>.



sex/gender system as the system of three sexes or “tripartite with the terms of sexual identity being *phuchai* (male), *phuying* (female), and *kathoe* (transvestite/transsexual/hermaphrodite).” Morris (ibid.) postulates that the semantic transformation from hermaphroditic *kathoe* to male to female transgendered *kathoe* in the Thai sex/gender system was a result of Thai patriarchy’s appropriation and naturalisation of *kathoe*. That is, from a sex/gender neutral category, *kathoe* has historically become an institutionalised male category (1994, p. 24). According to Morris (1994), the exclusivity of *kathoe* to represent only male to female gender transgression in the present context but not vice versa emphasises that female gender transgression “had no special designation” because female sexuality, including her reproductivity, was strictly policed and deemed as “inviolable, irreversible, and unified” in the traditional sex/gender system (p. 26).

According to Morris (1994), within “the system of three sexes,” sexual practices and object choices are irrelevant to marking sexual identities but rather an individual’s gender performance in the public domain that is crucial to the social categorisation of their gendered sexual identities whether they are *phuchai*, *phuying*, or the transgression type of *kathoe*. Morris (1994) asserts that,

It would not be mistaken to understand the categories of *phuying*, *phuchai*, and *kathoe* as kinds of sexual identity, but it would be wrong to assume that such sexual identity determines either sexual practice or object choice.

The existence of the third kind, *kathoe* in *pathamamulamuli* provides “neither the distribution nor production of power within that realm” but rather suggests “the imaginary possibility” apart from the binary opposition of male and female (Morris, 1994, p. 24). *Kathoe* thus occupies an indeterminate status in the system of three sexes, as noted by Jackson & Sullivan (1999, p. 4) that

Historically, three forms of sexed or gendered beings, called *phet* (pronounced like “*pairt*”) in Thai, were recognised within local discourses, namely normative masculine man (*phuchai*), feminine woman (*phuying*) and an intermediate category called *kathoe*.

Despite the pervasive ‘third sex’ (*phetthisam*) status of *kathoe* in the Thai sex/gender paradigm, the patriarchal institutionalisation of *kathoe* has rendered *kathoe* asymmetrically inferior compared to *phuchai* and *phuying*. That is, *kathoe*’s gender transgression from male to female marks their non-normative position in comparison with their gender normative male and female

counterparts. Pointed out by Costa and Matzner (2007, 26), the gender transgression of *kathoey* is often constructed as ‘deviant,’ rather than ‘variant’ in Thai social contexts. They (2007, p. 1) state their decision not to refer to Thai transgenders who took part in their research as *kathoey*, which is a more commonly known term in Thailand, but rather call them *saopraphetsong* (lit. the second type women) because they found the term *saopraphetsong* “more neutral” and “more polite” compared with the term *kathoey*.

Since the appropriation of femininity by *kathoey* can be symbolically seen as a rejection of manhood, *kathoey*, not women, assume the true opposite of men in Thai contexts. Morris (1999, p. 63), citing Freud’s castration anxiety theory, says that it “does not work to produce antithetical sexual differences ... between the masculine and feminine, but between the masculine and the emasculated.” According to Jackson (1999b, p. 225), “the femininity of Thai females largely exists outside the domain over which Thai masculinity is defined.” As being *kathoey* is thought of as a failure to achieve manhood, *kathoey* provides Thai men a self-contrasting image to define their masculinity. *Kathoey* is, in fact, constructed on the notion of unmasculinity, not femininity. In this context, Thai men test their masculinity by comparing with unmasculine *kathoey*. *Kathoey* is not perceived as genuinely feminine, but rather as being unmasculine. Therefore, *kathoey* is a ‘parody’ of Thai men to prove that they are ‘real men’ (ibid.).

Jackson’s assumption is challenged by Costa and Matzner (2007, p. 31) questioning the theoretical hypothesis of the *kathoey* – *phuchai* (man) binary by Western researchers. They (2007) argue that “it is unclear why in the Thai context men would necessarily define themselves and construct their masculinity in opposition to *kathoey*, rather than women who are seen as men’s opposite and/or complementary in many social contexts” (p. 31). The emphasis on “the functionalist orientation” of *kathoey* in the Thai traditional sex/gender paradigm, according to Costa & Matzner (2007, p. 31), “fails to account for the complexities surrounding the construction of gender and sexual subjectivities.”

## Constructing Gay Identity in the Thai Context

The emergence of the visible *gay* sub-culture in Bangkok since the 1960s might illustrate Thailand’s intricately socio-cultural involvement with the West, but Thai homosexual men’s adoption of the label *gay* differs from their “original” conception in many ways. Rather than positioning themselves in opposition to heterosexual men and women, the English term *gay* was taken as a

self-identified label by many Thai male homosexuals to distinguish themselves from the more popular Thai term for gender and sexual transgression of *kathoe*. In this context, *gay* identity is not constructed in the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but rather in the binary opposition between non-gender normative *kathoe* and gender-normative masculinity.

Since the label *gay* is originally derived from English, the *gay* identity is often simplistically perceived as a Western implant. Whilst the relationship between Thai gay communities and their globalised gay brotherhood is undeniable, the insistence on transnational connection fails to recognise the complexity of interactions between local sex/gender paradigms and socio-economic transformations engendered by global forces (Sinnott, 2004, p. 35).

Before the emergence of *gay* identity in the 1960s, the term *kathoe* in the popular usage refers to both non-normative gender expressions and non-normative sexual practices. That is, *kathoe*, not only refers to male to female cross dressers, but also often includes gender-normative men who have sexual attraction to other gender-normative men (Costa and Matzner, 2004, p. 19). The conflation of sexual practices and gender expressions in the *kathoe* identity highlights the lack of terminology in Thai language to distinguish gender-normative homosexuals from transvestites, transgenders, and transsexuals, respectively.

In Thailand, homosexuality is often understood as being ‘misgendered’ or *phitphet* (Sinnott, 2004, p. 28). *Phet* can be literally translated as ‘sex’ in English, i.e. *ruamphet* (.lit sexual intercourse) or *phetsamphan* (.lit sexual relation). *Phet* signifies masculine and feminine as in *phetchai* (lit. male) and *phetying* (.lit female). *Phet* is also used to identify sexuality as in *rakruamphet* (.lit homosexuality) and *raktangphet* (.lit heterosexuality). Due to the ambiguity of the word *phet*, in the 2000s Thai feminist scholars recently coined Thai equivalent terms for gender and sexuality. These new terminologies i.e. *phetsaphap* (.lit gender), *phetwithi* (.lit sexuality), respectively, are still yet to register in Thai mainstream discourses. In other words, the three systems of sex, gender, and sexuality are popularly accommodated in the single notion of *phet*. Jackson (1995b, p. 218) explains that

The linguistic conflation of the domains of biology, gender and sexuality in Thai leads to a common tendency to “naturalise” both ascribed gender and sexuality to biology. For example, in Thai discourses on gender and sexuality the categories *chai*, *ying* and *kathoe* are typically conceived in terms of performance of masculine, feminine and transgender roles,

respectively, which in turn are believed to be biologically based in maleness, femaleness and hermaphroditism.

Thai homosexual men's appropriation of the label *gay* in the 1960s in Thai public discourse can be seen as a response to the increasing valorisation of masculinity among gender normative Thai homosexuals during that period of intense interactions with sex/gender discourse from the West. Thanks to the close military and business association with the United States from World War II until the Vietnam War era, Thailand was America's regional centre for military and economic expansion. Foreign investment, particularly from the U.S., was heavily promoted and facilitated by the Thai government. Businesses and services targeting American personnel and Western expatriates stationed in Thailand sprang up dramatically, particularly in big cities. The huge influx of economic migrants from the countryside relocated to big cities to work in newly established factories and service industries. It can be said that the intense economic industrialisation during this period entailed significant socio-cultural changes in Thai society.

The discovery of *gay*-identified men in Bangkok by the Thai press in October 1965 was a historical pivot, marking the shift in sex/gender paradigms in relation to the reimagination of transgenderism and homosexuality in Thai public discourses. The murder of Darrell Berrigan<sup>12</sup>, an American expatriate in Bangkok in October 1965 was followed by the Thai media's intense scrutiny of his homosexuality and a month long report of the sub-culture of young men who called themselves *gay*. The competition among the Thai press to report the murder case and subsequent analyses of homosexual pathology by columnists and psychologists, to some extent, can be said to have registered *gay* identity in the Thai sex/gender system.

It is worth noting that before the Thai press' exposure of Thai *gay* group after the Berrigan murder case in 1965, masculine gender-normative homosexuals were invisible in Thailand. Gender-transgressed *kathoey*, on the contrary, often drew regular attention from the public. *Kathoey* beauty contests mostly held in temple funfairs received attention not only from the press, but also from the police who frequently arrested *kathoey* on suspicion of prostitution<sup>13</sup>. *Kathoey* cross dressers were notoriously known not only for their hyper-feminine performance, but also for their involvement in prostitution and theft.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson (1999a) and Terdsak (2002) provide full details regarding the case and press revelation of Berrigan's homosexuality.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the image of being a world brothel, prostitution has been illegal in Thailand since 1960.

Pan Bunnak (1989, p. 14), a famous hair artist, recalled his/her adventurous experience during the 1960s that *kathoey* could be differentiated in two groups: 1) cross dressing *kathoey* who participated in *kathoey* beauty contests and were often subjected to police harassment, and 2) *kathoey maisadaeng-ok* or gender-normative *kathoey* who would escape police patrol providing that they were not seen caressing one another in public.

The pre-context of *kathoey* before the Berrigan murder case suggests that it was an exclusive category for both non-normative gender expression and homosexual behaviours. The press' lengthy coverage of the *gay* group unwittingly emphasised and clarified differences between *kathoey* and *gay* categories in the Thai public domain. To help explicate the emergence of *gay* identity in Thai public discourses, it might be appropriate to investigate how the stories in relation to this murder case chronically developed in the press until the emergence of the *gay* identity.

On 4 October 1965, *Thairath*<sup>14</sup> reported that Darrell Berrigan<sup>15</sup>, an editor of the English language newspaper, *Bangkok World*, was found dead in his car. Berrigan was shot through the back of his head. His trousers and underpants appeared to have been pulled down to his shins. After initial investigation, the police found that "Mr. Darrell Berrigan was a sexual degenerate who enjoyed having sex with *kathoey* and young men" (*Thairath* October 4, 1965, p.1 cited in Jackson 1999a, p. 374, also cited in Terdsak<sup>16</sup> 2002, p. 60).

Thai newspapers competed against each other to report both progresses on the case and the revelation of Berrigan's hidden lifestyle with male sex workers. *Thairath* on 7 October 1965 further revealed that Berrigan's colleagues were aware of his 'sickness' and Berrigan's attraction to young men was analogous to what men had for women. *Thairath* described one of Berrigan's sex partners, named *Po* as "a *kathoey* who disliked cross dressing but rather preferred normal male clothes" (*Thairath* October 7, 1965, p. 16, cited in Terdsak 2002, p.p. 61-2).

On 8 October 1965, *Thairath* published an article by Sisiat<sup>17</sup> who suggested that Berrigan's homosexuality was heavily influenced by the West. Sisiat's article reflected his understanding of homosexuality that it can be distinguished into two categories: 1) the Thai traditional *kathoey* who take on

<sup>14</sup> *Thairath* is one of Thai language tabloid newspapers.

<sup>15</sup> Berrigan was well-known among Western expatriate circles and Thai political elites in the 1960s. He was named a 'friend of Thailand' as an appreciation for his contribution to the country during and after World War II.

<sup>16</sup> According to Thai convention, Thai scholars are listed and referred by their first names in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> Sisiat was *Thairath*'s regular writer of a column, called *Saraphanpanha* (lit. all kinds of problems).



feminine mannerisms; and 2) the new type of *kathoey*, called ‘homosexual.’ He further commented that this new type of *kathoey* was derived from the socially progressive civilisation and Thai people, who were educated abroad, brought this behaviour back to the country (*Thairath* October 8, 1965, p. 2, cited in Terdsak, 2002, p. 63).

By exposing Berrigan’s past, the reporters stumbled on a new discourse of masculine-identified homosexuality among the male prostitute circles of Bangkok whose main clients were foreign expatriates like Berrigan. At the beginning, there was a little confusion over the terms to refer to those boys who had sexually associated with Berrigan. The reporters initially referred to them as *kathoey* but later noticed the significant differences between the effeminacy of *kathoey* and the masculinity of those boys. They then called these gender normative sex workers *kathoey phuchai* or male *kathoey* (*Thairath* October 10, 1965, p. 14, cited in Terdsak, 2002, p. 66).

On 11 October 1965, *Thairath* published a sensational report about its discovery of a group of male sex workers who called themselves *gay*. *Thairath* reported that these gays or *phuchai khaitua* (.lit male prostitutes) were ‘sleeping partners’ of *farang*<sup>18</sup> or Westerners. *Thairath* highlighted that these young men were considered good looking and completely masculine. These men were reported to have never cross-dressed, unlike *kathoey*. *Thairath* described these sex workers as young men who earned themselves a living as being *gay*. It also added that there were around two hundred *phuchai khaitua* who were civil servants and actors. These young men enjoyed living in luxurious rented houses and apartments, paid by their *farang* lovers (*Thairath* October 11, 1965, p. 16, cited in Terdsak, 2002, p. 67). In other words, the investigation of the Berrigan murder case by the Thai press led to the initial confusion over the concept of *gay* identity as male prostitutes whose main clients were Western expatriates and Thai elites referred to themselves as *gay*. *Gay* described by the Thai press in 1965 became synonymous with male sex workers. The emergence of the word *gay*, therefore, specified a gender distinction between masculine and effeminate *kathoey*.

Although the first introduction of a new sexual identity in 1965 by the Thai press was imbued with social distrust and antagonisms due to the word *gay*’s association with prostitution and the murder of Darrell Berrigan, *gay* was described by the press as a completely different “class” from *kathoey*. While

<sup>18</sup> *Farang* is a Thai slang for “Caucasian” foreigners. Although it is popularly speculated that *farang* is derived from the French word *français* or *farangset* in Thai, etymological linguistics studies show that *farang* is originally derived from the Persian word *farangi* or ‘foreigner.’ (Jurispong Chularatana, *Krungthepturakit* September 24, 2009, retrieved from [http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/lifestyle/culture/20090924/78380/ถอดราก-ศัพท์\(แบบ\)เทศ.html](http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/lifestyle/culture/20090924/78380/ถอดราก-ศัพท์(แบบ)เทศ.html)).



*kathoey* were often socially positioned as “low class,” those who called themselves *gay* were described by the press as having “refined mannerisms” and a “high taste in fashion.” Their affluent lifestyles were said to be provided by their *farang* partners. However, these *gay*-identified men were said to come from different backgrounds ranging from governmental officials to actors. The emphasis on the “normal” masculinity of these young men in opposition to the effeminate and cross-dressing *kathoey* by the Thai press underscored differences between the two identities and designated *gay* as a new non-normative category in the Thai sex/gender system.

### ***Kathoey versus Gay***

*Gay* is located in opposition to the *kathoey* identity as another non-normative category in the Thai sex/gender paradigm. In the last section, I have shown how the label *gay* emerged and registered in Thai public discourses as a new category of non-normative sex/gender identities. The emergence of gender normative young men who identified as *gay* after the murder of Berrigan was met with astonishment by the Thai press as the gender expressions of *gay* men were radically distinct from those of *kathoey*. Differences between the two categories further appear multi-dimensional. Social positions, personal lifestyles and often educational background were cited by the press after the Berrigan case as markers of the emerging masculine-identified homosexual men.

Although it was unclear why *gay* had become a preferred choice of identity for those men in the 1960s, the adoption of the label *gay* can be argued to help lessen social stigma, attached to the *kathoey* identity and prostitution at the interface between public and private spheres. As the gender transgression of *kathoey* breaches the social expectation of normative masculinity, the self-chosen *gay* identity can be understood as an attempt by masculine-identified homosexual men to re-masculinise their sex/gender identity and to distance them from the unmasculine *kathoey*. That is, by identifying oneself as *gay*, it is imperative to evaluate and position not just one’s same-sex erotic attraction, but rather one’s gender expressions in the public domain. As Morris (1994, p. 20) asserts:

The crucial element in the Thai system of three seems to be a division in which sexual and gender identity is conceived as a repertoire of public appearances and behaviors that is quite independent of the various subject positions and sexual practices available within the private realm.

In other words, the term *gay* is designated as one of men's multiple identities. Rather than positioning in opposition to heterosexuality, *gay* identity is constructed in Thai public contexts as another possibility of *phuchai* or men and therefore is in a sense analogous to *kathoei* (Jackson & Sullivan, 1999, p. 5).

The emphasis on different gender expressions of *kathoei* and *gay* at the public level underlines the abjection of *kathoei*'s effeminacy by masculine-identified *gay* men. It is unclear if this reflects the masculine chauvinist attitudes in the Thai culture. The label *gay*, however, allows masculine-identified homosexuals to maintain their public presentation of having gender normativity; thereby, they can technically avoid social criticisms of their same-sex relations, considered a private matter.

The conformity to the normative gender image of masculine-identified gay men in relation to the public/private division nevertheless fails to completely thwart social prejudices against same-sex relations in Thai contexts. The discourse of the psychological pathologisation of homosexuality, emerging in the Thai press in parallel with the masculine-homosexual *gay* identity in the 1960s, described homosexuality as a sickness or disorder and a by-product of the Westernisation of Thai society. *Kathoei*, on the contrary, are more integrated into the pervasive discourse of heteronormativity. Pointed out by Jackson (1999c, p.p. 238-39), the emergence of *gay* identity disrupted the Thai traditional sex/gender system. In the Thai discourse of *phet*, the difference between transgenderism and homosexuality has not been clearly distinguished. Before the emergence of masculine-identified *gay* identity in the 1960s, gender roles, rather than sexual orientation, were crucial in determining whether one was a man or *kathoei* and the homoeroticism was not central to the formation of homosexual identity. Traditionally, a man could have sex with *kathoei* and still maintain his masculine status because *kathoei* is sexually constructed as inferior to him. That is, *kathoei* is a product of his/her feminine gender role rather than his homosexual identity. The inferiority of *kathoei* in relation to gender normative *phuchai* (men), to a degree, places *kathoei* in a gender deviant category rather than a sexual deviant one.

This concept of egalitarian homosexuality upsets the traditional sex/gender system because the masculine and feminine are traditionally seen as a complementary binary. Being constructed as a gender deviant, *kathoei*'s homoerotic desire is conceived within the heterosexual framework whilst being a gay man disturbs the Thai traditional sexual culture based on masculine-feminine binarism (Jackson 1999c, Van Esterik, 2000, p. 215). *Kathoei* is thus seen as Thai, safe, normal, familiar, generally recognised as a psychological woman trapped in a man's body, while *gay* is regarded as foreign, strange,

dangerous, and genuinely perverted by the traditional sex/gender system. *Gay* identity, according to Jackson (1999c), “is out of place within traditional discursive schema, neither truly a ‘normal man’ nor fully *kathoe*y, and the lack of discursive place for gay men within the traditional system no doubt in part explains why many Thais remains disturbed and troubled by the image of the masculine gay man” (p. 39). *Gay* is, therefore, a genuine sexual degeneracy in comparison to *kathoe*y whose gender deviancy more or less reaffirms the notion of complimentary sex/gender between masculinity and femininity.

The revelation of *gay*-identified men by the Thai press partly dispelled the ambiguity of *kathoe*y for representing universal sex/gender non-conventional practices in Thai males. The emphasis on differences between the two identities not only extricated the masculine *kathoe*y from the feminine one, but also established *gay* as a completely different and higher class of sex/gender category to that of *kathoe*y in Thailand.

Despite being a vital factor, the gender normative expression does not constitute a sole predication in classification of non-normative sex/gender identities between *kathoe*y and *gay*. *Gay* and *kathoe*y identities are additionally intersected by social stigma, attached to both social status groups. Although the gender normative practices of *gay* men help alleviate social criticisms towards their same-sex eroticism compared to *kathoe*y whose breach of social gender norms are directly subjected to social disapproval, the English origin of the label *gay* and its association with Western gay men since the first public exposure cannot be argued to help improve their social image either. *Gay* is often regarded as ‘un-Thai’ or ‘alien’ to the conventional (hetero) sexual relations. *Kathoe*y is generally described as having ‘lower’ mannerisms and sexual behaviours compared with gay men who seem to enjoy higher ranking in the popular perception.

The interchange between *gay* and *kathoe*y in popular contexts reveals the confusion over various definitions of both categories in Thai contexts. *Kathoe*y and *gay* share their same-sex attractions but differ in their gender expressions. The overlapping of both categories emphasises the fact that certain gay men may further specify their *gay* identity through the idealisation of gender binary relations between masculinity and femininity. Consequently, their sex roles can constitute their sub-*gay* identities as either *gay king* (active/insertive) or *gay queen* (passive/insertee). The identification as either *gay king* or *gay queen* does not just profess gay men’s preference of being active or passive in sexual intercourse, but rather reflects to their self-evaluation of their gender performances. The sub-identities of *gay king* and *gay queen* maintain the primacy of gender in the construction of *gay* identity in Thai contexts.

## Reinventing *Gay*

The emergence of a masculinised version of non-normative male sex/gender category in 1965 can be said to untangle *gay* from the indigenous *kathoey*, loaded with negative connotations in Thai popular discourses. Since its first appropriation into Thai sex/gender paradigms, *gay* has been classified as ‘higher’ compared to *kathoey* for many reasons. The normalisation of masculine gender in *gay* identity may explain the explicit gender hierarchical structure between the two identities, but the label *gay* is also imbued with negative social attitudes towards their same-sex eroticism, rendered *gay* as well as *kathoey* inferior in relation to normative sex/gender categories.

Although homosexuality has never been subjected to legal nor religious sanctions in Thailand, admitting one’s same-sex attraction is not unproblematic. Individuals growing up with non-normative sexual attraction have faced indirect social pressure to conform to the heteronormative practices as being publicly exposed of their homosexuality is to lose face and to have one’s image damaged. Jackson (1995b, p. 42) notes that Thai society is manoeuvred by the culture of ‘appropriateness’; thereby, the loss of face (Thai *-sia na*) “is much more than embarrassment” for Thais as they are being judged as “inappropriate.”

The popular misperception that gay men’s same-sex attraction resulted from having a female mind arguably contributes to the cultural valorisation of effeminate homosexuality. Therefore, being an openly gay man in Thai contexts risks not only losing his own face as he is believed to fail the social expectation of being a “proper man,” but also jeopardising his family’s face as their parents would be accused of not properly teaching a son to be a man.

The discursive image of *gay* identity in the mainstream and gay press has undeniably played a crucial role in disenchanting the identification of *gay* by a number of Thai gay men. This negative description of gayness, to some extent, highlights the fact that the adoption of label *gay* by Thai homosexual men may draw social criticisms as well as refashion a positive image in relation to the loaded term *kathoey*. In Thailand, photographs of Western gay men continue to dominate the space of Thai gay press, not only in pornographic materials but also in the mainstream press. It is unclear why images of Western gay men appear more popular than the Thai ones, but this practice has unwittingly reproduced the popular perception that *gay* is foreign although the way the label *gay* has been subsumed and reinterpreted in the Thai sex/gender system is rather historically and contextually uncommon to the Western module from which Thai *gay* identitarians have drawn their inspiration.

The emergence of the recent Thai term for masculine-identified *chairakchai* (lit. men (who) love men) in the early 2000s may symbolise the ongoing effort of Thai homosexual men to normalise their sex/gender identity with social constraints on same-sex relations. However, it is unclear who originally coined this term. *Chairakchai* was firstly employed by the very first mainstream Thai gay rights organisation, called *Fasirung* (lit. rainbow sky). It is likely that the term *chairakchai* has been formatted in the same way as the term *yingrakying* (lit. women (who) love women), coined by Thai lesbian group, *Anjaree*, in the early 1990s.

As the term *gay* becomes synonymous with negative connotations, similar to what the traditional term *kathoe*y has been popularly perceived, the term *chairakchai* demonstrates the renewed negotiation of Thai gay men with the heteronormative discourse. Unlike the official Thai translated term for homosexuality, *rakruamphet*<sup>19</sup> (lit. love same sex), the term *chai rak chai* erases the potential ambiguity and negativity that the word *phet* or sex may attach to the term. *Chairakchai* thus metaphorically challenges the discursive negative images of *gay* men in Thai contexts and also theoretically opens up the idea that person of same sex/gender can potentially form romantic relations. The invention of the recent term, *chairakchai* is analogous to what Plummer (1974, cited by Weeks, 1991, p. 75) has pointed out that the socio-historical construction of sexual-meanings are not fixed, but rather constantly ‘worked at’ and ‘negotiated’ through individuals’ interaction.

## Conclusion

The emergence of *gay* identity suggests that *gay* adopted in the Thai sex/gender system is historically and contextually specific. That is, unlike their Western *gay* counterparts, the term *gay* has evolved through Thailand’s historical situations since its first public appearance in 1965. Because *kathoe*y is a traditional term for universally non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices, the adoption of the label *gay* by masculine-identified homosexual men in Bangkok in 1965 can be argued as an attempt to position *gay* men in a structural hierarchy with the traditional non-normative *kathoe*y who have been popularly subjected to social discrimination and disrespect. The emergence of *gay* identity initially sensationalised the Thai public with the unfamiliar form of masculine-identified homosexuals, allegedly derived from Western expatriates and Thais who were educated abroad. However, *gay* identification in Thai

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<sup>19</sup> The antonym of *rakruamphet* is *raktangphet* (lit. love different sex).

contexts retains a significance of gender in the formation of sex/gender category in opposition to *kathoe*y and subsequently heterosexuals (*chai ching yingthae*<sup>20</sup>).

The polarisation between *gay* and *kathoe*y reflects the valorisation of masculinity in the Thai patriarchy. *Kathoe*y has become ‘lower’ in the hierarchical relation to *gay* identification. Since its conception, *gay* has been represented as a completely different species to that of *kathoe*y. *Gay* signifies not only normative gender identification, but also extends to higher tastes in fashion and socialisation. The split into two sub-set *gay* identities of *gay king* and *gay queen*, nevertheless, underlines the fact that the adoption of label *gay* by masculine-identified homosexual men continues to be defined in the traditional sex/gender system in which gender is a primary factor in Thai contexts.

The recent invention of the term *chairakchai* (lit. men (who) love men) by Thai masculine-identified homosexual men can be seen as an attempt to renegotiate and refashion same-sex relations in the confinement of discursive heteronormative discourse in Thai contexts.

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<sup>20</sup> *Chaiching yingthae* literally means real men true women, equivalent to ‘straight’ (men and women) in English. Jackson and Sullivan (1999: 5) argue that Thais have borrowed only the notion of gay identity but not its binary concept of straight. Indeed, ‘straight’ might be a strange concept for many Thai people, including gay people themselves. This is because the terms *gay* or *kathoe*y are ‘marked categories’ or ‘labels’ exclusively for socially non-normative sexual behaviours. As a result, heterosexual men and women are unmarked and do not necessarily need further social labels to identify their conventional sexual practices. Yet, the notion of *chaiching yingthae* offers an alternative explanation to Thai understanding of sexuality. That is, *chaiching yingthae* already stands as an opposite binary of *gay*. It would be unnecessary for Thais to use ‘straight’, an English term for something that already exists in the local vernacular system.



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