

Unimaginable Desires: Gay Relationships in Thailand

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Declaration

I declare that this work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

This thesis aims to locate male same-sex relations in Thai public discourses in order to understand how the homoeroticism has been placed outside the legitimate realm in the Thai sex/gender system, irrespective of Thailand's global image of being a 'gay paradise' and the considerable tolerance of homosexuality in Thai society. Borrowing from Foucault's notion of power relations, this research examines a range of popular and academic resources to uncover discursive power relations in the construction of homosexual identities in Thailand. It also highlights the constant interaction between homo-minority and hetero-majority within the public space.

Drawn from diverse sources, this thesis explores the institutionalisation of periphery status of non-normative gender and sexual identities and how they appeared in Thai historical and religious discourses as well as the recent representation of *gay* and *kathoey* identities in the Thai mainstream media. This thesis also includes empirical data from interviews with twelve Thai gay-identified participants, conducted between 2003 and 2008. The inclusion of lived experiences of interviewees offers insights into their subjectivation with the label *gay*, arguably remaining problematic in accordance with the Thai sex/gender paradigm and particularly the contextual sensitivity or *kalathesa*.

This research draws attention to discursive power relations in Thai gay men's implicit negotiation of their same-sex validity within the heteronormative framework. The combined analyses of personal narratives of research participants and Thai language queer films, i.e. *Satri Lek* (2000 - *The Iron Ladies*) and *Sat Pralat* (2004 - *Tropical Malady*), respectively, provide the critical understanding of Thai gay men's strategically viable compromise of their political project for social acceptance.

The thesis acknowledges that Thai gay men's politics of negotiation has substantially opened up a discussion for social acceptance of homosexuality, but has unwittingly hindered a full social dialogue regarding the materialisation of equality for people with non-normative gender and sexual identities.

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Note on Thai Language and Transliteration

According to Thai convention, Thai scholars are listed and referred by their first names in this thesis.

The romanisation of Thai words follows the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS), published by the Royal Institute of Thailand (1999). The RTGS, however, does not include diacritics, which phonetically indicate the variation in vowels and tones.

The transliteration of Thai names, preferentially adopted by Thai individuals, for example, Pichet Suypan (พิเชฐ สายพันธ์), Terdsak Romjumpa (เทอดศักดิ์ ร่มจำปา), Nidhi Auesriwongse (นธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์), Chetta Puanghut (เชษฐา พวงหัตถ์) and so forth remains unaltered.

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Preface

This thesis was developed from my conversation with a Thai gay friend in Bangkok in 2004. This research project would not have been possible if I had not decided to leave my job at a Japanese company in Bangkok, where I worked for four years after my undergraduate degree, and to come to London in 2002. Having been brought up in a conservative background, I had a firm belief that homosexuality was unnatural. I also silently thought that my same-sex attraction was temporary. However, my views changed after starting my Master's Degree in Gender, Culture and Modernity at Goldsmiths in September 2002. Here, I came across postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist social theories. I began questioning everything I had believed about the absolutism of heteronormativity. From thereon, I realise that there can be more than one way of doing things.

This learning experience appeared to transform my mentality as Phaen, one of my research participants, also acknowledged that I became more open-minded when I met him in Paris in 2003. He told me that I had changed a lot from our previous meeting at our university in Bangkok in June 2002. According to him, back in Bangkok, I held sets of worldviews which I thought were static and absolute. Phaen at that time was in his fourth year of his Master's Degree in Philosophy while I was about to quit my job of four years to come to London. Phaen recalled that he was annoyed by my single-mindedness as I implicitly expressed my disapproval of his financial dependency on his parents after completing his first degree from the same university in 1998. Now, I realise that I should not have imposed my standards on him or others as we do have our reasons and we are different individuals. We might have something in common,

for example, coming from the middle class background, having had the university education, but we do have our own ways of doing things and, most importantly our life experiences are not exactly similar.

The geographic distance from my home country has allowed me to explore the issue of sexuality which is still culturally sensitive and considered inappropriate for public discussions by many conservative Thais. The freedom I have enjoyed to accept who I am sexually and the opportunity to think outside the restricted norms of heterosexuality also enabled me to look back into what I have taken for granted for a long time with more critical perspectives. As I bring the unspeakable into the public space, I reclaim the 'cultural aphasia' that I have unwittingly kept silent for many years. Having written this thesis in English, I have felt more at ease with the issue of my sexuality since I sometimes feel awkward to speak about it in my mother tongue. Therefore, writing about Thai gay subculture in English also brings attention to the issue of 'cultural translation,' which does not literally mean the linguistic ability to translate from Thai into English but rather the awareness of the contextual complexity, intrinsically attached to the cultural scripts of the research materials.

The fact that I have done my interviews and writings about Thai gay men's social negotiation, mostly outside Thailand, can be said to have posed a substantial challenge for me, but I have maintained my regular updates on information of LGBT groups in Thailand through the Internet. The Internet has helped establish the virtual network of information regardless of my geographic location. Nevertheless, the location is matter for my ethnographic interviews with twelve Thai gay men, who participated in this project, as the verbal and non-

verbal interactions, occurring during individual face-to-face discussions, to some extent, point out the issue of *kalathesa* or 'contextual sensitivity' in relation to participants' personal articulation of their sexual identities.

In this thesis, I have also examined a range of historical, religious and popular discourses to complement personal narratives of research participants. The discourse analyses are intended to contextually illustrate Thai social intervention on people with non-normative gender expressions and sexualities. They also highlight the power relations of *gay*-identified men within the heteronormative Thai society for their negotiation for social inclusivity. The collection of media reports of Thai LGBT groups and analyses of two Thai films: 1) *Satri Lek* (2000 a.k.a. *The Iron Ladies*), 2) *Sat Pralat* (2004 a.k.a. *Tropical Malady*), included in this thesis, provide the useful understanding of social and popular representations of people with non-normative gender expressions and sexualities as social peripheries in Thai society and also question the popular myth of social tolerance of homosexuality in Thailand.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Unveiling Unimaginable Desires

Prologue

On June 29, 2007, *Reuters*¹ news agency reported the jubilant celebration of Thai homosexuals to the inclusion of their equality in the post-coup d'état constitution². The report included statements from a former Bangkok senator and member of the constitution drafting council, Jernsak Pinthong (เจิมศักดิ์ ปิ่นทอง)³ and the leader of Thai Gay⁴ Political Group, Natee Teerarojjanapongs (นที ชีระโรจนพงษ์)⁵, who welcomed the clause guaranteeing equal status of heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. The decision to include 'sexual identity' into the article 30, clause 3 of the new charter was considered a major u-turn from the council members, who earlier in the same month rejected the LGBT⁶ groups' proposal of

¹ The full article can be accessed from <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-28241620070629>.

² After the coup d'état on 19 September 2006, the 1997 constitution was revoked. The 1997 constitution was often called the 'People's Constitution' due to the extensive involvement of Thai voters in the drafting process and its democratic nature of its articles that formally recognised Thais' entitlement to universal equality and right to human dignity.

³ Jernsak Pinthong (เจิมศักดิ์ ปิ่นทอง), often known for his role as a host in a number of television political talk show programmes, was a lecturer in a Thai public university. His sharp and frank criticisms on Thai politics earned him a popular recognition from the Thai public. He was elected as a senator for Bangkok in Thailand's first direct senator election in 1997.

⁴ In this thesis, 'gay' refers to gay men in a general sense, compared to 'gay,' signifying the sexual label 'gay', emerging in Thai public discourses in 1965. Further discussions regarding the label 'gay' will be explored in Chapter three.

⁵ Natee Teerarojjanapongs (นที ชีระโรจนพงษ์) is one of the first openly gay public figures in Thailand. Having involved with American gay rights groups when he was studying in the U.S., Natee set up a HIV/AIDS charity in Thailand in the 1980s to raise the public awareness and to campaign for safe-sex practices. He also formed a gay group, called *Klum Sen Sikhao* (กลุ่มเส้นสีขาว - The White Line Dance Troupes) to encourage Thai gay men's personal acceptance of homosexuality or 'coming out' and gay men's integration into mainstream society through the concept of good behaviours or *kunla gay* (กุลเกย์ - good gay). He is now the leader of a gay political group call, *Klum Gay Kanmueang* (กลุ่มเกย์การเมือง - The Gay Political Group) and a regional Northern Thai Gay Alliance, called *Chiang Mai Araya* (เชียงใหม่อารยะ - Civilised Chiang Mai). Natee unsuccessfully ran for a Bangkok senator post in 2006. His controversial projects such as the proposal to instigate gay studies for primary school children in Bangkok and his public role as a self-appointed Thai gay spokesperson continue to make headlines in the Thai press despite his reputation among Thai gay men is rather mixed and not so well received that he failed to woo Bangkok gay voters for the senator election in 2006. He is often regarded as 'Gay Natee' (เกย์นที) by the Thai press.

⁶ LGBT is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

'sexual diversity,' saying it would problematise existing laws which only recognise equal rights between men and women (*Reuters* June 29, 2007).

Under the new proposal, the article 30, clause 3⁷ would be as follows:

"Any discrimination onto individuals because of their birth, ethnicity, language, sex, *sexual identity*, disability, age, physical condition, psychological condition, personal status, economic or social status, religious belief, education, or political views, provided that they are not contradictory to the constitution, shall not be permitted."

(Cited by Jermsak Pinthong in *Phuchatkan* (ผู้จัดการ) July 2, 2007)

The agreement, however, was revoked overnight after Karun Sai-gnam, a member of the council pointed out that the inclusion of 'sexual identity' into the article 30, clause 3 of the draft violated the regulation of the council in which any clause previously agreed by the council shall not be amended, with the exception of altering particular wordings. Eventually, the council voted 30 to 29, deciding that adding 'sexual identity' would mean to amend the clause. As a result, the proposal was rejected (*ibid.*).

The council, nevertheless, compensated gay political campaigners for the refusal by making an official memorandum of the constitution regarding the issue of sexual diversity that:

"Sexual difference means not only the differences between men and women, but also the differences of individuals with gender, *sexual identity*, and *sexual diversity* which are different from the ones they were born into. Therefore, it is unnecessary to include those categories into the article 30 because 'sex' already includes those meanings and it is legally forbidden to discriminate against those individuals."

⁷ The full article written by Jermsak Pinthong, titled *Mong Patthanakan Sangkom Thai Phan Praden "Attalak Thang Phet" Phan Sapha Rang Ratthathammanun* (มองพัฒนาการสังคมไทย ผ่านประเด็น "อัตลักษณ์ทางเพศ" ผ่านสภาร่างรัฐธรรมนูญ - lit. Perspectives on the development of Thai society on the issue of 'sexual identity' by the council of constitutional drafting) can be retrieved from <http://www.manager.co.th/Daily/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9500000076558>.

(The memorandum of the 2007 constitution, regarding the issue of sexual diversity, quoted in <http://www.sapaan.org/article/72.htm>)

The one night victory not only reveals Thai LGBT groups' political project for the legal recognition of non-normative gender and sexual identities in the constitution as the prerequisite for the social inclusion and equality for sexual minorities, but also highlights the political unimaginability of social acceptance LGBT rights groups have been struggling to achieve. That is, despite their petition for official inclusion in the article 30, clause 3 was refused, the council apparently compromised on their demand by officially extending the meaning of the word 'sex' in the clause to include both 'sexual identity' and 'sexual diversity.' Superficially, this compromise by the council may have been seen as a substantial achievement by LGBT campaigners. Essentially, Thai LGBT people do not significantly gain any political advance at all. By not allowing the official recognition in the article 30, clause 3, it can be contended that Thai LGBT people do not legally *exist* in the public sphere and their attempt to appropriate the socially available space has failed to materialise.

'Sexual diversity,' according to the memorandum of the 2007 constitution, continues to be seen as 'deviance', not 'variance' from the heteronormative gender. Although the extension of the constitutional definition of 'sex' to include 'sexual diversity' seems to suggest the changing social attitudes towards sexual minorities, the memorandum of the constitution contains the rigid and disputable statement that describes "*the differences of individuals with gender, sexual identity, and sexual diversity different from the ones they were born into.*" It is also worth noting that the memorandum of the constitution regarding the issue of sexual diversity was not included in the free printed draft constitution copies, sent

to every household in the country's national database by the drafting council before the national referendum. Fifty Seven per cent of voters approved the draft constitution on August 20, 2007.

Thailand still does not have any laws specifying equal rights for LGBT people, not to mention same-sex civil partnership law which does not exist in Thailand. Transsexual individuals still cannot have their birth sex/gender identified titles changed in accordance with present sex/gender after their sex reassignment operations, leaving them with many social and legal problems. Their newly reassigned sex, in fact, restricts them in a number of ways, for example, it is difficult for male to female transsexuals to find work except the ones that are already well established by other transsexuals such as hairdressers, cabaret performers and so forth. Many countries, particularly in the Middle East and China, refuse entry to people whose sex/gender does not correspond with the ones indicated in their passports⁸.

Thailand: Gay Paradise?

The story of Thai LGBT campaigning for equality seems at odds with the well-received image of Thailand in the West as a 'gay paradise.' It highlights Thailand's paradoxes and contradictions⁹. Whilst allowing LGBT people to enjoy the freedom of sexual expressions, Thai society asserts strictly discursive control over the lives of its sexual minority populace. At the same time, Thai society's

⁸ Although the mentioned countries do not officially prohibit LGBT people from entering their borders, a number of Thai transsexuals reported harassments made by immigration officers and their ordeals of being turned away at the passport-controls (personal communication with Cara, a Thai post-op transsexual who is currently living in Paris).

⁹ For a further explanation of Thailand's cultural paradoxes, see Totman (2003: 108-9) and Van Esterik (2000: 3-5).

accommodation of sexual minorities continues to make headlines in the Western press¹⁰.

The expression 'Thailand, the land of smiles' is not only internationally recognised, but also locally reproduced by Thai authorities¹¹. The impression of Thailand as a gay paradise in the queer world is so renowned that it is often misrepresented in the Western press that homophobia does not exist in this exotic land. On the one hand, the image of the exotic Thai body with guilt-free homosexuality is partially a creation of a Western imagination. On the other hand, Thais, themselves, particularly those in the tourist industries, take advantage of high levels of tolerance of sexual minorities to further exploit the pink dollars.

The myth of gay paradise indicates paradoxical and contested relationships between Thailand's heteronormative discourses and Thai homosexual men and women. That is, irrespective of Thailand's worldly constructed image of being a harmonious culture with great tolerance of differences, Thai lesbian and gay men have encountered a series of social anti-homosexual sentiments. The social illtreatment against homosexuals, to some extent, unmasks the popular image of Thailand's welcoming smiles, perpetually sold to millions of (gay and lesbian) tourists, and suggests that the imagined 'gay paradise' is, in fact, a mere illusion.

¹⁰ BBC reported about transgender toilets in Kampang Secondary School in North-East of Thailand on July 29, 2008. Further information about the project and interviews of head master and transgendered students can be found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7529227.stm>.

¹¹ In his interview with CNN's Dan Rivers, Abhisit Vejjajeva (อภิสิทธิ์ เวชชาชีวะ, 2008- present), the incumbent prime minister of Thailand promised to bring back Thailand's worldly recognised image of 'the land of smiles' (<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/12/17/thailand.abhisit/>).

This thesis aims to locate male same-sex relations in Thai public discourses to understand how homoeroticism has been placed outside the legitimate realm in the Thai sex/gender system, irrespective of Thailand's global image of 'gay paradise' and a considerable tolerance of homosexuality in Thai society. Inspired by Foucault's notion of 'power relations,' this research examines a range of popular and academic discourses to uncover discursive power relations in the construction of homosexual identities in Thailand and to highlight the constant interaction between homo-minority and hetero-majority within the public space.

In this thesis, I want to trace some of intrinsic historical, religious and cultural mechanisms, enabling the continuation of this 'regime of images' (Jackson 2004a, 2004b)¹² despite rapid socio-political changes in the country. I will map out certain cultural and social aspects I believe have contributed to both the social tolerance and boundaries even to non-sexual conformists' space to negotiate their full acceptance into the mainstream arena.

Culturally, a presentation of positive image or surface is a social prime focus. To avoid being social outcasts, many Thai gay men even in the present context still feel compelled to conform to the hetero-centrism by keeping their homosexuality secret as being gay is often conflated as being effeminate. They risk losing social respect if their socially marginalised sexuality is discovered. While leading double lives may cause psychological sufferings for many gay men, 'coming out' even with their immediate family members is often still restrained by Thai taboos against sexual discussions in public. This still often

¹² Jackson (2004a, 2004b) argues that the Thai regime of images heavily polices individuals' presentation of heteronormativity in the public space while private practices of homosexuality are considerably tolerated.

inherit hypocritical relationships with issues of sex and sexuality that still remain largely unspeakable. On the one hand, they are traditionally seen as 'dirty' (Thai: สกปรก - *sokkaprok*) and should not receive significant attention due to Buddhist teachings, requiring believers to give up this worldly pleasure for enlightenment. On the other hand, sexual desires are also at some level culturally recognised as parts of human nature. Thai sex cultures, to some extent, restrict how gay men can 'come out' as methods that are more sophisticated are needed not to upset these taboos against sexual discussions. At the same time, this somewhat liberating view on sex that sexual desires are natural and Buddhist beliefs of *kamma* and reincarnation also unwittingly validate these men's homosexual inclination as 'natural.'

Religiously, as I shall explore in detail, Thais do not view homosexuality as a sin. Same-sex eroticism might not be officially endorsed by Buddhist practitioners but being born with homosexual inclination is religiously believed to have had committed bad deeds in past lives, notably rape or adultery. It is, therefore, difficult for homosexuals to escape their fate. Furthermore, the Buddhist teaching of the Three Characteristics of Existence: *Dokha* (Suffering), *Anicca* (Impertinence), and *Anatta* (Non-Self) enhances the social tolerance of sexual minorities as gender and sexuality are believed to be free-floating, not fixed categories as one might reincarnate as a different gender and sexuality from the ones lived in a previous life due to their *kamma*.

Historically and legally, homosexuality has never been criminalised in Thailand except during the first half of the twentieth century when the Thai government under the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Thai: Phrabat Somdet Phra

Chunlachomklao Chaoyuhua – พระบาทสมเด็จพระจุลจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว - reign 1868 - 1910) adopted Western criminal law codes to include ‘sodomy’ as an ‘unnatural crime’ punishable by imprisonment from three months to three years. In 1907, the law was passed due to the pressure of legal reforms by Western imperialists. This law was finally repealed in 1956 for the reason that no one had ever been convicted by this law. However, as I will also explore in the thesis, Thai traditional laws: The Three Seals Law (กฎหมายตราสามดวง - *kotmai tra sam duang* – 1808 - 1907) carried remarks that discriminated against transgenders and homosexuals who were banned from testifying in lawsuits. They were seen as unreliable witnesses. This prohibition was similar to a Buddhist ban on the ordination of transgenders and homosexuals.

At the same time in contemporary Thailand, the visibility of non-sexual conformists in Thai public space is noticeably increasing. After the 1960s Thai media’s exposé of a ‘gay den’ in Bangkok that received the widespread press coverage, *gay* has become a new category, marking another kind of Thai masculine identities. Gayness has become since the 1960s associated in the present context with an upper class, Western educated, masculine, affluent lifestyle, contrary to the traditional category of non-normative gender *kathoey*¹³, which is often portrayed as lower class, loud-mouth, hyper-effeminate, lustful and so forth. In other words, since its conception in Thai society, *gay* has developed into a distinctive class of sex/gender category. However, both categories are, to some extent, accommodated in Thai society. *Gay* is likely to avoid the social stigma, attached to traditional sex/gender non-conformist categories such as

¹³ The definition of *kathoey* is complex. I will further explore it in detail in Chapter three. *Kathoey* is often interpreted as transsexual (s) or transgender (s) in English.

kathoey if they remain silent while the sex/gender transgression of *kathoey* is impossible to hide and they are integrated into the rigid binary sex/gender system. Gay still largely remains alienated from the traditional sex/gender system but seems content to remain silently marginal.

Contemporary Thailand seems to the Western eyes as modern, Western, and accommodating diversity. However, key cultural notions such as contextual sensitivity and Buddhist beliefs are still at work. I am arguing that these factors are, in fact, limiting the ways sexual minorities *can* negotiate for public acceptance. These concepts have also shaped homosexuals' worldviews and understanding of their social positions to avoid major rifts with heteronormativity. Certainly, Thailand has evolved into a modern or civilised (Westernised) country, where Western norms have been seriously and indispensably applied into most sectors of the society, but the data reveals that heteronormative conservatism still retains its grip on the cultural production of knowledge. It is still doubtful whether a 'real' Thai gay movement could eventually be established. The lack of political commitment among Thai gay men, especially those whom the research has been conducted with, implies a grim prospect for some Thai gay activists. It might not be wrong to assume that both gay activists and cultural conservatism are at present adhering to the Buddhist's ethos of the 'middle path'¹⁴. In other words, both sides seemingly agree on the compromised offers without resorting to serious challenges to the society at large.

¹⁴ The Middle Path (Pali: *majjhima patipada*, Thai: *Thang Sai Klang* - ทางสายกลาง) is described by Buddha as a path of moderation between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification.

Understanding Thai Terminologies

There are a number of Thai contemporary terminologies regarding non-normative gender and sexualities, which I believe are crucial to address here as they are vital to the understanding of Thai sex/gender conceptualisations for non-Thai speakers. These words include local Thai, English¹⁵, and recently coined Thai translated terms for English concepts.

In this thesis, I maintain the commonly used transliteration of certain Thai words such as *kathoey* (กะเทย), *gay* (เกย์), *tom*¹⁶ (ทอม), *dee*¹⁷ (ดี้), 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 thesis. For example, *kathoey* can be taken as both singular and plural in Thai depending on the immediate contexts.

These terms I am going to introduce can be said to reflect Thai knowledge about sex/gender distinctiveness as well as the interaction with foreign influences on the multiplicity of sex/gender and sexual identities in contemporary Thailand.

Before going into detail, it should be remembered that Thai terminologies regarding non-conventional gender and eroticism used in this thesis are mostly standard Thai language or Central Thai regional dialect.

¹⁵ Although widely used English words, for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, homosexual, heterosexual are to be found throughout this thesis, their Thai equivalences if available or applicable will also be employed where they seem appropriate.

¹⁶ *Tom*, allegedly derived from 'tomboy' in English, can be crudely described as butch or masculine lesbian.

¹⁷ *Dee*, derived from 'lady' in English, is tom's femme counterpart.

This following lexicon list is intended to provide the preliminary introduction to the pervasive Thai vocabularies, inclusively describing non-conventional sexual conditions, practices and categories which can be found in Thailand's contemporary popular and public discourses. The following discussion of these terms includes not only the literal meanings of each word, but also its etymological investigation. I believe that this examination outlines the socio-cultural backgrounds to Thai conceptions of same-sex relations before they will be further explored in subsequent chapters in the thesis.

Kathoey (กะเทย) is a traditional Thai term describing the indeterminacy of sex/gender in humans, animals, and plants. For example, *mamuang kathoey* (มะม่วงกะเทย - *kathoey* mangos) refers to small undeveloped mangoes whose seeds are infertile. *Kathoey* is defined in the official Thai dictionary¹⁸ as a person who was born with both male and female genitalia, often known as *kathoey thae* (กะเทยแท้) or true *kathoey*. *Kathoey* has also been used to refer to both men and women whose gender characteristics and mannerisms are perceived of those belong to their biologically opposite sex/gender or *kathoey thiam* (กะเทยเทียม - pseudo *kathoey*). In contemporary popular discourses, *kathoey* has exclusively become a blanket term for male to female transvestites, transgenders, transsexuals and sometimes effeminate gay men. Despite being considered neutral for many *kathoey* people themselves, the word *kathoey* does imply a pejorative connotation of being 'abnormal.' I will further explore the historical and cultural etymology of the word *kathoey* in Chapter three.

¹⁸ The Thai language dictionary, compiled and updated by the Royal Institute of Thailand (1999), can be accessed on-line from <http://rirs3.royin.go.th/dictionary.asp>.

Gay (เกย์) is a more recent term, seemingly taken from English to describe normative masculine-identified men who are attracted to other normative masculine-identified men. *Gay* firstly appeared in the Thai press in 1965 after the murder of Darrell Berrigan, the editor of the English language newspaper, *Bangkok World*.¹⁹ The Thai press initially described those young men allegedly involved in the murder case as ‘professing *gay*’. *Gay* thus became a synonym for a male prostitute. However, this label *gay* distinguishes it from the traditional *kathoey* prostitutes in terms of class, gender and social background. That is, these young men were described as masculine, with good manners and from a high class in comparison to *kathoey* prostitutes who were commonly known for their effeminacy, bad manners and lower (economic) class status (Jackson 1999a: 340). The press also discovered that these *gay* persons were mostly frequented by Western expatriates and members of the Thai elite class, who had been educated abroad. Despite the distinguishing social perception between *gay* and *kathoey*, it is not uncommon to see *kathoey* and *gay* being interchangeably used in Thai popular discourses even in the present context. I will further address the emergence and meanings of *gay* in Thai contexts in Chapter three.

Phetthisam (เพศที่สาม) or ‘third sex’ is also taken as a blanket term for all non-normative sexualities disregarding their different objects of sexual attraction. ‘Third sex’ or *phetthisam* crudely intervenes in a binarism of normative sex/gender identities. It denotes a middle sex/gender category that is neither male nor female. *Phetthisam* offers an alternative understanding distinct from the rigid binary concept of masculine and feminine. Most importantly, it does not

¹⁹ See Jackson 1999a for comprehensive and detailed analysis of the Berrigan case in relation to the emergence of *gay* identification in Thailand in 1965.

imply social stigma or pejorative meanings compared with other labels for non-normative sexualities. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the appropriation of this word by many non-normative genders and sexualities as well as the more non-judgemental mainstream media.

Rakruamphet (รักร่วมเพศ) is a Thai translation of homosexuality in English. It is often found in more formal discourses compared with *phetthisam*. The antonym of *rakruamphet* is *raktangphet* (รักต่างเพศ) or heterosexuality in English. Despite being coined for the English words of homosexuality and heterosexuality, respectively, *rakruamphet* and *raktangphet* differ from the English originals in semantic nuances. While homosexuality and heterosexuality indicate the objects of sexual practices, the Thai translations ignore this central semantic core of the English originals. That is, the Thai translations disregard the English concept of sexual objects, considered religiously and culturally vulgar and instead, opt to use the word *rak* (รัก) or love in English. *Rakruamphet* and *raktangphet* then shift the focal meaning from the object of lustful desires to the object of romantic and meaningful relationships.

Lakkaphet (ลักเพศ) is a description of people with socially marginalised sexualities. Literally, it means someone who steals socially recognised mannerisms and characteristics belonging to those of his or her opposite sex/gender. *Lakkaphet* is considered more colloquial and pejorative compared to *rakruamphet* and *phetthisam*.

Biangben thangphet (เบี่ยงเบนทางเพศ) literally means 'sexual deviance' in English. However, it is sometimes confused with *phitprokkati thangphet* (ผิดปรกติ

ทางเพศ) or sexual/gender disorder mostly found in medical discourses. Whilst *phitprokkati thangphet* pathologises a medical abnormality related to individuals' sex/gender or sexuality, *biangben thangphet* is a more colloquial term. The two words, however, are often interchangeably used in popular discourses.

It is worth noting that Thai word *phet* (เพศ) can be understood as sex, gender and sexuality in English. I am not arguing that Thais do not understand the differences among the three categories or the three categories have no place in Thai sex/gender system, but it should be emphasised that the concepts of gender and sexuality are also recently invented in the West. It is not surprising that many Thais and Westerners alike still find these three concepts confusing unless they have academically familiarised themselves with these concepts. Although there have been attempts to coin Thai terminologies for the English translation of 'gender' and 'sexuality,' respectively, many Thais still find them awkwardly translated. For example, there have been attempts to register *phetsaphap* (เพศสภาพ) as a translation for 'gender' and *phetwithi* (เพศวิถี) for 'sexuality,' respectively. *Phetsaphap* literally means sexual condition and *phetwithi* literally means sexual way or path, respectively. In short, the concept of *phet* is complex and still very pervasive in Thais understanding of sex, gender and sexuality.

It is also worth noting that *gay king* (เกย์คิง) and *gay queen* (เกย์ควีน) are colloquial sub-categories of *gay*. *Gay king* is a gay guy who performs an insertive role in sexual activities while *gay queen* prefers to be penetrated. *Both* (โบท, pronounced 'boat' in Thai) refers to someone who enjoys both active and passive sexual roles. *Gay king*, *gay queen* and *both* can be crudely compared

with the English terms of ‘top/active,’ ‘bottom/passive’ and ‘versatile,’ respectively.

Tom (ทอม) and *dee* (ดี้) 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.

Chairakchai (ชายรักชาย – lit. men (who) love men) and *yingrakyong* (หญิงรักหญิง – lit. women (who) love women) are the most recent terms for homosexuals, coined in Thai language by lesbian and gay rights activists. *Yingrakyong* was coined first as the attempt to find an alternative identity to that of lesbian. *Anjaree*²⁰ (อันญจารี) is the first lesbian group who started using this term in 1986. *Chairakchai* has become an alternative for *gay* in the past decade. It is worth noting that *rak* (รัก) or ‘love’ is also central to the conceptualisation of these two terms, apparently similar to the more official binary of *rakruamphet* (homosexual) and *raktangphet* (heterosexual).

Chaiching yingthae (ชายจริงหญิงแท้) literally means ‘real’ men ‘true’ women²¹, equivalent to ‘straight’ (men and women) in English. Jackson (1999: 5) argues 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 *kathoey* are ‘marked categories’ or ‘labels’ exclusively for socially non-normative sexual behaviours. As a result, heterosexual men and women are unmarked and

²⁰ *Anjaree* means someone who follows a different path.

²¹ ‘Real men true women’ is my own translation of *chaiching yingthae* (ชายจริงหญิงแท้). *Ching* (จริง) and *thae* (แท้) have the same meaning of being real, genuine or original.

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.

Maipa diaokan (ไม้ป่าเดียวกัน) is another colloquial term for homosexuality. *Mai* (ไม้) literally means ‘wood,’ but here it is shortened for ‘tree’ or *tonmai* (ต้นไม้) in Thai. *Pa* (ป่า) means ‘forest.’ *Diaokan* (เดียวกัน) is an adjectival phrase, meaning ‘same.’ *Maipa diaokan* can be crudely translated as ‘trees in the same forest.’ *Maipa diaokan* is also known in contemporary contexts for its implicit reference to men who prefer to have sex with men or *phuchai chop maipa diaokan* (ผู้ชายชอบไม้ป่าเดียวกัน). It should be noted that this expression is not applicable to women who have sex with women. It is still unclear why *maipa diaokan* has become an exclusive metaphor for homosexual men. Possibly, it might be because ‘tree’ is a sub-consciously phallic symbol according to Freud (1991: 188)²². Traditionally, direct references to sex are considered inappropriate in Thai culture. This might explain linguistic problems for non-Thai speakers that certain words could have more than one meaning depending on the context. For example, *fangdap* (ฟันดาบ) would mean sword fighting in ordinary circumstances. However, in certain contexts, it denotes male homoeroticism. *Tiching* (ตีฉิ่ง) literally refers to the clash of cymbals²³, but also exclusively denotes female homoeroticism.

²² Freud's Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis was firstly published in 1962.

²³ Cymbals are Thai musical instruments, made of bell-like small round metal plates, which are hit together to create a musical sound.

Research Objectives and Theoretical Frameworks

If the proverb “a picture is worth a thousand words” is true, the following two pictures may well summarise precarious situations homosexuals in Thailand are experiencing. While homosexuals have been socially tolerated and allowed to lead their homosexual ‘lifestyles,’ their sexual orientation is still socially unacceptable in accordance with Thailand’s pervasive heteronormative discourses of sex/gender appropriateness.



Figure 1 Chulalongkorn University staff ushering a transgender graduate away from participating in her faculty’s graduate group photograph.
(Source:<http://topicstock.pantip.com/chalermthai/topicstock/2008/06/A6752058/A6752058.html>)



Figure 2 Colourful costumes in Bangkok Gay Pride Parade November 2006
 (Source: <http://www.balconypub.com/gallery.html/gallery=061105,year=2006>)

The idea for this thesis was originally conceived back in winter 2004 when I was watching a Thai TV series, called *Rak Paet Phan Kao* (รักแปดพันเก้า - Love 8009), in Bangkok. The series is about a group of young people, living in the same apartment building in Bangkok. Interestingly, one of the major couples in the series is a gay couple: 'Chon' (จอน) and 'Thi' (ที), respectively. Unlike other Thai soap operas, these two gay characters have never shown their gender ambiguity or inclination towards effeminacy. This is considered the very first time ever that the two gay lovers are not subject to social ridicule of their non-normative sexuality. The public reception towards this series was unexpectedly very good. Despite the widespread rumour that the series might have been cancelled due to the intensive social order campaigns²⁴ in 2005 by the Thaksin²⁵

²⁴ Thaksin's social order campaigns started in 2003 when he declared the national war on narcotics. He promised to eradicate Thai 'social illnesses,' including drugs and prostitution. During 2003 – 2005, numerous night clubs and gay saunas were often raided on weekly basis by vice squads, consisting of senior advisors to the interior minister, police and reporters, to reenforce strict laws on underage patrons, drug usage and prostitutions.

²⁵ Thaksin Shinawatra (ทักษิณ ชินวัตร) was one of the most popular Thai Prime Ministers (2001 – 2006). He was toppled by a military junta, called 'the Council for National Security' (*sapha khwam mankhong haeng chat* - สภาความมั่นคงแห่งชาติ) in 2006. His policies were popular especially among

government, the final seventieth episode ended as Chon and Thi emigrated to the U.S. together.

My initial reaction to this series was inexplicable. That is, on the one hand, I was content with the changing image of Thai gay men on national television. On the other hand, I was wondering if this was the starting point for homo-equality. These questions made me reflect on my own experience as a gay man who at that time had been living in London for a year and a half and had completed my master's degree in gender, culture and modernity. Out of my own curiosity and some discussions with my friends in Bangkok, I realised the significance of the issue of 'coming out' of the hetero-closet that it was not only central to being gay, but also crucial for the social recognition and validation of homosexuality. I started looking into the issue of sexual rights and constitutional equality in search for answers why homosexuality is still socially and legally non-existent despite no records of oppression against sexual minorities in the country and the long standing misperception of 'gay paradise' continuing to circulate among the Western gay press.

I then structured my research to locate homosexuality in Thai public discourses to examine how homoeroticism has been placed outside the legitimate realm, irrespective of pervasive references to same-sex desires in

rural Thai voters but were heavily criticised by urban middle class Thais. During his 5 years in power, he was accused of numerous conflicts of interests, human rights abuse, and media censorship. He is currently residing outside Thailand after fleeing his 2-year prison sentence from one of his many ongoing corruption trials. Since losing his power, he has been sponsoring an anti-government group, called 'The National United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship' (แนวร่วมประชาธิปไตยต่อต้านเผด็จการแห่งชาติ – *Naeoruum Prachathippatai Totan Phadetkan Haeng Chat*) to destabilise Thailand's political and economic stability in order to regain his wealth and his political power. This group is also known as 'The Red Shirt' (*suea daeng* - เสื้อแดง). Their violent actions forced Thai government to cancel the ASEAN Summit in April 2009. The Red Shirt Group was also responsible for the anarchic unrest in Bangkok in April 2009 and April 2010. It should be noted that at the time of writing this thesis, 920 million pounds worth of his money from the tax evasion charge is being frozen and awaiting the confiscation while his appeal is being reviewed in the supreme court.

both traditional and modern Thai public discourses. This research attempts to understand how Thailand's homosexual minorities have negotiated their peripheral positions within heteronormative frameworks and to observe whether the social validation of gay relationships in Thailand's mainstream discourses is still beyond imaginable materialisation.

To address the above questions, I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach to establish the theoretical framework for this thesis. It is a framework influenced by research and scholarships in post-structuralist theory, queer and post-colonial theory as well as ethnographic research on Thai culture.

Michel Foucault's analysis of 'power relations' is insightful in opening up the issue of discursive forms of power relations between hetero-majority and homo-minority. Rather than simply a set of relations between the oppressor and the oppressed, says Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* (1980: 89),

"Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a net like organisation...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application."

This concept of 'power relations' is pragmatic when approaching sensitive and taboo subject such as sexuality in Thai culture. To follow Foucault, it is, therefore, imperative to examine the discursive network of power operating in society in terms of not only legal issue such as the homophobic legislations, but also social and cultural issues such as homosexual status in religious teaching, sexual norms and representations in mainstream discourses and so on. These are parts of the discursive power network, explicitly and implicitly enforcing the social construction of homosexuality for not only homosexual individuals but also

non-homosexuals. Through the study of mainstream discourses, it can be suggested that the power interaction between homo-minority and hetero-majority can be highlighted as homo-minority should not be seen as passive in the power relations, but rather a point where power is enacted and renegotiated.

Judith Butler's theorisation of 'gender performativity' also provides an analytical tool to deconstruct Thailand's social embodiment of non-conventional sexual identities. Butler postulates that gender is a performative effect of discourse. Butler (1990: 25) puts it:

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result."

Butler's performativity theory has given a helpful departure point for my investigation of non-conventional sexual identities in Thailand. That is, like gender, it is crucial to understand how the proliferation of sexual identities such as gay emerged in Thailand in the 1960s as Butler puts it as "a set of repeated acts within highly rigid regulatory frame" (ibid. p.33). In other words, 'gay' identities can be understood as a continuing process of repetition and reconstruction within the limited spatiality of social discourses.

Connecting Butler's theory of performativity and Foucault's analysis of power relations, I do acknowledge that contemporary Thai gay subjects either as individuals or collectives such as gay rights groups are enacted out of the intensive construction in public discourses, tightly controlled by the heteronormative institutions. That is, their choice of redefinition or reconfiguration of their identities were pre-scripted or dictated by the hetero-values. However, the relations between hetero-majority and homo-minority are not simply in a top-

down direction. Built on Foucault's model of power and resistance, I am arguing that these gay subjects have realised their limitations, but they at the same time negotiate their alternative and resistant identifications within the prescribed social norms.

At this point, the historical and anthropological researches on Thai culture and gay studies, particularly Penny van Esterik's theory of Thailand's contextual sensitivity (2000) and Peter A. Jackson's substantial works (1989, 1995a, 1995b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b) on a range of topics from his interpretation of Thai discourses regarding homosexuality to his genealogical analysis of Thai sex/gender system, are crucial in accommodating the combined theoretical model of Foucault and Butler. Observations on social interaction between homo-subjects and public discourses are supplemented in this thesis by the lived and ethnographic experiences of Thai gay individuals who participated in this project. Through the study of personal narratives unveiled by the interviews, it is possible to discover how the prevailing social norms and discourses play significant parts in shaping informants' subjectivities, thereby illuminating the contested relations between social orders and individuals' agency. The rich data from the interview not only emphasise my argument that Thai gay subjects are aware of their socially and politically circumscribed position in manoeuvring their demand for equality, but also elucidate the interplay between Thai gay individuals and Thai society. The ethnographic data, in addition, reveal the ongoing dialectical processes of negotiation between Thai gay individuals and Thai mainstream society.

Writings on Thai Non-Normative Genders and Sexualities

Studies on sexual minorities have often not received adequate attention in Thai academia (Rakkit Rattachumpoth 1999: xvii). As Jackson (1999c: 228) asserts,

“It is extremely difficult for Thai scholars to conduct research openly on homosexuality within Thai academia, with the mention of the topics tending to arouse either embarrassment (especially amongst female academics) or derisive and dismissive laughter (from males).”

When homosexuality becomes the subject of academic inquiry, it is often described as ‘social problem.’ Jackson’s investigation into 207 Thai language books, academic journals and postgraduate theses published between 1956 and 1994 on homosexuality reveals a double standard and discrimination Thai academics have often employed. A majority of these writings still concluded homosexuality to be a pathology and perversion (1999b: 29-60).

Terdsak Romjumpa (เทิดศักดิ์ รั่มจำปา) points out to the unchanging attitude towards homosexuality as perversion in a university textbook for teacher trainees, called *Sex Education* (เพศศึกษา – *Phetsueksa*), edited by Suchat and Wannai Somprayun (สุชาติ และ วันนี โสมประยูร – 1978) despite being re-edited and published for the fourth time in 2001. It seems that Suchat and Wannai have never updated their knowledge about homosexuality, highlights Terdsak, despite the fact that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) de-listed homosexuality as a category of psychological disorder in 1974 (2002: 148-9).

The fact that transgenderism and homosexuality are generally tolerated in Thai society has often misled some heterosexual Thai and Western researchers to assume that homosexuality is not an issue but is rather accepted in Thailand;

thereby, it is often thought of being insignificant and unworthy of academic inquiry (Jackson 1999c: 228).

Thailand's high visibility of non-conventional gender and sexual practices in the social milieu, on the contrary, is cited as an inspirational departure point for a number of non-Thai researchers on Thai transgenderism and homosexuality. Totman (2003: 1-2) notes that the article about Thai *kathoey* he read while travelling to Thailand as a tourist in 1999 drew his attention to the study of Thai transgenderism. Jackson (1989: 1) describes his fascination with Thais' attitudes towards homosexuality, which he experienced while living and working in Thailand between 1983 and 1985, as a motivation for studying homosexuality in Thailand.

The lack of interests among Thai researchers as well as the culturally sensitive nature of the topic might well explain the shortage of Thai language academic writings regarding this issue. This is not surprising that a number of the academic writings on Thailand's marginalised sexualities, which have influenced me during the course of this project, have been conducted by researchers who can be categorised as 'Westerners.'

Peter Jackson is considered as one of the pioneer researchers on Thai gay studies. He has extensively published various writings, covering a great number of topics in relation to Thailand's same-sex eroticism and transgender culture that have proved helpful to engage with.

In *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand* (1995), a revised version of *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: an Interpretation of Contemporary*

Thai Sources (1989), Jackson provides detailed and comprehensive insights into Thai male homosexuality. Particularly, relevant to non-Thai speakers, this book presents basic Thai vernacular terminologies for homosexualities spoken in Thailand. Jackson collects a great deal of information in relation to contemporary homosexual situations in Thailand. He also explains the distinction between the traditional form of Thai homosexuality, *kathoey*, and the English loan word of *gay*, contrasting with the effeminacy with which *kathoey* has long been associated.

Jackson also analyses corresponding letters to a columnist, called 'Ko Paknam' (โกปภักดิ์), in two weekly magazines, called *Plaek* (แปลก - Strange) and *Mahatsachan* (มหัศจรรย์- Miracle)²⁶. He identifies the uniform patterns people would write to 'Ko,' a pseudonym of the columnist. These letters provide Jackson with an in-depth understanding of how the newly emerged 'gay' identities were constructed in Thailand during the 60s and 70s. The correspondence between the columnist and letter senders also helps dispel myths about homosexuality and beliefs Thai gay men can hold about their lives.

Jackson questions the misperception of Western visitors to Thailand that this land of smiles is a gay refuge due to its lack of prosecution against homosexuals in the article, 'Tolerant but Unaccepting: the Myth of a Thai "Gay Paradise",' in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Thailand*, edited by Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (1999c: 226-242). Jackson argues that the increasing visibilities of sexual minorities as well as their involvements in local communities to some extent mislead non-Thai speakers about the double

²⁶ *Plaek* and *Mahatsachan* are weekly magazines, specialising in extra-ordinary news and stories such as the sightings of extraterritorial beings. The magazines also regularly publish a number of erotic stories.

standards and pressures for social conformity Thai homosexual men and women are facing. Despite the increase of entertainment businesses catering for gay men and women, particularly in major cities throughout the country, Thai gay men and women are still facing social discrimination and antagonism because of their non-conformist sexuality.

Jackson also co-edited *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand* (1999) with Gerard Sullivan. The book puts together case studies of Thailand's contemporary male, female homosexuality and transgenderism by eight Western researchers.

In the first article of the book, 'A Panoply of Roles: Sexual and Gender Diversity in Contemporary Thailand,' Jackson and Sullivan point out the fact that the common misperception of Thailand as a gay paradise was caused by Thais' tolerance of homosexuality and the increasing visibility of transgenders and gay people in the public space. Homosexuality, however, is still largely considered as 'unacceptable behaviour' in Thailand. Yet, unlike the legal and religious prosecutions which gay women and men in the West have traditionally encountered, Thai homosexuals face rather implicit and non-interventionist sanctions i.e. gossiping, withholding approval of inappropriate behaviours and so forth (1999: 4).

Jackson (cited in *ibid.*, pp. 5-6) argues that the concept of *gay* has been assigned a place in Thai sex/gender system as another form of multiple Thai masculinities, not as part of gay/straight binary opposition as in the Western conception of sexuality. This is due to Thai indigenous concept of *phet* (เพศ), in which differences of sex, gender and sexuality are integrated into a single

paradigm. This remains a dominant discourse of the Thai sex/gender system despite the greater influence of Western concepts of sexuality in both academic and popular discourses.

Prudence Borthwick's article in the same collection, 'HIV/AIDS Projects with and for Gay Men in Northern Thailand' (pp. 61-79) looks at two HIV prevention campaigns in Northern Thailand. She firstly examines the methods and approaches of organisers of 'Miss Angel *Kathoey* Beauty Contest' employed to send their messages about the importance of HIV prevention and AIDS awareness to the public. To her surprise, the Miss Angel project challenged her understanding about the public and private distinction as Miss Angel organisers demystified the HIV/AIDS knowledge and presented it through collective entertainment by using the *kathoey* beauty contest to attract the general public's attention. The contest was held in a department store in central Chiang Mai city where access to people from kindergarten children to older people could enjoy the public entertainment from the contest as well as be informed about the HIV prevention through questions posed to contestants. Interestingly, contestants were strongly encouraged to have their HIV blood tests as part of the contest and some even received the shocking news from the organisers that some of them were tested positive, leaving them anxiously to find out privately with the organisers if they were positive or not after the contest.

Miss Angel contests shows how Western perception about private and public has to be rethought even in the sensitive case like HIV testing. This also raises questions about the cultural differences where collectivity and individuality might entwine differently in a different social context.

Borthwick's second case study of Ban Coh's Anti-AIDS association organised by a group of gay men in Ban Coh village offers another testing site for Western conceptions about gay lives. Unlike most familiar Western contexts that Borthwick grew up with, gay men in Ban Coh village felt integrated into the hetero-majority. Ban Coh's gay association is not an urban but rural phenomenon. They identified themselves as gay men as *gay* represents something 'modern' and 'sophisticated,' in contrast with the traditional effeminate *kathoey* model.

The notion that *gay* identity represents 'modernity' due to its etymological connection with English and Western gay men since its emergence in Thailand is echoed in Stephen O. Murray's article, 'Increasingly Gay Self-Representations of Male-Male Sexual Experiences in Thailand' (p. 81-96). The article shows the significant proliferation of identification with *gay* by male homosexuals. He looks into erotic experiences published in two books *Dove Coos I* and *Dove Coos II* published in 1992 and 1995 respectively. Together with a study of Uncle Ko's column researched by Jackson, he also compares statistical data on inter-class relationships. His findings confirm what Borthwick reported earlier that *gay* from the 1990s denotes a sense of sophistication and 'modernity' while *kathoey*, the traditional form of Thai homosexuality, now exclusively means transgender or transsexual people. There is a significant increase of people identifying with *gay* as a masculine identity and disassociating with the effeminacy the *kathoey* traditional model signifies.

Observations and critical analyses made by these non-Thai researchers are very useful for studying culturally sensitive issues such as non-normative

gender and sexual relations which have long been neglected by Thai researchers for the above reasons. These writings are even interestingly constructive in contributing to a more in-depth understanding of culturally tabooed topics of sex and sexuality which are generally avoided by Thai researchers. A number of these writings arguably offer the extensive explanation about how gender and sexual identities have been traditionally understood in the Thai society as well as shaped through the interaction with foreign gender and sexual values.

In the article, 'Performative Genders, Perverse Desires: A Bio-History of Thailand's Same-Sex and Transgender Cultures' (2003), Jackson argues against the assumption that modernity and globalisation necessarily led to an international homogenisation of sexual cultures. Based on Foucault's 'bio-power' and 'genealogical approach,' Jackson asserts that the history of legal and religious suppression on same-sex eroticism combined with the development of the pathologically medical and psychiatric discourses on homosexuality in the West during the nineteenth century incited the discourse of sexuality and the 'speciation' of homosexuality in the West. Jackson also argues that there was no similar regimes of 'bio-power' operated in Thailand prior to the period of the emergence of new sexual identities in the 1960s (*ibid.*, pp. 1-2). That is, unlike the West, homosexuality has never been subject to legal nor religious prosecution in Thailand.

Jackson posits that gender rather than sexuality played a crucial role in the construction of modern Thai sexual identities due to Thai State's re-gendering schemes since the nineteenth century in an attempt to civilise Thai

populace in parallel with the Western standard (ibid., p. 28). According to journals, written by Western missionaries and merchants who travelled to the Kingdom of Siam²⁷ in the nineteenth century, Siamese people were criticised for being androgynous due to the lack of 'visible' gender differentiation. (ibid., pp. 11-12) For fear of colonisation in the second half of the nineteenth century and to achieve an ambition to become a 'powerful' (civilised or *araya* (อารยะ) in Thai) nation during the first half of the twentieth century, this critique was promptly and strategically met by successive Siamese political elites' projects of gender re-imagination. From the absolute monarchic reign of King Mongkut (Thai. Phrabat Somdet Phra Chomkiao Chaoyuhau - พระบาทสมเด็จพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว - reign 1851-1868) to the military dictatorship under Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkram (จอมพล แปลก พิบูลสงคราม - first premiership 1938-1944, second premiership 1948-1957), Thais were subjected to a succession of royal and governmental initiations to refashion Thai citizens alongside the Western gender perception. The re-gendering project reached its peak in 1941 when Prime Minister Plaek issued the 'The Office of Prime Minister Announcement, regarding 'State Preferences' (*ratthaniyom* - รัฐนิยม), Number 10²⁸, regulating general public codes of dressing in order to maintain 'public order' in conformity with 'civilised' (Western) gender values. This decree was followed by the dressing guidelines, issued by the Interior Ministry, providing specific details for

²⁷ Siam (สยาม) was the official name of Thailand until 1939.

²⁸ During 1938-1945, Thailand, under the authoritarian ruling of Plaek Phibunsongkram, entered a significant transformation of national culture. The Announcement of State Preferences can be understood as the attempt by Phibunsongkram to transform Siam into a modern state of Thailand. There were in total 12 issues of State Preferences, covering a range of cultural revolutions to reconstruct a new State of Ethnic "Thai", for example, the State preferences, issue 1, announces the changing of the official name of the country from Siam to Thailand in 1939, issue 4 commands Thai citizens to stand up in order to pay respect to the Thai National Anthem and the Royal Anthem every time the songs are heard. It can be said that the influence of the State Preferences, issue 1 and 4 still remains prominent in Thailand until today.

what men and women should wear and not to wear in certain public places and occasions. According to the regulations, Thai men and particularly women were officially disallowed to wear a traditional unisex *Chongkraben* (โจงกระเบน) in public places and were required to put on trousers and skirts for men and women, respectively (ibid., p. 22)²⁹.

The same year also witnessed Prime Minister Plaek's additional policy on naming of Thai citizens to reassure the efficiency of his re-gendering project. Due to the gender-ambiguous connotation of certain Thai names, Prime Minister Plaek ordered the formation of the 'Committee for Establishing the Principles for Assigning Personal Names' to provide Thai citizens a list of gender-specified names. The prime minister required all Thais to participate in his national civilising mission. Thai parents under Field Marshal Plaek's government were recommended to assign the names for their newborn children according to the list of gender-appropriate names, issued by the committee.

Not only did Field Marshall Plaek's twelve 'State Preferences' and subsequent regulations bring dramatic changes in Thais' livelihood by re-assigning the distinctive gender conceptualisation to Thai public, but also led to the formation of visible gendered subjectivities (ibid., pp. 23-24). Jackson posits that the gender politeness markers: *khrap* (ครับ) for men and *kha* (ค่ะ) for women, respectively, are also the 'by-products'³⁰ of Plaek's regendering schemes since it

²⁹ Further information can be found in Arts and Culture Magazine (*Sinlapa Watthanatham* – ศิลปวัฒนธรรม), August, 1997, p. 87-109, also see Van Esterick (2000: 103).

³⁰ Based on the study of the first person pronouns in Thai language by Voravudhi Chirasombutti (วรวิฑูรี จิระสมบัติ) et al. (in Jackson and Cook 1999: 114-35), the contemporary gender-marked first person pronouns: *phom* and *dichan* for men and women, respectively, are likely the unintended 'by-products' of Thai State's introduction of the gender re-imagining propagandas to the populace. Voravudhi et al. postulate that first pronouns, showing marked gender distinctions, are, in fact, the modern development in Thai language. For example, before 1882, *dichan* (ดิฉัน) appeared to have been used

has now become necessary for Thais to mark their gender apart from other personal qualifications, such as age, social status, occupation and so forth (ibid., p. 24).

Built on Butler's notion of gender performativity, Jackson explains that the unintended shift of discursive self-representation in Thai pronoun system is the result of Thai State gender re-imagining campaigns, enforcing the repetition of pervasive performances clearly marked feminine and masculine, respectively (ibid., p. 25). When Thais' public representation of masculinity and femininity became visibly distinguishable after 1941, it is likely that the alteration of Thais' gender perception and gendered re-imagination somehow constitutes the proliferation of new sexual identities (ibid., p. 26-31). Jackson (ibid., p. 26) suggests that:

“It is a corollary of Butler's above observations that new forms of sexual desires may emerge from a major shift in understandings of gender. Indeed, Butler provides the outlines of an alternative mechanism for incitement of proliferating forms of sexual being to that described by Foucault. It will be recalled Foucault argued that proliferating sexual diversity emerges as an unintended sequence of a new regime of power over sexuality. In contrast, Butler's work suggests that a somewhat similar outcome may emerge from a new mode of power over gender.”

In other words, through Thailand's historical specificity in relation to the re-fashioning of Thais' normative gender expressions, Jackson attempts to connect Thailand's self civilising projects with the emergence of new sexual identities, namely *kathoey*, *gay king*, *gay queen*, *tom*, *dee*, *bai*³¹. Argued by Jackson, the shift in understanding heteronormative gender norms and gender roles in the

by high-ranking royal men while it is only suitable for feminine identified speakers to refer to themselves as *dichan* in the contemporary Thai language.

³¹ *Gay king*, *gay queen*, *tom*, *dee*, and *bai* can be compared with the English terms of top (insertive sexual partner), bottom (receptive sexual partner), butch lesbian, femme lesbian, and bisexual, respectively.

Thai sex/gender system provides the space for the emergence of new eroticised identities as it has become possible for these identities to transgress, not the traditional gender perception but rather the 'civilised' version of heteronormative masculinity and femininity. Jackson additionally claims that it has only become possible to witness the transgression of 'civilised' gender norms particularly by transgenders or *kathoey* and its subsequently fractionated *gay*, *tom*, *dee*, and *bai* after World War II due to Thai State's successful re-fashioning campaigns upon its populace as the gender demarcation is now socially institutionalised in 'modernised' Thailand.

By concluding that it has become possible for the emergence of gendered subjectivities in Thailand only after the succession of Thai re-gendering campaigns, Jackson's argument seems to neglect aspects of Thais' understanding of gender differentiation. Despite what Western visitors to Thailand before the birth of Plaek Phibunsongkram's gender refashioning schemes often described Thai populace as androgynous, I am arguing in contrast to Jackson that ancestral Thais did possess cultural differentiation of gender. Post-colonial studies have shown that it was not uncommon for Western colonialists to ignore the indigenous cultural intelligence to legitimate their claim of cultural and racial superiority. Furthermore, familiar with contrasting gender characteristics in Europe, Western visitors to the old Siam were amazed and probably confused by local norms and customs they were not accustomed to. Anthropologists have also done a significant work revealing that different societies have different gender concepts and expressions. Siamese men and women might have had similar gender surfaces according to Western standards, but the local populace who were brought up in the tradition would have been

able to recognise the differences. Studies of historical and traditional literary scholarships³² have provided crucial evidences that the transgression of gendered subjectivities were recorded long before Plaek Phibunsongkram's initiation.

In comparison to the severe punishments and direct discrimination against homosexuality in traditional European countries, Western researchers are often amazed by Thais' tolerance against transgenderism and same-sex erotic relations. As a result, Thais' ethical positions regarding social treatments towards non-conventional gender categories and sexual practices are often generalised by non-Thai researchers as contextually and historically specific or unique to Thailand.

Richard Totman's study of *kathoey* in the north of Thailand underlines his attempt to explain why *kathoey* can be highly admired by the general public at the same time they are also suffering from both explicit and implicit antagonistic attitudes in Thai society. His book, *The Third Sex: Kathoey: Thailand's Ladyboys* (2003) can be divided into two parts – ethnographic narratives (biographies) which he had collected during his fieldwork between 2000 and 2001 and analyses of secondary resources. Totman uses narratives as a complement to historical and contextual analyses of *kathoey*. For example, when Lek prostituted herself due to financial temptation, the chapter is followed by a discussion of the sex industry in Thailand. He emphasises the necessity to listen to his subjects' stories, possibly because he is a psychologist, rather than to simply analyse discourses and what he has observed.

³² See Terdsak Romjumpa (2002) for detailed and extensive collection of Thai language historical and literature scriptures regarding non-normative gender and sexual identities in Thailand's traditional periods (before the World War II).

Totman's assumption about the possible connection between traditional and contemporary roles of *kathoey* as local entertainers was derived from a lack of knowledge about Thai traditional theatrical arts. His photographic evidence showing male performers in female role costumes is adopted to support his claim that *kathoey* in the traditional and modern periods perform the entertaining role for local populace and this role probably allows *kathoey* the space in the Thai public space as a part of society. However, this is not the case. Traditionally, only the king could possess all-female-troupe performers. Any other persons attempting to acquire similar possession to that of the king could be subject to severe punishment. Therefore, it was a tradition for outside royal court performing companies to be consisted of all-male-troupes.

However, Totman's study exposes the reality of what is perceived by outsiders as 'glossy' lifestyle these transgender cabaret performers are imagined to have without knowing the exploitation and discrimination which these transgender people are facing.

In *Materializing Thailand* (2000), Penny van Esterik posits that *kalathesa* or 'contextual sensitivity' is concerned with surfaces and appearances. She asserts that *kalathesa* "provides a way to give agency to the social cosmetic and elevate it into a significant social form" (p.36). She argues that "Thailand encourages an essentialism of appearances or surfaces" which are also gendered (p.4). Van Esterik also points out that Buddhist doctrine contributes both to the Thai fascination with gendered surfaces over essences or fixed gender identities, and to a greater fluidity of notions of normative masculinity and femininity (p.6).

Penny van Esterik's observation of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity in the Thai society is considered useful for my research as it offers the intrinsic cultural explanation for the social tolerance of homosexuality in Thailand, but it is also worth noting that this social etiquette of 'contextual sensitivity' should not be generalised as unique to Thai culture. Similar observations³³ can be made from other societies for example Japan where the value of politeness and consideration to others can be said to have been normatively and culturally embedded into the national mentality. Although this might be less imaginable in modern industrialised countries, particularly the West where it is often imperative for the state to guarantee the rules of law and individual civil rights, many Thais are still finding this social practice an easier way to avoid serious disputes and more effective than allowing the disagreements to escalate.

Thai Scholars Writing on Thai Gay Men

Despite the antagonistic sentiments towards studies of homosexuality in Thai universities, there are several Thai researchers whose works offer sharp and critical analyses of the social marginalisation of people with non-normative genders and sexualities. Terdsak Romjumpa's master's thesis, *Discourses on "Gay" in Thai Society 1965 – 2001* (2002) offers a detailed study of Thai language documents, archives and literatures on masculine-identified homosexuals or gays before and after 1965³⁴. His pioneering thesis helps position Thailand's conceptualisation of gayness in its historical events and

³³ Tom Boellstorff's *The Gay Archipelago* (2005) reveals a considerable level of tolerance of private practices of homosexual behaviours among diverse ethnic groups in Indonesia.

³⁴ See Jackson (1999a) for contextual analysis of the Darrell Berrigan's murder case in 1965, Bangkok. The word *gay* was firstly mention by the Thai press, investigating a *gay* subculture of masculine-identified prostitutes.

presents contested definitions of 'gayness,' produced by both dominant heteronormative discourses and Thai local homosexual groups.

Terdsak's thesis can be considered an exceptional case. Despite doing his master's degree in Chulalongkorn University (จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย), the oldest and most conservative³⁵ university in Thailand, he did not explicitly or implicitly advocate Thailand's prevailing notion of perverted homosexuality. As an openly gay person, Terdsak has been admired as a pioneer local gay scholar who disregards and challenges the taboo on homosexuality in the Thai academia. The fact that he did both his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University where the number of female and gay students and academic staff outnumber male ones might explain the unusual tolerance and openness towards homosexuality in the faculty³⁶. Terdsak's thesis was considered controversial at the time; however, his research has to certain extent contributed to the development of local gay studies as his extensively detailed analysis of discourses on *gay* in Thai society between 1965–2001 can be seen as a condensed encyclopaedia for the next generation of interested local researchers.

Nidhi Auesriwongse (นิธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์) is one of Thailand's contemporary well-known historians. He has published a significant amount of academic

³⁵ When Terdsak and I were doing our undergraduate studies at Chulalongkorn University in the 1990s, 'tradition' is one of the 5 key moral principles or SOTUS for short (i.e. seniority, order, tradition, unity and spirit), vigorously embedded onto new students through all year round extracurricular activities. At present, students are still expected to wear university uniforms, bearing the university emblem on daily basis. However, 'private' or casual but polite clothing is vigorously regulated. Students who refuse to follow the rules may risk having their behaviour points cut and if being cut for more than 51 points, they can be expelled. Students may also be prevented from attending lectures and entering certain buildings if found wearing incorrect or 'impolite' footwear.

³⁶ I have known Terdsak since 1994 when we both started our undergraduate degrees at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. There were only 27 male first year students in 1994 compared with 270 female first year students. Out of 27 male students, only 7 can be categorized as heterosexuals.

writings as well as regular articles in local Thai language daily and weekly newspapers. Unlike his academic contemporaries, Nidhi's chief interests are in the histories of ordinary people. He employs a deconstructionist approach to contextualise people's mundane activities and to challenge the official texts or knowledge.

In *About Sex: Thoughts, Self, and Sexual Bias/ Women, Gay, Sex Education, and Sexual Desires*, (ว่าด้วยเพศ ความคิด ตัวตน และอคติทางเพศ ผู้หญิง เกย์ และ กามารมณ์ – 2002 – *Wa Duai Phet Khwamkhit Tuaton Lae Akati Thang Phet Phuying Gay Lae Kamarom*) Nidhi discusses sexual 'taboo' issues in Thai society. This book is a collection of Nidhi weekly articles published in *Matichon*, (มติชน) a daily newspaper. Nidhi is the very first mainstream academic to present unorthodox perspectives on a number of cultural and historical issues. The articles in this book cover a range of topics from 'sex and power' to 'country girls.' In the first article of the book, 'Dui Dui Pai Su Tui'³⁷(ดูๆไปสุดดู), Nidhi theorises the connection between Thai gay men's exclusion from the public space (read = being culturally unaccepted) and the creation of gay men's secret vocabularies. These vocabularies, on the one hand, reflect a variety of technical terms in relation to gay men's sexual behaviours and activities, and on the other hand, express the lack of deeper and long lasting relationships among gay people due to social pressure (Ibid., p. 6).

Nidhi's article, 'Dui Dui Pai Su Tui,' illuminates social antagonistic attitudes towards gay men and their sexual behaviours through the study of gay men's

³⁷ *Dui Dui Pai Su Tui* is a linguistic play of an unofficial metaphor for homosexuals, namely *tui*. *Tui* was firstly used by Thai (tabloid) press in paedophile cases in the 1980s. *Tui* is a nickname of the guy who was accused of child sexual abuse. *Tui* has eventually transformed from a common name to a verb, meaning to have anal intercourse.

underground glossaries in Thailand. Nidhi's observation suggests the complex and deeper exclusion of sexual peripherals at the sub-conscious level. Yet, his comment on the lack of meaningful relationships among gay men, to some extent, reflects a heteronormative perception towards the popular image of gay men who are believed to be sexually promiscuous and unable to form meaningful and long-lasting relationships.

'Gay: in the lived backdrop of Silom' (เกย์: ในฉากชีวิตแห่งสีลมสถาน – *Gay: Nai Chak Chiwit Haeng Silom Sathan*)³⁸ is written by Pichet Suypan (พิเชษฐ์ สายพันธ์), a lecturer in the Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University. This article is part of *Peripheral Lives, Self and Meaning: case studies of gays, yingrakyong (หญิงรักหญิง - women who (love) women), elderly, domestic refuse collectors, teenagers, and homeless children (ชีวิตชายขอบ ตัวตนกับความหมาย กรณีศึกษา เกย์ หญิงรักหญิง คนชรา คนเก็บขยะ วัยรุ่น เด็กข้างถนน – Chiwit Chaikhop Tuaton Kap Khwammai Korani Sueksa Gay Yingrakyong Khonchara Khonkepkhaya Wairun Dekkhangthanon)*, edited by Paritta Chalernpow Koanantakool (ปริตตา เฉลิมเผ่า ก่ออนันตกุล - 2002). Pichet focuses his study on a group of Thai gay men who have frequented gay entertainment venues along Silom Road. His analysis of interviewees' gay identification through shared experiences in Silom underlines the interplay between space and cultural embodiment. Silom, according to Pichet (2002: 86) is not only a physical gay place, where gay punters' material needs are met by a range of services, tailored exclusively for gay consumers, but also an imaginary gay space, where their identification with the notion of being *gay* can be rediscovered and resignified. It is, in fact, the lived experiences of gay men who frequent Silom and their

³⁸ Silom is a commercial district in central Bangkok. It is one of the 'gay' centres in Bangkok.

interaction with the place that engender the meaningful space of gay Silom, which continues to be rewritten and resignified (Ibid., p. 92).

Despite Pichet's attempt to provide a comprehensive detail of developments of *gay* identities and their related historical processes, particularly in the United States, he leaves out the emergence of gay identity in Thailand as if Thai gay men's identification with the American notion of gayness were seamless, transcendently universal. His emphasis on the parallel development of gay entertainment venues along Silom Road and the subjectification of gay identity with the imaginary space of Silom risks essentialising the diverse experiences of Thai gay men and others who share the imaginary space of Silom to discover and resignify their sexualities.

Chapters Plan

This introductory chapter has outlined key arguments, vital to the understanding how Thai gay men have negotiated their social positions and self-imagination within the discursive regime of heteronormativity. I have also discussed the theoretical framework and background to this research project. I have also pointed out how the interdisciplinary methods of ethnographic interviews and the discourses analysis of diverse academic and popular resources would enable me to gain insights into these complex power relations.

Chapter two: Researching Thai Unimaginable Sexualities, discusses how two research methods of discourse analysis and ethnographic interview are employed to identify power relations between Thai gay men and Thai heteronormative society in Thai public discourses. Since I have collected

research data from diverse sources, I will describe how they will be analysed in subsequent chapters. I will also address an important role of the Internet for this research. As I have spent most of my time outside Thailand, the Internet has enabled me to maintain my connection not only with my research participants, but also with Thai gay communities in multi-locations. I will also discuss how I conducted the ethnographic interviews with twelve Thai gay men whose trust and friendships are vital for this research project in gaining insightful information in relation to interviewees' contested identification with *gay* identity. Since I have written this thesis in English, I will draw attention to the emerging analytical issues such as 'cultural translation,' 'contextual sensitivity' during the data collection and analysis.

In Chapter three: Mapping Thai Homosexuality in a Queer World, I will explore debates around 'global queering' and the position of Thai gay men who identify with the label *gay*. I will trace the conceptualisation of the traditional sex/gender category, *kathoey* in relation to the introduction of *gay* identity in 1965 by the Thai press. I will examine how the identity *gay* is experienced in Thai contexts. The personal narratives of twelve Thai gay men who participated in this research will also be included to show how they understood differences of both identities: *kathoey*, and *gay* as well as the social stigma, attaching to both sex/gender categories. By identifying as *gay*, Thai gender normative male homosexuals are able to reassert their masculinity and distinguish themselves from the socially loaded term of *kathoey*, but the emergence of *gay* after the murder case in 1965 and the fact that the word *gay* highlights the non-normative sexual relations proves problematic for some gay men who prefer to maintain their positive presentation in the public space.

Chapter four: Positioning Same-Sex Eroticism in Religious and Historical Thailand is intended to study marginalised social positions of people with non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices in religious and historical discourses. I will investigate the existence of non-normative sex/gender categories and sexual practices in Thailand's pre-modern literatures to identify the presupposition of the Buddhist tolerance of homosexuality and Buddhist influences towards the social positioning of same-sex relations in contemporary Thailand. I will also investigate the traditional legal scriptures of the 'Three Seals Law' to study the social and legal exclusion of sexual minorities before the modernisation period in the nineteenth century.

In Chapter five: Homosexuality and Contextual Sensitivity, I will investigate how the notion of *kalathesa* (กาลเทศะ) or contextual sensitivity helps explain Thai social tolerance of same-sex relations. I will look into the role that *kalathesa* plays in the personal acceptance of homosexuality or 'coming out.' As Thais across social classes culturally tend to avoid public discussions of sex and sexuality, 'coming out' may also prove problematic for many gay men as the identification with *gay* as a sexual marker brings unnecessary attention to their same-sex relations. The lived experiences of research participants will also be analysed to show how they understand what 'coming out' means to their relationships with themselves and their families.

Chapter six: Negotiating Images – Representations of Non-Normative Genders and Sexualities aims to discuss the politics of negotiations, arguably employed by Thai gay men. Continuing from Chapter five, I will explore how *kalathesa* plays a significant part in shaping Thai gay men's politics of inclusivity

and the integration to mainstream society. To further explore this point, I will focus on the analysis of two Thai *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films: *Satri Lek* (2000, *The Iron Ladies*) and *Sat Pralat* (2004, *Tropical Malady*). Both films can be argued to offer understanding of Thailand's exterior tolerance of homosexuality. The messages asserting throughout both films reveal the dialectic relationship between the heteronormative orthodoxy and the emerging diverse discourses of homosexual identities in contemporary Thailand. The film analysis is also complemented by personal narratives of research participants who also emphasise the awareness of *kalathesa* in negotiating relationships not only with their families, but also with Thai heteronormative society.

In Chapter seven: Exposing the Myth of Thailand's Gay Paradise, I will firstly outline the arguments I have extensively discussed in previous chapters. I will then examine the social and political events regarding same-sex relations in Thailand since the introduction of the 1997 'People's Constitution as the starting point of the social negotiation of the LGBT rights activists to exercise their constitutional rights. I will focus on the examination of the press reports of the discrimination against LGBT people as well as the political negotiation made by the LGBT rights activists. I will also argue that due to the lack of legal recognition of same-sex relations, homosexual men and women are unable to imagine and materialise their existence in Thai society.

Chapter eight: Conclusion: Demystifying Social Tolerance of Homosexuality argues that the social tolerance of homosexuality may be just a myth, similar to the 'gay paradise' one. I will also discuss what disadvantages of Thai LGBT public campaigns for social acceptance might be for same-sex

relationships. Particularly, I will explore how the identitarian politics might be contextually problematic in Thai society.

Chapter 2: Researching Thai Unimaginable Sexualities

This chapter discusses research methods and analytical issues emerging during and after the collection of research data. Having discussed my conceptual and theoretical frameworks in Chapter one, I will further outline and examine methodological approaches I have used for this thesis, namely discourse analysis and ethnographic interview. The result of combining two methods can be said to have substantially contributed to insights into the power relations between Thai gay men and the heteronormative Thai society. I will also address how I analyse the research data and methodological issues arisen when I was analysing and interpreting textual, visual and interview materials.

Since the research materials were collected from diverse sources, I will firstly discuss how analysing these different types of public and popular discourses can be argued to complement ethnographic interviews of research participants in illuminating the interwoven cultural intricacy and the social tolerance of homosexuality in this Southeast Asian nation.

Secondly, I will draw attention to the essential role of the Internet in this research project. Having been the indispensable part of modern lifestyles, the Internet arguably allowed me not only to keep in touch with my research participants, but also to maintain up-to-date knowledge about LGBT movements in Thailand despite spending most of my time researching and writing my thesis in London.

Thirdly, I will describe ethnographic interviews with twelve *gay*-identified Thai men whose understandings about the identification with the label *gay* and their personal narratives provided me invaluable research data.

Since all interviews were conducted in Thai and subsequently translated into English, not only did I struggle to maintain Thai nuances in English translated versions, but also encountered the cultural and contextual complexity of interview scripts. Therefore, I will discuss these emerging analytical issues to draw attention to the notion of cultural translation, which is arguably important for researching a culturally sensitive issue such as sexuality in Thailand.

I will also introduce a number of emerging issues from the interview materials, but they will not be addressed in detail in this thesis due to the limit of research frameworks, which primarily focus on Thai homosexual men's identification with *gay* identity and their related issues around the political negotiation for social inclusivity. This discussion shows that the ethnographic interviews with these twelve Thai *gay* men have also generated interesting and rich data, which this research project may not have had adequate time and resources to cover these interesting topics, for example, the issue of 'foreign exoticism,' the rethinking of power relations in cross-cultural relationships.

Analysing Thai Public Discourses

Having said in Chapter one that I was inspired by Foucault's notion of 'power relations,' my examination of Thai public discourses regarding non-normative genders and sexualities in this thesis focuses on power relations between homo-minorities and hetero-majorities in order to understand how

homosexuality has been socially constructed as an unacceptable behaviour in Thai society regardless of the popular perception of Thais' tolerance of homosexuality, widely recognised the world over. Therefore, I have taken up critical and interpretative approaches to analyse the use of language and the ways in which social conceptions and attitudes towards same-sex relations are shaped in Thai public discourses.

Argued by Fran Tonkiss (2001: 246), a sociological approach to discourse analysis investigates the social production of knowledge through the use of language "which is seen not simply as a neutral medium for communicating information, but as a domain in which our knowledge of the social world is actively shaped." These public discourses are not just texts, reflecting the social reality of ill-fated lives of people with non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices, but rather social space where power networks of Thai heteronormative establishments are discursively and repetitively enacted. In other words, these public discourses are sites in which Thais' understanding of non-normative gender and sexual identities are created and reproduced, and social identities of these sexual minorities are also formed.

By public discourses, I mean historical, religious, legal, literary and media documents or texts which have been circulated in the Thai public arena. Public discourses here can also be argued to contain authoritative accounts which are often popularly referred to as 'official' or 'standardised' sites of discursive knowledge in Thai society.

In Chapter three, in comparison to the analysis of Rosalind C. Morris (1994) regarding the conceptualisation of the third sex in Thai sex/gender

system, I also provide the arguably official definitions of *kathoey* derived from the Royal Institute Thai language dictionary, compiled by Thailand's senior and well-known academic figures.

As an indispensable part of Thai culture, analysing Buddhist texts can be said to provide pivotal data for understanding of the peripheral status of people with non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices in Thai society. In Chapter four, I examine Buddhist core teachings and monastic rules for monks from the *Tipitaka* or Buddhist Canon in relation to Buddhist anti-homosexual attitudes and exclusion of non-normative gender and sexual categories i.e. *pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka* from participating in Buddhist monastic communities. I also draw attention to paradoxical gaps between Buddhist emphases on non-confrontation and compassion, and daily anti-homosexual practices of exclusion justified by Buddhist canonical proscription and worldviews.

In the second part of Chapter four, I explore similar accounts of social exclusion of people with non-normative gender and sexual categories in Thai traditional legal scriptures, *Three Seals Laws (Kotmai Tra Sam Duang – 1808 – 1907)* by which *kathoey* and *bando* (บัณเฑาะก์)³⁹ are banned from testifying in legal disputes. I also investigate the historical and literary texts regarding same-sex relations before the emergence of modern homosexual identities in the 1960s in order to position people with non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices in historical contexts as these texts present the discursive construction of homosexuality as an unacceptable sexual behaviour but the texts

³⁹ *Bando* is derived from the Pali term *pandaka*. The definition of *bando* is quite complex and will be further explored in Chapter four. *Bando* is often translated as *kathoey* in contemporary usage.

also indicate the social tolerance of same-sex relations in traditional Thai societies.

In this thesis, substantial research data is derived in addition from contemporary Thai language academic literature on the issue of homosexuality and transgenderism in Thailand, written by Thai historians, for example, Nidhi Auesriwongse (2002), Kittisak Prokkati (1983), Chetta Puanghat (2000). I have also drawn on the works of young Thai academics on the subject of gays, *kathoei* and same-sex eroticism. In particular, I have cited materials from Terdsak Romjumba's Master's thesis (2002), and Orathai Panya's conference paper (2005), respectively. Terdsak's master thesis (2002), titled *Discourses on 'Gay' in Thai Society 1965-2001*, provides historical backgrounds for the emergence and conceptualisation of 'gayness' in modern Thailand. Orathai's paper on *Sex and Libido in Thai Literature* also offers a theoretical support on the traditional views of sexuality found in Thai literature.

Since I came to London in 2001, Thai LGBT situations have constantly changed. To be able to access to the up-to-date information, I have researched the contemporary Thai press and their attitudes towards gay men and *kathoei* and also collected a range of news reports, newspaper articles as well as talk show scripts, television series, electronic materials in relation to gay men, gay lifestyles and social discussions on 'gay problems.' In Chapter one, the extracts of news report and the related news articles regarding political campaigns for constitutional equality by Thai LGBT rights activists were intended to emphasise my point that the power relations between homo-minorities and hetero-majorities

in Thai society are more complex than to be simply seen as non-resistant power relations.

I also draw attention to the use of language by Thai mainstream press when referring to transgenders or gay men to show that the social misperception of non-normative gender and sexual categories as 'unnatural' or 'abnormal' is still pervasively reproduced in Thailand's contemporary popular discourses. However, the mainstream press are also political sites where counter-discriminatory discussions and the negotiation for social inclusivity are often made by Thai LGBT rights activists.

As homosexuality is still culturally considered as 'inappropriate' in Thailand, I include the 'coming out' scene from the Thai language film, *The Love of Siam* (2007) and five images from that scene in the beginning of Chapter five in order to introduce the notion of contextual sensitivity or *kalathesa* in the negotiation of social tolerance of homosexuality by Thai gay men.

In Chapter six, I also analyse two Thai language films in more details. The films are *Sat Pralat* (2004, a.k.a. *Tropical Malady*) and *Satri Lek* (2000, a.k.a. *The Iron Ladies*). The analysis of visual materials in this research is used to explore the notion of contextual sensitivity in relation to questions of gay identity and gay visibility in Thai public discourses. The analysis looks into the relationship between Thai practice of tolerance towards sexual minorities and Thai gay men's increasing appropriation of the mainstream media. As the homosexual experience of social exclusion and discrimination is often described as a form of social invisibility and gay identity politics can be seen as a struggle to obtain public visibility, the visual materials offer partially helpful

understandings of the continuous negotiation process between Thai gay men and hetero-majorities. The film analysis also aims to understand how mechanisms of social inclusion and social sanctions towards sexual minorities work in contemporary visually mass mediated societies.

It is worth noting that images, accompanying the film analysis in Chapter six, are primarily intended to virtually supplement discussions of relevant film stories and characters. The set of images from *Sat Pralat* (2004) when Tong's mother found Keng's love note are designated to implicitly highlight the cultural sensitivity of (homo)sexuality in Thai public space and also to bring attention to the issue of social tolerance of homosexuality in relation to the taboo of public discussions of sex as Tong's mother hid the note in her bra after reading it.

The scope of materials gathered for this research poses a tough challenge to me as the required data cover different grounds and methodologies. I am aware that the material gathering and data analysis themselves are time-consuming processes, but opting for a single source of information either ethnographic interviews or media materials might overlook the fact that each informative source can supplement what the other lacks. Crucially, the issue of unimagability of same-sex equality in Thailand is complex and multi-faceted. To be able to understand those hidden 'between the lines', combining various sources of information helps show the 'interconnectedness' of Thai cultural aspects that work in their own ways to render gay relationships unimaginable in Thai contexts.

Internet and Virtual Ethnographic Research

Although I spent most of my researching time in London, attempting to investigate what is happening in Thailand with a few research trips to Thailand and otherwise limited traditional access to up-to-date LGBT events in Thailand would not have been possible without the assistance of the Internet technology. Thanks to the internet, I have been able to access day-to-day information and archives of most of Thailand's mainstream media. The internet virtually collapsing the distance between Bangkok and London enables me to make a continuous investigation in real time through my laptop screen.

Through the internet, I have managed to achieve both status of insider and outsider simultaneously. As an insider, I am able to maintain my regular contact with my research participants who are living in Thailand and in European countries through e-mail and instant messaging. The popular internet networking sites such as 'myspace,' 'facebook' and 'hi5' also help keep my personal communication and interaction with research participants always up-to-date. Recently, with popularity of 'skype,' I can conduct follow-up on-line interviews with research participants whose computers are equipped not only with this software but also with adequate digital web camera and microphone. As an outsider, I am informed by on-line information and data enabling me to reflect on what is happening in Thailand without having actual physical involvement.

The internet offers the freedom to conduct a long distance research but also shapes it in a particular way. The internet has blurred the physicality of the real world. Unlike the conventional ethnography in which ethnographers are required to study people in 'their natural settings' (Walsh 1998 in Seale 2004:

228), the Internet, to a degree, establishes the virtual networks of information of Thai gay men communities which are not restricted by geographic distances. The Internet allows me to conduct ethnographic observation in multi-locales where my research participants are residing. The Internet also virtually connects me with the LGBT communities in Thailand. This particular characteristic of the Internet has substantially made this research possible on the limited research budgets.

With high-speed broadband technology, I can easily monitor situations happening in Thailand. I can watch the real-time streaming programmes broadcasted by Thai televisions on my laptop. Downloading the whole length programmes and official scripts if permitted is also progressively facilitated by the advent of the Internet. The internet transcendently expands an availability of information which is traditionally impossible to retrieve physically as on-line information is not geographically restricted but rather is “retrieved as and when required to meet the needs of a specific enquiry” (Bradley 2001: 5 cited in Odih in Seale 2004: 282).

Despite the significant contribution of the Internet to this project, like conventional ethnographer, I have employed ‘a variety of techniques of inquiry’ (ibid.). Not only did I collect diverse research data as I have discussed in the previous section, but also conducted face-to-face interviews with twelve research participants.

Ethnographic Interviews and Interviewees' Backgrounds

Essential data for this thesis are drawn from ethnographic interviews with twelve Thai gay men from twenty-three to thirty-four years of age. I have personally known nine research participants for more than ten years since I was in Thailand. One of them, Wira (วีระ - 34), whom I have been friends with since my high school years, studied a mass communication degree at an open university in Bangkok but did not complete his study. Wira has been ordained as a Buddhist monk for seven years and is currently staying at a temple in my Southern home town of Nakhon Si Thammarat.

I formed friendships with the other eight participants during my undergraduate study in Bangkok. Four of them i.e. Khen (เค็น 32), Chira (จิระ - 32), Rot (โรจ - 34), Phaen (แพน - 34) are my friends who graduated the same year as I did. The other four research participants i.e. Pom (ป้อม - 32), Kit (กิต - 31), Tam (ตั้ม - 33), and Haek (แฮ็ค - 30) are 'junior' students at the Faculty of Arts. The other guy, O, (โอ - 29) is Kit's boyfriend.

Chira is a Bangkokian. Before going to university, he studied in one of the most prestigious high schools in Bangkok. He majored in French and minored in English and History. Chira was known as the Godmother of the faculty's extra-curricular activities because he participated in almost every activity. After graduation, he worked with an international telecommunication company. Then, he continued his MA in French Translation at the faculty but did not finish it since he decided to go to France to further his study. Now, Chira is doing a PhD in Linguistics in Paris and has a French boyfriend. Chira plans to be a lecturer in

Linguistics. Although he is currently living with his French boyfriend, he has never thought of settling down in France.

Rot was born in Chiang Rai, a Northern province of Thailand near Burma. Rot has not had a good relationship with his family for a long time. He moved to Bangkok to do a Japanese B.A. at out faculty. He is a Northern cultural expert who specialises in the Northern dialect (written-spoken) and Northern dances. After working with a Japanese publishing company for 4 years, Rot decided to leave Bangkok for good. He returned to his native province of Chiang Rai and is currently teaching English and Japanese at a higher educational institution in Chiang Rai.

Tam is from Nonthaburi, an adjacent province of Bangkok. He had his primary and secondary education at an all boy school in Bangkok, one of the oldest boy schools in the country. His love for French contributed to his university education at the faculty. He is two years junior than Chira and Rot. He is currently living with his French partner in Strasbourg, France.

Khen was born in Phang-Nga, a Southern province of Thailand. He moved to Bangkok when he passed the university entrance examination to study at the faculty. He graduated with the first class honours and gold medal in Pali-Sanskrit languages. I firstly met Khen in a Japanese class before he later changed his major to Pali and Sanskrit. As soon as he graduated, Khen continued his MA in the same area at the faculty but he did not finish it since he was awarded a scholarship to further his studies aboard. Khen has recently completed a PhD in Buddhist Studies in Germany. He also married to his German partner in 2008.

Phaen was born in Bangkok. His father is a retired Thai army general while his mother is a nurse. During his undergraduate study at the faculty, Phaen was so active and enthusiastic that he was elected as the president of the Faculty of Arts' student union during his fourth year. He majored in French and minored in English and Philosophy. After his first degree, he continued his Master in Philosophy at the faculty. He is currently doing a PhD in Political Philosophy in Paris.

Pom went to the same high school as Chira did. After completing his B.A. in French from the faculty in 1999, Pom received a grant from the Swiss government to study for a one-year diploma in French literature in Geneva. He then moved to Paris to pursue his postgraduate studies in French literature and philosophy doctoral degree. However, he later switched to doing an MBA after he decided to settle in France with his French partner of nine years.

Kit and I went to the same high school in Nakhon Si Thammarat. We never spoke to each other until he entered the faculty two years after me. With his English degree from the faculty, he started his career as an interpreter at the American Embassy in Bangkok. He later completed his Masters in International Relations from another university in Bangkok and succeeded in the competitive entrance examination for his diplomatic career with Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is currently serving in a Thai diplomatic mission in an African country. Despite being posted far away from home, he intends to keep his relationship with his Thai boyfriend of eight years.

Haek is originally from Phuket, south of Thailand. He was one year below Kit at the faculty. He was very studious but also participated in most of the extra-

curricular activities. After graduation, Haek worked as a free-lance English home tutor and translator. He is currently doing a PhD in Linguistics at the faculty.

O is Kit's boyfriend. O is from the Northeast region. With the Chinese background, O describes his parents 'a bit homophobic.' O and Kit have been together for eight years. Despite Kit is working in Africa for the time being, O still remains faithful to his boyfriend.

The reason I highlight the age differences between my interviewees is because Thais' socialisation is still prominently structured by seniority. Despite the fact that we have known each other for a long time, it is still crucial, especially for the junior ones to address to the senior friends with the proper prefix *phi* (พี่) followed by senior friends' names, to sound polite or to show their *kalathesa*⁴⁰ in conversation.

These eight research participants and I graduated from the same faculty and university. At the faculty, male students were the minority as the majority of students were female. The fact that women out-numbered the overall population also brought us (male students) closer. We (male students) all had to participate in almost every extra-curricular activity at the faculty and inter-university levels due to a small number of male students. Chira, Khen, and I were in the group, called 'angels,' a nickname for a group of friends formed in 1995 at the university where I studied between 1994 and 1998 in Bangkok. The group originally consisted of nine gay male friends but expanded to recruit several younger gay male students, several straight and bisexual female friends in following years.

⁴⁰ *Kalathesa* (กาละเทศะ) here means to know one's position in social hierarchy. Further information will be provided in Chapter five.

Due to the excessive involvement with the faculty's activities, our group, the 'nine angels' received a de-facto recognition for being creative and enthusiastic as we helped win many awards for the faculty.

The choice of the word 'angel'⁴¹ was not explicitly discussed between group members, but it was derived from the Christian notion of angels who are believed to be sexless, neither male nor female. This self-chosen 'angel' can be said to reflect the members' subconscious that their same-sex attraction does not conform to the heteronormative values. Therefore, it can be generalised as 'third sex.' It is also worth noting that I will discuss the social conceptualisation of 'third sex' in Chapter three.

The other two participants are Saem (แซม - 24) and Phat (พัท - 34). Phat went to the same university as my friends and I. However, we never met until he came to Goldsmiths for his Masters Degree. Phat has a long term relationship with his Thai boyfriend who is five years older than him. As a tour guide, his boyfriend regularly visited him while Phat was living in London. Phat is currently working as an English tutor in Bangkok.

Saem is the youngest among my research participants. I was introduced to him by my Thai gay friend in London. Saem is originally from Khon Kaen, a province in the Northeast or *Isan* of Thailand. He recently completed his postgraduate studies from the U.K. and is currently working in Bangkok.

It should be noted that I did not initially want to make my memories and emotions the focus of this research as it would be too intimate and would also

⁴¹ Although the Thai name for the 'Angel' group is *Klum Nangfa* (กลุ่มนางฟ้า), which implies the 'effeminacy' of its member, our official English name is 'angels' due to the above reason and the different concepts of celestial entities in Thai and Christian mythologies.

run the risk of universalising my own experience as stand-point for the following discussion of more general social questions concerning the conceptualisation of gayness in Thailand. As Plummer (1995) points out, personal narratives are often entangled with more public ones. I wanted to share this story of mine here because it can be understood as an emotional engine for this research and as a heuristic tool for considering the relevance of participants' narratives. I also hope that the study of these narratives will allow me to properly untangle the sociological currency and intricacies of discourses around gay identities, visibility and representation in Thailand.

This thesis does not claim that the findings from the interviews represent Thai gay men's attitudes of self-identification as being gay nor does it attempt to universalise Thai gay men's experience. Although many interviewees selected for this research share common grounds of being middle-class gay men and having been exposed to Western gay discourses as many of them are currently residing in Europe, the interviews do reveal that interviewees' conceptualisation of their homo-experience vary with social, educational, ethnic and religious backgrounds. However, it is undeniable that this group of young men represent the 'transitional' generation of Thai gay men. That is, before the emergence of Western gay discourses in the mid sixties, masculine-identified men who are attracted to other masculine-identified men (gay men) seemed unknown in Thai society⁴². These transitional people were mostly born during the time when gayness was firstly caught the public glimpse⁴³. Since its first appearance,

⁴² This does not mean that there were no masculine-identified men having sexual relations with other masculine-identified men in Thailand before 1960s. But, they were merely invisible and unnamed in public discourses.

⁴³ 'Gay' was firstly described as a 'profession' of young good looking boys by reporters in 1965 after the investigation into the murder case of American journalist, Darrel Berrigan

'gayness' has revolved around economically affluent men with Westernised education. Even the word *gay* (เกย์) is a loan word from English. Therefore, interviewees' narratives are significant in understanding the conceptualisation and the development of these transitional gay subjectivities in Thailand. The participation of Thai gay men from the transitional generation in this research, I believe, would strengthen the findings and contribute rich data to future research in Thai gay studies.

Due to different locations where my informants and I live, I mostly depended on the modern technological assistance of the Internet to arrange the interviews. I firstly sent them e-mails, asking about their interest in participating in this project. After receiving their confirmation, I sent each of them another e-mail, asking details about their general backgrounds and their attitudes towards gay situations in Thailand and abroad. This was intended to give me some basic understanding about them. Despite the fact that I have known some participants for a long time, we hardly discussed certain sensitive issues, particularly concerning their sexuality. At the outset, I must stress that I am careful not to manipulate my friendships with research participants to obtain data for writing up this thesis. However, because of our friendships, I have been given consent to the unlimited access to their intimate details that they would not share with anyone else. All names referring to participants are pseudonyms and chosen by participants themselves. They do understand the nature of the research that might cause controversy, but they also support what I am doing as they want to see their voices being represented. Their personal perspectives added the liveliness and invaluable insights to the data apart from discourse analysis.

In summer 2003, I visited Chira and Pom in Paris. I conducted face-to-face interviews with both of them. The interviews were the elaboration of questions I had asked them in the e-mail enquiries. Both e-mail enquiries and one-to one interviews were done in Thai and I later translated them into English. At the same time, I also attempted to benefit from the advance of the Internet instant messaging technology as my participants and I have subscribed to 'hotmail messenger.' Despite the different time zones in which we lived, I interviewed Khen who was reading a course of M.A. in Japan at the time and Rot in Bangkok via 'hotmail messenger.' Initially, we set up the date and time we would be on-line at the same time. The questions for the Khen and Rot were similar to those for Chira and Pom focusing initially on the issue of 'coming out' and their growing up experience.

The differences between face-to-face interviews and instant messaging interviews are very interesting. Although the instant messaging conversation virtually simulated the verbal conversation I had with informants in Paris, the conventional interviews were livelier. First of all, the observation of our eye contacts and their physical or facial expression were what the Internet instant messaging could not offer. Secondly, the recordings from face-to-face interviews offer me 24/7 accessible audio materials as I can listen to the recordings whenever I want and the variation of informants' tonal voices at particular times and some particular topics of discussion also proves more meaningful when being listened to with the interview scripts. Thirdly, some questions were developed during the interviews. This made the interviews more interesting and encouraged both the interviewer and interviewees to discuss more as the conversation continued.

It is true that by instant messaging, I no longer need to transcribe the conversation as the whole length conversation can be saved and printed out immediately after the conversation is terminated. However, vocabulary and idioms used in the hotmail messenger is different from those in usual conversation due to restrictions on time and our ability to type fast. For example, participants and I tend not to use pronouns or additives indicating politeness and gender whereas tape recorder did keep these minuscule details I would have missed out in the internet interviews. It should also be noted that there are more than twenty different first and second person pronouns in Thai. Choosing particular first or second pronouns can reflect speakers' perception in terms of gender, social, age, profession or religious position.

The Internet connection was sometimes interrupted for no reasons and could not be resumed instantly. This technological malfunction could cause further delay to reschedule the interviews in following occasions when both participants and I were free.

In sum, although the Internet instant messaging could help save both time and financial resources, the virtual simulation created by the internet cannot seamlessly replace certain small details such as facial expression, pronoun omission which conventional face-to-face interviews offer.

The first time I went back home was between December 2003 and January 2004, I contacted my high school friend, Wira. I conducted the interview with him at the temple he was staying in the south.

In July 2004, Khen moved from Japan to Germany. I stopped over in Strasbourg to interview Tam and headed to Munich to interview Khen. In June 2005, I also did a follow-up interview with Chira and Pom in Paris.

In November 2005, I interviewed Saem in Durham after several weeks of persuading him to participate in this research. Again in April 2006, I went back home. This time, I conducted face-to-face interviews with Haek and Rot as well as Kit and O. separately. I also conducted follow-up talks with Wira in the south.

In London, I interviewed Phat in July 2007. I interviewed Phaen in Paris in June 2008 after several years of discussing about the project. As I will further discuss his case in Chapter three, Phaen is the only participant who strongly feels unpleasant with the identification with sexual labels such as *gay*.

Because all interviews were conducted in Thai, I spent excessive time in transcribing the tape recordings and translating them into English. I discovered that transcribing and translating the interviews were very challenging and time-consuming. Since my ambition was to obtain as less fabricated data as I could, I conducted interviews in friendly conversational manners. That is, I allowed questions to also be developed in the flow of conversation. Starting with simple introductions to participants, I subsequently put more serious questions such as their attitudes towards 'equal' rights in Thailand, particularly with informants who were having serious relationship at the time. This inquiry method proved valuable in securing answers to questions possibly viewed as sensitive such as their sexuality and so gradually developing trust. Many of the participants pointed out after the sessions that the interviews were very therapeutic.

Although I have personally known some of the participants for many years, talking about their understanding of their sexual identities are not sometimes comfortable for the interviewees and I. As public discussions of sex and sexuality still pervasively remain taboo subjects in Thai society, my friendships with research participants, to some extent, helped alleviate the interviews atmosphere and allowed interviewees and I to discuss about their 'unspeakable' (homo)sexuality. One of the interviewees, Saem, even asked to talk in English as he found that it was easier for him since he had been in England for many years.

Due to the delicate and sensitive nature of interviews, I emphasised with all participants that I would only refer to them by pseudonyms and other information which are likely to cause any future embarrassment to them would not be mentioned unless being permitted. These measures were laid out before them to ensure interviewees that their privacy would remain intact. Some participants, for example, Chira and Pom gave me their permission to use their real names, which I very much appreciated but I have maintained my caution that the using of pseudonyms is necessary.

However, the main drawback of this open-ended inquiry is that each session lasted very long. The longest interview transcription was sixty pages in length.

Linguistic and Cultural Translations

The process of translation involves the interaction between at least two or more languages. The issue of translatability is not simply affected by the

translator's knowledge of both languages, but rather the translator's ability to convey the expression beyond the national and cultural boundaries. Translation is thus not an uncomplicated process that anyone who speaks 'the language' can do.

To have a successful translation requires translators' satisfaction that no miscommunication or misapprehension was made due to their selection of vocabulary and their syntactic expressions. I was often reminded by the tutor in the translation course at my faculty in Bangkok that the most difficult task of translating English texts into Thai is how to translate the texts without traces of milk and butter. Since I attempt to translate the Thai scripts into English for this research, I have to revert that process and make sure that there is no trace of fish sauce left on the translated texts. Translators' good command of both English and Thai is not only a prerequisite but also the masterful understanding of both cultures.

Since all the interviews were conducted in Thai, another vital problem I have encountered is the issue of translation. When translating interview scripts into English, I often encountered the problem of translatability. Having mentioned earlier, the interview scripts are often rich with hidden agendas, reflecting local pervasive discourses. Ideally, the perfect translation from Thai into English requires the ability to find English vocabulary and idioms, which are equivalent to the original Thai version. However, without consideration of certain connotations and cultural aspects covertly attached to certain words or expressions used by interviewees, the rich and hidden agenda would completely be ignored. Having mentioned earlier about first and second person pronouns in Thai, there were no

equivalent pronouns in English. As 'I' and 'You' are the only first and second person pronouns in English, respectively, 'I' and 'You' cannot express the gender and age-structured pronoun *nu* (หนู) many interviewees who are younger than I used during the interviews. *Nu* is an informal first person pronoun. It literally means 'mouse' or 'mice' but here denotes the social and/or age inferiority of the speaker. *Nu* is contemporarily used by women in Thai⁴⁴. However, many *kathoe*y and gay men who feel comfortable with their feminine expressions often use *nu* in talking to people older than them.

The grammatical issue also complicated the translation process as Thai and English are completely two different languages in terms of morphology and syntax. There are no tenses in Thai. That is, verbs do not inflect with person, tense, voice, mood or number nor are there any participles. Tense is conveyed by tense markers before or after the verb. However, since the interviews were conducted in friendly conversation manners, both informants and I often use informal vocabularies. For example, we often omitted pronouns and we used certain codes substituting the word 'sex'. These all added up to complications in translating the interview scripts from Thai into English.

Apart from the linguistic hindrance, the issue of 'cultural translation' is also another difficult task. As a Thai gay man, it is sometimes very challenging to reflect upon the cultural presuppositions on which I, being a 'supposed' member of Thai gay communities, have taken for granted. Unlike conventional ethnographers, who study unfamiliar cultures to them, I am using my insider

⁴⁴ *Nu* is considered appropriate for Thai adults to address to young children of both genders as *nu*. Young boys or even some (heterosexual) male adults sometimes refer to themselves as *nu* when they are speaking with their family members. However, this practice has become less frequent as *nu* is generally considered as a pronoun for girls and women in the contemporary usage.

position investigating what I was once culturally blinded from the outside. Before coming to London, I did not realise how much the awareness of *kalathesa* had played such an important part for me in accepting the homosexual peripheral status. Without questioning it, I saw same-sex relationships as unimaginable in the Thai socio-cultural context. After living in London for a year and having a chance to research on Thai gay men's issue of 'coming out,' I started to understand the 'cultural script', constituted by interdependent networks of "cultural structures, knowledge, and meanings" (Walsh 1998 in Seale 2004: 227). The insight enables me to deconstruct the cultural mechanisms silencing gay men from challenging the heterosexist imperatives. Like language skills, it takes a number of repetitive practices to avoid the risk of 'going native' or universalising the experience (ibid. 229). However, as a 'native' myself, I have also consulted other ethnographic research on gender and sexuality in Thailand to maintain the analyst position.

Reading observations and analyses made by Western researchers, for example, Jackson (1989, 1995a, 1995b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b) and Van Esterik (2000), can be intriguing as I often find some concepts such as *kalathesa*, Thais' emphasis on 'orderliness' difficult to explain to non-Thais. Their comments and observations are thus useful for complementing the findings from my empirical data as the interpretation of the interview materials cannot simply offer the thorough understanding of the multifaceted problems homosexual people in Thailand are experiencing. Moreover, from the outset, word by word translation has proved impossible. It is even harder to explain something that does not exist in Western contexts since some cultural dimensions cannot be simply translated into the rhetoric, to which

English readerships are accustomed. To make the translation easier for general readers, footnotes with historical and cultural descriptions to key concepts are provided.

The fact that I have written this thesis not in Thai but in English can be said to be the essential factor, allowing me to explore and intellectually engage with sensitive issues such as sexuality in Thailand. Having come from a conservative background myself, it would have been more difficult or 'unimaginable' for me to conduct the academic enquiry concerning homosexual issues in my home country. Having mentioned earlier, not only my interviewees, but also myself sometimes during the interviews or our general discussions continue to unwittingly encode references to our sexual identities as if we were negotiating for the culturally acceptable vocabulary that would not violate the Thai taboo on public discussions of sex and sexuality. Although half of the interviewees and I have been living outside the country for many years and those conversations took place in Europe, Thai heteronormative values still appear to have discursively embedded in our mentality. Thanks to this research project, both interviewees and I have been enabled to recognise this 'cultural aphasia.' It should be noted that this point will be explored in detail in Chapter five.

Emerging Issues for Future Research

Further analytical issues have also emerged during analysing the interview materials, for example, the class/power-structure between *gay* and *kathoey*, racial tension between Thai and Western *gay* partners. Particularly, the interview data indicate a significant strain between the old *kathoey* identity and the newly emerged *gay* label while Western *gay* men's political and economical

advantages have also complicated the issue of cross-cultural relationships between Thai and Western gay men⁴⁵.

Despite the historical relativity between *kathoey* and *gay*, it is important to note that these two groups have now evolved into two separate categories. *Kathoey* prefers 'real' men whereas many gay men abhor 'effeminacy.' It should be noted that I will further discuss the class/power disparity between *gay* and *kathoey* in the following chapter.

Indeed, the emergence of Thai *gay* identities owes a great deal to the West's sexual revolution, but it is more difficult to retain balance between recognising global queering and local gay men's reflexivity to both Western cultural forces and anti-colonial discourses. As half of participants have formed relationships with Western gay men, it is undeniable that there are further unexplored issues I might not be able to fit into this research. Further research and development might be needed to cover the issue of power disparity in cross-cultural couples. Although increasing number of people have formed cross-cultural relationships year after year, having a Western boyfriend may pose several problems for Thai gay men. Not only, have the concern of their family's acceptance of their homosexuality, but also social bias on cross-cultural

⁴⁵ I was highly inspired by the Channel 4 documentary, called *My boyfriend, the Sex Tourist: Part 2 – Girlfriend for Sale*, directed by Monica Garnsey. It was broadcasted on Channel 4 on December 19, 2007. This documentary explores the relationships between Thai women from the rural area in the Northeast and her Western customers/partners.

relationships put a number of informants in an uncomfortable situation. There are a number of thoughts⁴⁶ worth pointing out, as follows:

Firstly, the notion of 'foreign exoticness' was sometimes mentioned during the interviews. It is widely believed in Thailand that there are certain physical features, considered exotic for Westerners but these are not culturally appreciated by Thais. The embedded tradition that values fairer skinned tone has championed both local and national discourses. Since its first introduction in the 1980s skin-whitening lotion is ranked as the one of the most popular beauty products of the country. Phat, one of interviewees, remarked that he felt he was desired in the U.K. as nobody would love his dark skin in Thailand.

To some degree, it is undeniable that beauty is in the eye of the beholders. Beauty is as subjective as personal taste for food. However, a Thai person is expected to fulfil certain 'social criteria' in order to be socially classified as beautiful. These sets of criteria are similar to fashion that comes and goes. But, this obsession with whiteness has been around for a long time well before the contact with the West.

Thais' obsession with whiteness can be traced back to the start of the Ayutthaya Kingdom(1351 - 1767) when the Indian influenced Khmer culture played a crucial part in forming Thai political and cultural ideologies⁴⁷. As the fairer skin not only reflects social status but also how much the abstracted good kamma the person has accumulated. Nevertheless, the process of globalisation

⁴⁶ It should be noted that I will not be discussing these points in the following chapters as they are not the main focus of this thesis.

⁴⁷ The obsession with 'whiteness' is possibly traced back as far as the Ayutthaya period (1351 -1767). Thai culture during that time is said to be heavily influenced by the ancient Indian political concept of *Devaraja* or *Thewaracha* (เทพาราช) in Thai as well as by classical literature such as the *Ramayana* or *Rammakian* (รามเกียรติ์) in Thai.

has strengthened this concept further by emphasising that 'Western' standard is an international standard.

To have a Western partner is, therefore, a solution for some of my interviewees who preferred to leave their unhappy, unfulfilled or unsuccessful past in Thailand and to start their lives over in the West where they think that they will be more appreciated.

This notion of 'foreign exoticness' is not only applied to Thai men and women but also to their Western counterparts. The generalised descriptions of Westerners as being tall, light colour hair and paler skinned have somehow been thought to represent an 'ideal beauty' or the international standard. Going out with someone who has 'world class' standards, to an extent, psychologically and socially empowers these men, who might have been shunned by other Thai gay men. Western partners not only support their Thai lovers' finances, but also elevate their Thai lovers' social status. Yet, the reality might turn up side down when these people actually come to live in the West. Phat complained to me that it was not as easy as he had thought. He found out that there were fewer Western gay men who were attracted to 'oriental' gay men. He later realised that he also went out with the same Western guys who had previously dated his friends.

Secondly, the Internet plays a significant role in cross-cultural matching. Most of my interviewees who have been in relationships with Western boyfriends and partners met their men through some forms of Internet dating sites. Pom met his French partner while looking for free-accommodation during his European backpacking tour. Tam met his Alsace French partner because of the French gay

dating web site. Khen knew his Bavarian partner after chatting with him on gayromeo.com. Chira went to the blind date with his boyfriend after exchanging messages on a gay dating website. Saem met two of his boyfriends from teenage web site, called 'faceparty.com.'

It seems that the Internet has become an integrated part of today's dating practices for many Thai gay diaspora in Europe. The Internet provides a safer virtual space to explore the possibility of meeting up with Western friends and potential partners in a more economical way compared to traditional picking up practices around gay cruising areas or gay hangout scenes in city centres. With the Internet, some interviewees had had a chance to know their Western partners well before they left Thailand, as in case of Pom and Tam.

In sum, the Internet has transcended both geographical and physical barriers linking people from different cultures. The Internet also saves interviewees' time and economic resources compared to conventional dating practices. Especially for the new arrivals in Europe, the Internet offers a secure virtual space to interact with their potential partners. The Internet also makes it easier for them to make a decision whether to meet their contacts or not.

Thirdly, it is the notion that Thais are culturally passive to the Western power has to be rethought. Thirty or forty years ago, Western men travelled to Thailand to enjoy the company of these Thai men. Thanks to the economic surge in the 1980s, these Thai people have now come to the West. A number of my interviewees relocated themselves to Europe to follow their dreams. These young gay men left the country with university degrees and efficient knowledge of European languages. It can also be said that class is another important factor

for these cross-cultural relationships. Thanks to their university education, it is less difficult for some interviewees to migrate to the West.

My interviewees who have Western partners to some extent are more able to negotiate their relationships since all of them are also working either full-time or part-time. This enables them to contribute financially into their relationships more or less. Yet, it is not 50-50 sharing cost as most interviewees are also studying and their incomes are significantly lesser compared to their Western partners who work full-time. Chira is working as a waiter at a Thai restaurant in Paris. He helps his partner pay for utility bills and odd bills whereas his French partner is responsible for the rent. Pom is working full-time in Paris and helps his partner pay their mortgage for their apartment in the suburban area of Paris. Tam enjoys a free accommodation at his partner's apartment in Strasbourg, France. His partner paid for his tuition fees and maintenances for the first three years as he could not legally work at that time. Now, Tam is working as a chef in a restaurant in Strasbourg.

These Thai gay men revealed their acknowledgement of their position in this Orientalist discourse of 'foreign exoticness' in the West as well as their aspiration to form secure relationships with their European partners. They know that because of their darker skin colour that gives them the status of exotic others as well as non European others while living in the West.

Having relationships with Western men while living in Europe might be because of various reasons for my interviewees. For Chira, Khen, Tam, and Pom, moving in with their boyfriends or partners after going out for a few months might be purely for practical reasons that they could saved a lot of money from

the rent. For Pom and Tam, having French partners entitle them to their partners' social security welfares and legal migrant status. In fact, it is them who gain, not lose in the relationships with their Western boyfriends. However, it can also be said that both Western and Thai partners exploit each other exoticness in the relationships.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how two research methods of discourse analysis and ethnographic interview are employed for collecting and analysing the research data in this thesis.

I have argued that discourse analysis of Thai public discourses allows me to explore what Foucault termed 'power relations' in the production of 'official' knowledge of non-normative gender and sexual identities in Thai society as 'unnatural.' The examination of diverse research materials, to some extent, demonstrates that the peripheral status of same-sex relations in the heteronormative values has not only been discursively reproduced but also contested. The public discourses are thus sites where power is enacted and negotiated.

I have also discussed how the Internet has played an important role in not only providing access to diverse and up-to-date information of Thai LGBT communities but also connecting me with research participants in multi-locales.

The research data from ethnographic interviews with research participants can be said to complement findings from discourse analysis. Not only did face-to-face interviews provide insights into interviewees' day-to-day interaction with

the social negativity, attached to the label *gay*, but also allow interviewees and I to discuss and personally reflect on culturally sensitive issues such as sexual identities.

Having had to write this thesis in English also brings attention to the notion of 'cultural translation' which does not involve only the issue of translatability but also the awareness of the cultural implication of the research. That is, since English is not my first language, by writing this research in English allows me to reflect and academically research into this 'cultural aphasia.'

Chapter 3: Mapping Thai Homosexuality in a Global Queer World

This chapter presents the analytical investigation into Thailand's notion of gayness. This aims to provide the contextual examination of how the emergence of modern homosexual identities has been debated among researchers on Thai queer studies. Despite the word *gay* being etymologically affiliated with homosexual rights movements, particularly in the U.S., the appropriation of *gay* identity by a group of Thai homosexual men in 1965 was rather intended to highlight socio-economic differences compared to the traditional non-normative sex/gender category of *kathoey*. Although the sexualised label *gay* is often seen as a cultural import from the West, its application in Thai contexts reveals the hybridisation of Thai sex/gender system and Western discourses of sexuality. Thai homosexual men's appropriation of *gay* identity from the 1960s underscores their active participation in their redefinition and reconstruction of their homosexual experience within the framework of Thai heteronormativity.

In this chapter, I will firstly examine the cultural interplay between Western and Thai gay communities. I will focus on the discussion of Denis Altman's global queering phenomenon and his critics in order to position the emergence of modern homosexual identities in Thailand in relation to a globalised queer culture. I then explore the historical and semantic juxtaposition between traditional models of gender and sexual transgression of *kathoey* (กะเทย) identity and recent terminologies for exclusive homosexual identities such as *gay* (เกย์), *chairakchai* (ชายรักรชาย) and so forth. The investigation into etymological conceptions of both *kathoey* and *gay* identities will focus on their relevant positions in the Thai sex/gender system. This 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 public appearance in the 1960s.

Focus will also be made on the lived experiences of my research participants, particularly on their self-discovery of same-sex attractions and their understanding of various social categories for non-normative gender and sexual identities. Their personal narratives reveal both the positivity and the negativity the identification with label *gay* might have brought.

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 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, it also brings unnecessary attention to those whose homosexuality has come 'out' in the open and problematises the validity of same-sex relations in heteronormative Thai society.

Unpacking 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 lesbian and gay people in the public domain is usually thought of as reflecting Thais' openness and social tolerance towards these socially sexual

deviants. Needless to say, 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 their communities is often interpreted by internationally mainstream gay discourses as showing Thais' acceptance of *kathoey* and Thailand as such an exceptional place where homosexuality has a respected place in Thai culture (Storer 1999: 7, Matzner 2002: 1, Jackson and Sullivan 1999: 4).

Due to its rapid economic growth between the 1980s and early 1990s, Thailand was expected to become the fifth Asian Tiger⁴⁸. Having aspired to become part of the developed world, the affluent economy prompted Thais to intensively escalate Western style socio-economic development. Together with the increasing influx of tourists and expatriates, Western cultural commodities have gained the significant presence in Thai society. Western knowledge has long been regarded as the indispensable 'capital' to modernise and materialise the goal of first world membership⁴⁹. The very same period also witnessed the bloom of 'purple'⁵⁰ businesses and establishments, aimed at metropolitan queer consumers such as gay bars, nightclubs, saunas, coffee shops and so on. This

⁴⁸ 'Tiger' here is a nickname of NIC(s) or newly industrialised country. Four Asian Tigers are Hong Kong, South Korean, Taiwan, and Singapore.

⁴⁹ The inspiration to become a developed country has been officially reiterated throughout Thailand's modern political chapters. Successive Thai political elites have vowed to drive the country into the first world community. The earliest state propaganda could be found in a column by Sawattanthasut (pseudonym - สวัสดิ์ตันทสฺหฺรฺ) in *Si Krung* (ศรีกรุง) Newspaper dated 3 November 1941. In the article, Sawattanthasut urged Thai people to join the then Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkram's new campaign to "build a powerful Thailand by the new health regime." (Thai: *sang thai maha amnat duai sukkhaphap phaen mai* - สร้างไทยมหาอำนาจด้วยสุขภาพแผนใหม่) He also quoted Prime Minister Plaek's speech regarding the campaign that: "Thailand is a civilised nation. Thailand is a civilised country. Thais are civilised people so that we will cooperate in developing ourselves, making our nation to become eternally developed." (Thai: *thai pen arayachat thai pen araya prathet thai pen arayachon laeo rao cha ruammeukan sang tuarao, sang chat khong rao hai watthana thawon* - ไทยเป็นอารยชาติ ไทยเป็นอารยชนแล้ว เราจะร่วมมือกัน สร้างตัวเรา. สร้างชาติของเรา ให้วัฒนาถาวร - *Si Krung* November 3, 1941, p. 15)

⁵⁰ 'Purple' represents the notion of homosexuals' unfulfilled love. Unlike their Western counterparts, purple, not pink, has long been associated with Thai homosexuals. This is due to the successive reproduction of tragic gay love in Thai public discourses, particularly in motion pictures.

proliferation of entertainment venues and services catering exclusively for gay men worked to affirm Thailand's global reputation as 'a gay paradise' (Jackson 1999c: 226, Matzner 1998: 1, Storer op.cit.).

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: 1). This internationalisation of modern homosexual identities 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 were said to be frequented by young Thai Western educated gay men who had had first-hand experience of Western gay lifestyles abroad.

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 not only between local LGBT members but also with 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 the new imagining of 'modern homosexuality' across the world. The Stonewall riot in New York in 1969, according to Altman (ibid., 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 (ibid.) further enunciates 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, 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 (ibid., 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: 70). Ethnographic research on Southeast Asian gay men, for example, Boellstorff (2005: 82), Garcia (1996: xiii), Manalansan (2003: viii) suggests that gay-identified men in Indonesia, the Philippines and 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: 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: 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: 363, 2001: 3) is not a recent social phenomenon but rather appeared pretty much the same times 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: 363).

Jackson (2001: 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: 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* (ทอม) and *dee* (ดี้), 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 (ibid., 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” (ibid., p. 33). It is imperative, according to Sinnott (ibid., p. 39), to understand that the new identities such as *gay*, *tom*, *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 origins, the newly eroticised identities have been adopted and interpreted in relation to the Thai sex/gender system.

Unlike Thai *tom* and *dee*, Thai gay men, are fully aware of their transnational connection (ibid., 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: 70). Storer (1999a: 6) argues that the incorporation of multiple homosexual identities such as *gay*, *gay king*, *gay queen* into the Thai vernacular system lacks coherency as *gay* means different things to different people. He 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" (ibid.). 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: 5). The deploying of the alternative self-chosen label of *yingrakying* (หญิงรักหญิง) by *Anjaree* (อัญจारी), a Thai lesbian group, in the mid 1980s and the resistance to lesbian and gay identities by Thai homosexual men and women recapitulate the suggestion by Jackson (2003: 1) that:

"This 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: 8). However, the notion that the transnational gayness was 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 the West's neo-imperialism in his speech at the United Nations in 1991 (*The Nation* July 20, 1997, cited in Sinnott 2004: 25). Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe, was reported to warn gays and lesbians to stay away from his country (*Aarmo* 1999: 260, cited in *ibid.*).

On 21 February 2009 in Chiang Mai (เชียงใหม่)⁵¹, Thailand, organisers of the Chiang Mai Gay Pride parade had to cancel the event as a local group called, *Rak Chiang Mai'51*⁵² (รักเชียงใหม่'51 - Love Chiang Mai'51) and its supporters blocked access in and out of Phutthasathan Chiang Mai (พุทธสถานเชียงใหม่), the meeting point for parade participants. The group demanded the immediate cancellation of the event and an apology from the event organisers. They claimed that the gay pride was inappropriate for Chiang Mai because the city was renowned for its cultural heritage. They accused the gay pride organisers of undermining the city's image and the fact that a religious site such as Phutthasathan was chosen as the meeting point was highly inappropriate. The local police were reported as doing nothing to stop the intimidation. The organisers eventually agreed to cancel the event and apologised to the Love Chiang Mai' 51 group (*Prachatai* (ประชาไท) February 22, 2009⁵³).

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

⁵¹ Chiang Mai is the biggest city in the Northern region of Thailand. Having been the economical and educational centre of the region, Chiang Mai's gay scenes are said to be the third biggest in the country after Bangkok and Patthaya, respectively.

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Full coverage of the event can be retrieved from http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/page2.php?mod=mod_ptcms&ID=15648&Key=HilighNews.

of both local *kathoey* and transnational *gay* identities exemplifies the suggestion that the adoption of globalised terms for homosexualities 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 an extent explains why the word *gay* means different things to different people. The interchangeability between *kathoey* and *gay* in the Thai vernacular system also reveals the confusion between pervasive terms for homosexualities in Thai popular discourses.

Positioning *Kathoey* in the Thai Sex/Gender System

Having outlined the preliminary introduction of *kathoey* and *gay* identities in Chapter one, *kathoey* has long been the Thai indigenous 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. Therefore, 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 *kathoey*, which predates the identity *gay*. To highlight the power relations of non-normative gender and sexual categories in Thai public discourses, in this chapter, I will study how *kathoey* is defined and documented in Thai public discourses in relation to the social understanding of this non-conformist sex/gender category. I will firstly look into the official and rather authoritative definition of *kathoey* described in the Royal Institute Dictionary (1999)⁵⁴. Then, I will outline how *kathoey* is understood as a 'third sex'

⁵⁴ The Royal Institute Dictionary is compiled by the top Thai language academics to provide the systematic and standardised knowledge of Thai language. Having enjoyed such a privilege in Thai academia, the Royal Institute Dictionary is the most consulted academic reference for definitions and

in the northern Thai folklore, *pathamamulamuli*. I will also discuss how *kathoe*y has been appropriated as a non-normative male category in the Thai patriarchal sex/gender culture.

Having mentioned in Chapter one, the Royal Institute (ราชบัณฑิตยสถาน - *Ratchabanditayasathan*) Thai language dictionary ⁵⁵(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 (ลำไยกะเทย - infertile longan). In other words, *kathoe*y etymologically denotes 1) non-normative sex/gender categories i.e. hermaphroditism and transgenderism, 2) non-reproductivity in living beings. However, *kathoe*y is often differentiated into two categories: 1) *kathoe*y *thae* (กะเทยแท้ - genuine *kathoe*y) or hermaphrodites, 2) *kathoe*y *thiam* (กะเทยเทียม - pseudo *kathoe*y) 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 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*, (ปฐมมูลมูลลี) Rosalind Morris (1994: 19) describes the Thai traditional sex/gender system as the system of three sexes or “tripartite with the terms of sexual identity being *phuchai* (male), *phuying* (female), and *kathoe*y (transvestite/ transsexual/ hermaphrodite).” Morris (ibid.) postulates that the semantic transformation from hermaphroditic *kathoe*y to male to female

clarification of Thai language. The official description of the duties and responsibilities of the Royal institute can be retrieved on-line from http://www.royin.go.th/upload/246/FileUpload/1405_4021.pdf.

⁵⁵ The 1999 edition of the Royal Institute’s Dictionary can be accessed online at <http://rirs3.royin.go.th/dictionary.asp>.

transgendered *kathoey* in the Thai sex/gender system was a result of Thai patriarchy's appropriation and naturalisation of *kathoey*. That is, from a sex/gender neutral category, *kathoey* has historically become an institutionalised male category (ibid., p. 24). According to Morris, the exclusivity of *kathoey* 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 (ibid., p. 26).

According to Morris (ibid.), 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* (ผู้ชาย), *phuying* (ผู้หญิง), or the transgression type of *kathoey*. Morris (ibid.) asserts that:

“It would not be mistaken to understand the categories of *phuying*, *phuchai*, and *kathoey* 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, *kathoey* 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 (ibid., p. 24). *Kathoey* thus occupies an indeterminate status in the system of three sexes, as noted by Jackson and Sullivan (1999: 4) that:

“Historically, three forms of sexed or gendered beings, called *phet* (pronounced like “*paɪt*”) in Thai, were recognized within local discourses,

namely normative masculine man (*phuchai*), feminine woman (*phuying*) and an intermediate category called *kathoey*.”

Despite the pervasive ‘third sex’ (เพศที่สาม - *phetthisam*) status of *kathoey* in the Thai sex/gender paradigm, the patriarchal institutionalisation of *kathoey* has rendered *kathoey* asymmetrically inferior compared to *phuchai* and *phuying*. That is, *kathoey*’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 (*ibid.*, 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* (สาวประเภทสอง – 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: 63) cites Freud’s castration anxiety 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: 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.).

However, this assumption is challenged by Costa and Matzner (2007:31) who question the theoretical hypothesis of the *kathoey* – *phuchai* (man) binary by Western researchers. They (ibid.) 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." The emphasis on "the functionalist orientation" of *kathoey* in the Thai traditional sex/gender paradigm, according to Costa and Matzner (ibid.), "fails to account for the complexities surrounding the construction of gender and sexual subjectivities."

The Construction of 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 Thai popular term for gender and sexual transgression of *kathoey*. 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 *kathoey* 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: 35).

Before the emergence of *gay* identity in the 1960s, the term *kathoey* in the popular usage refers to both non-normative gender expressions and non-normative sexual practices. That is, *kathoey*, 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: 19). The conflation of sexual practices and gender expressions in the *kathoey* identity highlights the lack of terminology in Thai language to distinguish gender-normative homosexuals from transvestites, transgenders and transsexuals.

In Thailand, homosexuality is often understood as being 'misgendered' or *phitphet* (ผิดเพศ) (Sinnott 2004: 28). *Phet* (เพศ) can be literally translated as 'sex' in English i.e. *ruamphet* (ร่วมเพศ - sexual intercourse) *phetsamphan* (เพศสัมพันธ์ - sexual relation). *Phet* signifies masculine and feminine as in *phetchai* (เพศชาย - male) and *phetying* (เพศหญิง - female). *Phet* is also used to identify sexuality as in *rakruamphet* (รักร่วมเพศ - homosexuality) and *raktangphet* (รักต่างเพศ - 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* (เพศสภาพ - gender), *phetwithi* (เพศวิถี - 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: 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 *kathoey* 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 discourses 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 after 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 Berrigan⁵⁶, 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 an 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 prostitution⁵⁷. *Kathoey* cross dressers were notoriously known not only for their hyper-feminine performance, but also for their involvement in prostitution and theft.

Pan Bunnak (ปาน บุณนาค - 1989: 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, 2) *kathoey maisadaeng-ok* (กะเทยไม่แสดงออก) or gender-normative *kathoey* who would escape police patrol providing that they were not seen caressing one another in public.

⁵⁶ Jackson (1999a) and Terdsak (2002) provide full details regarding the case and press revelation of Berrigan's homosexuality.

⁵⁷ Despite the image of being a world brothel, prostitution has been illegal in Thailand since 1960.

The pre-context of *kathoe*y before the Berrigan murder case suggests that *kathoe*y was an exclusive category for both non-normative gender expression and homosexual behaviours. The press' lengthy coverage of the *gay* group unwittingly emphasises and clarifies differences between *kathoe*y 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*⁵⁸ reported that Darrell Berrigan⁵⁹, 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 *kathoe*y and young men" (*Thairath* October 4, 1965, p.1 cited in Jackson 1999a: 374, also cited in Terdsak 2002: 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* (ป.) as "a *kathoe*y who disliked cross dressing but rather

⁵⁸ *Thairath* (ไทยรัฐ) is one of Thai language tabloid newspapers.

⁵⁹ 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.

preferred normal male clothes (*Thairath* October 7, 1965, p. 16, cited in Terdsak 2002: 61-2).

On 8 October 1965, *Thairath* published an article by Sisiat⁶⁰ 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 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 *ibid.*, p. 63).

By exposing Berrigan's past, the reporters stumbled on the 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* (กะเทยผู้ชาย) or male *kathoey* (*Thairath* October 10, 1965, p. 14 cited in *ibid.*, 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*

⁶⁰ Sisiat (สีเสียด) was *Thairath*'s regular writer of a column, called *Saraphanpanha* (สารพันปัญหา - all kinds of problems).

reported that these gays or *phuchai khaitua* (ผู้ชายขายตัว - male prostitutes) were 'sleeping partners' of *farang*⁶¹(ฝรั่ง) 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 *ibid.*, 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 *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

⁶¹ *Farang* is a Thai slang for 'Caucasian' foreigners. Although it is popularly speculated that *farang* is derived from the French word *français* or *farangset* (ฝรั่งเศส) in Thai, etymological linguistics studies show that *farang* is originally derived from the Persian word *farangi* or 'foreigner.' (Jurispong Chularatana - จุฬิศพงษ์ จุฬารัตน์, *Krungthepthurakit* (กรุงเทพธุรกิจ) September 24, 2009, retrieved from [http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/life-style/culture/20090924/78380/ถอดราก-ศัพท์\(แขก\)เทศ.html](http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/life-style/culture/20090924/78380/ถอดราก-ศัพท์(แขก)เทศ.html)).

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: 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 *kathoey* (Jackson and Sullivan 1999: 5).

The emphasis on different gender expressions of *kathoey* and *gay* at the public level underlines the abjection of *kathoey'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. *Kathoey*, on the contrary, are more integrated into the pervasive discourse of heteronormativity. Pointed out by Jackson (1999c: 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 *kathoey* and the homoeroticism was not central to the formation of homosexual identity. Traditionally, a man could have sex with *kathoey* and still maintain his masculine status because *kathoey* is sexually constructed as inferior to him. That is, *kathoey* is a product of his/her feminine gender role rather than his homosexual identity. The inferiority of *kathoey* in relation to gender normative *phuchai* (men), to a degree, places *kathoey* 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, *kathoey'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 *ibid.*, Van Esterik 2000: 215). *Kathoey* 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 (*op.cit.*), "is out of place within traditional discursive schema, neither truly a 'normal man' nor fully *kathoey*, 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." *Gay* is, therefore, a genuine sexual degeneracy in comparison to *kathoey* whose gender deviancy more or less reaffirms the notion of complimentary sex/gender between masculinity and femininity.

Gay – ‘High Class’ versus *Kathoey* – ‘Low Class’

The revelation of *gay*-identified men by the Thai press partly dispelled the ambiguity of *kathoey* for representing universal sex/gender non-conventional practices in Thai males. The emphasis on differences between the two identities not only extricated the masculine *kathoey* from the feminine one, but also established *gay* as a completely different and higher class of sex/gender category to that of *kathoey* 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 *kathoey* and *gay*. *Gay* and *kathoey* 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 *kathoey* 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 ‘alienated’ to the conventional (hetero) sexual relations. *Kathoey* is generally described as having ‘lower’ mannerisms and sexual

behaviours compared with gay men who seem to enjoy higher ranking in the popular perception.

To explore these social stereotypes attached to both *kathoey* and *gay* identities, there would be no better way than listening to the lived experience of people who identify themselves as *gay*, *kathoey*, or both. During the ethnographic interviews with my research participants, the hierarchical relation of gay men's higher class status in comparison with that of *kathoey* is also being reiterated by most participants. Wira (วีระ) describes that:

"I think that *gay* is another level compared to *kathoey*. *Gay* is higher than *kathoey*. I think that *kathoey* is common. *Kathoey* is completely feminine. *Kathoey* is someone who is a screaming queen; someone who is always lustful; someone who enjoys having sexually promiscuous relations with different men and so on."

As *kathoey* becomes a loaded term of negativity, it is not uncommon for certain Thai gay men to avoid this public identification of gender transgressive *kathoey*. Pom (ปอม) points out this pervasive abjection of *kathoey* identity that:

"when being asked about their sexual identity, gay people would try to avoid labelling themselves *kathoey*."

The popular perception of *kathoey*, outlined by Wira and Pom reflects social antipathies against the visibility of non-conventional gender practices in the public of *kathoey*. *Kathoey* is not simply a term for people with hermaphroditic conditions or people who are identified as transgenders, but rather a term loaded with social stigma in relation to their non-conventional gender expressions and sexual practices. Pom's answer, however, recognises the interchangeability between *kathoey* and *gay* in popular discourses. Thai gay

men sometimes refer to one another as *kathoey* in a humorous way. Chira (ฉิระ) explains that:

“I know that the word *kathoey* is a bit derogatory but we call each other *kathoey* just to make fun of their effeminate mannerisms and sometimes just for a laugh, nothing in particular.”

To some gay men, *kathoey* might be an ‘insult’ reproaching their effeminate mannerisms in the public domain but the very word can also become a common joke among friends as Chira further comments that:

“It would get on my nerves if someone whom I don’t know calls me *kathoey* but if they were my (*gay/kathoey*) friends, I don’t mind.”

The interchange between *gay* and *kathoey*, reveals the confusion over various definitions of both categories in Thai contexts. *Kathoey* and *gay* share their same-sex attractions but differ in their gender expressions. The identitarian 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* (เกย์คิง - active/insertive) or *gay queen* (เกย์ควีน - passive/insertee). Wira and Pom identify their preference as *gay queen* or even *kathoey* while Chira remarks that he is more *queen* than *king*. Tam (ตั้ม) comments that it was common that most gays are *sao* (สาว - lit. girly). O (โอ) describes himself as *gay king*, citing his preference for an active role in his relationship with his boyfriend, Kit (กิต), to whom he often refers as his *mia* (เมีย) or wife in Thai. Wira further points out that: “*gay king* is rather hiding (prefers to be in the closet) while *gay queen* is more open about his expressiveness...everything.” Their identification as either *gay king* or *gay queen*

does not just profess their 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.

To certain Thai gay men, being gay is defined by their attraction to another masculine person. Tam explains how he understands what *gay* is in our conversation as follows:

Tam: Gays are people who have the same sex... and like each other... in my understanding...um...

Jaray: Having the same sex? Can you be more specific what sex is?

Tam: Sex is...if they are men, they are male, female, who are attracted to persons of the same sex. (They are) men who are attracted to men and women who are attracted to women. Whatever."

Tam's view of gayness is shared by Saem (แสน) who employs the English term 'straight' when explaining his understanding of *gay* and *kathoey*. He says,

"I think *gay* is a word used for a wider picture. *Gay* is not straight. Straight is direct way while *gay* is a bent, not direct way. That is, I don't think it's quite a correct word since it means an immoral way...the word *gay* alone. For *kathoey* and *tut*⁶², I think they want to be women. Being a man but having a desire to become a women, attracted to men. For gays, I think they don't want to be women, just ordinary men."

The comments of both Tam and Saem regarding gayness undeniably reflect the sexual binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality in which gender of the object of attraction primarily influences the dichotomisation of sexual identities. Saem declines to be designated as either *gay king* or *gay*

⁶² *Tut* is a Thai slang, denoting a derogatory insult on someone's non-normative gender and sexual identities. It is equivalent to the English terms of 'poof,' 'fag,' or 'queer.' It is allegedly derived from *Tootsie* (1982), an American film with Dustin Hoffman. In this film, Michael Dorsey (Hoffman) disguised himself as a woman to get an acting job. Nevertheless, there are no written records when and why *tut* has become another slang term for effeminate homosexuals

queen as he asserts that he prefers *both* ways or being (sexually) versatile in English. Pom's regular trips to Bangkok enable him to observe that:

"Younger gay men in Thailand these days are really advanced. They said to me that they could be both active and passive. They don't call themselves *gay king* or *gay queen* anymore. Many kids these days just say that they are *bot* (both) or just *gay*. This would have been unimaginable in the old days. I think we may be a bit old fashioned."

The unimaginability that Pom has suggested is a non-fixated and unstable sexual identity of *gay*, subscribed by younger Thai gay men in comparison with my informants who are in their late twenties to early thirties. Younger Thai gay men, particularly in big cities in Thailand, have benefited from continuous Westernisation and technological advances such as the Internet, providing them direct access to digital resources from Western gay communities. This may explain the increasing identification of Western style *gay* identity among recent generations of Thai homosexual males as shown in Saem's comment that he positions *gay* as the opposition to straight.

Having been in the U.K. since the age of 16, the way Saem chose the word 'straight' reflects his familiarity with Western gay culture. Unlike the term *gay*, the English term 'straight' has not been appropriated into Thai language. However, the Thai term *chaiching yingthae* (ชายจริงหญิงแท้ - lit. real men true women) emerged in the early 1990s during the peak of Thailand's economic miracle. This is likely to suggest Western influence on the sexual dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality over the Thai sex/gender system. The emphasis of the 'realness' or 'trueness' of masculine and feminine genders, however, highlights the fact that the traditional significance of 'gender' still remains dominant in the Thai sex/gender system. This normative sex/gender

category of 'real men and true women' is in opposition to the non-normative sex/gender *kathoey* and *gay*, respectively.

Tam's assertion that "most gays are *sao*" (effeminate) echoes the pervasive generalisation about male sex/gender non-normative identities in Thai contexts. This generalisation of gay men's effeminacy suggests that the social stigma of non-normative sex/gender categories is still being reiterated despite recent normalisation of masculine *gay* identity since 1965.

In short, 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.

One Is Not Born; but Becomes Gay⁶³

The emergence of *gay* identity I have described in previous sections 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

⁶³ I replaced the word *women* with *gay* in Simone de Beauvoir's classic phrase "one is not born; but becomes a woman" (*The Second Sex* 1949) to draw attention to the social construction of *gay* identity in Thailand.

appearance in 1965. Because *kathoey* 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 *kathoey* 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 contexts retains a significance of gender in the formation of sex/gender category in opposition to *kathoey* and subsequently heterosexuals (*chaiching yingthae*).

The following narrative data from my own experience and empirical interviews with a group of Thai gay men reveal that their identification with *gay* identity is not essentially pre-determined but rather acquired through personal interaction with Western gay discourses and the collective interpretation of the emerging masculine-identified homosexual categories in Thai contexts.

Self- Discovery of Non-Normative Sexual Attraction

All informants and I realised our same-sex attraction since a very young age. In my case, it happened when I was around 9. I was living with my grandparents at that time. I was walking past a group of my grandmother's maids watching a TV programme. I took a glimpse of what was on the screen. I saw an actor who seemed to have some kind of halo or radiance shining out of his back. I knew instantly that I must have preferred guys over girls.

This self-discovery was actually a nightmare because the first time I noticed that I was different from other boys at school was when I was 8 years old. I was playing in the school playground with some of my classmates. One boy, suddenly called me *mia* (เมี้ย). I was shocked that I was being referred to as the equivalent of the English word, *sissy*. *Mia* is actually a Southern Thai dialect for female. Of course, it is absurd for a boy to be called *mia*.

Around the second or third year of high school (1984 – 1985), I formed friendships with other effeminate boys in my school. Although we were in different classes, we met up quite often during lunch or free time. Most of the time, we just chatted and exchanged gossip about other (straight) boys in our classes. We, however, never identified ourselves as *mia*. We just knew that we were attracted to other boys. Crucially, we positioned ourselves differently from other effeminate male students in our school. We thought that they were *raeng* (แรง) or strong in English. *Raeng* here is very difficult to translate into English. The closet word would be 'bitchy' but also with a sense of being sexually adventurous. We thought that we were not *raeng*.

Boys like me would be generally called *tut* (ตุ๊ด), *mia* (เมี้ย) or *kathoey*. However, those words were very derogatory to me as they signify the effeminacy, bad mannerisms and those popular stereotypes such as loud, bad tastes, promiscuous and so forth. I found the word *gay* by accident when I stumbled across a gay magazine, called *Mithuna* (มิถุนา) in a bookshop near my house. The magazine explained the definition of *gay* and pointed out that *gay*, unlike *kathoey*, were ordinary guys who just happened to like other guys. I

remember being so excited that there was an alternative apart from being put into those three effeminate categories that I wanted to escape so badly.

I do not know how I learnt about these concepts or definitions of *kathoey*, *tut*, or *mia*. I might have heard about them from television and other people. My mother told me about the Buddhist belief that people who committed adultery or raped women in their past lives would be born *kathoey* as a kammic punishment. We had a neighbour who had a wife living opposite of my house but was so effeminate that everyone in the neighbourhood called him *baomia* (บ่าวเหมี้ย) *Bao* is a Southern Thai dialect for boys.

I have come to understand recently why my friends and I did not want to be seen as *raeng* or called *kathoey*, *tut* or *mia* was because these identities suggest not only effeminacy, but also those negative connotations attached to these terms. It was not the verbal bullying that my friends and I most dislike, but rather the shame and disrespect we might have caused to our families. As maintaining a positive image is everything in Thai society, we have been taught the dutiful responsibility to uphold our family's reputation and status. Some of us managed to prove that we could do this familial duty by our academic merits. This was our inner drive that forced us to double our efforts compared to our *chaiching yingthae* (straight) counterparts.

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: 42) notes that Thai society is manoeuvred by the culture of ‘appropriateness’; thereby, the loss of face (เสียหน้า - *siana*) “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.

All research participants disclosed that they started to feel that they were different from their male friends from a very early stage in their lives. That is, they sensed their attraction to other boys. They grew up with the obvious feminine characters, except Chira who claimed that he had no feminine mannerisms at all. The informants shared similar experiences of being teased or derogatorily named *kathoey* or *tut* in their childhoods. The experiences of being named *kathoey*, to a degree, marks the starting point of self-realisation that they were different from other boys.

Rot (โรจ) recalls his memory that:

“It was around Pathom 1 (first year of primary school), I started to differentiate masculinity from femininity...and my friends started to make fun of my ‘abnormality.’ As I was teased of my mannerisms and I myself discovered my attraction to boys, I assumed that I might be *kathoey*. Besides, I didn’t like playing with boys or doing those boy stuffs but I liked playing something rather gently (นุ่มนวล - *numnuan*) like girls.”

Similar experiences also shared by Khen (เค็น) who points out that:

“I realised that I was different from other boys when I was in primary school. I don’t know why I felt that way. At that time, I didn’t clearly know what differences between boys and girls or whether boys should love girl because it is ‘normal’ ...or even what is *gay* or *kathoey*? I just felt that I wanted to be hugged by men. I liked to look at handsome guys. I began to understand that I was different from other boys when my friends started to make fun of my feminine manners. I mostly played with my female friends because I didn’t like those boys’ games so I refused to play with them. However, I did neither feel sorry nor confused. I just knew that I wasn’t a boy. My feminine manners might derive from my upbringing by my mother, my grandmother and my nanny. Anyway, I was angry when I was called *kathoey* by some boys at school but I did nothing.”

Chira sees *kathoey-tut-gay* as a transitional process of Thai gay men. He explains that this passage from *kathoey* to *gay* is a life-learning experience. He states that:

“They were *kathoey* when they were young because it was the only possible way to be attracted to another boy when you are also a boy. A man is supposed to be paired up with a woman. Thus, if you are a biological male, you can’t become a woman. You have to be *kathoey*. Now, when they were a bit older, their effeminacy would contradict their boyishness. As you know, Thai school boys were required to have a very short hair cut or *songnakrian* (ทรงนักเรียน - student (hair) style). At this stage, they would be called *tut*. When they became teenagers, they realised that they would have a chance with another boy who likes boys if they maintain their masculinity. They become *gay*.”

Phat (ภัท) recalls his experience of being *tut* when he was a teenager.

Phat describes himself that:

“I was absolutely *tut* in high school. I think if I want boys to like me I had to be the opposite, a girl. So, I started to wear make-up and behave in feminine ways. I was still studious but *raed* (แเรด – flirtatious, promiscuous and slutty). The more *raed* I was the more studious I told myself to be.”

At the age of 13, Phat came across the notion of *gay* identity through his socialisation with his senior gay friend, Phi Yenruedi (พีเย็นฤดี) who was 22 years old at the time. Phi Yenruedi introduced him to the notion of *gay* identity by lending Phat magazines for gay men such as *Mithuna* (มิถุนา), *Midway* (มิดเวย์). It

is worth noting the prefix *phi* (พี่) Phat puts in front of the name of his friend demonstrates his respect for his seniority. However, Phat maintains that he continued to be *tut* until he went to university. Phat recalls his university experience of becoming *gay* that:

“At my university, I was still *tut* but didn’t show off much like in high school. I think that *tud* is *dek* (เด็ก - childish). I saw *gay* role models from my seniors that men can love each other. At my faculty and others, many man-man couples showed me that men can have relationships with each other. I was so fed up with dressing up as girls to attract men, anyway. I started reading *gay* magazines from my neighbour, Phi Yenruedi. I firstly thought that *gay* meant men in office suit marrying women but had an affair with other men and had to conceal their relationships from others. At university, I thought I was a *tut* but behaved more proper in society because the experience in university made me understand more about *gay*. But, I didn’t pay much attention about my sexuality at all. I have two *tut* friends in faculty. They are effeminate but did not dress up as girls. When I was in my third year, I watched more *gay* films, such as *Philadelphia*, *Beautiful Things*. I just realised at the time that I was secure in my sexuality. I started to explore it and study about it from *gay* magazines and Ko Paknam (โกปภักษ์)⁶⁴ column for *gay* men.”

Resisting Gay Identity

Unlike the rest of my informants, Phaen (แพน) finds the identification with the Western style ‘gayness’ problematic. Despite living in Paris for 6 years and having successive French *gay* lovers, he never attended any of Paris’ Gay Pride events. He discloses his opinion that:

“I find *gays* disgusting. They fetishise perfect and youthful male bodies with six-packed abs. They enjoy parading in the middle of the city almost naked. They are liars. They never know enough is enough. They create this concept of ‘open relationships’ just an excuse for promiscuity. These are my reasons that I don’t want to be identified as *gay*. I’m just a *guy* who falls in love with another *guy*.”

⁶⁴ Ko Paknam is a pseudonym of a columnist who has published a column, called *Chiwit Sao Chao Gay* (ชีวิตเศร้าชาวเกย์ - lit. Sad Lives of Gay Men) in a weekly magazine, called *Plaek* (แปลก - lit. Strange). Also see Jackson (1995b) for details and analysis related to this issue.

Phaen's negative experiences with French gay men may have partly constituted his disengagement from identification with gayness. However, the discursive image of *gay* identity in the mainstream and gay press as described by Phaen 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 an 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* (ชายรักชาย - lit. men (who) love men) in the early 2000s may symbolise the on-going effort of Thai homosexual men to normalise their sex/gender identity with social constraints on same-sex relations as I have outlined in previous sections. However, it is unclear who originally coined this term. *Chairakchai* was firstly employed by the very first mainstream Thai gay right organization, called *Fasirung* (ฟ้าสีรุ้ง - lit. rainbow sky). It is likely that the term *chairakchai* has been formatted in the same way as the term *yingrakying* (หญิงรักหญิง - 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 *kathoey* 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*⁶⁵ (lit. love same sex), the term *chairakchai* 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: 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

In this chapter, I have shown the interaction between the traditional sex/gender label *kathoey* and the Western *gay* identity in Thai contexts. *Kathoey* traditionally represented all forms of gender and sexual non-normative categories in Thai sex/gender schema. After the murder of an American expatriate, Darrell Berrigan who was publicly exposed of his homosexuality in the Thai press in 1965, the adoption of the label *gay* by masculine-identified men did not erase the traditional identity of *kathoey* but rather positioned *gay* in direct opposition to *kathoey* in terms of gender identification.

⁶⁵ The antonym of *rakruamphet* is *raktangphet* (lit. love different sex).

The polarisation between *gay* and *kathoey* reflects the valorisation of masculinity in Thai patriarchy. *Kathoey* 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 *kathoey*. *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 identification of *bot* (both) or versatile in English by younger generations of Thai gay men further reveals the increasing influence of Western *gay* identity conception in which *gay* is positioned in opposition to *straight*. Personal narratives of Thai gay individuals, participating in this thesis, reveal the transitional phrases of sex/gender identification as a gradual process from *kathoey* to *tut* and eventually *gay*. However, identification with the Western style *gay* is also problematic for certain Thai gay men who are discouraged by the negative connotations attached to *gay* identity.

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.

Chapter 4: Positioning Same-Sex Eroticism in Religious and Historical Thailand

Although homosexuality has never been religiously or legally sanctioned in Thailand, its relationship with Thai heteronormative society is not unproblematic. References to sexual non-conformists found in Thailand's religious and historical scriptures are meagre but highly critical of non-normative forms of eroticism. Stories of transgenders and same-sex relations found in Thai religious and traditional legal texts often reflect the peripheral status of sexual minorities in Thailand's hierarchical sexual relations.

Chetta Puanghut (เชษฐา พวงหัตถ์ - 1997: 83) highlights the interplay between historical materialism in traditional societies and the abjection of homosexual behaviours in his article, *Discourse on Sex: Questions in Modern Thai History*. He posits that: "traditional societies substantially depended on large populations as significant labour resources for security, food cultivation and local construction. The practice of forced migration of captive people after successful battle campaigns was common and proved crucial to the increasing wealth and security of pre-modern states. Therefore, any non-reproductive sexual relations among the populace were not desired." Homosexual relations were consequently seen as a threat to political stability in the traditional period, particularly among the political elites, whose bona fide power heavily invested in continuing and maintaining their family-based power. Tamara Loos' study of an oath of allegiance for King Rama IV's *chaochom*⁶⁶ in her article, *Sex in the Inner City: the Fidelity between Sex and Politics in Siam* (2005), reveals that Siamese elites'

⁶⁶ *Chaochom* (เจ้าจอม) is a title for Siamese monarch's concubines of non-royal lineage.

political stability was strengthened by 'polygynous political marriages' with the monarch.

Chetta's emphasis on historical materialism⁶⁷ in the traditional period seems plausible in connecting the traditional society's economic need and its intervention on individuals' sexuality but it is unable to account for Thais' empathic attitudes towards sexual minorities. Thai populace who engaged in homosexual relations in the traditional period were not subject to severe punishments compared to their Western counterparts as homosexuality was not criminalised by Thai laws. Despite being criticised for their non-conventional sexualities, traditional Thai society seemed to exercise an exceptional tolerance towards these non-normative gender and sexual practices.

This chapter traces the conceptualisation of non-conformist sexualities in pre-modern Thailand. It is worth noting that the pre-modern or pre-modernisation period refers to a historical period up until 1851 when King Rama IV (Mongkut) ascended the throne as the year 1851 marked the start of Siam or Thailand's national reform or Westernisation projects. This chapter aims to study polymorphous sexual categories found in Thailand's religious and historical discourses to understand how homoeroticism and homosexual behaviours before the intensification of Western cultural influence were socially recognised. This study provides historical and religious backgrounds to marginal positions to which contemporary Thai gay men have been allocated. Having outlined in Chapter three, Thai gay men still find their identification with the 'global gayness' problematic although the *gay* identity helps demarcating gender normative

⁶⁷ I personally find Chetta's economic explanation of anti-homosexual sentiments in traditional societies is plausibly influenced by Marx's materialist theory of history. (1848)

homosexuals from the traditional gender non-normative *kathoey*. This chapter suggests that historical and religious factors are crucial to insights into Thais' perception of sexual minorities and their social positions. The examination of historical and religious texts indicates that people with non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices have been socially marginalised in Thai society before the start of Westernisation in the mid nineteenth century. Therefore, the peripheral status of these sexual minorities cannot be generalised as the by-products of Thais' modernisation projects.

Drawn on historical and religious texts, I will identify same-sex erotic categories, which appeared in the traditional period of Thailand. Firstly, I will focus on Buddhism and its attitudes towards unconventional sexual categories. As the Influential foundation of Thai culture, it is inevitable not to understand how same-sex relations have been framed in Buddhist discourses. I will explore how Buddhism has importantly contributed to Thais' understandings of marginal sexualities. I will investigate the references to non-conformist sexualities and their definitions in the Buddhist texts i.e. the Pali-Canon or *Tipitaka*. It is crucial to explore extensively the definitions and concepts about sexual minorities in Buddhist scriptures as it is common to find these concepts understood in India during the Buddha's time alien in our present context. Then, I will look into Buddhist influence on Thais' attitudes towards homosexuality to find out if Buddhism has lessened social discrimination against homosexuals.

Second emphasis of this chapter is the study of Thai traditional legal scriptures regarding social positions of people with non-normative gender and sexual practices. I will look into the legal categorisation of individuals with

homosexual behaviours in traditional legal codes, e.g. the Three Seals Law (กฎหมายตราสามดวง – *kotmai tra sam duang* – 1808 – 1907), and historical anecdotes regarding Thai political elite's reaction to homosexual scandals to contextualise the social perception towards these sexual minorities and their legal positions in Thai traditional society.

Buddhist Influence in Thai Society

Buddhism in Thailand is largely of the Theravada tradition.⁶⁸ As much as 95 per cent of Thailand's population is claimed to belong to the Theravada sect⁶⁹, although Thai Buddhism has integrated with its predecessors, namely Brahmanism⁷⁰, local animist beliefs such as ancestor and natural spirits worship, as well as Confucian and Taoist traditions from the large Thai-Chinese population. This arguably enabled Buddhism to remain the leading faith in the country. Buddhism was eventually institutionalised as central to Thai society and culture⁷¹ under the nationalist campaigns of King Rama VI or King Vajiravudh (reign 1910 – 1925 – Thai: พระบาทสมเด็จพระมงกุฎเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว – Phrabat Somdet Phra Mongkutklao Chaoyuhua). In other words, Buddhism has been made an essential part of Thai society.

⁶⁸ Buddhism can be crudely divided into two main sects: 1) Theravada (Lineage of the Elders) or Hinayana; 2) Mahayana. Theravada claims that its teaching and practices are closer to the original teachings of Buddha than those of Mahayana.

⁶⁹ According to Thailand's national census in 2000, 94.6 per cent of Thai population identified themselves as Buddhists of Theravada tradition.

⁷⁰ Brahmanism was later evolved into Hinduism.

⁷¹ In order to establish the 'national loyalty' (*khwamrakchat* - ความรักชาติ) among Thai populace, King Rama VI (reign 1910 – 1925) defined 'Thainess' or *khwampenthai* as consisting of 1) the Nation (*chat* - ชาติ), 2) the Religion (*satsana* - ศาสนา), 3) the Monarchy (*phra maha Kasat* - พระมหากษัตริย์). See Saichon Sattayanurak (2008 – สายชล สัตยานุรักษ์) *King Rama VI: Defining the Nation, the Religion and the Monarchy* (*Ratchakanthi Hok Kanniyam Khwammai Khong Chat Satsana Phramahakasat - รัชกาลที่ ๖: การนิยามความหมายของ ชาติ ศาสนา พระมหากษัตริย์*), retrieved from <http://www.midnightuniv.org/midnight2544/0009999440.html>.

“To be Thai is to be Buddhist,” claimed by Penny van Esterik (2000:65), it is undeniable that the Thai Theravada Buddhism has played a central role in shaping Thai identities and beliefs. Penny van Esterik (ibid.) asserts that:

“Buddhism must be front and center in a book about Thai gender because Buddhism matters to Thai people in many different ways, and is a key component of Thai identity. It has a profound impact not only because of its text and rituals, but also because of its paradoxes emerging from the gaps between doctrine and everyday life.”

The central role of Buddhist institutions in forging Thai identities can be seen from the close connection between monks and laypersons in the traditional society. Before the start of King Rama V's (1868 - 1910) national reform, monks played a crucial role in educating Thai male populace. Sukanya Nitungkorn (สกุญญา นีธังกอร์ 2000: 146) summarises the role of monks towards Thai educational system in the pre-modernisation period that:

“In Thailand, until the reign of King Rama V, the government thought that it was the role of the monastery (*wat*)⁷² to educate people. The education that parents expected from a monk was not only to include some reading, writing, and perhaps arithmetic, but also to attach also greater importance to moral teaching. The government took responsibility for providing financial support for the education of monks. Thai parents, commoners as well as noblemen, normally sent their children to local monasteries with which they had had some association with. However, for commoners' children, only a few were lucky enough to receive education. Most of them stayed at home helping their parents at work or doing household chores [Sathienkoses 1978: 450]. Apart from the monasteries, education was also instructed in palaces and some scholars' houses. However, the monasteries remained the center of learning (arts, medicine, astronomy, law, and philosophy). Because of Thai Buddhist custom which did not permit girls to stay close to a monk, education for girls was mostly done in their homes, or in the palaces for the daughters of noble families.”

The relationships between monks and laypersons in the traditional period underlines their interdependence of each other and explains why the Buddhist monk institution commanded a high level of influence over lives of nobles and

⁷² *Wat* or วัด means a temple in Thai.

commoners alike. That is, Buddhist monks depended on the generosity of local communities for means of subsistence⁷³ and protection from the state while in return monks provided professional and spiritual trainings for local communities. Temples and Buddhist monasteries were also crucial for local communities as local festivities in relation to Buddhism were held within temples' premises, offering meeting space for socialisation, entertainment and business opportunities for local people. In other words, Buddhist institution had played a prominent role in continuing local communities' cultural reproduction in the traditional period.

Buddhist Attitudes towards Sex and Sexuality

Having enjoyed such a considerable respect in Thai societies, Buddhism has left significant moral and spiritual values for Thais in many ways. Buddhist philosophical teachings offer explanation for causal phenomena, ranging from meaning of life to spiritual freedom. Buddhism has greatly contributed to Thais' production of knowledge. Pali, an official language of Theravada Buddhism, is not only used in religious rituals, but also embedded in Thai language, enabling Thais to engage semantically and semiotically with new vocabulary and knowledge⁷⁴. It is not uncommon that a number of literary works from the traditional period ranging from legal scriptures to romantic poetries mirror Buddhist worldviews, including its moral attitudes towards sex and sexuality.

Central to Buddhist teachings, 'four noble truths' or *cattari ariya saccani* (อริยสัจสี่) are four facts that are known to be true in the nature of reality. The first

⁷³ Monks are not allowed by the monks' rules to have any material possessions with exception of robes and some small necessities.

⁷⁴ To coin a new word derived from foreign languages in Thai language, Thai linguists will translate the original words into Pali and / or Sanskrit words and combine them into new words.

noble truth calls attention to the reality of suffering or *dukkha* (ทุกข์). Because all things are impermanent and imperfect, they will bring suffering to anyone who does not recognise this fact but desires them. The second noble truth, *sumudaya* (สมุทัย) identifies desires, cravings and emotional attachments as sources of suffering. The third noble truth, *niroda* (นิโรธ) explains the end of suffering through detachment from desires. The fourth noble truth, *magga* (มรรค) offers eight ways to discipline one's behaviours to achieve the end of suffering.

Sensual cravings are, therefore, considered as primordial obstacles to spiritual enlightenment. Provided that individuals still enjoy sensual pleasure, including sexual gratification, it is unlikely that they will be able to purify their minds from illusory sensation, allegedly leading to indefinite cravings and suffering from dissatisfaction. Buddhists are often reminded about the impermanence of worldly sensuality or *logiya* (โลกีย์), deemed as 'unreal' and are advised to seek 'real' satisfaction through mind peacefulness or *lokutara* (โลกุตระ - beyond the world), derived from the ability to recognise and terminate worldly desires.

To eradicate worldly desires, Buddhists are also required to appreciate the nature of things that universally share three characteristics. The three universal characteristics of existence consist of 1) *anicca* (อนิจจัง) or impermanence, 2) *dukkha* (ทุกข์) or suffering, and 3) *anatta* (อนัตตา) or non-selfhood. Buddha claimed that everything is marked by these three characteristics.

"All things whatsoever have the property of changing incessantly; they are unstable. All things whatsoever have the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness; seeing them evokes disillusionment and disenchantment in anyone having clear insight into their nature. Nothing whatsoever is such that we are justified in regarding it as "mine." To our

normally imperfect vision, things appear as selves; but as soon as our vision becomes clear, unobscured and accurate, we realise that there is no self-entity present in any of them.”

(Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (พุทธทาสภิกขุ) 2005: 37-38)

Nevertheless, it is believed that not everyone is capable of understanding this core dhamma nor is brave enough to suppress these desires despite being aware of this concept as individuals' accumulated good or bad deeds or *kamma* (กรรม)⁷⁵ from past lives as well as present one are also crucial in determining their likely future action.⁷⁶ This concept of *kamma* and the belief of reincarnation are viewed by Buddhists as constituting eternal dissatisfaction or suffering. Monks and laypersons alike are required to understand core Buddhist principles to be able to end the cycle of suffering and rebirth or *samsara*, (วัฏสงสาร) thereby achieving *nibbana* (นิพพาน)⁷⁷ or 'being free from *samsara*.'

Despite Buddhism's wariness of worldly cravings, sexual desires are understood as natural to human instincts. Similar to Catholicism, Buddhist monks are subject to strict vows of celibacy. The violation of proscriptions against sexual activities would lead them to spiritual defeat or *parajika* (ปาราชิก) and they would have been expelled from the priesthood if proved guilty. Laypersons, on the contrary, enjoy more laid-back and pragmatic attitudes toward sex and sexuality as sexual relations are not restricted within the procreative framework. That is, with the exception of the monks who are required to be celibate,

⁷⁵ *Kamma* or *karma* in Sanskrit is an Indian philosophical notion of cause and effect, explaining the causal relationships between present and past actions.

⁷⁶ Buddha metaphorically compared individuals' susceptibility to enlightenment with four stages of lotus: 1) a lotus that is buried in the mud under water, 2) a lotus that is emerging from the mud but is still under water, 3) a lotus that is about to rise above water level, 4) a lotus that is above water and blooming. Some people are very susceptible to the *dhamma*. They understood instantly while some people might find it very difficult to understand it at all.

⁷⁷ According to the *Theravada* tradition, *nibbana* or *nirvana* in Sanskrit is not a place but the state of mind, often described as the extinction of all cravings, all hatred and all ignorance of the true nature of things.

laypersons are expected to follow five precepts⁷⁸ voluntarily. The third precept forbids individuals to involve in any sexual misconduct. Sexual misconduct includes any forms of non-consensual and abusive sexual activities, such as adultery, rape, child molestation, sexual harassment and so forth. In other words, as long as the sex does not incur any harm between consenting parties, it is not prohibited. Laypersons, however, may be expected to abstain from sexual activities during religious festivities or in the inappropriate places on voluntary basis.

Thai Buddhist Attitudes towards Homosexuality

Compared to monotheistic religions i.e. Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Buddhism does not explicitly condemn same-sex eroticism but rather ostensibly appears neutral on the issue of sexual preference. This ethical silence, to some extent, proves appealing and practicable to many homosexual people who have been historically despised and persecuted by both evangelicals and mainstream religious institutions (Whitney 2000: 17).

It is generally accepted that the third precept, denouncing any forms of sexual misconduct does not specify whether they are heterosexual nor homosexual relations. Cabezón (2000: 30) supports this claim of Buddhism's

⁷⁸The five precepts (ศีลห้า - *pancasila*) constitute the basic Buddhist code of ethics, undertaken by Buddhist lay followers. The following are the five precepts translated in English as follows:

1. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life (killing) of living beings;
Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
2. I undertake the precept to refrain from stealing;
Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
3. I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct (adultery, rape, etc).
Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
4. I undertake the precept to refrain from false speech (lying);
Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
5. I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicants leading to negligence.
Sura meraya majja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami

indifference to homosexuality. He points out that: “the principal question of Buddhism has not been one of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality but one of sexuality vs. celibacy.” In other words, Buddhism indiscriminately places homosexuality on a par with heterosexuality as sources of suffering. Where homosexuality is condemned, it is due to the Buddhist deprecation of sexuality, not homosexuality per se.

In Thailand, the Buddhist conception of kammic laws is popularly used to rationalise the existence of homosexuality. It is believed that:

“Homosexuality arises as a kammic consequence of violating Buddhist proscriptions against heterosexual misconduct. These kammic accounts describe homosexuality as a congenital condition which cannot be altered, at least in a homosexual person's current lifetime, and have been linked with calls for compassion and understanding from the non-homosexual populace.” (Jackson 2000: 56)

Regarding this popular interpretation of kammic laws, homosexuality is viewed as a form of suffering, derived from committing sexual misconducts in previous lives. Therefore, being born with a homosexual desire is a natural phenomenon and considered beyond a homosexual's ability to change this fate. This belief arguably contributes to the social compassion or sympathy to homosexuals whom are regarded as ‘unfortunate’ (ibid., p. 83, Jackson 1995: 58).

According to Jackson (1989: 26), “Buddhist ethical literature does not directly mention anything about homosexuality, either in positive or negative sense.” This lack of acknowledgement can be interpreted that while Buddhism does not explicitly condemn homosexuality, Buddhism does not explicitly validate any forms of sexuality other than heterosexuality either (ibid.). In Thailand, the

third precept is often popularly interpreted as ‘violating another person’s husband or wife.’ This evidently suggests that Thais’ conception of ‘sexual misconduct’ is defined within heteronormative framework. The lack of recognition of homosexuality in Buddhist discourse reflects a tense relation between Thai homosexuals and their participation in a society strictly controlled by the heterosexual norms in which homosexuality is not acknowledged and is being forced to the powerful conformist values of hegemonic heterosexuality. In the other words, homosexual relationships do not have a place in Thai traditional values.

Having outlined in Chapter three, it would be problematic for people who identify themselves as either *kathoey* or *gay*. Buddhism’s distrustful attitudes towards sex and sexuality have also inadvertently contributed to negative impressions of sexual minorities since they are socially identified by their association with non-conventional sexual relations. As a result, to avoid unnecessary attention, these sexual minorities may choose to remain silent about their same-sex relations.

Non-Normative Sex/Gender Categories in Buddhist Scriptures

References to non-normative forms of genders and sexual behaviours can be found in the *Vinaya* (พระวินัย), the first part of the *Tipitaka* (พระไตรปิฎก)⁷⁹,

⁷⁹ The *Tipitaka* (พระไตรปิฎก - *Phratraipidok* in Thai, *Tripitaka* in Sanskrit) is the formal term for a Buddhist canon of scriptures (Gombrich 2006: 3). Many different versions of the canon have existed throughout the Buddhist world, containing an enormous variety of texts. The oldest and most widely-known version is the Pali Canon of the Theravada tradition. The *Tipitaka* writings of early schools of Buddhism, which were originally memorised and recited orally by Buddha’s disciples, fall into three general categories and are traditionally classified in three baskets. (*Pitaka* literally means basket.)

The first basket, the *Vinaya Pitaka* (วินัยปิฎก), is the code of ethics to be obeyed by the monastic community (*sangha*), *bhikkhu* (male monks), and *bhikkhuni* (female monks) It includes 227 rules for *bhikkhu*, 311 rules for *bhikkhuni*, and guidelines for the interaction between the *sangha* and the laity.

outlining monastic rules for *bhikkhu* (ภิกษุ) and *bhikkhuni* (ภิกษุณี)⁸⁰. The *Maha-Vibhanga* (มหาวิภังค์) division of the *Vinaya* contains detailed descriptions of behavioural restrictions for monks whose breach entails an automatically spiritual defeat and expulsion from the priesthood (*parajika*). One of the four *parajika* explicitly prohibits monks to engage in any forms of sexual intercourse i.e. oral, vaginal and anal with any of the four sexes or genders of human, non-human, or animals. The four sexes or genders are 1) male, 2) female, 3) *ubhatobyanjanaka* (อุภโตพยัญชนก), and 4) *pandaka* (ปัญฑะกะ). While male and female in the *Vinaya* are sex/gender categories, crudely distinguishable by reproductive genitalia similar to the present context, *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* are complex categories of different conceptions of sex/gender understood at least in the Buddha's time. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how these two non-normative sex/gender categories are described and treated particularly in Buddhist discourses as I believe that the existence of *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* in Buddhist writings, to an extent, reveals their respective places in the power relations in the heteronormative society.

Ubhatobyanjanaka

Ubhatobyanjanaka, according to the Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary (Rhys Davis 1975: 154), refers to a person or living being that has

According to the scriptural account, these were invented on a day-to-day basis as the Buddha encountered monk's various behavioural problems.

The second basket, the *Sutta Pitaka* (สุตตปิฎก) consists primarily of accounts of the Buddha's teachings on doctrines and behaviours, focusing especially on meditation techniques. The *Sutta Pitaka* has numerous subdivisions. It contains more than 10,000 suttas.

The third basket is the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (อภิธรรมปิฎก). It is the collection of texts in which the underlying doctrinal principles presented in the *Sutta Pitaka* are reinterpreted and reorganised into a systematic framework that can be applied to an investigation into the nature of mind and matter.

⁸⁰ *Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhuni* are Pali terms for male and female monk, respectively.

both male and female sex organs, equivalent to hermaphrodite in English. Yet, the definite meaning of *ubhatobyanjanaka* is contestable among Buddhist scholars. The fifth century Indian Theravadin commentator, Buddhaghosa suggests that there are *itthi-ubhatobyanjanaka* (female hermaphrodites), capable of impregnating women and giving birth and *purisa-ubhatobyanjanaka* (male hermaphrodites), incapable of giving birth and that either type could be sexually attracted to both men and women (cited in Harvey 2000: 413). Zwillling (1992: 206, cited in *ibid.*) argues that in that account, Buddhaghosa conflates hermaphroditism and bisexuality. Bunmi Methangkun (บุญมี เมธางกูร), a Thai Buddhist scholar (1986: 238 - 239, cited in Jackson 2000: 64) further extends the ability of both *purisa* and *itthi-ubhatobyanjanaka* that they are able to transform their physical genitalia and mental conditions into those of the opposite sex when they are sexually attracted to people of their own sex.

The *Dhammapada Atthakatha* (The commentary of the *Dhammapada*⁸¹) tells the story of Soreyya who was born a male but transformed into a female after being attracted to Maha Kaccayana (one of Buddha's prominent disciples). Soreyya then lived her life as a woman. She later gave birth to two sons. Until she eventually received forgiveness from Maha Kaccayana, she then returned to physical male and entered the monkhood. He subsequently became *arahant* or attained enlightenment (Malalasekera 1960: 1311-12, cited in *ibid.*, also cited in Harvey 2000: 412).

⁸¹ The *Dhammapada* is the popular section of the Pali Canon. The *Dhammapada* consists of 423 verses in 26 categories in Pali, most of which deal with ethical issues.

The *Vinaya* forbids *ubhatobyanjanaka* from being ordained because of the possibility that *ubhatobyanjanaka* may seduce their fellow monks into having sex with them (Vin. I. 89; Vin. II.217 cited in *ibid.* p. 413).

Pandaka

Pandaka, often called *bando* (บัญญัติเพศ) in the Thai version of Pali, is commonly translated into Thai as *kathoey*. Having said in Chapter three, *kathoey* in contemporary Thai contexts exclusively denotes male to female transgenderism but is also used as a blanket term which includes gay men. The actual meanings of *pandaka* are much more complicated. *Pandaka* cannot simply be reduced to signify people with either hermaphroditic conditions or homosexual desires as its definitions vary depending on different interpretations of Buddhist scholars.

Pandaka is divided into five different types⁸² in the footnotes of Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya (มหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย)⁸³'s *Tipitaka* (1996: 173, cited in Terdsak 2000: 203-204) as follows:

1. *asittakapandaka* (อาสิตตบัณฑิตเพศ) - a person who gains satisfaction from performing oral sex on another man and from ingesting his semen, or who only becomes sexually aroused after ingesting another man's semen;
2. *ussuyapandaka* (อุสสุยบัณฑิตเพศ) - a voyeur who gains sexual satisfaction from watching a man and a woman having sex;
3. *opakkamikapandaka* (โอบัปกมิกบัณฑิตเพศ) - an eunuch or castrated man lacking complete sexual organs;
4. *pakkhapandaka* (ปักขบัณฑิตเพศ) - a person who becomes sexually aroused in parallel with the phases of the moon, either becoming aroused during the fortnight of the waning moon and ceasing to be aroused during the fortnight of the waxing moon or, conversely,

⁸² Similar classification of *pandaka* by Buddhaghosa can be found in Harvey (2000: 414) and Jackson (2000: 66).

⁸³ Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya is one of two Thai major universities for monks.

- becoming sexually aroused during the period of the waxing moon and ceasing to be aroused during the period of the waning moon;
5. *napumsakapandaka* (นปงสกบัณเฑาะก์) - a person with no clearly defined genitals, whether male or female, having only a urinary tract.”

Satdhammashotika Dhammacariya⁸⁴ (พระสัทธัมมโชติกะ ฉัมนาจริยะ -1974: 227-228, cited in *ibid.*, p. 204) argues that among five kinds of *pandaka*, only *napumsakapandaka* is the genuine description of *pandaka* whereas the other four categories are, in fact, descriptions of *pandaka*'s behaviours. In other words, *asittakapandaka*, *ussuyapandaka*, *opakkamikapandaka*, and *pakkhapandaka* are sub-categories of *napumsakapandaka*. *Pandaka*, according to Satdhammashotika Dhammacariya's comment, is people with no distinctive or undeveloped genitals. Zwillig (cited in Harvey 2000: 415) postulates that the terms of *pandaka* signifying people with 'sexual dysfunction' are socially casted as *napusaka* or 'lacking maleness.' By this definition, all characteristics of lacking maleness i.e. impotency either biologically or by castration and non-conventional (non-masculine) sexual behaviours can be classified as being *pandaka*.

Pandaka is categorised with others people who are also excluded from ordination; either those with physical disabilities such as deafness or dwarfism, or those who have committed sinful crimes.⁸⁵ The Vinaya justifies the prohibition

⁸⁴ Satdhammashotika Dhammacariya was a Burmese monk, an expert in *Abhidhama*, taught at Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidlayala.

⁸⁵ According to Maha Chulalongkorn Rajavidlayala 's *Tipitaka*, the absolute prohibited persons from ordination are (cited in Terdsak 2000: 207):

- 1) "Three kinds of *Pandaka*:
 - 1.1 men who have lustful desires with unconventional sexual behaviours and seduce other men to follow them,
 - 1.2 eunuchs or castrated men,
 - 1.3 persons who were born as *kathoey*;
- 2) *Ubhatovyanjanaka*, an intersex person;
- 3) A person who committed murder of his mother;
- 4) A person who committed murder of his father;
- 5) A person who committed murder of *arahant* (lit. the worthy ones, the enlightened ones);
- 6) A person who destroyed *bhikkhu*;

of *pandaka* from being ordained by citing a story of a lustful *pandaka* monk who “approached some young monks, then some fat novices, then some mahouts and grooms, asking each in turn to ‘defile’ him. While the first two groups sent him away, the last group agreed to his request. They then spread it about that Buddhist monks were *paṇḍakas*, or that those who were not *paṇḍakas* nevertheless ‘defile’ *paṇḍakas*” (Harvey 2000: 416). This scandalous incident was said to have prompted Buddha’s prohibition of *pandaka* and the disrobing of *pandaka* who were already ordained (Vin. I.85-6, cited in *ibid.* p. 415).

Understanding *Ubhatobyanjanaka* and *Pandaka* in Thai Contexts

The conclusive definitions of *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* still remain disputable among Thai Buddhist scholars. Both Pali terms for non-normative gender and sexual categories are often interchangeably translated into Thai as *kathoey*. This lack of indigenous Thai vocabulary to distinguish these two different types of gender and sexual conceptions from Buddhist texts poses a semantic problem for contemporary Thai Buddhists as the term *kathoey* had been extended to include transsexuals, transvestites and even gay men in the present context. The rendition of *pandaka* as *kathoey* in Thai, nevertheless, depreciates the fact that the sex/gender system recognised in the Buddha’s time was structurally different from our present time. In the Buddha’s time, a man who sexually penetrated another man or a *pandaka* was not himself considered a *pandaka* (Harvey 2000: 416). On the contrary, the sexual relations between a gender normative male and his passive male partners were not thought of being

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- 7) A person who made the Buddha bruised;
 - 8) A person who attacked (raped) *bhikkhuni*;
 - 9) A person who was officially defrocked from his previous ordination.”

homosexual but rather heterosexual as the passive partners' sex/gender status was degenerated to that of female. This process of 'institutionalisation of indigenous homosexuality' can be seen as a social assertion to exclusively normalise heterosexuality (Zwilling 2000: 46-47).

Terdsak (2000: 203) defines *pandaka* as people who were born with no distinctive or undeveloped sexual organs whereas *ubhatoyanjanaka* is a person who can switch their genitals and psyche back and forth between being male or female. He claims that India's pervasive sex/gender discourses in the Buddha's time were not exactly the same as those being disseminated in present contexts. He concludes that contemporary Buddhist scholars' interpretation of *ubhatoyanjanaka* and *pandaka* as *kathoey* by their respectively cultural contexts have distorted the original meanings of the two words.

Terdsak's analysis of the historical derivation of the word *kathoey*, widely used in certain continental South-East Asian ethnic communities, i.e., Tai-Ahom⁸⁶, Cambodia, Siam for calling things and living beings with intermediate sex or infertile conditions, suggests that the translation of Pali Canon's *pandaka* as *kathoey* by many contemporary Thai Buddhist scholars was inaccurate as it ignores the contextual and cultural relativity of both words, having been rooted in different cultural and historical contexts (ibid., p. 15).

Jackson (2000: 67) identifies the confusion in translating the two Pali terms into Thai because of misrecognition by Thai scholars who 'interchangeably' translate both *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* as *kathoey*. He

⁸⁶ Tai-Ahom is a group of Tai-speaking ethnicity, living from South-Eastern India of Assam and Northern Myanmar (Burma).

acknowledges that *kathoey* was traditionally regarded as ‘true hermaphrodites’ but has later been widened to accommodate “a diverse range of physical, psychological and emotional phenomena that are now usually separated out into biological sex (hermaphroditism), psychological gender (transvestism and transsexualism), and sexuality (homosexuality).” Jackson illustrates the extensive meanings of *kathoey* in the contemporary context in comparison with English and Pali terms for non-normative sexual beings as follows:

“*Kathoey* denotes a type of person not simply a type of behaviour and in different contexts can include one or more of the following groups:

1. Hermaphrodites (Pali: *ubhatobyanjanaka*; Thai: *kathoey thae* or “true *kathoey*”): that is, people who to a greater or lesser degree are either born with or at some time after birth naturally develop physical characteristics of both sexes. Hermaphrodites also include people born without any clear determinable sex (Pali: *napumsakapandaka*).
2. Transvestites and transsexuals (Pali: *pandaka*, *itthi-* & *purisa-ubhatobyanjanaka*; Thai: *kathoey thiam* or “pseudo-*kathoey*s”): that is, people who are physically male or female but prefer either to dress and behave as a member of the opposite sex or, in the case of transsexuals, to undergo hormone treatment and/ or surgery in order to change their body to more closely approximate the physical features of a person of the opposite sex. In the Pali canon transsexualism is described as a spontaneous change of sex caused purely by psychological factors and not requiring medical intervention.
3. Homosexuals (Pali: *pandaka*; Thai: variously, *kathoey*, *gay*, *tut*, etc, for men; *kathoey*, *tom*, *dee*, etc., for women): that is, people who are physically male or female and are sexually attracted to people of their own sex.” (ibid.)

In short, irrespective to the substantial differences between Thai (*kathoey*), Pali (*pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka*), and English (*gay*, *lesbian* and so forth) terms for non-normative sex, gender, and sexual beings, it is worth noting that the notion of modern homosexuality as we have been accustomed to is the product of specific temporality and geography that is the historical product of the nineteenth century Western Europe. Cabezon (2000: 34) stresses that distinctions should be made between ‘homosexual desire,’ ‘homosexual act’ and

‘a conscious self-identification as a person of homosexual orientation’. He explains that:

“homosexual desire, for example, is often never consummated in sexual act (at times remaining “filial”), and for many cultures a homosexual act implies nothing about the “orientation” of the actor. Indeed, in many cultures where homosexual acts occur, there is simply no notion of “homosexual orientation” with which self-identify; and even in cultures where the notion is operative, a man takes the active role in the homosexual anal intercourse (as the “penetrator”), this often never vitiates the man’s status as a normative heterosexual male.” (ibid.)

Positioning Non-Normative Sexual Categories in Buddhism

Although Buddhism is often dubbed as a gay friendly religion, the exclusion of *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* from ordination for fear of spiritual threats these non-normative sex/gender categories might have brought to the strictly celibate monastic orders underlines Buddhist ‘paradoxes’ as suggested by Van Esterik (2000: 65). References to non-conventional genders and sexualities found in the Buddhist texts exemplify discrepancies between Buddhism’s indifference towards same-sex eroticism and its discriminatory attitudes towards non-conventional gender/sexual categories i.e. *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka*.

The *Vinaya* requires the *acariya* (อาจารย์) or teacher monk to question if his *naga* (นาค) or candidate for *bhikkhu* ordination is a ‘real’ man⁸⁷, not either *ubhatobyanjanaka* or *pandaka*. Certain procedures, to prove the ‘true’ sex of the applicant such as a genital examination, might be necessary to ensure that the forbidden people will not be ordained (Zwilling 2000: 50).

⁸⁷ A set of questions will be asked in Pali during the ordination ceremony. One of them is the affirmation of the *naga*’s masculinity. The question *purisosi* in Pali can be rendered into English as ‘you are a man, are you not?’ Although the *Tipitaka* does not forbid the ordination of women, the emphasis on the male gender of *bhikkhu* candidates and the fact that Thai sangha do not allow and recognise the ordination of *bhikkhuni* can be argued that women, too, are excluded from participating in the Thai *sangha*.

Terdsak (2000: 206) argues that it is necessary to include India's social context in the Buddha's time in order to understand the ordination ban. The condemnation of *pandaka* was mainly rooted in *pandaka*'s continuation to indulge in sexual gratification despite the complete prohibition by the Vinaya. In order to secure the social support from ancient India's Brahman dominated communities, it was urgent for Buddha to take a drastic precaution to rectify the damaging image.

Jackson (2000: 76) contends that Buddha's proscriptions against certain types of people joining the sangha (Buddhist community) are often understood to reflect his concern with upholding the public image of the sangha as being virtuous. Thus, sexually active people, criminals, disabled people, non-conventional gendered or sexual people were banned as they could have run the risk of bringing the monastic order into disrepute. Jackson (ibid.) writes:

"Buddhism, the middle path, has always been concerned with the maintenance of social order and since the Buddha's time the sangha has never claimed to provide a universal vehicle for the spiritual liberation of all individuals in society, explicitly excluding those who are considered to reflect badly on the monkhood in terms of prevailing social norms and attitudes."

Zwilling (op.cit. p.48) points out that the *Vinaya* also contains judgmental and distrustful opinions against *pandaka* as *pandaka* is included in the same category of 'hyperlibidinous' people, namely prostitutes, widows, and grown up unmarried girls whom are seen as threats to monks' chastity. The *Vinaya* describes *pandaka* and hyperlibidinous people as "incapable of self-restraint necessary for the practice of religious life" (ibid., p. 52). The *Vinaya* also contains strict rules forbidding monks to "sit or sleep in the same place where the

pandaka is present, or having entered upon the rainy season retreat a monk must leave that place if he is made an offer of food, good, and the like by a *pandaka*, just as when made an offer by a common prostitute, widow, or unmarried grown up girl” (ibid., p. 48). Buddhaghosa (cited in ibid., p. 49) condemns *pandaka* and sexual non-normatives for having “full of defilement passions, their lusts are unquenchable, and they are dominated by their libido and are as promiscuous as common prostitutes, widows, and grown up unmarried girls.” In the *Milindapanha*⁸⁸, *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* “are spiritually obstructed from attaining understanding of Dhamma even though they are practising correctly.” (*Milindapanha* 310, cited in Harvey 2000: 417)

Despite the canonical discriminations against *pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka*, there are also contradictory stories of *pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka* who were accepted by the *sangha* and were also respected for their high level of spiritual attainment. The *Vinaya* also contains cases of already ordained *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni* who changed their genders and took on physical characteristics of their opposite sex (*ubhatobyanjanaka*), and were tolerated by the Buddha who acknowledged the monastic adherence of the former *bhikkhu* and former *bhikkhuni* and allowed the former *bhikkhu* to follow the *bhikkhuni*'s order and the former *bhikkhuni* to follow the *bhikkhu*'s order (Jackson 2000: 71, Harvey 2000: 412).

⁸⁸ *The Milinda Panha (Questions of Milinda)* is a Buddhist text which dates from approximately 100 BC. It records a dialogue in which the Indo-Greek king Menander I (*Milinda* in Pali) of Bactria, who reigned in the second century B.C., poses questions on Buddhism to the Buddhist philosopher Nagasena.

Bunmi Methangkun (1986: 261, cited in Jackson 2000: 72) argues against the generalisation that homosexuals were incapable of enlightenment. He cites the story of Ananda, Buddha's cousin and disciple who was believed to be born as *kathoey* in many of his previous lives. The canonical story of Sorreya, who also attained the enlightenment after transforming back to his original male/masculinity and entering the monkhood, shows a contradiction with certain comments in the *Vinaya* regarding the incapability to achieve spiritual enlightenment of non-normative gender/sexual categories (ibid.).

Buddhist scriptures in relation to the kammic laws assert that being born as non-conventional gender/sexual beings is derived from sinful actions in previous lives or even an unclean mind from the present life as described in the case of Sorreyya. Malalasekera (cited in ibid.) describes Ananda's successive rebirths as a kammic consequence of his adultery with someone's wife when he was a blacksmith. In the *Sutta Pitaka*, Princess Ruja, a daughter of King Angati of Magadha Kingdom, recalled that she was born as *pandaka* in one of many lives due to the adultery committed when she was born as a son of a goldsmith in Magadha Kingdom (cited in Terdsak 2002: 16). These stories reflect Buddhism's strong belief in the causal relationship between actions in the past and consequences in the present as well as the idea of reincarnation. The story of Princess Ruja is one of many stories in *Sutta Pitaka* exemplifying both notions. That is, individuals' good and bad kamma would play a crucial part in future births. If individuals have accumulated a lot of merit, they would be born to wealthy families with attractive physical appearances whereas bad kamma would send them into poor families or even be born as animals with undesired or disfigured bodies. *Sutta Pitaka*, in fact, tells the story of Princess Ruja who

underwent successive lives, being born as a castrated donkey, a monkey whose testicles were bitten off by its group leader, a castrated ox, a *pandaka* in a wealthy family and an *apsara* (an equivalent of female angel) before being born as a princess. In other words, Princess Ruja, who had been born as a man, paid a crucial price of violating another man's wife in the form of successive lives of punishment.

In short, references to non-normative sex/gender and sexuality in Buddhist scriptures have revealed the inconsistency between Buddhism's tolerant and discriminatory attitudes towards gender/ sexual minorities. On one hand, their unfortunate fates seem accepted and sympathised. On the other hand, they are condemned for their non-conventional sexual practices, allegedly leading to the non-susceptibility to the enlightenment and barred from participation into *sangha* communities.

It can be contended that the discrimination many sexual minorities have been facing in Buddhist communities are actually imbued with heterosexist prejudices⁸⁹. The necessity to maintain a celibate monastic order may have entailed the universal ban against transgenderism and homosexuality. Yet, the prohibition underlines the *sangha's* distrust in the ability of gender and sexual minorities to self-discipline as they are believed to fail their spiritual attainment in relation to their kammic consequences. Unless they have exhausted their misdeeds from the previous lives, they then might be able to gain the spiritual

⁸⁹ Despite women are disallowed to join the Thai *sangha*, women are not literally forbidden to become monks by the Buddhist Canon. The Thai Council of Elders or *Mahathera Samakom* (มหาเถรสมาคม) upholds the ban of *bhikkhuni* in Thai *sangha* communities because of the lack of *bhikkhuni* tradition in Thailand. According to the *Vinaya*, *bhikkhuni* ordination requires the presence of both *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni*. Since there is no *bhikkhuni* tradition in the Thai *Theravada sangha*, women are technically unable to join the monkhood. Although there are several Thai *bhikkhuni* who were ordained abroad, *Mahathera Samakom* refuses to recognise them as *bhikkhuni* in the Thai *Theravada* tradition.

awakening as shown in cases of Ananda, Princess Ruja, and Sorreya, respectively.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Buddhism from time to time has provided a spiritual refuge for these social deviants. They can be comforted by the expectation that they, too, will transcend the suffering they are enduring if they continue to adhere to Buddhist ethical and moral practices once their misdeeds are depleted. This notion of *kammic* laws, however, contributes to the reproduction of heteronormativity as transgenderism and homosexuality are always perceived as punishment from violating heterosexual morality. Disregarding Buddhism's indifference towards homosexuality, scriptural stories of gender and sexual minorities, more or less, maintain the social hegemony of heterosexuality. The justification of the prohibition of *pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka* from ordination highlights Buddhism's antipathy towards non-conventional gender categories and sexualities. Zwilling (2000: 48) highlights the heterosexist Buddhism's analogy between non-convention gender/sexuality i.e. *pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka* and common prostitutes, widows, and grown up unmarried girls. It is believed that their hyper-libido is likely to endanger monks' chastity and therefore their interactions are 'severely restricted.' (ibid.) Despite being recognised for their sexually seductive nature, common prostitutes, widows, and grown up unmarried girls are allowed to be ordained once they have shown their detachment from carnal desires but neither *pandaka* nor *ubhatobyanjanaka* would receive the second chance. (ibid.)

This distrustful attitude against these women as well as gender and sexual non-conformists reflects patriarchal hypocrisy. That is, these types of

women, hermaphrodites, and homosexuals are seen as prime temptation. Their seductive nature is to blame for the *parijika* of the monks involved. To be cautious, monks' contacts with them should be limited. This hypocritical attitude, to a degree, paints the image of monks as innocent and sexually inexperienced while these women and sexual non-conformists are perpetually represented as lustful and ready to 'defile' monks' celibacy.

Sex/Gender Categories in Traditional Legal Scriptures

In this section, I will investigate the social positions of non-normative sex/gender categories and behaviours in the traditional period. Firstly, I will focus on the non-normative sex/gender categories in the historical documents in relation to their exclusion from being legal testifiers in legal disputes. I will assess possible factors that likely contributed to their legal disqualification. Secondly, I will study the classification of male and female same-sex eroticism found in Thai literary writings and historical documents to understand how same-sex relations were understood and socially positioned in the traditional period.

Similar to the classification of gender/sexual minorities found in Buddhist scriptures, references to alternative sex/gender categories and homosexual behaviours during the traditional period can also be found in Thailand's official legal documents. Thailand's traditional written legal scriptures, called the *Three Seals Law* (*Kotmai Tra Sam Duang* – กฎหมายตราสามดวง – 1808 -1907), identify three categories of people who would be likely called 'homosexuals' according to today's standard of gender/sexual demarcation. These three categories of people, according to Terdsak (2001: 11), were singled out for being

unmasculine. They are 1) *kathoey*, 2) *bando* (*pandaka*), 3) *khanthi* (eunuch). The *three seals law* used in this study is the King Rama I's version⁹⁰.

Khanthi (ขันที) was found on the list of inner court officials in the code of nobility ranking⁹¹ in the *Three Seals Law*. *Khanthi* (eunuch) is a castrated man who was assigned to work as a servant for royal concubines in the inner court of the royal palace where the presence of other (masculine) men was absolutely prohibited. (ibid.) With the exception of royal permission, certain male members of the royal family such as young princes were allowed to stay with their mothers until the tonsure ceremony, which they would be considered as entering their adulthood and subsequently would have to move to their own residences outside the grand palace. Male commoners such as daily labourers were strictly watched by female palace guards while being inside the inner court.

Kathoey (กะเทย) and *bando* (บัณเฑาะก์) appear in a section of the *Three Seals Law* called, the legal code on descriptions of liable witnesses. It is believed to be firstly enacted in 1351. (ibid., p. 12) Both types of persons are described as unsuitable to testify in the court of law. Terdsak (ibid., p.11) posits that the prohibition against having either *kathoey* or *bando* to testify suggests that *kathoey* and *bando* were understood as two distinctive sex/gender categories apart from male or female and their differences must have been identified by

⁹⁰After his coronation, King Rama I (reign 1782 – 1809) decreed the revision and compilation of the old *Three Seals Law*, used during the kingdoms of Ayutthaya (1350 – 1767) and Sukhothai (1238 – 1438) as almost all legal documents from the Ayutthaya Kingdom were lost and destroyed in the Burmese sacking of the capital in 1767.

⁹¹It is believed that this regulation was firstly enacted in the early Ayutthaya period (1350 – 1605) or earlier.

people of that time. The law suggests that a person who can be a witness must have the following six characteristics:

1. "a person who has maintained his/her own residence;
2. a person who has abundant off-springs (a person who is fertile or potent);
3. a person who is (สัปบุรุษ - sapparut) a good person;
4. a person who is kindly generous;
5. a person who is from a rich family;
6. a person who is respected by the public."

(The *Three Seals Law* compiled by Thailand's Fine Arts Department (*krom sinlapakon - กรมศิลปากร*) 1978: 212, cited in *ibid.*, p.12)

Kathoey and *bando* are also identified as two of the thirty-three types of persons who are deemed unsuitable legal witnesses⁹² according to this law on witness qualification.

⁹² The following types of persons were considered unsuitable legal witnesses according to the Three Seals Laws:

1. "a person who does not observe the five or eight precepts;
2. a homeless person;
3. a person who owes someone money;
4. a beggar;
5. a slave of persons involved in a lawsuit;
6. a deaf person;
7. a relative of persons involved in a lawsuit;
8. a blind person;
9. a friend of persons involved in a lawsuit;
10. a female prostitute;
11. a acquaintance of persons involved in a lawsuit;
12. a lewd (*phaetsaya* - แพศยา) woman, harlot;
13. a pregnant woman;
14. a person who has a quarrel with persons involved in a lawsuit;
15. an over-talkative person;
16. a **kathoey**;
17. a **bando**;
18. a person who is seeking revenge on persons involved in a lawsuit;
19. a wizard or a witch;
20. a person who has a lot of deceases;
21. a mentally ill person;
22. a youth under seven years of age;
23. a self-imposed doctor;
24. an elderly who is over seventy years of age;
25. a shoe maker;
26. a person who incites hatred;

Terdsak notes that only by the permission of either the plaintiff or the defendant, people in the above categories then could become a witness in the court of law. (ibid., p. 13)

The general exclusion of thirty-three types of people in legal investigation might seem discriminatory by today's standards. However, in a society where the moral obligation and religious ethical teaching were considered greater significant than the rule of laws and political influence, it is not surprising if the set of criteria for liable witnesses in courts of law mainly focuses on qualifications that reflect individuals' moral and ethical integrity, for example, people who regularly observe five precepts, people who are thoughtful and kindly generous, and people who are crucially known for his/her virtues. Thai authorities in the traditional period apparently preferred testimonies made by respectable social figures, wealthy and fertile citizens as these qualifications somehow reflect individuals' merit accumulation in the previous and present lives. Those who are excluded by the law can be summarily put into four categories as follows:

- 1) People with physical and mental disabilities – *kathoey* and *bando* apparently fall into this category, similar to those who are blind, deaf, mental disable, young and old. However, it is still debatable as to what kind of disabilities *kathoey* and *bandor* were believed to have. It might be either infertility as *kathoey* and *bandor* could not form conventional

27. a fisherman;
 28. a busker who dances to earn him/herself a living;
 29. a gambler;
 30. a busker who sings to earn him/herself a living;
 31. a theft
 32. a person who is always angry;
 33. an executor" (ibid.)

relationships that would produce offsprings, or their sex/gender ‘ambiguity’ as *kathoey* manifests the gender inverted mannerisms of the opposite sex whereas *bandor*’s ‘androgynous’ genitalia confuses the binary sex/gender norms;

- 2) People who have disrespectable occupations – this category includes prostitutes, shoemakers, fishermen, thieves, executioners, beggars, buskers, etc. *Kathoey* and *bando* could also fall into this type as their sex/gender inversion probably barred them from having socially respectable professions;
- 3) People who are deemed as bad or immoral – people who do not observe five or eight precepts. This category also includes people who are full of greed, hatred, anger, lust and so forth. Being born with ‘abnormal’ characteristics is popularly perceived as a punishment from bad deeds committed in past lives, according to the Buddhist notion of *samsara*. *Kathoey* is often portrayed in the contemporary media as ‘loud,’ ‘hot tempered’ and so on. It is thus possible to put *kathoey* and *bando* in this category;
- 4) People who are immediate relatives or have some sort of relationships with either the defendant or the plaintiff.

Compared to qualifications for liable witnesses, the categorisation of excluded types of people shows the significant influence of Buddhism towards Thai worldviews in the traditional period. Individuals’ positive or negative present situations are believed to mirror what they might have done in past lives. Certain superficial qualifications such as being born in a respected family and having

attractive physical appearances are regarded by Thais as pre-determined outcome of individuals' past actions.

The exclusion of *kathoey* and *bando* by the *Three Seals Law* can be considered analogous to the prohibition of *pandaka* and *ubhatobyanjanaka* from ordination in the *Vinaya* of the *Tipitaka*. Both prohibitions rule out the legal participation of *kathoey* and *bando* on grounds of incompatibility with proper masculinity. That is, *bando* fails to pass the biological requirement for being 'clear-cut' or 'real' male while *kathoey* fails to meet the expectation of 'proper' masculine behaviours. *Kathoey* and *bando* also share the disability that they are unable to reconfirm their masculinity by siring off-springs, crucially marked as one of the prerequisites for qualified witnesses by the *Three Seals Law's* standard.

Terdsak notes that the separable categorisation of *bando* and *kathoey* in the *Three Seals Law* indicates that they are two distinctive types of people. He asserts that *bando* is a person whose sex is undeterminable due to his/her ambiguous genitalia. He posits that at least from the Ayutthaya period onwards *bando* in the *Three Seals Law* is likely to have the same meaning as *pandaka* in the *Tipitaka* due to the influential relationship between Buddhism and the Thai populace of that period. In other words, *bando* is hermaphrodite in the Western medical concept or genuine *kathoey* (true *kathoey*). *Kathoey* in the *Three Seals Law* thus means social *kathoey* whose gender behaviours and mannerisms are not of his/her biological sex (op.cit.).

Historical Homosexual Behaviours: *Lenphuean* / *Lensawat*

Engaging in homosexual acts did not legally incur any penalties in Thailand's traditional period although *kathoey* and *bando* were excluded from witness duties. Thais' tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality, arguably derived from Buddhist teachings, are completely different from Judeo-Christian traditions where sex between people of the same sex/gender often receives hostile condemnation from the religious bodies that also theoretically sanction all forms of non-procreative sexual relations. Having explained in previous sections, in Thailand, homosexuality per se. does not entail a severe condemnation on grounds of natural transgression or the violation of God's sacred rule of procreation. Buddhism, contrary to monotheistic religions, recognises layperson's sexual practicality as long as it is consensual and does not entail any harm to all parties.

Although writings about same-sex relations in the pre-modern Thailand were very scarce, scandalous cases of lesbianism in the royal court and homosexual relations among Buddhist monks were not uncommon to the Thai populace in pre-modernised society. Lesbianism was called *lenphuean* (เล่นเพื่อน) while practising sodomy was known as *lensawat* (เล่นสวาท). *Len* (เล่น) means to play and *phuean* (เพื่อน) means friend(s) whereas *sawat* (สวาท) means love or sexual pleasure. Grammatically, *len kap phuean* (เล่นกับเพื่อน) means 'to play with friends but the omission of the preposition *kap* (กับ) has made the expression of *lenphuean* specifically denote female homosexuality. *Lensawat*, on the contrary, seems rather more sexually explicit than *lenphuean* as it does signify sexual activity as it can be interpreted as to make love. *Sawat* (สวาท) is

believed to be derived from *luksawat* (ลูกสาวท). *Luk* (ลูก) means child(ren). *Luksawat* thus can be understood as young male lover. *Lensawat* also implies generational same-sex relations. It is worth noting that both *lenphuean* and *lensawat* are descriptions of female and male same-sex erotic relations, respectively. Both terms are verbs, not nouns and therefore they highlight what Cabezon (2000: 34) has suggested that homoerotic relations do not constitute a 'conscious self-identification' that relinquish the normative genders of people who have homosexual relations.

Attitudes and Punishments towards Same-Sex Eroticism in Pre-Modern Thailand

With the exception of prohibition and punishment against *lenphuean* in the royal harem and *lensawat* among Buddhist monks, Thai laws did not list sexual activities between consensual people of same sex as crimes punishable by death, torture, or hard labour as in the West in the same period. There were no official records of punishments against same-sex relations among commoners and Buddhist laypersons (Terdsak 2001: 14, Ekkarong 2003: 52). Lesbianism among royal concubines if found guilty, could be subject to flogging for public humiliation. Historically, references to *lenphuean* in the royal harem firstly appeared in the early Ayutthaya period during the reign of King Boromtrailokkanat (สมเด็จพระบรมไตรโลกนาถ – reign 1448 -1488) who decreed the palace law, forbidding royal concubines and female servants in the royal palace to engage in *lenphuean*. The palace law number 124 states that:

“Had any pair of royal concubines found of making love as ‘husband and wife’, they would be flogged by leather whip fifty times. Had they still been found of the same guilty of *lenphuean*, they would be tattooed onto their

necks with the condemnation message and be shackled and paraded around the palace for public humiliation in order to make them afraid of doing *lenphuean* again”

(Department of Fine Arts 1978: 58, cited in Terdsak 2001: 15, also cited in Ekkarong 2003: 52)

In spite of being reprimanded by the royal command, *lenphuean* was still believed a common phenomenon in the royal palace and many aristocrats' personal harems, claims Ekkarong Phanuphong (เอกรงค์ ภาณุพงศ์) in his book, *Detecting Suspicious Historical Chronicles: Sex in History* (จับพิรุณ เรื่องเช่กษในประวัติศาสตร์ – *Chapphirut Rueang Sek Nai Prawattisat* – 2002: 51). Four hundred years after the enactment of the palace law against *lenphuean*, King Rama IV (*Ratchakan Thi Si* – รัชกาลที่สี่ – reign 1851 - 1868) wrote a personal letter to his daughters warning them that:

“Don't *lenphuean* with anyone. It would be better if you had a husband but remember that you should not let them swindle your money.” (cited in *ibid.*, p.54)

Notwithstanding the threat of being whipped and public humiliation, *lenphuean* was not considered a serious crime as there were no historical records showing any members of the royal harem had ever been punished in accordance with the very palace law. Harris Townsend, an American Ambassador to Siam during the reign of King Rama IV in 1856 wrote in his personal journal that:

“*Lenphuean* is very common as if it were an animal instinct. There is no severe punishment for engaging in it. It has never been punished, with exception in cases of monks.” (quoted by Anek Nawikkamun (เอนก นาวิกมูล) 1999: 41, cited in *ibid.*, p. 54)

It is worth noting that Townsend did not distinguish between female and male same-sex eroticism in his journal despite the fact that male same-sex relations were known among the local populace as *lensawat*. Compared to *lenphuean* which has never been publicly punished, *lensawat* should have been more acknowledged, since monks who were accused of committing *lensawat* with other monks or laymen would be put on trial, and if found guilty, would have been expelled from monkhood while their partners in crime would have been fined.

The most notorious case of *lenphuean* among the concubines was recorded in a poetry book, called *The Love Poems of Mom⁹³ Pet Sawan*, (เพลงยาว เรื่อง หม่อมเบ็ดสุวรรณค์ – *Pleng Yao Rueang Mom Pet Sawan*) by Khun Suwan Na Bangchang (คุณสุวรรณ ณ บางช้าง) (Ekkarong 2003: 57, Kittisak 1983: 91-92). It tells a love story between two concubines of Prince Kromphraratchawangbawon Mahasak (กรมพระราชวังบวรมหาศักดิ์ฯ), Mom Sut (หม่อมสุด) and Mom Kham (หม่อมขำ), who after the death of their husband, moved into the palace of Princess Krommuen Apsonsudathep (กรมหมื่นอัปสรสุดาเทพ) together as her servants. It was these very poems that made their relationship become an open secret, but there were no records of them being punished (ibid., p. 58). The poems start with the explanation why Mom Kham was called, 'Mom Pet.' The story goes that the way Mom Kham had swung her hips caught the eyes of other harem dwellers so that they felt compelled to give

⁹³ *Mom* (หม่อม) is a social title for a commoner wife of Thai princes. Until 1935 polygamy was legal in Siam. Many male members of the royal family and aristocrats had their own harems depending on their feudal ranks and financial status. Having had no sons with their princes, many of these women were likely to do labour works after the death of their husbands. Many of them were totally dependent on the mercy of the major wife and her son who might continue taking care of them if they had nowhere to go and had no support from their humble families. This book is believed to be written between 1841 – 1842.

her a nickname 'Mom Pet.' Also her sneaky love affair with her fellow concubine, Mom Sut, while attending the princess' bed chamber, made her life so scandalous that a fellow maid wrote a series of poems about her lesbian life and circulated them among the inner court dwellers. As a result, the word *sawan*, which means 'heaven,' was added after her nickname 'Pet' (เป็ด). *Pet Sawan* (เป็ดสวรรค์) literally means heavenly duck (ibid., p. 57-59).

It can be said that the reason Mom Sut and Mom Kham had escaped the punishment for engaging in *lenphuean* was because of the relaxed social attitudes towards same-sex eroticism, that homosexuality was not considered as 'real' as heterosexual relations. This can be assumed from the very Thai terms for homosexual behaviours: *lenphuean* and *lensawat*, that Thais at least in the traditional period did not take homosexual relations seriously. That is, the word *len*, which means to play, signifies temporality, not permanence. *Lenphuean* and *lensawat* thus represent the temporary transition in individuals' sexual experimentation while they are not in heterosexual relations. The act of playing either with friends or with lovers were ideally expected to stop once individuals have progressed to form the 'real' relationships of compulsory heterosexuality.

Sunthon Phu (สุนทรภู่ - 1786 – 1855), a great Thai poet, brought attention to *lenphuean* in at least four of his many works. In *Khobot* (โคบุตร)⁹⁴ and *Laksanawong* (ลักษณวงศ์)⁹⁵, scenes of female servants in the harem having sex were explicitly described in detail as if *lenphuean* were usually expected in a female over-populated place such as a royal harem. His widely well-known and

⁹⁴ There is no official record when this work was written. It is believed that it was written during the reign of King Rama II (1809-1824).

⁹⁵ It is believed that it was originally written during the reign of King Rama II (1809-1824) but eventually finished in the reign of King Rama III (1824-1851).

most popular work, *Phra Aphaimani* (พระอภัยมณี - 1845), also contains a few verses in which he satirically commented on what he perceived as a ‘normal behaviour’ among royal harem occupants. He critiqued the practice of *lenphuean* and suggested that: “women should not have wasted their time engaging in it as it was not real.” (อย่าหลงเลยเล่นเพื่อนไม่เหมือนจริง – *ya long loei lenphuean mai muean ching*) He also raised concern over common sight of quarrels among the jealous inner court dwellers due to their love triangles. (*Phra Aphaimani* 1962: 922)⁹⁶ In *Suphasit Son Ying* (สุภาษิตสอนหญิง - *Proverbs for teaching women*⁹⁷),

⁹⁶ “ฝ่ายห้ามแหนแสนสนมเมืองรมจักร *fai ham haen saen sanom mueang Romchak*
Talking about concubines of the Romchak City,
แต่ล้วน **มักเลงเพื่อน** เหมือนกันหมด *tae luan **nakleng phuean** muean kan mot*
they all lenphuean.
ด้วยเมื่ออยู่บุรีภิรมย์รส *duai muea yu buri phirom rot*
Because when they were living in the city,
เพราะท้าวทศวงศ์ไม่ว่าไร *phro Thao Thotsawongsa mai wa rai*
King Thotsawong did not reproach them for doing it (*lenphuean*).
จน **เคยเล่นเป็นธรรมเนียม** นางรมจักร *chon **khoei len pen thamniam** nang Romchak*
The women of Romchak **then have accustomed themselves to the practice.**
ทั้งร่วมรักร่วมชีวิตพิศมัย *thang ruamrak ruamchiwit phitsamai*
They make love and live together as couples.
กลางคืนเที่ยวเกี่ยวเพื่อนออกเกลื่อนไป *klangkhuen thiao kiao phuean ok kluean pai*
Many of them go out and woo girls at night.
เป็นหัวไม้ผู้หญิงลอบทิ้งกัน *pen huamai phuying lopthing kan*
They behave like thugs and often leave their (former) partners heart broken.
เห็นสาวสาวชาวเมืองการเวก *hen sao sao chao mueang Karawek*
When they saw women of Karawek,
ที่เยี่ยมเอกต้องใจจนใฝ่ฝัน *thi iam-ek tongchai chon faifan*
who are so beautiful that they desire them (women of Karawek).
แก้งฟุดฟอลดทอดสนิทเข้าติดพัน *klaeng phut plot thot sanit khao tit phan*
They flirted with the girls.
ท่าเชิงชั้นชักชวนให้ชวนใจฯ *tham choengchan chakchuan hai yuan chai*
They attempted to seduce the girls.
พวกพาราการเวกไม่รู้เล่น *phuak para Karawek mai ru len*
People of Karawek were not aware of their plan.
คิดว่าเขนซื่อตรงไม่สงไสย *khit wa chen suetrong mai songsai*
They thought they (Romchak women) were honest.
ต่อถูกจูบต้องทำนองใน *to thuk chup tong thamnong nai*
Even when they were kissed,
จึงไม่ตั้งใจไม่หมายให้ชายเขย *chueng mai titchai mai mai hai chai choei*
They do not want to have relations with men.
หนุ่มหนุ่มเกี่ยวเบียดบิดไม่คิดคบ *num num kiao biao bit mai kit kop*
Even when they are courted by young men, they never think of seeing them.
เหตุเพราะสบเชิงเพื่อนจึงเขื่อนเจย *het phro sop choeng phuean chueng chuean choei*
This is because they prefer *lenphuean*.
แต่เมืองเราชาวบุรีนี้ไม่เคย *tae mueang rao chao buri ni mai koei*
But people of our city have never done it.
อย่าหลงเลยเล่นเพื่อนไม่เหมือนจริง *ya long loei lenphuean mai muean ching*

Sunthon Phu (1986:633) focused his criticism on butch women. He warned them that “being half man or half woman is not something to be proud of. Nobody would praise someone who has such a character.”⁹⁸

Disregarding the serious relationship of Mom Sut and Mom Kham, lesbianism in the traditional period was perceived as unmatched to their heterosexual counterparts in terms of sexual gratification and social fulfilment. Like many phallogocentric cultures, sexual activities between women were not considered ‘real’ due to the disappearance of the phallus. The phallus, here, includes not only the actual masculine genitalia, but also the social authority through which men exercised control over women. As men in the traditional period monopolised political and economic power, it was unlikely that a lesbian couple would have been able to financially support each other without their husbands or families. In addition, women who engaged in *lenphuean* were often socially thought of being in a temporary relationship as Sunthon Phu had pointed out to the then popular perception that these women tended to change their

Don't waste your time lenphuean because they are not real.

อันรรมจักรนัครากับการเวก *an Romchak nakhara kap Karawek*

Because at Romchak and Karawek

อภิเชกเสนาหาประสาหญิง

aphisek saneha prasa ying

Woman marries woman,

ออกอ้ออั้งหึงหวงเพราะชวงชิ่ง

ok ue-ueng huenghuang phro chuangching

They often express their jealousy of each other.

ถึงลอบทึงหุดตีเพราะที่รัก

thueng lop thing thupti phro thirak

This results in breaking up and even physical violence because of love.

⁹⁷ There was no official record when this work was originally written but it was estimated to be written between 1837 and 1840.

⁹⁸ “เกิดเป็นหญิงให้เห็นว่าเป็นหญิง

koet pen ying hai hen wa pen ying

If you are born as a woman, you should behave as a woman.

อย่าทอดทิ้งกิริยาอันฉะฉาย

ya thotthing kiriya atchasai

Do not desert the mannerisms and courteousness

เป็นหญิงครึ่งชายครึ่งอย่าพึงใจ

pen ying khrueng chai khrueng ya phuengchai

Being half woman half men is not something to be proud of.

ใครเขาไม่สรรสรรเกียรติ์เมื่อนาม

khrai khao mai sansoen moen arom

Nobody would praise someone who has such a character.”

partners easily and this caused bitter arguments among harem dwellers. As a result, *lenphuean* among women in the harem was often tolerated and sometimes even ignored by the harem master himself as long as the relationships were kept under wraps to avoid a disgrace upon him if being publicly discovered.

Contrary to the secrecy of *lenphuean* in the inner court, *lensawat* among Buddhist monks and their accomplices often brought shame and disrespect to this very spiritual institution of Thailand. As Buddhist monks are subject to the strict vows of celibacy, any activities leading to the movement of seminal fluid are forbidden by the *Vinaya*. The *Three Seals Law* also bears records of monks who committed *lensawat* with good-looking boys. It describes how these monks seduced, molested and supported their boy lovers financially and materially to maintain their lovers' physical attractiveness. Similar to *lenphuean* in the harem, *lensawat* among monks and their lovers was portrayed as emotionally insecure. These men were often seen to engage in beating up each other or sometimes killing each other because of jealousy (Fine Art Department (*Krom Sinlapakon – กรมศิลปากร*) 1978: 567, cited in Terdsak 2001: 14). Kittisak Prokkati (กิตติศักดิ์ ปรกติ - 1983: 91), in his article, *The Legend of Homosexuality (Tamnan Rakruamphet – ตำนานรักร่วมเพศ)*, claims that King Rama I (reign 1782 - 1809) ordered the inclusion of the clause stating that any oral or anal sexual activities taken place on the Buddhist holy days were to be considered the violation of the third precept in the *Three Seals Law* and that violation could be legally punishable. Kittisak questions if this legal clause would have actually been enforced as it does not include the specific punishment for the violation. He also

highlights the discrepancy of the law itself that it does not mention the punishment for people who commit the acts on non-holy days. (ibid.)

In the following reign of King Rama II (reign 1809-1824), the (Buddhist) supreme patriarch (*Phra Sangkharat* - พระสังฆราช) was removed from office and subsequently disrobed after being found guilty of touching private parts of his young and handsome students (Chophraya Thippakonwong Maha Horathipbadi – เจ้าพระยาทิพพากรวงศ์มหาโหราธิบดี - 1961: 121, cited in Terdsak 2001: 12). King Rama IV (reign 1851-1868) decreed the punishment for laypersons who “violated this law by associating themselves with monks and novices in the following activities: smoking opium, drinking alcohol or spirits, eating rice or noodles and any other food that monks were not supposed to eat in the evening with monks in their residences, engaging themselves with monks in lewd or indecent behaviours in their residences. A fine shall be imposed on these people if accused and found guilty of their crimes with monks and novices.” (From King Rama IV’s Announcement Records 1851-1857 (ประชุมประกาศรัชกาลที่สี่ พ.ศ. ๒๓๙๔ - ๒๔๐๐), Volume I, Issue No. 30, p. 54, also cited in Ekkarong 2002: 45)

Nevertheless, certain points should be made to avoid further confusion that either the punishment or the proscription against same-sex eroticism among the royal concubines, ladies in waiting in the royal harem and Buddhist monks are evidence of prosecutions of homosexuality. Firstly, monks are subject to strict vows of celibacy. Any (hetero and homo) sexual activities occurring during the monkhood is considered a violation and if proved guilty, the accused would be expelled from the *sangha*. Secondly, all royal concubines and ladies in waiting had to take the Oath of Allegiance that they would not dishonour the king.

As the only male in the harem, any sexual activities that take place inside the harem can be considered as an insult to the king's masculine sexual prowess. The violators then have to be punished. The second King Phrapinklao (Phrabat Somdet Phra Pinklao – พระบาทสมเด็จพระปิ่นเกล้า), King Rama IV's brother, composed a poem for his concubines, advising them to refrain from *lenphuean* as he considered it as an infidelity against his honour (cited in So Phlainoi 1970: 226, Terdsak 2001: 21). Thirdly, it is not the 'homosexual act' per se that was being punished, but rather the violation of the celibacy vows taken by Buddhist monks and the oath of allegiance sworn by the concubines and servants in the royal court.

It can be said that there was no historical evidence showing the explicit punishment of male homosexuality in pre-modern Thailand. However, Chaophraya Thipphakonwong Maha Horathipbadi (1961: 132, cited in Terdsak 2001: 22) describes in his second book, of *the Ratanakosin Chronicle during the Reign of King Rama III* (Thai: *Phongsaowadan Rattanakosin Ratchakan Thi Sam – พงศาวดารรัตนโกสินทร์ รัชกาลที่ ๓*) about the trial case of Prince Kromluang Raksanaret (กรมหลวงรักษารณเรศร) who was charged of high treason against King Rama III (reign 1824-1851) in 1848. The trial records include the detailed descriptions of his mutual masturbation with one of his favourite male dancers. Prince Kromluang Raksanaret was found guilty and later executed. Kittisak (1983: 91) asserts that it is more likely that Prince Kromluang Raksanaret was sentenced to death due to political reasons rather than his homosexuality.

Despite being executed on ground of high treason, the transcription of the trial against Prince Kromluang Raksaranaret to an extent reflects the Thai

society's disapproving attitudes towards male homosexuality in the traditional period. Prince Kromluang Raksanaret's same sex relations were described as 'improper behaviours.' (Chaophraya Thiphakonwong Maha Horathipbadi 1961: 131, cited in Tersak 2001: 22, also cited in Pramin Khrueta-Thong (ปรมินทร์ เครือทอง) 2010: 89)

Although Prince Kromluang Raksanaret's homosexual behaviour was critically condemned in the trial transcription, it was more likely that the main reason to get rid off him was due to his political motivation. Mutual masturbation, according to the *Three Seals Law*, was not considered as a crime. In addition, Prince Kromluang Raksanaret's brother, Prince Kromluang Thepphonpak (กรมหลวงเทพพลภักดิ์) was also said in the trail transcription to share the same sexual inclination but received neither warning nor punishment from the king or his family members.

Conclusion

The historical documents reviewed in this chapter have substantially confirmed the long existence of non-normative gender categories and sexual practices in Thai society before the start of Siamese modernisation. Both cases of Prince Kromluang Raksanaret and his brother Prince Kromluang Thepponpak, and Mom Sut and Mom Kham, indicate that at least among the aristocrat families homosexual behaviours were not uncommon. Same-sex eroticism was acknowledged and to a certain extent tolerated. With the exception of the execution of Prince Kromluang Raksanaret on the high treason charge, there were no records of legal prosecution against sexual non-normatives in pre-modern Thailand.

The examination of both Buddhist and traditional legal scriptures reveals a plausible influence of Buddhist attitudes towards *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka* on the socially marginalised position of *kathoey* and *bando* in the traditional period. On the one hand, Buddhism preaches social understanding towards sexual minorities. On the other hand, it disallows these people to become part of the *sangha*. The exclusion of sexual minorities in the *sangha* also reflects the heterosexist perspectives that with the exception of heterosexual relations, other forms of sexual relations are not recognised by the *sangha*. In other words, the *sangha* does not sanction same-sex relations but does not condone it either.

In short, the history of homosexuality in traditional Thailand can be summarised as the history of exclusion. Individuals with non-normative genders and sexualities were cast out of the political and religious centres. It is apparent that Buddhist teaching of causal relationships or *kamma* was so pervasive that unconventional sexualities were often negatively represented in official religious and legal discourses. While homosexuality did not entail severe prosecution from either the state or the *sangha*, it drew social criticisms over the non-conventional sexual practices. This chapter has thus identified the social, legal, and religious peripheral status of homosexuality in pre-modern Thailand.

Chapter 5: Homosexuality and Contextual Sensitivity

The following scene is a conversation between Suni (สุนีย์), the mother and her son, Tong (โต้ง) when they were decorating a Christmas tree in the film *The Love of Siam* (*Rak Haeng Sayam* – รักแห่งสยาม – Chookiat Sakweerakul – ชูเกียรติ ศักดิ์วีระกุล 2007). Prior to this event, Suni had discovered her son's romantic relationship with his male friend, Mio (มิว). Suni confronted Mio and asked him to stop seeing her son. Tong was initially upset about his mother's intervention but eventually decided to stop his fling with Mio. Due to his father's ill health, the family seemed a bit closer again. It is worth noting that I am keeping the original English subtitle as shown in the film. I put the equivalent translation of what the dialogue is being spoken in Thai in the parenthesis.

Tong: "Are you tired, mom?"

Suni: "Of what?"

Tong: "Of everything"

Suni: "Of course, I'm tired. What can I do?
What about you? How's everything?"

Tong: "Good. I don't know. It's fine, mom."

Suni: "Could you turn on the light?"

Tong, help me put the ornaments on the tree."



Figure 3 Suni and Tong are decorating the Christmas tree.
The Love of Siam (Chookiat Sakweerakul 2007),
courtesy of Sahamongkol Film International

Tong: "Is it good here, mom?"
 Suni: "Just put it around..."
 Tong: "What about this on here, instead, mom?"
 Suni: "Just put it on..."
 Tong: "What about two of these together here?"



Figure 4 Tong is indecisive which doll he should choose.
The Love of Siam (Chookiat Sakweerakul 2007),
 courtesy of Sahamongkol Film International

Suni: "Just go ahead, o.k!" (raising her voice)
 Tong: "What if I put them there and you don't like it. You'll be upset again."

Suni looked up at her son's face. She seemed to realise what he actually asked her. She grasped both ornaments from her son and put them in her palms. One of the ornaments is a boy in a Santa costume and the other is a girl doll. She then said:



Figure 5 Suni is holding both dolls and asked Tong to pick the one he prefers.
The Love of Siam (Chookiat Sakweerakul 2007),
 courtesy of Sahamongkol Film International

Suni: "Choose what you think it's the best (for you.)"

Tong picked up the boy doll.



Figure 6 Tong picks a boy Santa.
The Love of Siam (Chookiat Sakweerakul 2007),
 courtesy of Sahamongkol Film International

Tong put the boy doll up on the Christmas tree.



Figure 7 Finally, Tong hangs the boy Santa doll on the Christmas tree.
The Love of Siam (Chookiat Sakweerakul 2007),
 courtesy of Sahamongkol Film International

Tong smiled at Suni. Suni sighed and smiled back.

Tong's way of 'coming out' to his mother proves effective as Suni eventually allowed her son to choose for himself. The way Tong insisted on Suni's decision about the dolls clearly shows his acknowledgement of Suni's love

and also his intention not to upset her or disappoint her. Tong did not literally confess that he was *gay* or he was attracted to boys. He simply picked the boy doll as a metaphor for his same-sex attraction. Non-Thai viewers might be a little curious why Tong and his mother did not directly discuss about his homosexuality. There is no straight answer. The indirect metaphor and expression communicated between Tong and Suni underlines the fact that they did not directly bring the subject of his sexuality into the spotlight. As sexuality is one of the strongest taboos in Thai culture⁹⁹, discussing this most intimate feeling even with someone from one's immediate family member is still considered inappropriate. The metaphor helps keeping the taboo intact and both mother and son had a chance to have a heart to heart talk even though in an inexplicit way.

The above dialogue and pictures are taken from a Thai film, called *Rak Haeng Sayam* (รักแห่งสยาม - *The Love of Siam*), released by Sahamongkol Film International (2007). Although this conversation between Suni and Tong may look banal, it is rich in symbolic and unspoken exchanges between the two. The mother and son were able to discuss the son's homosexuality without having directly said a word, implying same-sex eroticism or behaviours. I am using this extract from the film *The Love of Siam* (2007) to stress that the inarticulateness of one's (homo) sexuality in Thai contexts is arguably regulated by the unspoken cultural rules of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity which in turn offers Thai gay men opportunity as well as dictate how Thai gay men can negotiate their same-

⁹⁹ Oradol Kaewprasert's PhD thesis, titled *Gender Representations in Thai Queer Cinema* (2008), discusses the criticisms made by Western film reviewers that Thai queer films often fail to present protagonists' sexuality. Oradol (p. 104) argues that: "In Thailand, physical contact in public as an expression of affection is rare, therefore touching erotic issues in films is not mainstream concern... though romantic love may be universal, its specific cultural expression as regards to sex is not."

sex erotic identity within the heteronormative confinement. But, the fact that his same-sex attraction is verbally muted can also be interpreted that homosexuality is recognised but still not accepted. The film excerpt, therefore, illuminates how *kalathesa* plays a crucial role in Thai gay men's 'coming out' while the issue of sexuality is rather left unspoken in Thai contexts.

In Chapter Three, I have shown how *gay* identity has emerged and reconfigured in Thai contexts that despite Thai masculine-identified men's attempt to position *gay* in opposition to the socially loaded term of effeminate *kathoey*, *gay* is still being defined in relation to negative references of their non-normative sexual behaviours. The historical and religious peripheral status of people with non-conventional gender and sexual practices, found in Buddhist and traditional legal scriptures, are discussed in Chapter four to provide preliminary background to the 'outsider' position which sexual minorities have always had in Thai society. In this chapter, the focus is on the notion of *kalathesa* or cultural sensitivity which I believe can provide an insight into how Thai gay individuals have interacted with the heteronormative society for the social tolerance of their same-sex relations.

In this chapter, I will investigate how the notion of *kalathesa* can be argued to contribute to Thais' tolerance of same-sex relations. Thus, it is necessary to define *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity and its substantial role in the lives of many Thai homosexuals, struggling for social acceptance of their sexuality. As *kalathesa* essentially concerns with individuals' awareness of cultural appropriateness which includes gender expressions and sexual practices, personal narratives of Thai gay men, participated in my thesis, will be

considered to address the issue of ‘coming out’ and their gender and sexual subjectivation in their relations to other homosexuals and their respective families.

This chapter aims to unravel the interwoven mechanisms of *kalathesa* or the culture of appropriateness hidden in Thai gay individuals’ lived stories. The findings show that Thai gay men are spared from outright intervention into their private intimacies because *kalathesa* offers a likely non-confrontational strategy for Thai homosexuals to negotiate their space in the Thai public but the rules of *kalathesa* also dictates how Thai gay men can be open about their sexuality in the public space.

What is *Kalathesa* (กาลเทศะ)?

Linguistically, *kalathesa* (*kala* – กาล (๕) + *thesa* - เทศะ) is a compound noun between a Pali word of *kala* (time) and a Sanskrit word of *thesa* (place). *Kalathesa* literally means time and place. *Kalathesa* is often interpreted as ‘rules of social etiquettes’ or a personal articulation of proper behaviours in accordance with time and place. *Kalathesa* can be said to inform individuals how to assess their personal positions in the complex hierarchy of Thai socialisation. Before the political revolution from absolute monarchy to democracy in 1932, Thais were often reminded of their place in the social hierarchy since the violation of traditional sumptuary laws was punishable in pre-modern Thai society. *Kalathesa* is, therefore, an immense concept of how to conduct a proper socialisation with the consideration of time and place.

The appreciation of *kalathesa* can be said to contribute to the civility and orderliness of the society as everyone knows his or her place in the rank and is able to politely address or communicate with each other. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Thais do not speak impolitely or informally but knowing when and where to speak properly is far more significant for Thai rules of socialisation. If one is unable to identify suitable pronouns or to command a correct level of language¹⁰⁰ or vocabulary with people from different social backgrounds, one is likely subject to social ridicule about one's ill-command of *kalathesa*. Pointed out by Van Esterik (2000: 36-37):

“*Kalathesa* is very much linked to language. Speaking properly demonstrates one's knowledge of *kalathesa*. To speak properly shows respect and manners, and shows one knows how to address people according to their rank – when to use royal language, polite language, and when to shift to words stressing social equality and politeness, such as thank you, pardon me, please. This is knowledge that must have been shared beyond the bounds of Bangkok court and regional courts, or status hierarchies would not have been so effectively maintained in the hinterland. This is whether or not the Sanskrit terms were known or the royal language used in rural communities, *kalathesa* would be understood, perhaps through other systems of knowledge such as traditional medicine or astrology.”

In other words, a person who speaks properly according to his/her gender, age, occupation, and social status is regarded as *phudi* (ผู้ดี - genteel) or a person who well-behaves physically, verbally and mentally.¹⁰¹

Traditionally, time and space were two essential factors contributing to the well-being of each individual. This notion of *kalathesa* arguably reflects Thais

¹⁰⁰ Apart from royal vocabulary, a Thai speaker has to consider not only his or her own gender, age, social status, and sometimes occupation, but also the status of the person he or she is addressing to since there are more than 20 different first, second pronouns in Thai. Knowing and choosing correct pronouns can be said to indicate a person's awareness of *kalathesa*.

¹⁰¹ Mom Rajawongse Pia Malakun (หม่อมราชวงศ์ เป็ย มาลากุล) composed a book, called *Sombat Phudi* (สมบัติผู้ดี - 1912, *the genteel qualifications*), divided into 10 sections covering socially desired physical, verbal and mental comportments. This book provides a cultural commandment for generations of Thai populace as it has been included in a list of compulsory readings for Thai primary school students.

belief in cultural essentialism. It was believed that one's life would be blissful if one observes what colour one should wear as certain colours were encouraged to be worn on certain days¹⁰². These cultural anecdotes show significant involvement of *kalathesa* (time and place) and individuals in Thai traditional society. Certain beliefs still continue to influence aspects of people's everyday life. For example, one should not have their hair or nails cut on Wednesday as Wednesday is superstitiously considered as the 'rotten day' of the week. Although Thailand has undergone through constant projects of Westernisation since the nineteenth century, these ancient rules of the spatial and temporal intersection and individuality or *kalathesa* continue to assert their influence in Thai everyday life as pointed out by Prapai Viriyabhun (ประไพ วิริยะพันธุ์), the owner of Muang Boran (เมืองโบราณ) or Ancient City, an archaeological themed park, that:

"Everything has to depend on the suitable position, right nucleus and right time. The suitable position means the position that is rightly appropriate. The nucleus means growth under limitation. The right time means the needed environment at the time. If heaven needs something to remain, it will not develop beyond the limitation of growth. This is the state of balance according to the law of nature."

(<http://www.ancientcity.com/muangboran/objective.htm>, also quoted in Van Esterik 2000: 118)

In short, despite its unwritten status, *kalathesa* penetrates every aspect of Thai life that by not following it might result in losing 'face' and damaging social image (*phaplak* - ภาพลักษณ์). *Kalathesa* thus serves the purpose of social orderliness (*khwamriaproi* - ความเรียบร้อย) to assure the hierarchical structure is in its place.

¹⁰² See *Si Phaendin* (สี่แผ่นดิน - 1953), a famous Thai novel by Mom Rajawongse Kukrit Pramoj (หม่อมราชวงศ์ คึกฤทธิ์ ปราโมช). The English version of this novel is known as *Four Reigns*, translated by Tulachandra.

Homosexuality and Culturally Sexual Appropriateness

Although homosexuality is neither legally punishable nor religiously condemned in Thailand, homosexuality is often regarded as ‘improper’ behaviour in Thai mainstream discourses. Thai gay men are occasionally restrained by the rules of *kalatesa* or appropriateness (ความเหมาะสม - *khwammosom*) to maintain heteronormative representation of being ‘real’ (masculine) men in the public realm. The rejection of being labelled with socially non-normative gender and sexual categories of *kathoey* and *gay*, respectively by homosexually active men was not uncommon even in Bangkok, often dubbed as the gay capital of Asia.

The social negativity, attached to both *kathoey* and *gay* identities, described in Chapter three, are results of popular generalisation that non-normative gender and sexual practices violate this cultural appropriateness of time and place or *kalathesa*. That is, a person with non-normative gender and/or sexual practices upsets his/her position in Thai hierarchical gender/sexual relations since the gender transgression of *kathoey* and sexual penetrability of *gay* men are often translated as the desertion of manhood or masculine privileges.

Given the scandalous exposure of *gay* identified men after the murder of Darrell Berrigan, Thai press reports initially gave the impression that *gay* was more or less synonymous with prostitutes. The journalists stumbled across a group of young male sex workers who employed *gay* label to distinguish themselves from *kathoey* sex workers. Shortly after the revelation of these *gay* identified sex workers, tabloid newspapers published critical comments made by

psychoanalysts that homosexuality was 'gender/sexual' disorder or *biangben thangphet* (เบี่ยงเบนทางเพศ).

Despite the general disdainful attitudes towards homosexuality, social sanctions against *kathoey* and *gay* men in Thailand appear rather 'mild' in comparison with what homosexuals in the West have experienced. Suggested by Van Esterik (2000: 53), Thais generally avoid direct confrontation. This is partly explicable due to Buddhist's teaching of the 'Middle Way' that one should avoid neither extreme 'self-mortification' nor extreme 'self-indulgence.' It can be said that the notion of the 'middle way' or moderation as a way to salvation permeates Thai ethical thinking in a number of ways. These include how the social disapproval of non-conventional gender expressions and sexual practices are being executed in rather non-censured measures or non-interventionist sanctions, for example, gossiping, disapproval gestures, withholding approval and so forth in order to force individuals to conform to the social expectation. These sanctions, however, will only be exercised when homosexual behaviours are explicitly visible or being exposed in the public. Pointed out by Jackson and Sullivan (1999: 11),

"So long as a Thai homosexual "man" or "woman" maintains a public face of conforming to normative patterns of masculinity or femininity, respectively, he or she will largely escape sanctions."

Echoed by Van Esterik (op.cit. p. 39), the social tolerance towards homosexuality in Thailand is explicable in accordance with Thais' practice of *kalathesa* or 'contextual sensitivity.' For Thais, *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity is part of social etiquette Thai men and women have been socially expected to

command while moving between differently structured contexts easily and skilfully.

Because of the observation of *kalathesa*, Thai homosexual men benefit from the projection of 'conformist' image, lessening the risk of social disapproval and family conflicts from their violation of heterosexual norms. This very notion of *kalathesa*, to an extent, inadvertently affects Thai gay men's decision whether to 'come out' since gay men can avoid losing public face, providing that the heteronormative image is being upheld in public.

Tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality in Thai society are also explicable due to Thais' social taboos regarding public discussions of sex and sexuality. Despite the fact that sexual impulses are traditionally perceived as 'moods' (อารมณ์ - *arom*), naturally released from time to time, sex still remains a taboo subject in Thai society. Direct references to sex and sexual desires in public are considered improper and/or impolite behaviours. However, it is common for Thai men to talk about sex in male drinking circles to prove that they are 'real men' as well as the practice of teasing a newly wedded couple about their matrimonial consummation by close relatives or friends (Jackson 1995a: 46-47).

The Unspeakable Voices

Although Thailand is often globally projected as a gay paradise, it is still problematic for gay men and women to live their homosexual lives openly in this country. The traditional taboo against public discussions of sex and sexuality, to some extent, has rendered the issues of sex and sexuality as private,

unspeakable, impolite and inappropriate in the public arenas. Whilst being gay is inevitably referred to the sexual orientation or preference, 'coming out' as a gay man in Thai societies would violate this contextual sensitivity or *kalathesa* as bringing out the unspeakable into the speakable (read, public) domain.

On the one hand, Thai gay men appear to benefit from this taboo regarding public discussion of sex as their same-sex relations are their private matters and thus are inappropriate for public discussion. On the other hand, for fear of being exposed of their homosexuality, their intimate same-sex relations remain private and inappropriate for direct discussion even with members of their immediate families.

Despite being known as a 'global brothel'¹⁰³ (Altman 2001: 10, Bishop and Robinson 1998: 205), Bishop and Robinson (ibid., p. 196) argue that Thais have been systematically and institutionally silenced and ignored the articulation of public discussion about sex and sexuality. This cultural denial has led to the social cultivation of 'cultural aphasia' which is:

"a willed inability within a culture to allow for the articulation of certain ideas, the loss of a discursive or linguistic center for addressing particular issues." (ibid., p. 197)

Jackson (2004a: 181) calls this cultural sensitivity 'the regime of images' which heavily monitors "actions performed and statements uttered in the public (satharana) domain" compared to the tolerance of similar actions and statements taken place in the private domain. He (ibid.) asserts:

"when statements or representations do not conform with idealized forms, and are perceived as disrupting, "the image of smooth calm" (*phap-phot*

¹⁰³ Thailand has been widely constructed as one of major international destinations of sex industry.

(sic)¹⁰⁴ *heang khwam sa-ngop-riap-roi*), then both formal (legal) and informal (cultural) modes of power may be mobilized to expel the unwanted representations from the public domain. This regime of power/knowledge has epistemological implications, determining what can and cannot be articulated as public knowledge in Thailand.”

Bishop and Robinson (op.cit., pp.198-206) further explore the relationships between the unspeakable and public discourses. Their analytical investigation reveals a plausible connection between Thailand’s culturally discursive denigration towards the public articulation of certain issues, such as sex industry and monarchy, and its history of political situations. They suggest that Thais’ inarticulacy of public discussion of sex and sexuality is rather a recent phenomenon, highly influenced by the interaction with Western Judeo-Christian attitudes towards sex and sexuality, leaving an incessant effect until the present day.

History of Silencing

The history of silencing public discussion of sex and sexuality can be traced back to Thailand’s civilising projects in the nineteenth century. The threat of being colonised by Western powers during nineteenth century was argued to instigate the introduction of cultural modernisation to the local populace by the Siamese monarch. The initial projects of Westernisation were mainly focused on Siamese royal and elite circles but it has seemingly left a deep impact in the psyche of the nation.

Provoked by criticisms of the nineteenth century Western imperialists about Siamese nakedness, excessive polygamy and androgyny (Jackson 2003:

¹⁰⁴ *Phapphot* (ภาพพจน์) refers to a figure of speech, being employed in literature and poetry. for example, metaphor or *uppama uppamai* (อุปมา อุปไมย), personification or *pukkalathitsathan* (บุคคลาธิษฐาน) and so forth. *Phaplak* (ภาพลักษณ์) or image in English should have been used here.

6), Siam/Thailand has gone through significant effort to redesign her image in relation to the 'civilised' (read, Western) standards. Siamese royal initiation projects to civilise the nation were firstly started from the royal court. Royal family members, courtiers, and aristocrats were asked to voluntarily take part in the Siamese re-fashioning schemes. In 1851, King Mongkut (พระบาทสมเด็จพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว – Phrabat Somdet Phra Chomklao Chaoyuhau - reign 1851- 1868) addressed the necessity of the Siamese to cover themselves up in line with other civilised nations and also commanded all courtiers to wear the upper garments when attending the royal audience¹⁰⁵ (Phrabat Somdet Phra Chomklao Chaoyuhau 1960: 224, 274, Suwichai Kosaiyawat (สุวิชัย โกศัยยะวัฒน์) 2004: 42). King Mongkut also employed successive Western missionaries and governesses to teach English and Western technologies (natural sciences) to members of the royal family as part of the modernising projects. He also abolished a number of customs deemed as 'barbarous' by Western observers; for example, Western expatriates were exempted from prostrating during the royal audience.

King Chulalongkorn (พระบาทสมเด็จพระจุลจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว – Phrabat Somdet Phra Chunlachomklao Chaoyuhua - reign 1868-1910), Mongkut's successor, followed his father's policy. Not only did he send his sons to study in Europe, he also founded the King's scholarships, opening up opportunities for commoners to study abroad. To challenge successive pressures from Western nations, namely Britain and France, Chulalongkorn introduced national reforms, aiming to modernise the Siamese state. The reforms covered a range of 'civilising' programmes from Siamese bureaucratic and administrative systems to

¹⁰⁵ For security reasons, all male aristocrat courtiers were traditionally required not to wear the upper garments during the royal audience in the throne hall. King Mongkut was also abolished the prohibition of eye-contact between the king and his subjects.

legal amendment. Due to the shortage of trained civil servants for his ambitious schemes, Chulalongkorn employed a number of foreign experts to advise his modernising projects. To prepare capable personnel for his programmes, the king founded a school at the Royal Pages Barrack in the Grand Palace, later to become Chulalongkorn University. He later established other schools namely the Army Cadet School, the Cartographic School, the School for Princes and the School for Dhamma Studies.

Chulalongkorn's modernisation legacy was carried forward by his Oxford graduate son, Vajiravudh (พระบาทสมเด็จพระมงกุฎเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว – Phrabat Somdet Phra Mongkutklao Chaoyuhua - reign 1910–25) who elevated his father's civil servant training school to become Thailand's first university, Chulalongkorn University (จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย), in memorial and honour of his father. He made the universal primary education compulsory throughout the country. Due to the increasing Chinese migrants, he also passed a legislation requiring all students to have Thai language literacy skills and instilling the duties of being a good citizen in order to encourage the assimilation of migrants' children into Thai society. Vajiravudh is noted for promoting Thai nationalism. In his extensive writings, he constantly stressed the need for his subjects to be loyal to the nation, the religion (read, Buddhism), and the king. He also created a paramilitary organisation, the Wild Tiger Corps, independent of the regular army. He took Siam into World War I by joining the Allies, and after the war he succeeded in securing Siam's extraterritorial rights with Western powers. Siam lost her extraterritorial judicial right after the Bowring Treaty (1855) with the British, signed in the reign of King Mongkut. Vajiravudh also passed a law that

required all Siamese to adopt surnames. He also encouraged his people to take on more modern clothing styles and to abandon such habits as chewing betel.

After the political revolution in 1932¹⁰⁶, modernisation (read, Westernisation) has become a top priority for successive Thailand's political elites. As Bishop and Robinson (1998: 198) put it:

“During the age of modernisation, particularly from 1947 on, virtually anything tending toward Western, capitalist, democratic nationhood (including industrialisation and technological achievement) has been held as almost universally good. As with the projects of colonization and modernization in other parts of the world, the discourse of development in Thailand often included notions of leaving behind what Ann McClintock calls “anachronistic space,” the “prehistoric, atavistic, and irrational” that are “inherently out of the pace in the historical time of modernity ” (1995, 40) Traditional values were often cast as occupying this space, and the Western ideas of industrialization and capitalism became equated with modernization.”

French educated Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkram (จอมพล แปลก พิบูลสงคราม - first premiership 1938-1944, second premiership 1948-1957) launched twelve cultural mandates, outlawing certain traditional customs and dressing codes while enforcing the nationalised (read, westernised) practices and customs in order to “uplift the national spirit and moral code of the nation, and to instil progressive tendencies and ‘newness’ into Thai life” (Quoted in Wyatt 1982: 255, cited in Bishop and Robinson 1998: 199). These include a series of official initiations, for example, the legal abolition of wearing the unisex *chongkraben* (โจงกระเบน)¹⁰⁷, the mandatory regulations on public codes of dressing, the nationalisation of standardised ‘Thai’ circle dances (*ramwong* -รำวง), Thai version of ballroom dancing and the invention of *Patthai* (ผัดไทย)¹⁰⁸, a

¹⁰⁶ Siam became constitutional monarchy in 1932.

¹⁰⁷ *Chongkraben* is a long single piece of cloth to make into a unisex trousers-like lower garment.

¹⁰⁸ *Patthai* is said to have been invented in order to compete with the popular ‘Chinese’ noodles.

Under the fascist regime of Plaek Phibunsongkram, all the national media were tightly controlled by the central government. Sawattanthasut (สวัสดิ์ดีตันทาสูทธี), a newspaper columnist, echoed Plaek's nationalist campaigns in a column called 'making Thailand a powerful (read, civilised) nation by a new health regime' through the promotion of Western body building culture both in men and women. He argued that it was 'a duty of every Thai to build up a powerful Thai nation.' (*Si Krung* (ศรีกรุง) November 3, 1941)

After the World War II until the 1970s, Thailand's political and financial dependency heavily relied upon the United States of America. The public discourse of modernisation was dictated by the Cold War propaganda and its related binary divisions: democracy versus communism, free market capitalism versus state controlled socialist economics and so forth, resulting in the introduction of the legislation outlawing any related activities and literatures to Communism in Thailand (Bishop and Robinson 1998: 198). Ideologically, financially, and materially supported by the States, Communism was cast as 'enemy of the Nation, Religion (Buddhism), and Monarchy' (Thongchai Winichakul (ธงชัย วินิจจะกุล) 1993:69, cited in *ibid.*, p. 198). Governments under Field Marshall Plaek and his 'brutal' successor, Sarit Thanarat (1958-1963) suppressed the oppositional voices on allegation of engaging in communist activities. According to Thongchai Winichakul (1994: 6), Thailand's anti-communist law was modelled after the un-American activities legislation, in which communism was deemed as un-Thai in its ideas and ways of life.' Bishop and Robinson (1998: 199) note that:

"With this law, any criticism of Western Ideals (no matter their local application or effect on the population) became legally unspeakable, punishable by prison, torture, or death. Such lessons about linguistic

practice and their social consequences over an extended period of time are not easily shed; they become an integral part of the discursive landscape and political-social-cultural mentality.”

The above historical chronology of events clearly shows the significant role of Western discourse of modernity in shaping Thai political and cultural landscapes. For almost a century, Thailand has undertaken a series of transformations to become a ‘civilised’ nation under direct and indirect coercion by Western powers. Thai political leaders since King Mongkut onwards all took part in the attempt to reconstruct the ‘civilised’ Thai nation.

Hidden Eroticism

Given the account of the nineteenth century imperialists’ criticism towards Thais’ nakedness and excessive polygamy, Jackson (2003: 9) points out that:

“the new regime of self-civilising power was to create a new, bowdlerised, de-eroticised domain of public representation.”

Jackson (ibid., p. 8) argues that until the mid nineteenth century, the explicitly eroticised representation was not uncommon in traditional Thai artworks and literatures. Erotic images can be seen in murals painted on temple walls whereas the euphemistical descriptions of ‘love-making scenes’ or *bot atsachan* (บทอัศจรรย์ lit. the miraculous part) are recurrently found in Thai classical literatures. It is a tradition for poets to opt for euphemistically flowery language, denoting sex or sexual activities, rather than explicit description of the sexual nature. Classical poets employed metaphors, mostly drawn from natural phenomena such as bees’ fetching honey, water streaming onto rocks and so forth, to politely lead the imagination of readers to sexual activities. Jackson concludes that the absence of erotic representation in Thailand’s public

discourses after the start of Siam's self-civilising campaigns is due to the influence of Victorian repressive moral codes (ibid.).

The threat of colonisation from the criticising Western imperialists and introduction of self-Westernisation schemes, according to Jackson, caused the bowdlerisation of direct erotic expression from Thailand's official discourses. (ibid.) For Siam political elites during the mid-nineteenth century, in order to exhibit Siam's civilisation in accordance with Western standards, it was necessary to institutionally expurgate the representation of eroticism into the private domain. Niwat Kongphian (นิวัติ กองเพียร)¹¹⁰, a Thai columnist who is well-known for his weekly article about erotic art in *Matichon Sut Sapda* (มติชนสุดสัปดาห์ – *Matichon Weekend*), cites the incident when King Mongkut decreed the abbot of Wat Thongnopphakhun (วัดทองนพคุณ) to remove the 'obscene images' from the temple's murals. King Mongkut was reported to state that:

"These days people from many countries come and go from our shores...When pictures such as these exist in our monasteries, places presumed to be the residence of moral people, then it will appear greatly inappropriate and a source of considerable shame." (cited in Jackson 2003: 8)

The significant influence of Victorian sexual codes towards the institutionalisation of Thailand's official discourses of modernisation is undeniable, but the suggestion of Jackson and Bishop and Robinson that Western sexual norms played a crucially monopolised role in Thais' reticence about erotic expressions may run the risk of essentialism ignoring the local agency, based on different ideologies from those of Judeo-Christianity in the West, e.g., Brahmanism, Buddhism and local South East Asia Animism. The

¹¹⁰ Although Niwat does not write for *Matichon Sut Sapda* anymore, he continues to publish his weekly article on his website <http://www.niwatkongpien.com/index.php>.

euphemistical narrative of *bot atsachan* in Thai classical literatures arguably indicates that the public discussion of sex and sexuality has always been traditionally sanctioned.

Orathai Panya, a lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities Science, Khon Kaen University, asserts that the reason Thais avoid speaking of direct reference to sex and eroticism is partly due to the influence of Buddhist teaching that views sex and sexual desires as 'dispensable craving', believing to lead to subsequent suffering. Likewise, the reason that poets opt not to explicitly refer to sexual acts in classical literatures was because of Thais' taboo against public discussion of sex and eroticism for fear of being considered impolite, shameful and dirty. The taboos against explicit sexual references are not unique to Thai culture, cautioned by Orathai, even in India where the worldly renowned *kamasutra* was written or in China where the oldest sexual manual was discovered, direct references to sex/sexual activities are often deemed inappropriate. (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre's public lecture on Sex and Libido in Thai Literature on 20 June 2005¹¹¹)

Having discussed in Chapter four, sexual desires are seen as primordial obstacles to spiritual enlightenment. If one continues to indulge oneself in this worldly pleasure, it is very unlikely for a person to move beyond the *samsara* or the cycle of reincarnation. Buddhism views re-birth as a source of continuous unhappiness that human beings are doomed to face. The inevitable unhappiness and unfulfilment are taught as parts of life. *Nibbana* or being

¹¹¹ Also see Orathai Panya (2005)'s PhD thesis titled *Gender and Sexuality in Thai Erotic Literature*, SOAS, University of London.

detached from all the suffering is said to solely offer the escape route out of this vicious circle.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Buddhism has nothing against sexual desires or sexual activities per se. The bodily pleasure in Buddhism is considered a part of bodily or natural desires. Having described in Chapter four, the *Vinaya* contains explicit references regarding the nature of sexual intercourse, masturbation, and even explanation of human sexual activities to provide straight-forward and unambiguous rules for monks.

This Buddhist practical view of sex intricately influences Thais' perception of sex and sexuality as part of nature. The euphemistic description of eroticism in Thai classical literatures exemplifies this Buddhist attitude towards this sensual gratification. That is, metaphors describing sexual activities in *bot atsachan* are drawn from natural phenomena. On the one hand, Buddhism recognises human beings' sexual impulse as natural drive. On the other hand, sexual gratification is also understood to distract human beings from the way to *nibbana*.

In sum, studying Thailand's historical 'aphasia' helps understand how the discussion of sex and sexuality become invalidate in public spheres. It is still unclear if Victorian sexual values solely affected how Thais have become prudent about traditional perception of 'natural moods' or it was the great influence of Buddhist view on *logiya* pleasures that people who aspire *nibbana* should consider giving up or it is because the combination of both influences as what Van Esterik calls 'palimpsests' in which traits of previous cultures or influences have not yet completely erased but have still appeared from time to time together with newly additional conceptions.

Despite the increasing visibility of masculine-identified gay men in Thailand, their peripheral position in Thai sex/gender system neither provides the immunity from social criticisms nor approval for their same-sex relations, continuously regarded as non-conformist or inappropriate behaviours. Having been placed outside the collective context of heteronormativity, Thai homosexuals risk upsetting the social sensitivity if their homosexuality is being brought out into the speakable realm.

'Coming Out' and *Kalathesa* –

Individuality and Contestation of Temporal and Spatial Sensitivity

Is 'coming out' a Western concept? Would it work for Thai gay men? What does 'coming out' really mean for gay men? Is 'coming out' just a synonym for being seen as effeminate in public? How do Thai gay men 'come out'? These questions emerged when I was attempting to figure out how the issue of 'coming out' is translated in Thai contexts, not only by Thai gay men but also by Thai heterosexuals. The implication of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity in the lives of Thai gay men seems rather at odds with this concept of 'coming out.' I am arguing that the way 'coming out' is being perceived is largely due to the complicated subjectivation of Thai gay men in relation to the intersection of time and place. Rather than being comfortable with their sexuality in public, on the contrary, the awareness of *kalathesa* underlines the social expectation of appropriateness to which Thai gay men must adhere. The social expectation of an 'appropriate' exterior image is arguably indicated in the separation of their private (homo) sexual intimacy from their public persona of hetero-conformists.

In the West, 'coming out' is theoretically related to the development of modern homosexual movement in the 1970s (Plummer 1995: 82) Coming out, according to Fuss (1991: 1-4), indicates an interdependent parallel relationship between two sets of dichotomies: 1) heterosexuality and homosexuality, 2) inside and outside. To be out, on the one hand, signifies the 'negative,' 'devalued,' 'outlawed' meanings of the hetero/homo binary. On the other hand, it implies the process of moving from invisibility into visibility in pervasive discourses. Fuss (ibid.) notes that to 'come out' within a gay and lesbian community is, in fact, to be inside. That is, to be 'out' is to be included as a social member, to be able to make oneself visible and to be able to speak from one's own term and standpoint as a distinctive member of the larger society.

Weeks (1977: i) points out that 'coming out' is often perceived as a personal process of accepting one's own homosexuality and the attempt to publicly validate one's sexuality. However, it is also seen as the historical process of a socially progressive articulation of "homosexual identity and public presence."

The self-realisation of one's non-normative gender and sexual identities, according, Michael Warner (1993: xiii), involves:

"Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization connected with gender, the family, notion of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. It means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what health entails, or what would define fairness, or what a

good relation to the planet environment would be. Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer.”

The outlined definitions of ‘coming out’ apparently denote the historical connection of Western homosexual movements and their political strategy in demanding the recognition of their distinctiveness from ‘obligatory heterosexuality’. In the West, homosexuality has been regarded with abusive terms such as ‘faggot,’ ‘poof,’ ‘queer’ in popular homophobic cultures. The development of sexology and psychology in the nineteenth century pathologically rendered homosexuality to ‘sexual inversion,’ ‘sexual perversion,’ while legal and religious authorities treated homosexuals as ‘criminals’ and ‘anti-God’ practitioners, respectively (Weeks op.cit. p.p. 11-32 and Weeks 1991: 10-20). The notion of ‘coming out’ and the development of ‘modern’ homosexual identities, therefore, arguably emerged out of collective strategies in demanding equal rights with heterosexuals and challenging dominant social, legal, medical and religious discourses by which dominant heterosexuality has long claimed their legitimate supremacy. These misperception and discrimination against homosexuality, however, continue to exist irrespective of substantial changes to more egalitarian laws and legislations in a number of European countries. ‘Coming out’ is still a major slogan for contemporary gay and lesbian movements as it has been employed for thirty years. The placards, saying ‘out now’ are still being seen in gay pride events in European cities to encourage ‘closet’ gays and lesbians to come out and join the demonstration for equality.

‘Coming out’ in the public level can contribute to the political struggle for equal rights of sexual minorities while on personal level, ‘coming out’ enables

individuals to come to terms with their sexuality. Eichberg (1991: 17, cited by Plummer *op. cit.*, p. 58) asserts that:

“If you are homosexual, and ‘pass’ as heterosexual, I am asking that you disclose your homosexuality and realise that by hiding your sexual orientation you have contributed to the prevailing stereotypes of what it is to be gay and can make a major contribution in changing these stereotypes.”

Yet, definitions of ‘coming out’, to an extent, raise a question whether it is possible to move out of the limited framework of heterosexuality. To be out, according to Weeks (*ibid.*), is a personal liberation, yet it also reaffirms the division between the inside-heterosexuality and the outside-homosexuality while it also runs the risk of marginalising those who are still ‘in the closet’. (Spargo 1999: 47) The generalisation that coming out helps correct the prevailing social stigmatisation of homosexuality seems rather problematic. Considering the contemporary gay sub-culture in the West, the attempt to make or to display the distinctive ‘gay identities’ might marginalise other gays who do not see reasons to change their ways of life, their clothes, or hairstyles to be more gay. If being gay requires distinctive ways of life, clothes and mannerisms, ‘coming out’ which previously seems as liberating gay people from the rigid frame of heterosexuality may re-enforce new sets of norms that control how to be gay. This raises the question of whether the Western notion of ‘coming out’ is universal for all homosexuals, especially gay people in non-Western societies.

Coming out: An Issue for Thai Gay Men?

‘Coming out’ is arguably a personal decision with uncertain rules when and where one should ‘come out.’ The process of ‘coming out’, to some extent, is experienced differently in Thai contexts due to the cultural implication of

contextual sensitivity. Apart from the self-affirmation of same-sex attraction, described in Chapter three, Thai gay men, participating in this project, expressed their anxiety over the discussion of their homosexuality with their parents since sex or sexuality is not a suitable topic to talk with one's parents in any circumstances. This is due to a sensitive nature of the issue of sex itself, especially the non-normative sexual practices, regarded as 'inappropriate' in Thai contexts.

Heavily influenced by Buddhist teaching, sex is often regarded as a 'dirty' and 'embarrassing' topic among native Thai speakers. The definition of *gay*, to an extent, is problematic in itself. Given the circumstances when the *gay* identity emerged in Thailand in 1965, the label *gay* has been more or less provoked social sensitivity regarding public discussions of sex and in particular sexuality. As the term *gay* has become tainted with negative connotations, Thai homosexual men would undeniably feel reluctant to be identified with the term *gay*; otherwise, they risk upsetting the rule of appropriateness or *kalathesa*.

It is not uncommon for Thai gay men to remain silent about their homosexuality. Most interviewees showed a sign of unease and avoided direct references to sex and sexuality. During the interviews, Kit (กิต) frequently referred to *gay*-identified people as *khonthipenmueanrao* (คนที่เหมือนเรา - lit. people who are like us) while Wira (วีระ) differentiated *gay* people as *khonpraphetni* (คนประเภทนี้ - lit. this type of people).

Despite spending almost 10 years abroad, Khen (เคน) often refers to *gay* people as *khonthikhoapenyangwa* (คนที่เขาเป็นอย่างว่า lit. people who are that

kind). The avoidance of the word *gay* even in private conversation by my interviewees suggests that they sensed the uncomfortable identification with the concept of being *gay*. Interestingly, speaking out about their gayness either in public or private with me appeared indifferent to these interviewees as their inability to address direct references regarding non-normative sexual practices such as *gay* rather affirms the very idea of *kalathesa* that discussing sex and sexuality is considered 'inappropriate.' Also, due to the peripheral status of homosexuality in the Thai sex/gender system, the direct or frank reference to non-normative *gay* identity appears inarticulate among Thai speakers.

As the words *gay* and *kathoey* are imbued with social inferiority and stigma, avoiding these terms helps uphold the public heteronormative 'face' intact. In April 2006, I went back to Bangkok. One Saturday afternoon, I went to the Chatuchak (จตุจักร) weekend market. I noticed that a stall on a corner near the main road, which used to be a plant stall, was replaced by a pirate DVDs stall. Like many pirate DVD stalls in other areas of Bangkok, the visibility of gay-themed films and television series DVDs has noticeably increased compared with the previous time I went back home in 2004. A guy in his early thirties approached the stall. He looked at cover pictures of some DVDs and then asked the vendor, "Do you have G films?" He actually asked if the vendor had *ko* (ก.) films. *Ko* here is the first consonant sound of the word *ke* (เกย์) in Thai (*gay* in English). The question obviously puzzled the vendor. She replied that, "Do you mean Korean films?" That guy insisted that, "No, it's *ko* films" and emphasised one more time, "*ko*". It seemed that the second emphasis had shed light on the mysterious *ko*. The vendor then handed a catalogue of gay-themed films to that guy. To my understanding, the 'secret' code *ko* exchanged in the conversation

between that guy and the vendor helped smooth the social interaction without exposing that guy's sexuality to the nearby customers and at the same time, the taboo against public discussion of sexuality was not breached as the actual word *ke* (gay in English) had not been spoken.

Saem (แซ่ม), the youngest interviewee in my research, initially requested the interview to be conducted in English as he confessed that he felt more comfortable to speak in English about his sexuality rather than in his mother tongue, Thai, with a Thai speaker. After my insistence to conduct the interview in our native language, he gave in and eventually confessed that he felt relieved after the interview as he had never talked about his homosexuality in descriptive details and most importantly in Thai before. He also commented that the interview was very therapeutic. The theory of Bishop and Robinson (1998: 196) about Thailand's 'cultural aphasia' appears applicable in this case as the systematic and institutional ignorance of public discussion of sex and sexuality has given interviewees uneasy feelings when asked about their 'private' lives.

The unspeakability of sexual intimacy, dubbed by Sutham Thamrongwit (2001: 11) as 'a culture of silence' can be argued to restrain Thai gay men from frank discussion even with their families and obliges them rather employ indirect and subtler forms of communication, for example, the selection of the dolls in the case of Tong and Suni in *The Love of Siam* (2007). 'Coming out' is, therefore, being experienced differently in Thai contexts, according to Jackson (1995a: 261),

"In the West, gayness is widely linked with publicly coming out, projecting an attitude of personal and sexual rebelliousness against traditional values, and championing a political gay movement that supports gay civil

and political rights. None of these aspects of gayness in the West has any great relevance or appeal in Thailand.”

Translating ‘Coming out’ in Thai Contexts

Although ‘Coming out’ describes the voluntary public revelation of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, ‘coming out’ for Thai gay men in Thai popular discourses often suggests the non-normative gender performativity of gay-identified persons. There is no equivalent Thai translation of the English term ‘coming out.’ Nevertheless, ‘coming out’ is popularly understood in terms of varying levels of feminine expression of homosexual individuals, for example, *aepchit* (แอบจิต - lit. hidden heart), *aep* (แอบ) or *i-aep* (อีแอบ)¹¹² (abbreviated versions of *aepchit*), *saluachit*¹¹³ (สลับจิต - lit. camouflaged heart), *sadaeng-ok* or *ok-sao* (แสดงออก/ ออกสาว - lit. expressing or showing one’s effeminacy). These vernacular terms for ‘coming out’ in spoken Thai language indicate the primacy of gender in the construction of non-normative sex/gender identities in Thai contexts, described in Chapter three.

For certain gay-identified people, the concept of public revelation appears relatively obsolete because their non-normative gender performance has already been disclosed at the young age. Rot (โรจ), Haek (แฮ็ค), Tam (ตัม), Pom (ป้อม), and Khen (เค็น) share a common experience of being called *tut* (ตุ๊ด) and/or *kathoey* (กะเทย) by their primary school classmates.

Rot describes his bitter experience when he realised the meanings of those terms that:

¹¹² The prefix *i*, indicating impolite title for women, is arguably added to demonstrate the effeminacy of gay-identified persons in parallel with *kathoey*.

¹¹³ *Saluachit* suggests an unsuccessful effort to hide one true self.

“I felt angry but I did nothing. I just kept silent and ignored those people to make them think that I did not care about what they had said. I thought that they would get bored and stop doing it. My parents advised me to ‘behave more manly’...but I kept doing what I used to. I used to think that if I were like other people...‘normal’, I wouldn’t be teased, insulted by people...including other treatments that I didn’t like.”

The anger over the considerably derogatory references of *kathoey* and *tut* is also shared by Khen. He says,

“I was angry when being called *kathoey* by some boys at school but I did not retaliate.”

Tam shares his experience of being bullied at school that:

“Those boys at my primary school always called me names as if they wanted to make me feel ashamed and to show me that they were superior...Surely, I was unhappy but I could do nothing because they were much physically stronger and there were many of them. I just let them call me what they wanted. Honestly, I don’t understand why they were doing this to me. I hurt nobody and I’m friendly. I didn’t deserve such treatment.”

Pom was shocked when being called *tut* for the first time by a boy in his primary school. He reported the incident to his mother who also suggested him to behave more manly but also said that: “being *tut* is also cute.”

Their childhood experiences of being called *kathoey* and/or *tut*, to some extent, imposed a sense of inferiority on their impression, regarding non-normative gender and sexuality. These informants were presented with indirect pressure of social and parental expectations of becoming a ‘real man’ and behaving accordingly to their sex/gender in the public eye as Rot and Pom were reproached by his parents and asked to behave more manly.

Chira (ฉิระ), on the contrary, describes himself as a ‘normal boy.’ He recounts his childhood story that:

“I had never been called *kathoey* by my friends or anyone. I think it’s because of my personal adaptability to get along with both boys and girls...I played dolls or selling-buying games with girls while I also talked about football when hanging out with boys...I think because I was talkative, funny and easy-going, my friends had never teased me as being ‘kathoey,’ even though I was sometimes told that my mannerisms were ‘soft’ (นุ่มนวล - *numnuat*), and ‘well-behaved’ (เรียบร้อย - *riaproi* – lit. neat) like girls.”

Unlike parents of Rot and Pom, Chira’s parents never mentioned anything about his behaviours, which he also admits that his mannerisms were “a bit unusual for boys” of his age. Chira speculates that his parents probably thought that his preference to play with girls rather than boys was nothing serious so that they did not seem to worry about his girl-like behaviours. This perception that homosexuality is a temporary phase of a child reflects similar concepts of *lenphuean* and *lensawat* which I have described in Chapter four.

As their non-normative sex/gender identity has become a public knowledge, ‘coming out’ then is rather unnecessary for these informants. ‘Coming out’ in this sense reflects the internalisation of popular perception which predicates that being *gay* is synonymous to effeminate gender-bending behaviours. Khen, for example, stresses that his feminine personality, which he believes is innate for him, can be easily spotted especially by female friends who generally accept his femininity as genuine. Khen says,

“My junior code sister¹¹⁴, my Japanese friends, German friends, female friends at High School, with whom I stayed during the University Entrance examination¹¹⁵, all trusted me and even changed their clothes in my presence. They all said that my personality was feminine and they felt like living with another woman. In terms of mental qualifications, they trusted

¹¹⁴ In Chulalongkorn University, every freshman will be assigned a sophomore, a junior, and a senior in his or her faculty to look after him or her and give advice to him or her. This is part of a freshmen initiation ceremony. The process of code sister or brother selection is done through matching the student identification number of a freshman and his or her code family members.

¹¹⁵ Khen was originally from Pang-Nga. He had to travel to Had-Yai for University Entrance Examination and shared the accommodation with his female friends from his high school.

me as a woman. It wasn't that they sensed me as a gay man since the presence of masculinity is still prominent for gay men. My junior code sister, my Japanese friends, German friends trusted me and talked to me as if they were talking with another woman without consideration of my physicality.

'Coming out' to other Homosexuals

Like most people, socialisation with other gay friends not only helps develop informants' affirmative sex/gender identity, but also supports their emotional needs. All informants share similar experiences of having befriended other non-normative sex/gender identified people since their childhood. They describe their friendship formation as a natural process as they comment that it takes considerably less time for people with similar interests to pass the awkward moment and to become friends.

All informants are arguably familiar with a myth of 'gaydar' or the capability to tell whether a person is gay or not. Chira, for example, described that he could identify a man's sexuality by just looking into his eyes. He further explained that he sometimes relied on other identifying tactics to confirm his assumption, for example, the way a person speaks, the way he holds a drinking glass, or his body language and so forth. This 'gaydar' is relatively considered a sort of sixth sense, derived from personal experiences as the length of time that individuals have been exposed to the social constructed images of gay, being pervasively reproduced by the popular media. Nevertheless, this cannot guarantee one hundred per cent correct results. As pointed out by Pom and Chira that these rules to identify gay tendency or traits are in fact 'gay cliché,' enforced and presumed not only by the heterosexuals but also unwittingly by gay men themselves.

In the attempt to locate and identify their homosexual peers, some informants i.e. Chira and Pom employed a bullying tactic of name calling of which they had been victims themselves. Chira describes his experience of being a bully himself in our conversation that:

Chira: "Do you remember that junior, called 'Ke' (เก) in our faculty?"

Jaray: "Yes, I do."

Chira: "On his first day at our faculty, Ke was very *sao* (สาว - lit. effeminate/feminine) I could tell straightway that he was 'on our side' (gay). But he kept saying that he was a real man. So, every time I saw him walking to the canteen hall I shouted at him: oi! *Kathoey!*; or sometimes '*i-tut!*' (อีตุต)"

Jaray: "Wasn't he angry or embarrassed by that?"

Chira: "No, he shouldn't have been angry but of course embarrassed. But, it's the fact, isn't it? You see he is in our group now."

At the university, I formed friendship with 8 other gay men in the faculty. We named our group, the group of nine angels. Chira, Ken, and I are founding members. It is believed that Angels in Christianity have no sex but are divine. I think it was a kind of self- comforting process that we had built for ourselves. Anyway, this faculty is publicly well-known for being gay-friendly. Female students and staff disproportionately outnumber male ones. The majority of male students are either gays or transgenders. There I felt so liberated. I felt more secure. We had a lot of extra-curricular activities that strengthened our friendship and our creative skills. Our four year time at the faculty was so invaluable that we helped support each other emotionally. At the faculty, it seemed that we were all 'out of the closet'. There was no need to hide even in the presence of tutors. My friends in the nine angels group and I were the backbone of the faculty's extra-curricular activities. We participated in almost everything and secured many awards for the faculty during our four years there. We even ran for administrative posts for our student union.

Although all informants have been facing more or less social pressure to keep up their heteronormative image, socialising with gay friends, to a degree, empowers them to regain their self-confidence. Khen agrees with the emotional benefit of establishing a strong friendship with other homosexuals who Khen often refers to in the interview as *khonthikhaopenyangwa* (คนที่เป็นอย่างว่า - lit. person who is like this) that:

“Grouping together with other *puakrao* (พวกเรา- lit. our kind, read = gay friends) somehow helped regain my self-respect. I met my first gay friend in *Prathom 5* (primary school year 5). Later in my junior high school, my friends developed the self-protection strategy, defending each other from being bullied or verbally attacked by boys... In university, after knowing and hanging out with a lot of gay friends, I felt much more liberated.”

Apart from the emotional support, Phat (ภัท) acknowledges that his friendship with his senior *gay*-identified friend, Phi Yenruedi’ helped reaffirm his same-sex attraction and also opened up his perspectives of the gay world as Phi Yenreudee had provided him *gay* knowledge through the gay magazines such as *Mithuna*.

While many gay men enjoy the sense of liberation and boost their self confidence from their friendship with each other, some gay men find that the socialisation with *gay*-identified people can jeopardise their heteronormative image and is likely to make them become a subject of public ridicule. Seam reflects on his experience in his primary school that:

“When I was young at my school, I saw an effeminate boy being teased as *tut*. That made me realise that it was not good. I tried to resist it. I tried to deny it. I was very confused. Until I came to England when I was 15 or 16, I tried to discover and experiment what I was so much against since I thought that I had to try what it was like; otherwise I might have to end up resisting it all my life. Why didn’t I try to find another way to solve this problem? So, I tried to have a girlfriend.”

Saem, however, became more comfortable with his sexuality after coming to study in England. Saem spent his first two years in a boarding school where he met his first openly gay friend, called Harry. The friendship with Harry more or less prompted him to rethink his original plan to convert and pass as heterosexual. When I first met him in 2005 in London, Saem was still unsure and insisted that he was straight when being teased by a friend of mine. After hanging out with my friends and I for a few months, Saem told me that he was more secure about his sexual orientation as a gay man. Saem went back home that summer for three months and returned to the U.K. with uncertainty as his mother urged him to reconsider his decision. He told me after the trip that he was not gay anymore and he had dated a Thai girl when he was back home.

Similar to Saem, Phaen (แพน) learnt the negativity of identification with non normative sex/gender categories since a young age. He was teased by his classmates because he was seen as too *riaproi* (well-behaved) for boys. His class supervisor in prathom 4 (primary year 4) also told students in his class that *riaproi* boys could become *kathoeay*. This made him become an obvious target for public humiliation in his school. Phaen, nevertheless, met his first boyfriend when he was 15 but had kept his relationship secret.

I met Phaen in 1994 at the faculty. The fact that French was the major subject for Chira, Pom and Tam made Phaen a regular visitor to our nine angels group. Since the first day, it was difficult to identify if he was gay. His mannerisms were a bit ambiguous. Chira took a bold step to identify him by calling him *kathoeay* and/or *tut* regularly but Phaen never seemed to mind. He even spent a lot of time with Chira so that other students speculated that they

were boyfriends. However, during the second year, Phaen became closer to another group, which later posed as an arch-rival team, competing for elected posts for the faculty's student union. Phaen was occasionally said to be seen dating a couple of girls in his group. He was also subjected to vicious gossip that he had fallen in love with a senior straight male student in the faculty. He never confirmed any of the rumours. I grew closer to him when he moved to Paris to study his PhD. He was more open with me and agreed to be interviewed for this project. Phaen acknowledged that it was very gay-friendly at the faculty and he was surrounded by many good gay friends but he felt unsure if his revelation of same-sex attraction would have had any negative impact on him. Phaen says:

“Since then I'm always cautious about telling people that I like boys. I don't know if this could harm me one day.”

Despite the plausible empowerment of 'coming out' to other homosexuals, the negative experience of identification with non-normative sex/gender categories still considerably restrains certain individuals such as Phaen and Saem to 'come out' even with other people who have similar sexual orientation. In contrast, the majority of informants appear to enjoy the enhancement of their positive identification of non-normative sex/gender identities and recover their self-respect through their friendship with other homosexuals.

'Coming out' to Family

Since there is no universal approach to 'coming out,' the reaction to the disclosure of one's homosexuality to family members also varies significantly from one family to another. Many families are willing to accept their sons'

homosexuality as long as it is not displayed or flaunted in public while others completely refuse to reconcile once their sons reveal their attraction to men. Most gay men, studied for this project, acknowledge a crucial role of their families in the realisation of their same-sex attraction, more or less underlined by a compelling guilt of failure to their families' expectation and an awareness that the revelation of their homosexuality would also breach a taboo of discussion of physical intimacy, relatively considered 'private' for Thais.

There is no doubt that family plays a significant part in lives of my informants. If they can, they claim that, they do not want to cause any emotional distress to their beloved ones, especially their parents. O (โธ) who has been in a relationship with Kit for more than eight years confirms this point that:

"I don't see it would do me any good if I told my mom that I was gay. Even though I do want to bring my boyfriend home and introduce him as my boyfriend to her, I don't want to see her sad or feel disappointed. At the moment, we are happy. I don't want to change that."

For O and many gay men, 'coming out' may potentially destabilise the relationship they have held on good terms with their families. The revelation of their (homo) sexuality, on the one hand, may end the suspicion of their families and set the record straight, 'coming out,' on the other hand, may fail their families' expectation and risk damaging their families' reputation.

Apart from emotional distress that 'coming out' may cause to both parties, Thai discursive taboo, regarding discussion of sex and sexuality, continues to shape how Thai gay men and their families have to negotiate the way 'coming out' is being done. Discussing sex in Thai family remains unthinkable and inappropriate thanks to the discursive notion of 'sex' as 'dirty' and 'shameful,'

significantly influenced by Buddhist anti-sex attitudes. Most informants admit that they have never frankly discussed their homosexuality with their parents. They assume that their parents must have known or at least should have been able to speculate about their sexual orientation from successive incidents, according to them, are perfect indications that they are gays. Their parents are further said to acknowledge those signs and sometimes expressed their acceptance of their sons' true nature.

In my family, sex education is never mentioned; let alone the sensitive and private subject such as my homosexuality would have never been brought up for chatting at the family dinner table. I am certain that my parents are aware that I am gay although we never have had a serious talk about it. My parents must have been told about me being called *mia*¹¹⁶ at a private Christian school so that they moved me to a Buddhist state primary school. My mother told me the reason I was moved to that state school was her belief that it could provide me with more intensive academic training for entrance examination into the provincial secondary school where she was also teaching. Statistically, students from that state primary school gained the most entry to the provincial secondary school. Personally, I doubted it. I think one of the reasons was also because of the bullies. My class supervisor probably told her about it as it more or less affected my academic performance.

Around 1989 - 1990, my aunt took me and my parents to talk with Dr. Wanlop Piyamanotham (วัลลภ ปิยะมโนธรรม), a psychiatrist who claimed that he could cure gay people. The counselling went well. I gave him what I thought he

¹¹⁶ I have already discussed about this incident in Chapter 3.

expected from me. He put me in an observatory room and asked me to draw some pictures. I happened to learn a hypothesis, suggesting that a lack of male figure in the family is a cause of homosexuality in boys. So, I drew a picture of my father hitting me with a cane stick. I regret what I did now. In the end, the psychiatrist called us to talk together. He asked me if I wanted to be normal. I, of course, was so young and replied I wanted to. He then suggested that my father and I should have done some activities together, for example, car washing, boxing and so on. Anyway, after the trip to Bangkok, I did not see anything change. I was pretty much left on my own. My parents never told me what to do.

My mother, however, found a way to talk to me about it when I was studying in Bangkok almost five years after the counseling but she double coded her original meanings. In an ordinary summer day, my mother and I were watching television and there was a reference to kathoey people in the programme. My mother suddenly said that she wished her sons would become monks for good as we would not have to suffer from continuous rebirth if we attained the enlightenment and became *arahant*. She also said that her future grandchildren would eventually suffer a similar fate and it may be a good idea that my brothers and I do not enter into this marital and familial commitment that would instigate this chain of suffering as the classic Buddhist hearsay that states: "wherever is love, there is suffering." My mother's statement might seem analogous to the Buddhist teaching about *samsara* but I think she implicitly suggested to me that the way of monkhood may be the best way for me to stop that vicious cycle of *samsara*. She once told me when I was very young about the popular Buddhist belief that men who committed adultery or raped women in their past lives would be born *kathoey* as a kammic punishment. We also had a

neighbour who had a wife living opposite of my house but was so effeminate that everyone in the neighbourhood called him *baomia*. *Bao* is a Southern Thai dialect for boy. In short, I believe that my mother recognises that homosexuals would endure inevitably unfulfilled love and the best way to avoid that fate is to cut off all worldly pleasure and to become a monk.

During my third and fourth year at the university, my youngest brother came to study in Bangkok. As an eldest, I was obliged to look after him as if I was a substitute parent. However, we often had quarrels and even fighting. When visiting us in Bangkok, my mother told me to be nice to my brother(s) because their children would look after me when I got older. Her simple but complex statement indicates that she has known about my sexuality all along and she is worried that if my relationship with my brother(s) became impossible to heal, I would be left alone at old age as a homosexual. Her concern is plausibly derived from a popular perception that homosexuals tend to have short-lived relationships and would obviously have no off-springs who can dutifully look after them.

It is clear that my mother exercised discretion in both incidents as it was not easy for her to explicitly discuss my homosexuality. The taboo against references to sex and sexuality can be said to have substantially influenced her indirect and double coded statements to spare us both embarrassment if my intimate privacy would have been out in the open.

My mother is not alone for exercising indirectness and discretion when acknowledging my homosexuality. When I was studying for my undergraduate degree in Bangkok, I stayed at my aunt's house. She definitely knows about my

homosexuality as it was her idea to take me to see the psychiatrist when I was a teenager. One evening, there was a special television programme, interviewing an Italian footballer, Roberto Baggio and a lecturer from the faculty happened to be the interpreter. I personally know this lecturer who is also an openly gay man. During the interview, he did not seem to care if millions of viewers would see his mannerisms even when being teased by Baggio himself. After the programme, I heard my aunt shouting from her room on the upper floor that: "oh that lecturer is very much like you!" I did not reply. My adopted sister who was also staying with us at that time occasionally helped me clean up my room. One day I left a gay porn magazine under the bed without knowing that she would change my bed sheets on the following day. When I came home from university in the afternoon, I saw my bed sheets had been changed. I looked for the porn magazine under the bed but it had disappeared. I felt so embarrassed that my same-sex attraction had become known to her. A few hours later, I discovered that it had been placed inside my closet, probably by my adopted sister. However, she never mentioned anything about it and I was more than happy not to talk about it.

The silence regarding my (homo) sexuality practicing in my family is not uncommon. Pom claims that the reason his parents do not directly intervene on his noticeably non-normative gender behaviours and same-sex attraction is because his parents respect his privacy. Although they know that he is gay, they have never actually talked about it. Pom says:

"My parents highly respect the privacy of their children. They never force or ask anything their children do not feel like talking. Sex, of course, never comes up in our conversation."

Pom believes that the fact that he has never attempted to disguise his girly mannerisms i.e. wearing make-up, sometimes bought by his mother for him, leads to his parents' acceptance of his non-normative gender behaviours and his same-sex attraction. Pom points out that his effeminacy since childhood must have given his parents indications of his gayness. Although it might have worried them at the beginning, Pom asserts that his parents would get used to it. As a result, Pom acknowledges that it is unnecessary to 'come out' with his parents as they already know about his (homo) sexuality. For Pom, 'coming out' is a gradual process that his parents little by little learn about his same-sex attraction through his effeminate behaviours rather than through a frank discussion within the family, according to Pom, possibly causing distress for both his parents and himself.

Phaen also views that 'coming out' for him is a redundant concept. Although he has never told his parents that he is gay, Phaen believes that his parents have already known about his homosexuality. His parents encountered hard-core evidences of his same-sex attraction when he was 17. Phaen describes that moment that:

"I was masturbating in the bathroom when the telephone rang. I thought that nobody was home so I came out of the bathroom to answer the phone with one hand holding a gay porn magazine. Unfortunate, my father rushed to answer the phone, too. I was surprised and so embarrassed that I dropped the magazine. Of course, my father saw that it was a gay porn magazine but he didn't say anything about it. He just said I should have been more careful."

While doing his homework in his room, Phaen's mother dropped in to ask if he needed any snacks. His gay porn magazines, stacked in a book shelf on the wall unexpectedly fell onto his desk. His mother picked them up and put them

back on the shelf and reminded him to tidy up his book shelf. Phaen's carelessness about his gay porn magazines, not only embarrassed him, but also outed him to his parents. For Phaen, 'coming out' is unnecessary as his homosexuality has been revealed by the unexpected display of gay porn magazines, arguably making his parents acknowledge his sexual orientation without having to say anything regarding his (homo) sexuality.

Whilst some parents are prepared to put up with their sons' homosexuality, often regarded as private, the public speculation of their sons' homosexuality and their parental concern over their son's negative public image may have prompted them to press their sons to conform to the heteronormative practices. Families' sanctions on their sons' homosexuality are often relatively non-confrontational and subtle but also have put some informants under significant pressure to conform to the heteronormativity or at least to present heteronormative images to the public. In other words, having been facing family pressure, many gay men feel obliged to keep up their public image of being 'real' men.

Before coming out to his mother, Khen recounts his mother's emphasis on the 'unnaturalness' of homosexuality when the topic was being discussed on television. Khen says:

"Before telling her that I'm 'like this'...two years ago...she often mentioned, particularly when she was seeing some TV programmes or when she was seeing people who 'were like this'. She considers it 'unnatural'. That is, men have to marry women. Thus, men have to have sex with women. Having sex with men is considered 'unnatural'. But, my mom didn't say that 'the action' was immoral or harmful to society. She just wanted me to be a 'normal' person in the sense that I should have met the social expectation. I was born male, I must be masculine (straight). If I were born a female, I should have been feminine."

By his mother's assertion of unnatural homosexuality, Khen realised that his mother had known or was probably suspicious of his homosexuality but she did not want to talk about his sexuality openly. The refusal to discuss one's homosexuality among family members, to some extent, is arguably explicable by the *kalathesa* conception that sex is a taboo subject for discussion. The interview conversation with Khen clearly demonstrates this pervasive concern over appropriateness regarding discussion of sex as Khen, himself, also avoided referring to non-normative gender and sexual identities but rather substituted them with the ambiguous term, *khonthipenyangni* (คนที่เขาเป็นอย่างนี้ - lit. person who is like this).

Kit also experienced this parental indirect pressure. He believes that his parents are well aware of his homosexuality but they have never mentioned anything to him. Kit says:

“Until now, they just keep asking me when I am going to have a girlfriend.”

By asking a simple question, Kit's parents showed their concern over their son's sexuality but also hoped that it was not true and that was why they asked Kit to prove that he was a real man by getting a girlfriend.

Since the public revelation of their sons' homosexuality not only risks damaging their sons' social image, but may affect parent's social position. This may have prompted some parents to explicitly confront their sons to warn them that they know and hope that they would not continue to be gay. O, Kit's boyfriend, revealed how his parents implicitly put pressure on him after being told about his mannerisms:

“They told me that their friends asked if I were *tut* but they did not wait for my answer. They just simply told me that ‘Don’t become one.’ ”

Haek, a close friend of Kit and O, also retells the conversation with his mother when he was 10 years old in the interview that:

Haek: “After overhearing our neighbours gossiping about my feminine mannerisms, my mum asked me suddenly over the dinner table if I wanted to be a *tut*.”

Jaray: “What did you say?”

Haek: “Nothing. I just kept my silence. I did not reply.”

Haek realised that he would have upset his mother so that he chose to remain silent, instead of telling her the truth or defending himself.

After learning the truth that her son had been flirting with a guy, not a girl, Saem’s mother could not bear the idea of having a homosexual son as she said she would not dare to face anybody if his homosexuality became a public knowledge. She arranged her son to meet with the infamous Dr. Wanlop Piyamanotham. She threatened Saem that she would stop talking to him if he refused the treatment. She paid him to fly from Khòn Kaen (ขอนแก่น), a province in Northeast of Thailand to Bangkok because she was afraid that people in the province might have known about her son’s homosexuality if he had sought a local counselling service. She eventually threatened to starve herself to death if Saem had ignored her plea to give up his homosexuality. Upon consideration of his mother’s health, he told her that he would stop being gay and returned to England. Saem reveals to me that:

“What else could I do? She’s my mom. I know it’s impossible but I just had to lie. My father seems more sympathetic than my mom. He warned me this might jeopardise my future career. But, he did not tell me to stop being gay, unlike my mom who said she was so humiliated of me being

gay and she didn't know how she could have face her friends if they had found out about me."

Wira's father was a head teacher of the primary school he had attended. His father reproached him of not behaving manly after his colleagues told him about Wira's mannerisms. Wira said he felt so embarrassed and guilty as the public 'outing' had brought shame to his family. Wira says:

"I was so young, still in a primary school. My dad was very strict at that time. I felt so shameful but also felt sorry for him. I tried my best to behave more manly at least when I went to school."

Wira's sister and brother who are one and two years younger than him, respectively, are said to acknowledge his homosexuality but say nothing to hurt their brother's feelings. On the contrary, they are sympathetic to him, says Wira,

"My siblings knew all about me because we went to the same school. My younger sister told me that she heard what people were saying about me, but she did not criticise me."

After being confronted by their parents about their non-normative gender expressions and sexuality, rather than keeping silence, some informants took this opportunity to 'come out' to their parents.

Chira recalls the moment he discussed his same-sex attraction with his mother that:

"We were just having a chat. She suddenly asked me if I had a girlfriend and when I would get married. I replied that I would not because I wasn't attracted to women. I thought that my mother might think that I was joking. Anyway, she didn't reproach me but surprisingly said that I could be anything I wanted but I had to concentrate on my studies in order to be able to take care of the parents in old age. I think that my mother must have told my father before her death. I remembered there was a very awkward situation when I returned home and found that my hidden gay porn magazines were discovered and orderly arranged by my father. My parents never complain or try to persuade me not to be gay even though I am the only son of a Chinese-Thai family. My father once called me to

watch a televised *kathoe*y beauty contest together. He rather admired those *kathoe*y's beauty. He even said that they were more beautiful than real women."

One evening, Pom's father made a homophobic laden joke that if Pom were gay, he would beat Pom to death. Pom also jokingly replied that he should have beaten him immediately. Pom says:

"When I was a teenager, I started wearing make-up and putting on gay-signified clothes. My neighbours also started gossiping about me. My mother was so great that in spite of being embarrassed, she did not ask me to stop wearing make-up or dressing as I was doing, she asked me to take the cosmetics to school and do the make-up there instead."

Rot's parents have never been comfortable with his sexuality. When he was studying, Rot's mother often complained about his effeminate mannerisms and his choice of clothing. She also recommended that he should have behaved more manly. Rot attempted to compromise with his mother's advice by wearing clothes with less obvious signs of femininity. Despite Rot's academic success, his parents took him to see a psychiatrist in an attempt to correct his homosexuality. During his last year at the university, he decided to show his parents that he could not be converted to heterosexuality by taking his boyfriend to visit his parents. Rot describes that:

"After taking my ex-boyfriend home in Chiang Rai, I think they might feel that it was impossible to change me back and since then they stopped mentioning about my homosexuality."

Tam decided to come out to his mother after his father passed away. He confessed to her that the older French friend he was staying for a few years in Strasbourg was actually his partner with whom Tam had been together since his graduation from university. His mother also admitted that she was also

suspecting as Tam always helped his mother do the house chores and never introduced his mother to any girls.

Khen came out to his mother two years (in 2000) after his commencement of his master's degree in Japan. His mother acknowledged that she had speculated about his homosexuality but often brushed it off her mind. Khen describes how his mother has handled his 'coming out' in our interview conversation as follows:

Khen: "Now... after I told her that I'm 'like this'... she doesn't say anything (to me) again because I explained to her that people couldn't be judged on who they were but rather on their action and morality."

Jaray: "You once said that your mom must have known from the beginning that you're gay. Why did she just stop saying when you told her that you're...? Despite the fact that she knew... why...it shouldn't have had any effect since she already knew...I remember you told me that when you did tell your mum, she said she had already known, didn't she?"

Khen: "Mom said she didn't know. I mean she said she was suspected that...she was afraid that I was...That's it. She thought that her own son wouldn't be (gay)...he was just well-mannered or studious...so she didn't pay much attention to it. In addition to my regular practice of Buddhist *Dhamma*, she thought that I wouldn't have any interest in this way (homosexual desires), um...although she sometimes found the ... 'obscene' materials or those (male) pornography magazines in (my) room. She also met my friends... 'who are like this' (who are gay)."

Jaray: I think she might have known it...

Khen: Mom...she tried to tell herself that I wasn't (gay). That is, she tried to suppress her idea (that I'm gay)...She refused to believe her own instinct that her son was like that (gay). She comforted herself that although my friends were gays, I would have been. After telling her and explaining to her that it wasn't that horrible, she might have been afraid that her son might be distressed if she had continued (talking about her assumption of homosexuality's unnaturalness). As a result, she stopped talking about that since then.

Family's Tolerance and Private Homosexuality

Tachell (1991:41, cited in Jackson 1995b: 69) notes that Thai families are likely to know and tolerate their sons' homosexuality but are reluctant to talk about it:

“This contradiction between the acceptance and avoidance of homosexuality suggests that tolerance is not always based on full acceptance and that it probably has more to do with the Thai tradition of family loyalty than with a sexual morality.”

The gay sons also attempt to compromise their gayness with their moral obligation to sustain families' legacy, according to Jackson (1995b: 264):

“Thai gay men's identities are formed in the context in which divorcing oneself from one's family connections and obligations is almost unthinkable.”

The strong family connection of informants may be said to explain why Saem decided to please his mother by giving her a promise that he would give up his homosexuality; whilst Kit, Haek, and O decided to remain silent when being asked about their (homo) sexuality, which is perceived as out of place in the heteronormative Thai society.

Rot and Pom, on the contrary, may seem radical compared to Saem, Haek, Kit and O but their voluntary agreement to reduce their non-normative gender expressions in public can be said to demonstrate their struggle to negotiate with their parental demand to conform to heteronormative values. Pom chose not to wear make-up from home when going to school to ward off gossip from neighbours while Rot agreed to wear clothes with lesser gay indications.

The de facto acceptance or tolerance of their homosexuality is partly due to their families' consideration that their (homo) sexuality is private and partly due to informants' personal achievements either academic or professional. Rot, Pom, Tam, Khen and Chira speculated that their educational and subsequent career achievements helped them gain the respect for their privacy and possibly the tolerance of their homosexuality from their respective families.

Phaen notices that his parents become less strict and allow him to live his life after securing a place in the top higher educational institution in the country.

Phaen says,

“My parents must have felt reassured that I am capable of taking care of myself. They did not say anything even when they saw my ex-boyfriend embrace me at the airport. My mom just suggested to my dad to leave us alone.

Khen has also proved to his mother that he could succeed academically despite his mother initial disapproval of being gay. He later won a prestigious national scholarship to further his postgraduate studies abroad. Khen says,

“My educational achievement might have pleased her.”

Despite living in France, Tam occasionally returns home to visit his mother. He also paid for the refurbishment of his parents' house from the money he had earned by himself. His committed relationship with his French partner has demonstrated to his mother that gay people are capable of having long-lasting relationships.

Parents of Rot and Phat become less hostile to their sons' non-normative gender/sexual behaviours since they both graduated from a top university and continuously offer their respective parents some financial support.

After years of misadventures in Bangkok, Wira returned home without finishing his university degree. He later ordained as a monk in a rural temple near his hometown. Until now, he still remains a monk and has gained the considerable respect from villagers and his parents. Despite his failure to complete his degree, Wira is currently pursuing his long-distance study with Thailand's Open University.

Although homosexuality has been arguably tolerated in Thailand, its peripheral position in the hegemonic heterosexual standard neither provides the immunity from criticisms nor approval for certain behaviours regarded as non-normative. Many gay men have earned the tolerance of their homosexuality from their families through their struggles either academic or professional to prove to their parents that they can be successful. Many gay men, however, have no other choice and remain in the closet about their homosexuality or risk indirect sanctions from other people and sometimes their own family members.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that despite the fact that homosexuality has never been outlawed by the Thai State or condemned by Thai Buddhism, Thai gay men are still subjected to conform to social expectations of proper masculinity. Thai values of 'appropriateness and positive self-representation are substantial factors, making individuals develop a sense of self-awareness of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity to understand their status and place in the Thai hierarchical system, and to be able to avoid presenting socially unacceptable behaviours.

I have also argued that the Western notion of 'coming out' as a gay man may have been experienced differently in Thai contexts because of the prevailing taboo on talking about sex or sexuality in public, making 'coming out' relatively 'inappropriate.' This cultural 'aphasia' regarding the discussion of sex and sexuality can also be said to make the identification with non-normative gender/sex categories such as gay problematic in Thai society where sex and sexuality remain sensitive subjects, often regarded as private.

The cultural taboo on discussion of sex and the notion of 'private' (homo) sexuality can be said to engender relatively non-confrontational and subtle strategies of 'coming out,' particularly to family members. While most informants speculate their respective parental acknowledgement of their homosexuality, they have never discussed it directly. Informants' incidental conversations with their respective parents, nevertheless, show their parents' de facto tolerance of their homosexuality.

Empirical interview data also point out that parental reactions to the revelation of their sons' non-normative gender expressions and/ or same-sex attraction vary from one family to another. While some families are prepared to concede to non-normative gender and sexual practices of informants, some families have exercised both discrete and explicit pressure to informants to conform to the heteronormative values. Despite their inability to fulfil their social expectations, informants have substantially shown their relentless efforts to prove their worthiness through their successes in education and profession, respectively.

In short, the notion of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity can be said to offer non-confrontational strategies for Thai gay men to negotiate their sexual subjectivation or space in the public domain, but the awareness of *kalathesa* by gay men also restricts the ways in which Thai gay men may choose to 'come out' under the significant pressure to maintain the appropriate masculine gender surface.

Chapter 6: Negotiating Images – Representations of Non-Normative

Genders and Sexualities

“Bangkok Rainbow aims to organise a tour, promoting friendship. Now we have clearly separated between seminar and sight-seeing trips. If it is a sight-seeing tour, we use ‘WE WAY,’ meaning ‘our way...a journey with travel companions’ and most importantly we also impose a strict rule of **‘no sex with travel companions.’** One of the reasons, some gay men feel reluctant to join gay groups is because they don’t want to be seen negatively. When people think of gay, they think of people who are obsessed with sex. This is why some people were discouraged to join our tour at the beginning. They were afraid that our tour would have been a sex tour. They might think that if some people have had promiscuous sex during the tour, this would have tarnished the image of everyone in the tour. Therefore, we have imposed this rule and we clearly state that we are not a sex tour to everyone who has joined us and if they are interested in sex tours, they have to go with other operators. This trip is for friendship.”

(Nikorn Arthit, (นิกร อารัตย์) the president of Bangkok Rainbow Organisation, cited in “Gay Tour” No (Promiscuous) Sex?!?’ in *Phuchatkan* (ผู้จัดการ) April 28, 2009, retrieved from <http://www.manager.co.th/Home/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9520000047621>)

As masculine identified gay men have become increasingly visible in Thailand since 1965, their non-normative sexuality has often drawn negative attention from the public. The representation of *kathoey* (กะเทย) and/or *gay* (เกย์)¹¹⁷ imagery in Thai public discourses often maintains the stereotypical misconception of these sexual minorities. People with non-normative gender and sexual identities have frequently been impersonated by a number of comedy shows in the mainstream media as social outcasts who regularly exhibit socially ill-mannerisms such as being loud, having insatiable sexual appetite and so forth. However, it is also noticeable that an increasing number of Thai gay men, particularly those who are working in the entertainment business and gay rights

¹¹⁷ The reason of using ‘and/or’ conjunctive phrase is to highlight the ambiguity of both *kathoey* and *gay* identification that they are often interchangeably conflated in Thai popular discourses.

groups, have steadily challenged this social misrepresentation by using the very same mainstream press as a platform to offer an alternative and a more socially acceptable image of gay men. But, the way Thai gay men negotiate their appropriation of the public space, continues to reflect a substantial influence of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity on their unofficial campaign for social inclusion of Thai gay men. The statement of the Bangkok Rainbow President as quoted above highlights the concern over the positive presentation of social image or *phaplak* (ภาพลักษณ์), arguably shared by many Thai gay men due to the social criticisms over the 'excessively' sexual connotations, attached to the label *gay*.

Having discussed in Chapter five, it can be contended that Thais' taboo against public discussions of sex and sexuality has largely influenced the ways Thai gay men consider their public revelation of their same-sex attraction culturally improper. Despite their homosexuality is regarded as an open secret among their families and friends, Thai gay men are still confronted with significant pressures to maintain their public image of having normative gender and sexual identities. This cultural taboo on sexual discussions, to an extent, problematises the identification with a socially sexualised label such as *gay* since *gay* not only defines the masculine gender expression of homosexually active persons as distinctive to that of feminine *kathoey*, but also highlights their non-normative sexual practises, regarded as 'private' in Thai culture. This mindset may explain the abjection of sex craving image, socially attached to the identity *gay*, stressed by the president of Bangkok Rainbow.

This chapter will discuss the contested representation of non-normative gender and sexual identities in Thai popular discourses to understand how

people with non-normative gender and sexual identities have been constructed, particularly in Thai language films in which the protagonists can be categorised as *kathoey* and/or *gay*. This investigation aims to argue that the representation of *kathoey* and/or *gay* characters in these films epitomises the on-going negotiation of Thai gay men for social inclusivity of their same-sex relations and also indicates the peripheral position of people with non-normative gender and sexual identities in Thai society.

Firstly, I will investigate the history of the proliferation of Thai *kathoey* and/or *gay* cinema in Thailand as there has been a significant increase in the number of Thai language films with *kathoey* or/and *gay* themes for mainstream audiences since the year 2000. Secondly, I will discuss the ways Thai gay men have attempted to be socially accepted and to challenge the social stereotypes attached to their non-normative gender and sexual identities. I will look into the correlation between stories of the *kathoey* and *gay* themed films and what I call, 'the politics of negotiations' employed by Thai gay public figures as to widen the social empathy for the homosexual cause. Focus will also be made on central issues of Thai gay men's concerns over their social inclusion and essentially *kalathesa* or being seen as having the socially acceptable image as I believe this mindset is very pervasive among Thai gay communities.

To help explicate this point, I will analyse two Thai language films i.e. 1) *Satri Lek* (สตรีเหล็ก - 2000, a.k.a. *Iron Ladies*), 2) *Sat Pralat* (สัตว์ประหลาด - 2004, lit. Monsters; a.k.a. *Tropical Malady*) to suggest that the popularly constructed representation of non-normative genders and sexualities, visualised in these films, not only provides an impeccable illustration how *kathoey* and/or

gay, are understood in the Thai society, but also appeals to the Thai public for the social acceptance and validity of same-sex relations in Thailand. The analysis of these films also suggest that *kathoey* and/or *gay* audiences are also informed about their peripheral positions in Thai gender and sexual hierarchy by the representation of non-normative gender and sexual characters in the films.

The representation of characters with non-normative gender and sexual identities, shown in these two films provides critical insights into Thai social articulation of *gay* subjectivities, arguably understood in Thai contexts by both *gay* subjects and heterosexual counterparts alike. Therefore, the films can be considered as part of social and cultural networks of public discourses by which the subjectivity of these sexual non-conformists have been fashioned. The representation of *kathoey* and/or *gay* appeared in these films can also be seen as the by-product of the negotiation for acceptable imagery of these gender and sexual minorities.

The reasons why I have chosen these two films are: 1) they enjoy both international and local recognition¹¹⁸; 2) *Satri Lek* (สตรีเหล็ก - 2000) and *Sat Pralat* (สัตว์ประหลาด - 2004), offer insights into Thailand's tolerance towards homosexuality; 3) the films suggest that there exist dialectic relationships between the heteronormative orthodoxy and the emerging discourses of homosexual identities in the contemporary Thailand.

¹¹⁸ Thanks to its success at the 2004 Cannes' International Film Festival, *Sat Pralat* was eventually screened at limited cinemas in Thailand. The Thai press'extensive coverage of the film made its director famous among Thai film goers for his alternative and artistic cinematographic expressions. Also see Oradol Kaewpraser's PhD thesis (2008: 184) for further information and analysis of *Sat Pralat*.

As human beings define their subjectivity through their understanding of their contextual interaction and negotiation, language or a cultural medium such as cinema can be said to help explicate or to make a sense of the world. That is, subjectivities have been constructed through language. Gay or sexual marginalised subjectivities are also produced or shaped within the realm of language. Films, television dramas, laws and so forth are considered as parts of social discourses that have influenced the institutionalisation of certain 'popular' perception regarding these social periphery people and also underlined the scopes and limitation in which these marginalised subjectivities can be contested and constructed.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault compares modern society with Jeremy Bentham's 'Panopticon' design for prisons. In the Panopticon, a single guard can watch over many prisoners while the guard remains unseen. The dark dungeon of pre-modernity has been replaced with the bright modern prison, but Foucault cautions that "visibility is a trap". As a result, prisoners' bodies are subjected to 24/7 surveillance. Foucault asserts that it is through this visibility that the modern society exercises its controlling systems of power and knowledge. Increasing visibility leads to power located on an increasingly individualised level, shown by the possibility for institutions to track individuals throughout their lives. Foucault also suggests that a 'carceral continuum' runs through modern society, from the maximum security prison, through secure accommodation, probation, social workers, police, and teachers, to our everyday working and domestic lives. All are connected by the witting or unwitting supervision of some humans by others. In other words, every social being is

consciously and unconsciously kept on surveillance to enforce the application of norms of acceptable behaviours.

These two films can be said to epitomise rigid forms of acceptable homo-persona, permitted to be reproduced in the mainstream (heteronormative) discourses. By lacking the opportunity to cultivate the alternative identities, Thai gay agencies are shaped by their immediate contexts. In other words, it can be argued that the expectation of Thai gay men's political maneuver to achieve significant progress as their Western counterparts is still far from materialisation.

The film analysis is also complemented by personal narratives of Thai gay men, who participated in this project, to discern the operation of *kalathesa* in comparison with dialogues spoken by gay characters portrayed in the films. In this regard, the lived narratives of these gay men reflect the notion of contextual sensitivity, which has played in mellowing the potential confrontation and enabling Thai gay men to be included into the mainstream.

The inquiry into narratives of both fictitious characters and interviewees can be said to unravel social restrictions, imposed on homosexual individuals to conform to compulsory heteronormativity, strengthened by the very same notion of contextual sensitivity.

Background to the Films

Released in 2000, *Satri Lek* is a light hearted comedy film, telling a dramatic story of a *kathoey* and/or *gay* volleyball team from Lampang (ลำปาง), who won Thailand's National Championship in 1996. Despite its positive representation of *kathoey* and/or *gay* characters, *Satri Lek* was considered

atypical compared with its *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films which often depicted the tragic lives of these non-normative gender and sexual characters. Only ten days after its national released date, *Satri Lek* became the second largest box office success in the Thai cinema history. (Julian Gearing, *Asia Week*, May 5, 2000, Vol. 26. No. 7) Aimed to alter the negative attitudes towards *kathoey*, the film presented *kathoey*/and or *gay* as “real people with hearts and minds and a significant presence in the wider community”. (Totman 2003: 87) Yongyooth Thongkongthun (ยงยุทธ ทองกองทุน), *Satri Lek*'s director, stresses that *Satri Lek* has broken the taboo of the cultural aphasia, a denial towards the existence of sexual minorities in public discourses and has brought the lives of these sexual minorities back into the public recognition. (ibid.)

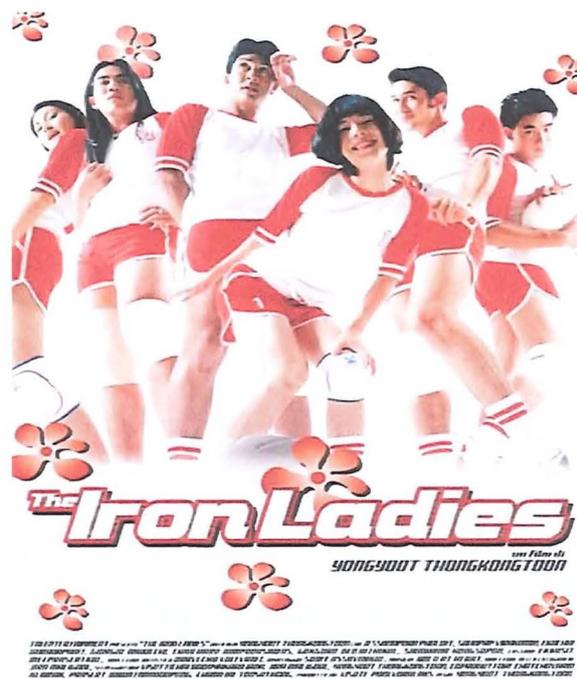


Figure 8 U.K. distributed DVD Cover of *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkongthun 2000), courtesy of Peccadillo Picture

In contrast with the national success *Satri Lek* enjoyed, *Sat pralat* (2004, a.k.a. *Tropical Malady*) was not well received by Thai viewers, allegedly due to

its unconventional cinematic expression¹¹⁹. *Sat Pralat* is a love story between two men, a national park ranger, Keng (เก่ง), and a country boy, Tong (ต๋อง). Their innocent courtship at the beginning of the film later turned into a mythical and symbolic soul searching journey of its protagonists in the second part of the film. Completely opposite to the typical representation of *kathoey* and gay men, shown in *Satri Lek*, the unconventional story of two ordinary men in *Sat Pralat* offer a glimpse of the continuous attempt to reconstruct sexual identities and reconfirm the existence of masculine-identified homosexuals in Thailand, alternative to the common perception of Thai gay men's effeminacy. Despite failing to make the equivalent box office record compared to *Satri Lek*, *Sat Pralat* gained an impromptu international recognition after being awarded the Grand Jury Prize in the 2004 Cannes' International Film Festival for its outstanding characteristics from the rest of the contesting films for the Palme D'Or award. Despite being shown in limited cinemas in Thailand, the success of *Sat Pralat* in Cannes' International Film Festival has gained its director Apichatpong Weerasethakul (อภิชาติพงศ์ วีระเศรษฐกุล) a local attention among cinema goers but at the same time, the long unspeakable issue of homosexuality is also being subtly put back into the limelight by this independent film maker.

¹¹⁹ Unlike Hollywood films, which Thai audience may find them more accessible, *Sat pralat* can be said to present a considerably unconventional narrative method. The dialogues are simple and almost improvisational in the first half of the film, whereas silence and confusion of the jungle seems to dominate the second part of the film.

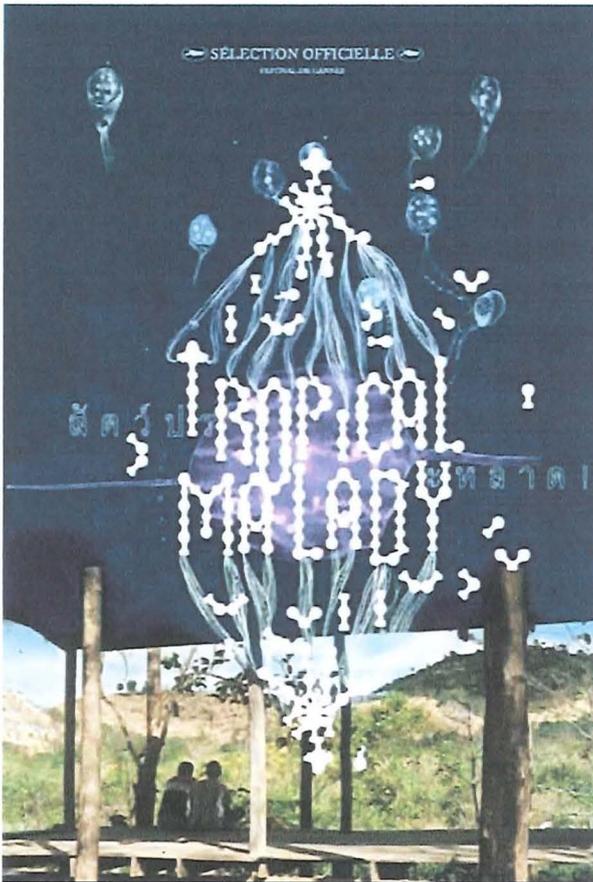


Figure 9 Film Poster of *Sat Pralat* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders Films

The Proliferation of *Kathoey* and/or *Gay* Representations in Thai Cinema

Since the start of the 21st century, the representation of homosexuals in the Thai mainstream media has noticeably increased. The financial success and the popularity of *Satri Lek* (2000) can be said to have prompted the proliferation of *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films for mainstream Thai audiences. Oradol Kaewprasert's Phd thesis (2008) also suggests that unlike other queer films in the West, the proliferation of Thai queer films is due to its commercial motivation. The following *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films have been released in Thai mainstream cinemas after the national success of *Satri Lek* in 2000. These films are:

- 1) *Prang Chompu Kathoey Prachanban* (พรางชมพู กระเทย ประจันบาน - 2002, lit. Pink Camouflage: Kathoey in Battle, a.k.a. *Saving Private Tootsie*)¹²⁰;
- 2) *Beautiful Boxer* (2003)¹²¹;
- 3) *Huachai Thoranong* (หัวใจทรนง - 2003, lit. Dignified Heart, a.k.a. *The Adventure of Iron Pussy*)¹²²;
- 4) *Satri Lek 2* (สตรีเหล็ก 2 - 2003)¹²³;
- 5) *Wai Huem Chia Krahuem Lok* (วัย หีม เขียวกระหึ่มโลก - 2003, a.k.a. *Cheerleader Queens*)¹²⁴;
- 6) *Sat Pralat* (สัตว์ประหลาด - 2004, lit. Monster, a.k.a. *Tropical Malady*)¹²⁵;
- 7) *Kaeng Chani Kap I-Aep* (แก๊งชะนีกับอีแอบ - 2006, lit. Gang of Gibbons¹²⁶ and Closeted Guy, a.k.a. *Metrosexual*)¹²⁷;
- 8) *Namprik Long Ruea* (น้ำพริกหลงเรือ - 2006, lit. Chili Paste in a boat or pot luck in Anglo-American sense, a.k.a. *Navy Boys*)¹²⁸;
- 9) *Pleng Sutthai* (เพลงสุดท้าย - 2006, lit. The Last Song, a.k.a. *The Last Song*)¹²⁹;
- 10) *Koi Thoe Gay* (โกย เถอะ เกย์ - 2007, lit. Run Gay Boy Run, a.k.a. *Ghost Station*)¹³⁰;

¹²⁰ Directed by Kittikon Liao-sirikun (กิตติกร เลี้ยวศิริกุล).

¹²¹ Directed by Ekkachai Uea-khrongtham (เอกชัย เอื้อครองธรรม).

¹²² Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (อภิชาติพงศ์ วีระเศรษฐกุล) and Michael Shaowanasai (ไมเคิล เซาวานาศัย).

¹²³ Directed by Youngyooth Thongkongthun (ยงยุทธ ทองกองทุน).

¹²⁴ Directed by Poj Arnon (พจน์ อานนท์).

¹²⁵ Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (อภิชาติพงศ์ วีระเศรษฐกุล).

¹²⁶ *Chanee* (ชะนี lit. Gibbon) is a Thai gay slang for women. The story goes that women are euphemistically referred to as 'gibbon' because when a gibbon sings, it sounds like a Thai word *phu* ฝัว or husband in English.

¹²⁷ Directed by Youngyooth Thongkongtoon (ยงยุทธ ทองกองทุน).

¹²⁸ Directed by Worapot Phothinet (วรพจน์ โพธิ์เนตร).

¹²⁹ Directed by Pisarn Akkaraseranee (พิศาล อัครเศรณี).

- 11) *Ho Tao Taek* (หอแต้วแตก - 2007, lit. Screaming Queen Dorm, a.k.a. *Haunting Me*)¹³¹;
- 12) *Kho Hai Rak Chong Charoen* (ขอให้รักจงเจริญ - 2007, lit. Long Live Love, a.k.a. *Me, Myself*)¹³²;
- 13) *Rak Haeng Sayam* (รักแห่งสยาม - 2007, lit. Love of Siam, a.k.a. *The Love of Siam*)¹³³;
- 14) *Phuean Ku Rak Mueng Wa* (เพื่อน ภูรักมิ่งว่ะ - 2007, lit. Mate, I Love You, a.k.a. *Bangkok Love Story*)¹³⁴;
- 15) *Tat Su Fut* (ตัดสู้ฟัด - 2007, an inverted word order of *tut su fat*, ตัดสู้ฟัด - lit. Faq Fighter, a.k.a. *Kungfu Tootsie*)¹³⁵;
- 16) *Na Khana Rak* (ณ ขณะรัก - 2008, lit. A Moment of Love, a.k.a. *A Moment in June*)¹³⁶;
- 17) *Saeng Sattawat* (แสงศตวรรษ - 2008, lit. The Ray of Century, a.k.a. *Syndromes and a Century*)¹³⁷.

The proliferation of *kathoey* and/or *gay* mainstream cinema has also encouraged small independent cinema production houses to cash in on the trend. Several independent *kathoey* and/or *gay* films have also been released exclusively for audiences in art house cinemas and often released in DVD format for home viewers only. These films are:

¹³⁰ Directed by Yuthlert Sippapak (ยุทธเลิศ สิปปภาค).

¹³¹ Directed by Poj Arnon (พจน์ อานนท์).

¹³² Directed by Pongpat Wachirabunjong (พงษ์พัฒน์ วชิรบรรจง).

¹³³ Directed by Chookiat Sakweerakul (ชูเกียรติ ศักดิ์วีระกุล).

¹³⁴ Directed by Poj Arnon (พจน์ อานนท์).

¹³⁵ Directed by Jaturong Jokmok (จาตุรงค์ จักมิก).

¹³⁶ Directed by O Natthaphon (โอ นัฐพล).

¹³⁷ Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (อภิชาติพงศ์ วีระเศรษฐกุล). Despite being shown in various international film festivals worldwide since 2006, the censored version of this film was eventually released in limited cinemas in April 2008 in Thailand. Apichatpong initially decided against screening the cut version. The censored scenes of the film were replaced by black films.

- 1) *Chan Rak Nai Phuchai Mi Ong** (ฉันรักนาย ผู้ชายมีองค์ - lit. I love you, a man with xxx* a.k.a. *Miss Queen Thailand* (2003)¹³⁸,
- 2) *Thang Rak Si Rung* (ทางรักสี่รุ่ง - 2003, a.k.a. *Rainbow*)¹³⁹,
- 3) *Tam Sai Nam* (ตามสายน้ำ - 2004, a.k.a. *Down the River*),¹⁴⁰
- 4) *Rainbow Boys* (2005, a.k.a. *Right by Me*)¹⁴¹,
- 5) *Silom Soi2* (สี่ลมซอยสอง - 2006)¹⁴²,
- 6) *Club M2* (2007)¹⁴³.

Politics of Negotiations: Contesting for 'Acceptable' Gayness

The increasing number of *kathoey* and/or *gay* films, released in the Thai mainstream market for the last decade as listed above, does not indicate the absence of anti-homosexual sentiments in Thai society. The majority of these films, however, reproduce the negative stereotypes, socially associated with *kathoey* and *gay* identities. Many stereotypical characteristics such as insatiable appetite for sex, ill-awareness for *kalathesa* and essentially non-normative hyper-feminine mannerisms of some *kathoey* and effeminate *gay* characters are often considered as 'laughable' for mainstream audiences. These eccentric and comical behaviours become a 'selling point' for most of the *kathoey* and/or *gay*

¹³⁸ Directed by Tomoko Eruyoh. * *Ong* here is a Thai gay slang, meaning a *kathoey* or *gay* guy who suddenly behaves unusually, especially for switching his/her preferred sexual role from being passive to becoming active. *Ong* originally refers to someone who is possessed by supernatural beings.

¹³⁹ Directed by Yutthana Khunkhongsathian (ยุทธนา ขุนทองเสถียร).

¹⁴⁰ Directed by Anucha Bunyawanthana (อัญชา บุญยวรรณะ), this film was awarded the cinematic photography award at the 2004 Thai Short Films & Videos Festival, organised by Thai films Foundation and Thailand's Ministry of Culture. Periodically, Thai authority exercises its censorship towards homosexual messages on national television for fear of being bad example to impressionable youths. The recently failed attempt to ban all references to homosexuality was made by then Cultural Ministry's Permanent Secretary General in June 2004. Therefore, by emphasising the support from the Thai authority towards particular pieces of *gay* themed films, I would like to emphasise the ironic relationship between these two irreconcilable parties which can be sustained under the acknowledgement of *kalathesa*.

¹⁴¹ Directed by Thanyatorn Siwanukrow (ธัญธรณ์ ศิวานุเคราะห์).

¹⁴² Directed by Piya Rangsithianchai (ปิยะ รังสีเทียนชัย).

¹⁴³ Produced and edited by Vitaya Saeng-Aroon (วิทยา แสงอรุณ).

films, listed above. Varayuth Milintajinda (วรายุทธ มลิณธจินดา), an openly gay actor and famous Thai soap opera producer asserts that:

“We often come across *kathoey* or *gay* characters, performing *raeng raeng* (แรงๆ)¹⁴⁴ roles to make the audience laugh. Many people see these characters as the colourful addition to the show. At the same time, the press are often unappreciative and critical of the inclusion of *kathoey* roles in the show.”

(*Krungthepturakit* (กรุงเทพธุรกิจ), June 6, 2003, retrieved from <http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/2003/06/06/jud/index.php?news=jude3.html>)

Wiroj Tangvanit (วิโรจน์ ตั้งวานิช), the president of *Fasirung* Association (ฟ้าสีรุ้ง - lit. Rainbow Sky) comments on this commercialisation of ‘eccentricity’ of non-normative genders and sexualities in the Thai press that:

“If we ask the press to report our positive sides, we have to ask ourselves whether we have presented our positive sides to the public, too. Once we have proved that we have contributed to the greater good of the society, the press should report this, too. I’m sometimes disappointed by the way the press are eager to sell only the eccentricity of homosexuals.” (cited in *ibid.*)

The notion that gay men should prove themselves as equally valued members of Thai society is also echoed by Nathee Teerarojjanapongs (นที ชีระ--โรจนพงศ์), the president of the gay political group (กลุ่มเกย์การเมือง) and former candidate for Bangkok senator, points out that:

“Some (gay) men may have hyper-(effeminate) mannerisms for example being loud, screaming queen and so on, either being a woman or a man if they are going over the top, the society will look at them negatively. We can’t blame the society (for this misperception). I think that (Thai) society accepts gay men who behave normally. I don’t think there is a social dislike (of gay men) or there isn’t any. I’ve openly come out for many years. I’ve never been accused by the press of being *gay* and behave inappropriately.”

¹⁴⁴ *Raeng raeng* (แรงๆ) can be translated as ‘very strong’ but in this context, ‘raeng raeng’ should be understood as very camp or hyper-feminine with malicious characteristics.

(This comment was made by Teerarojanapong during his participation in *Thueng Luk Thueng Khon* (ถึงลูกถึงคน), a television talk show programme, broadcasted by Channel 9 on June 16, 2004)

The assertions made by the above three openly gay public figures suggest that Thai gay men are, in fact, aware of social stigma attached to the identification with non-normative gender and sexual identities as described in Chapter three and Chapter five. Varayuth acknowledges that the inclusion of *raeng raeng* roles, performed by *kathoey* or gay characters, in mainstream drama aims to draw public attention to the show. Natee Teerarojanapongs is publicly critical of these hyper-effeminate expression of *kathoey* and gay men as he believes that these non-normative gender expressions would reiterate the negative stereotypes, socially associated with these identities and most importantly would fuel further social misunderstanding of these sexual minorities. Having admitted his disappointment of the misrepresentation of *kathoey* and gay men by the press, Wiroj does not directly condemn the focus on the 'eccentricity' of *kathoey* and/or gay men, but rather encourages his fellow *gay* brotherhoods to behave more sensibly and constructively for the good of society.

Despite consistent calls for more positive representations in the mainstream media, non-biased reports and relevant news articles of gay men are very scarce or almost non-existent, especially in the Thai language press. The English language press, for example, *The Nation*¹⁴⁵, has published considerably neutral reports and is arguably sympathetic to the homosexual cause than its Thai language counterparts in which scandalous reports,

¹⁴⁵ *The Nation* is one of the two daily English language broadsheet newspapers in Thailand.

particularly on criminal and moral cases, committed by homosexuals are often sensationalised to cash in on public attention.

Nevertheless, from February 2004 until February 2009, *Phuchatkan* (ผู้จัดการ), the daily Thai language newspaper published a weekly article, called *Loek Aep Sia Thi* (เลิกแอบเสียที - a.k.a. hiding no more), on its *Metro Life* section. Having obviously targeted *gay*-identified readership, this weekly column, not only put together diverse articles ranging from *gay* men's lifestyles to raising social awareness of sexual diversity, but also encouraged Thai *gay* men to be proud of themselves and to come out. It was considered the very first time that the public space had been devoted to *gay* men and most importantly written by an openly Thai *gay* man, Vittaya Saeng-Aroon (วิทยา แสงอรุณ) who also authored a book, called *Mae Khrap, Phom Pen Gay* (แม่ครับ ผมเป็นเกย์ - 2005, lit. Mom, I'm *gay*) and subsequently produced a few independent *gay* themed films, i.e. *Rainbow Boys* (2005) and *Club M2* (2007). After the first public appearance of *gay*-identified men in the Thai press in 1965, it can be contended that at least in this weekly column, *gay* men are represented as normal as straight people.

Although stories of *kathoey* and *gay* men are not uncommon in Thai mainstream media, the representation of long-lasting, meaningful and monogamous relationships of *kathoey* and *gay* men are very rare or almost non-existent. Only a handful of the listed films in the previous section i.e. *Tropical Malady* (2004), *The Last Song* (2006), *The Love of Siam* (2007), *Bangkok Love Story* (2007) and *A Moment in June* (2008) can be categorised as romantic dramas in which the romantic relationships between *gay* or *kathoey* identified protagonists and sometimes even with *phuchai* (ผู้ชาย) or straight male

characters form a substantial theme of the film stories. However, none of the relationships shown in all of these films have survived so far. Same-sex relations at least in the mainstream media are fatally doomed as being portrayed by Somying Daorai (สมหญิง ดาราย), the *kathoey* protagonist of *The Last Song* (original version 1985, remake version 2006) shot herself in the head after being rejected by her ex-lover. This departure of the main protagonist as a love worshiper, to an extent, is considered 'classic' as it is also reiterated in *Bangkok Love Story* (2007) in which Mek (เมฆ) decided to shield his lover, It (อี๊ด), from a bullet in the gun fight in the last scene. While other films show how gay love might be theoretically unfulfilled since Thai society may not be ready for same-sex romantic relationships. The unsuccessful love is particularly highlighted in the last scene between Tong and Mew in *The Love of Siam* (2007) in which Tong politely broke up with Mew despite having had his mother's 'indirect' consent as illustrated in the 'coming out' scene in the introduction of Chapter five.

The only successful *gay* relationship in the Thai media is the story of Chon (จอน) and Thi (ที) in the weekly television series, called *Love 8009* (รักแปดพันเก้า - *Rak Paed Phan Kao*¹⁴⁶). This show offers a glimpse of hope for many gay men that they might successfully form a meaningful relationship themselves. In the last episode, the gay couple protagonists, Chon (จอน) and Thi (ที) live happily together in the U.S. (not in Thailand) after long and difficult struggles for the acceptance of Thi's family. Although the reason of migration to the U.S. of

¹⁴⁶ *Rak Paed Pan Kao* was directed by Siriwit Uppakan, Chirasak Yochio and Witsawet Buranawitthayawut (สิริวิทย์ อุปการ, จิรศักดิ์ โย้จิว และ วิศเวศ บุรณวิททยวุฒิ) and broadcasted from January 2004 to January 2006.

the couple was necessarily logical because Thi had to take over his family business from his late father who opposed his son's relationship until his death.

Apart from the migration to the U.S., the love story of Chon and Thi can be considered a break from tragic and/or unsuccessful endings in most conventional *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films. It might be purely speculative but *Love 8009* suggests the changing attitude towards the acceptance of same-sex relations in Thai society, especially Chon's parents and his straight friends who also lived in the same apartment building and are very supportive of Chon and his relationship with Thi. Thi, on the contrary, endured a difficult coming-out process as his career in acting was severely disrupted after the public revelation of his homosexuality.

The relationship of Chon and Thi suggests that contemporary Thai society may be prepared to tolerate same-sex relations if the couples are willing to keep their relationships in private (among families and friends). However, once their relationships become publicly known, as the case of Chon and Thi by the paparazzi who followed them on their date, the departure from the Thai context of both gay characters in *Love 8009* can be said to indicate that Thai society is not after all be ready to validate same-sex relations.

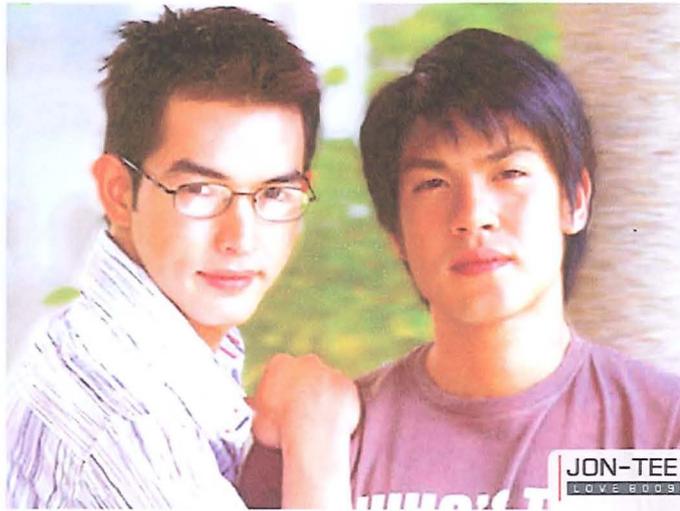


Figure 10 Chon and Thi, *Rak Paed Phan Kao* (lit. *Love 8009*, Siriwit Uppakan, Chirasak Yochio and Witsawet Buranawitthayawut 2004 - 2006), courtesy of EXACT

Homosexuality and Social Acceptance

Comments made by both Wiroj Tangvanit and Natee Teerarojjanapongs can be said to reaffirm my argument that people with non-normative gender and sexual identities have to negotiate the social tolerance and possible acceptance of their same-sex relations. That is, apart from the taboo of sex and sexual discussion which regards sex as a shameful and private matter as outlined in Chapter five, Thai homosexuals are also occasionally subjected to the social demand to maintain the normative gender and sexual image. Whilst Natee Teerarojjanapongs indicates that the hyper-feminine mannerisms of certain gay men may have caused the social prejudice against gay identified men, Wiroj Tangvanij encourages homosexuals to make an effort to be included into the mainstream society.

It is difficult to gauge to what degree the society is prepared to tolerate non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices. Wiroj's suggestion of gay men's contribution to the greater good of the society is analogous to what

my research participants have described in Chapter five. Since the majority of my research participants state that they are content with their educational and professional achievements, they stress that they never hide their homosexuality from the general public. However, they do not feel the compelling need to tell their straight friends about their sexuality. If being asked, they would tell the truth since they do not think that covering or pretending to be 'straight' (*phuchai thae - ผู้ชายแท้* – lit. real men) is necessary although they doubt that they would be in that situation very often thanks to Thais' cultural reservation regarding public discussion of sex and sexuality. Haek points out that:

“I don't think it is necessary to announce that I am gay since everyone seems to know it already. But, if they want to find out, I'd be happy to tell them the truth.”

Personal experiences shared by research participants and myself prove that this cultural restriction on public discussion of sex and sexuality is still pervasive for Thais regardless of the location where they are. On 23 July 2009, I attended the meeting of Thai students who were studying in London at the Thai embassy in South Kensington, London. Everyone was instructed to introduce themselves regarding their nickname, age, the programme of study, the respective affiliate governmental agency where they would be working with after the graduation and the favourite colour. When I informed the participants, including the most senior official figure at the meeting, the educational minister counsellor, about my research field involving the investigation of gender and sexual conceptions in Thailand, there was a silence. Unlike other participants whose research topics had generated some queries, nobody asked me any questions until the counsellor decided to break the ice by moving on to another topic. I did not even mention anything *gay*. After all everyone has had more or

less Western orientated education and we are not in Thailand but the congregation of Thais might be said to have made participants abide by the cultural taboo of the public discussion of sex and sexuality. Even if there were some interested people with academically genuine questions, this sensitive issue might have put them at risk of being seen too keen on this 'dirty' and 'shameful' topic of sex and sexuality.

To avoid similar awkwardness like I have encountered, most of my research participants say they would choose the self-censorship of their non-normative gender expressions and would sometimes remain silent about their homosexuality especially with the presence of people are more senior in terms of social status. Chira, for example asserts that the most important thing is the awareness of *kalathesa*. He explains that:

“I would *saotæk*¹⁴⁷ (สาวแตก – to be expressively effeminate) only when I am socialising with other gay friends. But I would be *samruam* (สำรวม - well-behaved) in the presence of *phuyai* (ผู้ใหญ่ - seniors).”

Having discussed in Chapter five, Thai society requires individuals' collective conformity to social norms and values. To be seen as behaving 'appropriately', one must possess a sensitivity to identify one's social status, gender and seniority. In addition, one must also know how to react or how to behave in certain places and occasions. All participants point out that although homosexuality may be tolerated, it does not mean that homosexuality has been seen as an acceptable way of life. Thus, to be accepted, the participants often have to negotiate how much they can be seen as 'out' with the prevailing social norms.

¹⁴⁷ *Saotæk* (สาวแตก – lit. exploded effeminacy) here means to be expressive with feminine mannerisms. Also see other slang terms for coming out in Thai contexts in Chapter five.

While the slogan: 'we are here; we are queer; get used to it', reflects the political strategy of sexual non-conformists in the West, the challenge posed by Thai gay men to Thailand's absolutism of heteronormativity is rather non-confrontational and non-provocative but more constructive in dialogue engagement with the heteronormative discourse. Jackson (1995a: 253) asserts that:

"Nevertheless, it is also the case that giving the appearance of being non-conformist, whether in speech, dress, manner or views, undermines one's position of authority in Thailand. In order to have alternative or radical opinions considered seriously, it is firstly necessary to demonstrate one's good credentials as a person who is worthy of being given a respectful hearing. To be accepted, new ideas must therefore be presented in the grab of old views and beliefs, as being compatible with "Thai-ness" and the traditional norms of Thai society. Aggressive assertiveness achieves little in Thailand, while modesty and show of good Thai manners confers authority by demonstrating one's integrity. Once one has demonstrated one's integrity it may then be possible to politely advocate some limited form of change or reform."

For the above reasons, most research participants affirm that they have, to some extent, demonstrated that they are not losing their 'Thai-ness' although their homosexuality might be culturally perceived as a form of sexually non-conformity. Rot, a skillful Thai dancer, was respected by both junior and senior students at the Northern cultural society in his university. During his four years at the university, he helped out and participated in all events of his society. Chira and Khen were also known for their skills in playing traditional musical instruments at the faculty's Thai musical society. Tam was praised for his cooking skills. He often volunteered to cook for the faculty's events.

For Phaen, being consistent with his contribution for the collective society, such as his educational institution might have paved the way for his social recognition. Phaen intensively participated in extracurricular activities organised

by the faculty as well as the university. During the winter and summer vacations, he joined a number of student volunteer activities in the countryside of Thailand. He taught young school children and also helped out in building projects such as providing standard toilets, school buildings, water-wells and so forth, to rural villagers. His enthusiastic contribution to the extracurricular activities was well acknowledged by students and tutors at the faculty. He was elected as the president of the faculty's students' union during his fourth year. It is worth noting Phaen considers his sexual orientation 'private' as he did not publicly mention about his attraction to other men during his undergraduate years. However, he also states that everyone should have guessed about his homosexuality as he never pretends to be 'straight.' Phaen says:

"I don't think that my homosexuality defines who I am. Yes, it's part of me but my life does not always revolve around my sexual orientation. I don't think I should be defined by whom I have sex with."

Some research participants also consider their being academically helpful to their classmates to have probably contributed to being accepted when they were in primary and secondary schools, respectively. Pom, for example, views that:

"I think my classmates accepted me because of my 'goodness.'

Rot describes his elevated status from being bullied by male classmates because of his effeminacy to being respected for his top academic performance.

Rot says:

"At the primary school, I was often verbally abused by those bully boys because I was different...but later when I became top of the class, they asked me to let them copy my homework. I agreed and since then they stopped calling me names."

The public image of being a good person can, to an extent, be argued to help facilitate the participants into the heteronormative society as they have had proved that they are worthy to be accepted. However, when asking their opinions on the notion of 'coming out' to the general public that exclude their close friends and family members which I have already discussed in Chapter five, most informants emphasise the pervasiveness of *kalathesa* and further state that they know how to behave especially in the formal milieu such as the work place. Therefore, they do not think their homosexuality would jeopardise their future career opportunities¹⁴⁸.

The research participants, however, do not view that they are leading double lifestyles although their expression of their homosexuality in public would violate the contextual sensitivity in the public space. On the contrary, they assert that knowing when, where and with whom to *saotaek* is just a part of everyday social etiquette. Chira explains that:

“It is similar to the way teenagers would opt to use impolite words with their close friends and would shift to polite words when they are speaking with adults.”

In sum, Thailand's cultural sensitivity, particularly the view that sex and sexuality are private matters may explain the social tolerance of homosexuality my research participants have encountered. However, it is apparent that the participants, to an extent, have also negotiated their appropriation of the public space by adhering to the pervasive *kalathesa* that their homosexuality is deemed

¹⁴⁸ It is worth noting that the majority of my research participants are more or less professionally affiliated with Thai government agencies, except Pom and Tam who both have settled and been working in France. Chira, Phaen and Khen are expected to fulfil their working obligation with Thai government after completing their PhDs in Europe. Kit and Saem are currently working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rot is a university lecturer in Chiang Rai. Haek is studying for his MPhil and also looking for a career in a Thai university. Phat is a private tutor in Bangkok. O is working in a hotel in Bangkok and Wira is a monk in the south of Thailand.

'improper' to be expressed in the public arena. Morris (1994: 27) recapitulates this point that:

“...the invisible deeds are still considered beyond jural control. Private homosexuality, even when generally suspected, is considered a separate realm that does not impact on a man's public performance of his civic duties.”

Negotiation for Public Space:

***Kathoey* and/ or *Gay* Cinematic Representation**

In the previous section, I have shown that the major concern for social acceptance of Thai gay men is to maintain their positive image in relation to Thailand's contextual sensitivity. As the term *gay* is loaded with social misperception of non-normative gender expressions and sexual behaviours, Thai gay men often find the identification with the label *gay* culturally problematic or contextually 'improper.' Instead of organising a public rally for social justice and equality like gay rights movements in the West, Thai gay men who participated in this research as well as those three gay celebrities I have quoted above, not only point out the negative stereotypes, associated with the identity *gay*, often reproduced by the press, but also underline the significance of keeping up with the social sensitivity to be included into the mainstream. I will further discuss Thai gay men's social campaigns for equality and acceptance in the next chapter.

In this section, I will show how the negotiation for social inclusion of Thai gay men has been visualised into the mainstream cinemas. I will investigate how the campaign for social acceptance of non-normative gender and sexual

identities is being symbolically discussed in two Thai language films: *Satri Lek* (2000) and *Sat Pralat* (2004), respectively.

Rather than directly confronting pervasive heteronormative values and the social discrimination people with non-normative gender and sexual identities have endured, both films simply illustrate happy and tragic stories of these socially stigmatised people. Whilst viewers may find the witty scripts and the hyper-feminine performance of characters in *Satri Lek* (2000) laughable, the plea for social understanding and acceptance is perpetually put forward throughout the film dialogues (Oradol 2008: 131). *Sat Pralat* (2004), on the contrary, moves the audience with its simplicity of its narrative of a love story between two ordinary men and also leaves behind questions and puzzles which the audience may need to deconstruct its hidden messages throughout the story. It is, therefore, the understanding of Thais' cultural sensitivity that is central for Thai gay men's negotiation for their public appropriation.

Already Here! Place and Position of Non-Normative Gender and Sexual Identities in Thailand

Although *Satri Lek* and *Sat Pralat* can be crudely categorised as *kathoe*y and/or *gay* themed films, these two films undoubtedly differ in many ways. While *Satri Lek* main characters consist of mainly *kathoe*y-identified or effeminate *gay*-identified characters, the two main protagonists in 'Sat Pralat are portrayed as ordinary men who simply fell for each other. Both films, however, seemingly share common goals, aiming to break the silence about the existence of non-normative gender and sexual minorities, and also to challenge social prejudices against these sexual minorities.

The opening scene for each main character both in *Satri Lek* (2000) and *Sat Pralat* (2004) not only affirms the social existence of these sexual non-conformists' and their roles in their wider communities, but also informs viewers how *kathoey* and/or gay men cope with their day-to-day social prejudices.

Satri Lek begins with the introduction of Mon (มน). Mon challenged the homophobic practice of the volleyball club he was auditioning for a place in the team. He asked the coach if the reason he was not chosen was because he was *kathoey*.

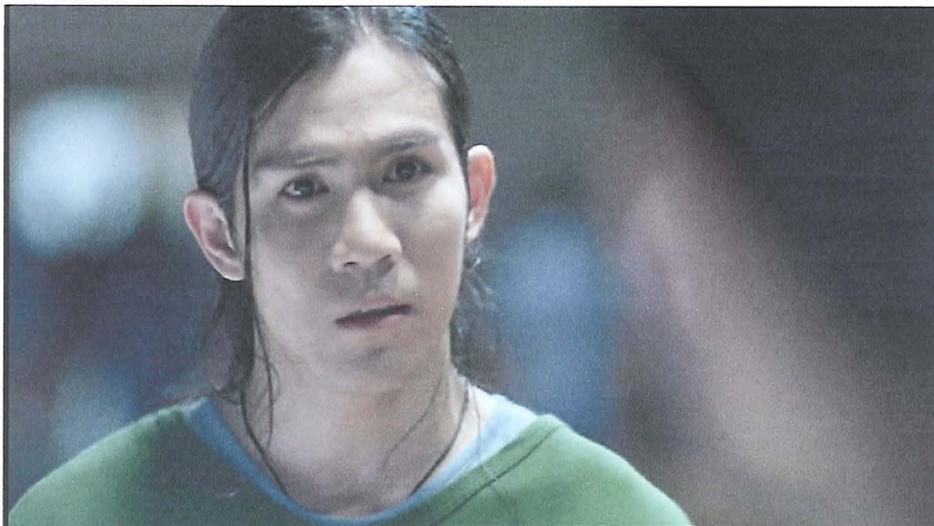


Figure 11 Mon frankly asked the coach if the reason he was rejected because he was *kathoey*. *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkongthun 2000), courtesy of Tai Entertainment

Chung (จุง), the most cheerful and optimistic person in the group, was selling sweet steam rice cakes (*khaokriap pakmo* - ข้าวเกรียบปากหม้อ) in a market in Lampang¹⁴⁹. After having been insulted about his transgenderism by the clam omelet (*hoithot* - หอยทอด) vendor at the market, Chung was not afraid to retaliate instantly.

¹⁴⁹ Lampang is a small provincial town in the north of Thailand, famous for horse drawn carriage taxis.



Figure 12 Chung is arguing with the clam omelette vendor at the market in Lumpang. *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkongthun 2000), courtesy of Tai Entertainment

The hyper-feminine mannerisms of Nong (โหนง) contradicted his masculine physique. His skills in volleyball outshone his fellow army conscripts, who had no problem hanging out with him.



Figure 13 Nong is playing volleyball with his fellow army conscripts, *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkongthun 2000), courtesy of Tai Entertainment

Pia (เป็๋ย), the only post-operational *kathoey* in the group, enjoyed working in a cabaret show in Phatthaya¹⁵⁰ and also lived with her on and off boyfriend.

¹⁵⁰ Phatthaya is a seaside resort town in Chonburi, a province in the Eastern region. Phatthaya is internationally well-known not for the beaches but rather for its massive scales of sex industries.



Figure 14 Pia was performing on the stage, *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkongthun 2000), courtesy of Tai Entertainment

Wit (วิท), the only masculine identified gay male of the group, was surprised by the unannounced visit of his *Satri Lek* friends at his engagement ceremony. The team, nevertheless, did their best to pass as normative heterosexuals as they did not want to expose Wit's homosexuality in front of his parents.



Figure 15 Wit (right) was surprised by the unexpected visit of his friends. *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkongthun 2000), courtesy of Tai Entertainment

The introduction of *Satri Lek* characters provides diverse accounts of how the social tolerance and discrimination towards sexual minorities are differently

exercised across various sections of Thai society. The discrimination that Mon and Chung experienced at the beginning of the film is best recapitulated by Jackson and Sullivan (1999: 11) that:

“apart from shaming aberrant individuals by naming their deviance, Thai sanctions against both homosexuality and transgenderism are markedly non-interventionist. Thai law does not criminalize homosexuality and neither the state nor Buddhism, which is extensively practiced, attempts to enforce compliance to heterosexual norms.”

Unlike the dramatic introduction of *Satri Lek* characters, *Sat Pralat* introduces its two main characters in two non-linear events. Keng (เก่ง) and his fellow national park rangers found a male body, apparently killed by a tiger in a national park whereas Tong (ต๋อง), the other protagonist of the film, a part-time worker at a local ice factory, was walking naked in the park. The two unrelated scenes introducing the two protagonists of *Sat Pralat* can be said to epitomise the lives of ordinary *chairakchai* (ชายรักชาย - lit. men (who) love men) in Thai society. That is, the stories of these two men can be found anywhere in the society as they represent lives of ordinary men who happen to fall in love with each other.

Oradol (2008: 191) argues that *Sat Pralat's* avant-garde narrative technique heavily employs the symbolic representation of ‘liminality.’ Based on Victor Turner’s concept, Oradol asserts that the two protagonists of *Sat Pralat* are ‘liminal people’ as “they do not belong to any clear-cut sexual categories, or the category is not yet classified at all.” (ibid., p. 192) In other words, Apichatpong, the director, seems not to define the two protagonists’ sexuality that they are heterosexuals, homosexuals, or bisexuals but rather leaves this issue unresolved as if they are not belonged to the conventional society. Contrary to

Satri lek, the non-normative gender expressions and sexuality of their main protagonists are highlighted the first thing in the film as this stereotypical representation of *kathoey* and gay men is not uncommon in Thai society.

Fake Copy? Positioning Non-Normative Gender and Sexual Identities in Thai Contexts

Throughout the film, *Satri Lek* characters suffered a series of verbal abuse on the daily basis. Pointed out by Jackson and Sullivan (op. cit.), the verbal abuse form parts of Thailand's social non-interventionist sanctions, enforced rigorously upon *kathoey* and/or gay men whose non-normative gendered cloths and mannerisms violate the social norms of appropriate gender expressions. Thanks to the lack of history of prosecutions against same-sex relations in Thailand, the exaggeration of feminine imitation, performed by Chung and Nong is likely to receive just a stern look from the general public.

Non-conventional sexual minorities often feel the social pressure to maintain their heteronormative image in public even when they already conform to the gender normative values. In *Satri Lek*, Wit is portrayed as a gender normative gay guy. Brought up in a Chinese tradition¹⁵¹, Wit faced the difficulty of 'coming out' to his parents who had expected him to get married and have children. His public presentation of normative gender expressions managed to fool his parents that he was a 'real' man but behind closed doors with his *Satri Lek* team members, Wit is seen to have embraced his effeminate side. Pia is a transsexual. Because she had her sexual re-assignment operation for many years, her feminine mannerisms do not contradict her surgically constructed

¹⁵¹ Postulated by Jackson and Sullivan (ibid.), homosexuality and transgenderism are less tolerated among Thai middle and upper class family, particularly those of Chinese ancestry.

female body. Punters who frequent Pia's cabaret show are often amazed by her convincing womanhood. The presentation of normative gender expressions of both Wit and Pia shielded them from social criticisms over Wit's homosexual inclination and Pia's gender transgression, respectively.

Nevertheless, the film also seems to suggest that the more Wit and Pia attempt to pass as sexual and gender normative, they unwittingly reiterate the discursive heterosexist norms under which they are deemed as 'fake' copies.

Despite his best effort to pass as a straight man in the public space, Wit can only be *chai thiam* (ชายเทียม) or 'fake man' as long as he is still attracted to men. His masculine status is culturally relegated to that of women who are traditionally seen as weaker in sex/gender terms to men.

Pia's surgically constructed female body and her convincing feminine mannerisms did not seem to give her a peace of mind. She lived in a constant fear that her boyfriend would one day choose a 'real' woman over her because she realised that being a 'real woman' in Thailand is rigidly defined by having only biological female genitalia, not the constructed or artificial¹⁵² ones. The fact that Pia was very popular with the audiences who came to see her cabaret performances also suggests that they admired her not because of her talented lip-sync performances but rather her convincing mimicry of femininity. Her medically constructed female body is often popularly regarded as *ying thiam* (หญิงเทียม – lit. fake/artificial woman). In fact, she does not become a complete woman as she has hoped for.

¹⁵² Artificial can be crudely translated as *thiam* (เทียม) in Thai.

The notion of 'fake copy' has also been explored in Peggy Phelan's book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Phelan (1993: 93-111) stresses that the ultimate goal of mimicry is to pass as 'real' without any notice or to pass as unmarked. According to Phelan (ibid.), to be unmarked, individuals are required to reiterate the prevailing and accepted norms of what they consider as 'the original'. Although 'reiterate' literally means to repeat again, the morphological analysis of 'reiterate' shows that re- means to repeat and -ite- means to change; thereby 'reiterate' means to repeat and change. As a result, although Pia determines to achieve the point of being unmasked, she only reproduces the reflection of prevailing dominant norms, which she tries to pass. In other words, Pia's cabaret performances highlight the fact that Pia is imitating the social expectation of femininity, perceived to be 'original.'

Phelan also uses the examples from Livingston's film 'Paris is Burning' (1991). She argues that the film illustrates the effort of a group of homosexuals in New York to achieve the unmarked position. This group held drag competitions. The competitors were judged from the realness they could reproduce. Competitors contested in various categories ranging from socially normative characters such as business executives, Ivy League college students and so forth, to marked feminine characters such as high drag, butch queen and so on. The competitors won the prizes for their best imitation, not for being 'real.' Phelan asserts that:

"The walks both perpetuate the aspiration to be real and mark again the artifice that makes it, always impossible to be real (and not only for the walkers)." (ibid., p. 103)

As mimicry is the strategy involving the relation between the dominant and the subordinate and the discourse of power, mimicry involves the notion of being the 'original' or being 'real' and being a 'fake' or being a 'copy' as the binary opposition is often believed to be 'natural.' As long as the binary concept continues, the reproduction of the bi-polarised opposition would still persist. Anyone attempting to pass would not be able to become the 'real' but could only become the convincing imitation.

While visiting Pia at the backstage, Mon mentioned how Pia had transformed into such a beautiful woman that he and other friends (Jung and Nong) could not instantly recognise when she was performing on the stage. They also commented that Pia looked like 'Piyanut,' the first runner-up of 1988 Miss Thailand. Pia unwittingly replied to the compliment that she was not surprised by the comment since both Piyanut and herself were clients of the same (plastic surgery) clinic. It was her own acknowledgement that her beauty derived from surgeons' knives, to a degree, epitomises the status of Pia in the Thai sex/gender system that she is only a convincing copy or *saopraphetsong* (สาวประเภทสอง – lit. second type of woman). That is, no matter how much she looks like a 'real' woman, she is 'just' a copy version of a woman.

The term 'second type of woman', thus, is not the recognition of traditional *kathoey* role in Thai society as suggested by Jackson (1995: 195) that *kathoey* traditionally provided sexual outlets for unmarried young Thai men as pre-marital sex was traditionally tabooed. On the contrary, Pia's status of being *saopraphetsong* highlights what can be constituted as 'real' in the Thai sex/gender system. This rigid definition of 'real' womanhood has arguably

brought the insecurity about who they are not only to Pia but also to Chung and Nong. Although Pia completed the sexual reassignment and she is a physical female, she is still considered a 'fake' woman or a second type of woman in Thai contexts.

For Nong and Chung whose gender transformation is still incomplete, their exaggeration of feminine mannerisms can be said to highlight, possibly analogous to what Butler (1990) terms, the phantasmatic invention of gender identities, exposing the fact that there was no true original and the discursive gender identities are socially constructed. The incomplete copy of femininity might make Nong and Chung feel insecure as their parody of hegemonic feminine identity entertained people who came to watch them playing volleyball but at the same time also triggered some people's intolerance of their breach of gender appropriate norms

Satri Lek also suggests that the normative masculine gay men are also performing a gender parody as Chung described 'closet' gay guys who are passing as straight men to secure places in the volleyball team as *kekchong* (เก็ทชง), equivalent to 'straight acting' in English gay slang. Chung says to Mon that:

"You ought to know by now those stupid sport clubs will never let queens on the team. At most they'll take *kekchong*. That's all."

Kekchong (เก็ทชง) was translated for English speaking viewers as 'fags posing as real men' in the film subtitle. *Kek* (เก็ท) literally means to act or to pose whereas *chong* (ชง) means to dissolve something in water, such as coffee powder, tea powder, milk powder and so on. *Kekchong* as Chung has used it

refers to gay men's masquerade of being straight men. It is worth noting that *kekchong* is commonly adopted by Thai effeminate gay men or *kathoey* to satirically or derogatorily describe the act of 'passing' or 'covering'¹⁵³ as straight men by closeted gay men or butch gay men. As I have explored in Chapter three, there is no doubt that non-normative gender expressions of gay men and *kathoey* would often draw social criticisms in Thailand. By calling normative masculine gay men *kekchong*, effeminate gay men and *kathoey* take pride in their non-normative gender expressions. For them, they are being true to their essential feminine core of their sex/gender identity as they are sexually attracted to 'real' men. Within this mindset, the *Satri Lek* team members are sceptical about the normative gender expressions of these *kekchong*. Their normative masculinity would never be considered as 'real' but would be comparatively reduced to 'fake' masculinity because of their sexual attraction to normative masculine men.

Challenging the Generalised Effeminacy of Gay men

Although *Satri Lek* has brought the public attention to the social injustice and discrimination against non-normative gender and sexual identities in Thailand, *Satri Lek* characters can be said to reproduce the social stereotypes of *kathoey* and gay men that they are indiscriminately effeminate. This view is also shared by one of my research participants, Tam (ตั้ม). Tam reflects in the interview about the well-known effeminacy of gay men in our faculty that:

Tam: "oh, everyone is effeminate (*sao* - สาว)..."

Jaray: "Your definition of effeminacy, what is it?"

Tam: "Um...you must have feminine mannerisms, sort of screamy..."

Jaray: "Do you include the fixed passive sexual role?"

¹⁵³ On the issue of 'covering,' see Yoshino (2006).

Tam: "But, in my opinion if you have feminine mannerisms, you're supposed to..."

Jaray: "Is it because 'gay' is a neutral word?"

Tam: "Yes."

Jaray: "But what do you mean, then? I'm confused with the word *gay* you used at the beginning."

Tam: "I include everyone. But when I mentioned about people in our group, most of them are effeminate. For me, everyone has feminine mannerisms. Asked if we are different from (gay) people in the Faculty of engineering, they are gays but in the closet, aren't they? They don't express feminine mannerisms."

Jaray: "Um...you're right. But why's it that only in our faculty gay people dare to express their femininity?"

Tam: "It might have been...what we call... our faculty's stereotype...It was as if the Faculty's emblem, sewed at the front of our uniform."

Jaray: "Able to express without being disgusted..."

Tam: "Yes, I think it must be that way...The fact that many of us are women and a handful are men. And the men we have...people know that if compared with other faculties, where there are more male students. They thus have to keep their masculinity at their best."

Unlike *Satri Lek*, the main protagonists of *Sat Pralat* can be described as gender normative men. *Sat Pralat* locates the love story of Keng and Tong in a rural area where human beings and nature live side by side.

Sat Pralat begins with the introduction of its two protagonists: Keng and Tong. Keng is a national park ranger. In this introductory scene, he was posing for pictures with a corpse he and his fellow rangers had stumbled on near the border between the park and the nearby village. The film, next introduces Tong who was roaming the forest without any cloths on¹⁵⁴.

Apichatpong explains that the military uniform represents "physical and mental strength in homosexual circumstances." (*The Nation* May 18, 2004) With the protection of his uniform, Keng's public masculinity remains intact from any

¹⁵⁴ It can also be argued that this naked character is not Tong because to he was seen walking from the distance so that his facial features are not clear. However, the viewers would recognise this naked character again in the second part of the film.

suspicious and criticisms from the public eye. The nakedness of Tong implies the vulnerability of homosexuality in the heteronormative public. The nakedness, however, underlines Tong's acceptance of his homosexuality. The nakedness and homosexuality in this regard are compared to human primal instincts, needed to be controlled or wrapped up under the heteronormative norms as the quotation at the beginning of the film says,

“All of us are by nature wild beasts. Our duty as a human being is to become like trainer who keep their animals in check and even teach them to perform tasks alien to their bestiality.”
Wide Beasts by Ton Nakajima (1909-1942)

The advantage of wearing the military uniform, Keng has seemingly enjoyed is re-emphasised when Tong, Keng's lover, wore a soldier uniform to look for a job at the town centre. Tong confessed that he had expected his uniform to land him a job. Tong eventually came clean with the shop assistant at the shoe shop that:

“I'm not a soldier. I'm looking for a job. I hope the uniform will get me a good work”



Figure 16 Tong was talking with a shop assistant in a shoe shop at the town centre.
Sat Pralat (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders Films

The military uniform in the film *Sat Pralat* is thus recognised for not only social benefits, attached to it, but also the symbolic meaning, stated by the director. The sexualised label *gay* is socially imbued with negative impressions since its first introduction into Thai public discourses in 1965. Tong's soldier uniform can be said to metaphorically challenge the popular and generalised image of effeminate or 'camp' gay men, often reiterated by the mainstream press. As the image of a soldier is traditionally associated with 'machismo' masculinity, the soldier uniform, worn by Tong may be said to suggest the attempt by normative gender male homosexuals to re-masculinise their social image that they are not 'camp.' Therefore, Tong's soldier uniform can not only ward off social suspicions of his homosexuality but also suggest that he is not effeminate.

Throughout the film, neither the word *kathoey* nor *gay* is mentioned. This might be Apichatpong's suggestion that the loaded terms of *kathoey* and *gay* are socially constructed and there are normative masculine identified men like Keng and Tong who have same-sex relations but they do not think that it is necessary to identify themselves with those terms.¹⁵⁵

Deviant Desires in the Public Space

Since 1965, the visibility of gay men in the public space has noticeably increased. Homosexuality is often crudely translated as misgendered or *biangben thangphet* (เบี้ยงเบนทางเพศ). It can be argued that since the first introduction of *gay* identity after the murder of Darrell Berrigan in 1965, the popular misperception of homosexuality remains pervasively unchanged. The

¹⁵⁵ See Ordol's discussion of liminality in her PhD thesis (2008: 191-193).

Thai mainstream media continue to reiterate and sensationalise negative images of non-normative gender and sexual practices. Derogatory terms for homosexuality such as *tui* (ตุ้ย - slang - sodomy; buggery, *Khaosot* (ข่าวสด) November 25, 2003), *wittathan* (วิถถาร - pervert, *Khaosot* November 14, 2003) *thuadam* (ถั่วดำ - lit. black beans; slang - sodomy; buggery, *Dailynews* November 14, 2003), *tut* (ตุ๊ด - slang - faggot, *Khomchatluek* (คมชัดลึก) July 15, 2005) can be commonly found on headlines of Thai language newspapers. Thai conservative academics still define 'homosexuality' as a 'social problem' (*panha sangkhom* – ปัญหาสังคม, *Khomchatluek* October 10, 2003).

The notion that homosexuality is considered 'abnormal' is subtly presented by Apichatpong throughout the film *Sat Pralat*. Apichatpong's *Sat Pralat* illustrates physical and virtual interactions of Thai homosexuals in the public space. In half of the film, the characters, to some extent, have a sort of relationship with the space, 'the jungle' (*Pa* - ป่า), a free place with access to all, but also a place where wild beasts roam and live. The jungle is also metaphorically depicted in the film as the space where Keng and Tong could explore their feelings and sexuality without any restrictions from heteronormative conventions.

But, if the jungle is not a physical one but rather a virtual space, located not in the rural area as shown in the film but in the city, this jungle in the city (*pa nai mueang* - ป่าในเมือง) can metaphorically become the name of a gay sauna in Bangkok where many gay men appropriate this public space for private

matters¹⁵⁶. In the film, the jungle mystery also brought out ‘primal instincts’ (homosexuality) of both protagonists in the second part of the film. Despite its official status as a national park, a shared ‘public’ space, the jungle in this film represents a ‘private’ space where non-conformist sexuality is allowed to exist without social sanctions. This point is emphasised when Keng took Tong for a dinner at a seafood restaurant, called *Chan Mueang*, (lit. suburb). The singer at the restaurant recognised Keng from the crowd. She invited Tong to join her on the stage to sing the song, called *Wana Sawat* (วนาสวาท lit. love jungle) to honour Keng (who is a national park ranger). The song lyric suggests the opportunity the jungle has opened up for two people to start their relationship. Comparatively, Keng would not have met Tong who lived near the park border if he had not been a park ranger and vice versa. The song describes the role of ‘the jungle’ in the couple’s relationship that:

“Our hearts feel the same. Our spirits are related, because of the jungle. We will love and be loyal to each other. We will weave our spirits together in this jungle.”



Figure 17 Tong and the singer at the seafood restaurant were singing *Wana Sawat*. *Sat Pralat* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders Films

¹⁵⁶ See Sunt Suwatharapinun’s PhD thesis (2005 - สันต์ สุวัชรภินันท์) titled *Spaces of Male Prostitution: Tactics, Performativity and Gay Identities in Streets, Go-Go Bars and Magazines in Contemporary Bangkok, Thailand*, regarding the appropriation of public spaces in Bangkok by male sex workers.

In this regard, 'the jungle' can be metaphorically compared to Silom area, dubbed as the centre of gay lifestyles in Bangkok. Argued by Pichet Suypan (พิเชษฐ สายพันธ์ - 2003: 82), Silom is the place where the *gay* identity can be materialised as Silom and its neighbouring Suriwong have been historically and socially associated with the intense commercialised businesses exclusively for gay people's socialisation. The jungle is also a place where *Sat Pralat* (สัตว์ประหลาด - lit. monster) live. *Sat Pralat* here is a metaphor for homosexuals who live at the edge of the society since compared to their heterosexual counterparts, homosexuals, often condemned as 'social deviants.' Similar to what Pia in *Satri Lek*, she referred to herself and her teammates as 'social orphans'. These social outcasts are not socially accepted to occupy the centre of heteronormative discourses despite the fact that homosexuality is not legally criminalised in the Thai society. This discrepancy between being tolerated and not accepted has arguably pushed homosexuals to articulate their own underground culture (Nidhi Auesriwongse 2002: 5).

Sat Pralat also presents the notion of weirdness, queer, someone who is an outcast of his or her society. In this sense, gay men and *kathoey* can be metaphorically referred to as *Sat Pralat* (สัตว์ประหลาด) or monsters of the heteronormative society. Pan Bunnak (ปาน บุนนาค) describes his experience of living at the peripheral edge of the society during the 1950s in a gay magazine, *Neon* that:

"At that time, people who are *kathoey* felt like we were indeed *monsters*. They (straight people) stared at us because *kathoey* had to drag and for some people they couldn't become women. Some people looked very much like footballers and when they put the make-up on...imagine! And the society didn't accept...at all. Wherever they went, they were rejected. But there were some places that they could go...the biggest place

kathoey socialised with each other was at Sanam Luang.¹⁵⁷ It was behind the statue of the mother earth, in the position of squeezing the water out of her hair¹⁵⁸. Most of them are adult *kathoey*. Younger ones didn't go there. Younger ones went to Makkhawan Bridge area.' (*Neon*, Issue 28, 1985, p. 75-88, also cited in Suypan 2003: 55)

Unlike *Sat Pralat*, *Satri Lek* story took place in the urban area where homosexuals are more visible compared to the countryside contexts in *Sat Pralat* where people with homosexual orientation are less likely to identify themselves with the Western style *gay* identity. The anonymity of the city or the urban space can be argued to offer an opportunity and space for gay men and *kathoey* to explore their sexuality and to create their networks. But, being relatively free from family sanctions does not mean that gay men and *kathoey* in the city can disengage themselves from the social control. On the contrary, the city is the place where cultural restrictions on homosexuals can be highly visible. The city, as the political centre, is the place where power relations upon individuals are often strictly enacted. During the years 2002 and 2003, the Thaksin government revived the vice squads who patrolled night entertainment businesses in order to eradicate the social problems such as drugs, prostitution and underage drinking. Unfortunately, gay meeting places such as gay bars, gay clubs, gay saunas and so forth were included in the watch list of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Every time the vice squads raided these gay venues, the exposure of the lurid and underground lives of gay men often galvanised the press' sensational coverage. Two talk show programmes, concerning the social order of gay saunas and

¹⁵⁷ Sanam Luang (lit. the royal field) is a huge open public space in the inner Bangkok, often reserved for royal festivities. Sanam Luang is also used by homeless people to sleep at night and frequented by low-class female and *kathoey* prostitutes.

¹⁵⁸ The mother earth (พระแม่ธรณี – *Phramae Thorani*) is the deity figure in Hindu and Buddhist mythologies. In the Buddhist Mythology, the mother earth is praised for her invaluable action that she stopped the devil (มาร- *Mara*) and his army from tempting the Buddha away from reaching his enlightenment. She was described as squeezing out a torrent of water out of her hair and this eventually drowned the *Mara's* army.

teenage homosexual behaviours were subsequently broadcasted on Thai Channel 9 on 19 September 2003 and 10 October 2003, respectively. The city, as the cultural centre, is the place where the *Satri Lek* team's winning of the national volleyball championship has brought the media and public attention to non-normative gender and sexual identities. The city is also a place where the *Satri Lek* team has faced successive discrimination to disqualify them from the championship competition.

In short, 'the jungle' and 'the city' can be metaphorically interpreted as two parallel and sometimes interchangeable locales in which socially sexual deviants exist. However, non-normative gender and sexual beings are also expected to modify their 'real' personalities upon entering the public arena, dominated by heteronormative discourses. Within the boundary of 'the jungle,' the 'primitive' or primal instincts, deemed by mainstream discourses is allowed to freely manifest without discriminations and criticisms as 'the jungle' arguably provides the anonymity to individuals whose past and present is not yet ready to be known by the public and/or their immediate circles. 'The Jungle' guarantees the serenity and space for homosexuals to explore their sexuality. Similar to 'the jungle,' 'the city' offers a safe heaven for many homosexuals to take refuge from their tight-knit communities in the rural area. In 'the city,' these social deviants are also presented with opportunities to be economically independent from their families. However, in 'the city,' as an 'open or public' space between strangers (Bech 1999: 215 - 241), sexual minorities have to learn to share the space with hetero-majorities. In this regard, the construction of the artificial 'jungle' by homosexuals within 'the city' (gay veneus) can be said to provide the space where homosexuals can temporarily escape the direct scrutiny of the heteronormative

norms. 'The City' is also the place for homosexuals to challenge the social misperception as the *Satri Lek* team had proved that their volleyball skills were no lesser than the macho heterosexual players.

Anti-Homosexual Sentiments V.S. Social Tolerance of Homosexuality

Satri Lek depicts day-to-day social prejudices and discrimination against non-normative gender and sexual conformists. Although gay bashing is not common in Thailand, homosexuals are likely to experience indirect anti-homosexual sentiments such as gossiping, withholding approval, or sometimes explicit verbal abuse. Nong, for example, was called 'freak' while promenading in a market in Nakhon Sawan¹⁵⁹. Nong's overt feminine mannerisms, contradicting his masculine body, might possibly draw criticisms from the homophobic passers-by. At the market, Nong came across a toy tiara for girls. He asked the vendor if he could try it on but the vendor looked at him with disapproval and told him to leave at once. Mon, another *Satri Lek* team member, suspected that the reason he had not been selected for the male volleyball team in Bangkok was because of his effeminacy, which does not comply with the 'proper' image of normative male volleyball players.

¹⁵⁹ Nakhon Sawan (นครสวรรค์) is the a province in the northern of Thailand's central region (ภาคกลาง - Phak Klang).



Figure 18 Nong's request to put on the toy tiara was fiercely refused by the shopkeeper. *Satri Lek* (Yongyooth Thongkonthun 2000), courtesy of Tai Entertainment

Unlike *Satri Lek* team members, Tong and Keng, the two protagonists of *Sat Pralat*, did not experience any forms of social sanctions against their relationship. The de facto tolerance of homosexual relations can vary across social sections. For Keng and Tong, their normative masculine expressions might possibly explain how their relationship was tolerated, particularly by Tong's family. Although non-normative sexuality is not accepted in Thailand, sex and sexuality is culturally regarded as 'private.' Therefore, as long as Keng and Tong could keep their same-sex relations out of the public knowledge, their relationship would not challenge the heteronormative norms nor jeopardise the social image (*phaplak*) of their respective families. This might explain the more or less acceptance of Tong's mother when she found Keng's love note for Tong in Tong's trousers. Tong's mother did not seem to be bothered about her son's same-sex relations. On the contrary, she gave back the note to Tong. But, she did not directly state whether she would approve the relationship.



Figure 19 Tong's mother is washing Tong's cloths.
Sat Pralat (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders Films



Figure 20 Tong's mother discovers a note in Tong's trousers.
Sat Pralat (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders

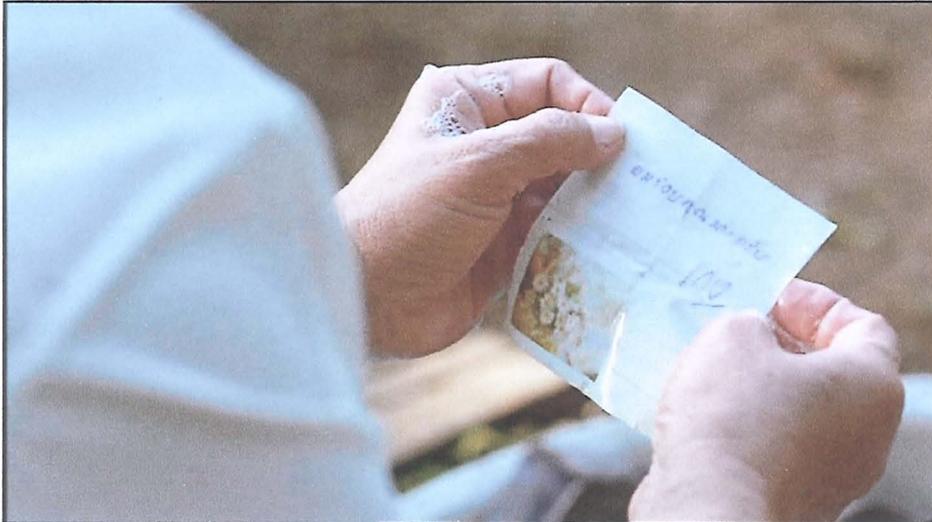


Figure 20 Tong's mother is reading the note. The note says, "I like you a lot, Keng."
Sat Pralat (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders Films



Figure 21 Tong's mother looks around and puts the note in her bra,
Sat Pralat (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy to Anna Sanders Films



Figure 22 Tong's mother returns the note to Tong.
Sat Pralat (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy for Anna Sanders Films

The tolerance of sons' homosexuality varies from family to family. While Tong's mother did nothing to stop Tong's relationship with Keng, Wit's parents were mortified to learn that their only son was gay from watching him playing with his *Satri Lek* teammates on the television. They eventually disinherited him when Wit refused to return home and to disassociate from the *Satri Lek* team.

Noted by Jackson (1989: 45 - 47), the ethnic and economic divisions are decisive factors of Thais' tolerance of homosexuality. He suggests that ethnic Thai-Chinese and upper class ethnic Thai families tend to have less tolerance of their sons' homosexuality in comparison to lower class ethnic Thai families (ibid., p. 50). The less tolerance of homosexuality of Wit's family in comparison to Tong's mother's more relaxed position towards same-sex relations is, to some extent, explicable on grounds of these ethnic and economic differences. Unlike Wit, Tong is less likely to feel pressures "to perform, to succeed and to uphold the family name" (ibid.).

Chira, one of the research participants, is also from the family of Chinese ancestry, but he finds no rejection from his mother when he told her that he was attracted to men. Chira, however, expresses his doubt over his mother's acceptance of his homosexuality that:

"I think that my mother might think that I was joking so she said nothing about it but in fact I wasn't joking. I think she might have thought that I would change since they, Thai senior people, or Thai people don't know what gay is. However, they accept gay. I think that the reason they accept gay because the image of gay in Thai society is presented as 'funny,' 'talkative' and so on. I think they accept gay on those points, no problem."

Despite having the similar family background as Wit, Chira is not disinherited by his family. Chira suggests that the discursive images of Thai gay

men, often reproduced in the public discourses are not totally negative. According to Chira, the social perception of *gay* as being ‘funny’ and ‘talkative’ contributes to the tolerance and probable acceptance of homosexuality in Thai society.

Having explored in Chapter four, it can be also contended that Buddhist teachings of non-confrontation and impertinence have influentially lessened the social hostilities towards *kathoey* and gay people. As being born with homosexual desires is seen as the punishment from adulterous conducts in previous lives, these sexual minorities should deserve the compassion and sympathy, not hatred nor prosecution. (Totman 2003: 66-67, Jackson 1995b: 58) Gender and sexuality in Buddhism are seen as fluid and impertinent, subject to constant changes and variances depending on individuals’ accumulated merit from previous and present lives. That is, not only *kathoey* or gay men, but also straight people can encounter the repercussions from their bad kamma at some points in their lives.

Negotiating Acceptable Gayness: Homosexuality and the Appropriation of the Public Space

Despite the lack of social and religious prosecutions against homosexuality in Thailand, homosexuality is still regarded as ‘improper’ or ‘inappropriate’ behaviour. Thai homosexuals are often subjected to indirect restraints to conform to the heteronormative conventions thanks to the cultural sensitivity that requires individuals to maintain the positive image (*phaplak* - ภาพลักษณ์) of having normative gender expressions and affirming to compulsory heterosexual identities; otherwise, they risk losing ‘face’ not only theirs but also

their respective families. With these restrictions in place, it is unlikely that Thai homosexuals would have aggressively challenged the established institution of heteronormativity. The study of both films: *Satri Lek* and *Sat Pralat*, respectively highlights the negotiation for social inclusion my research participants as well as Thai gay public figures, quoted above, have more or less agreed upon.

To establish the social tolerance and subsequent acceptance, it seems essential for Thai gay men and *kathoey* to know how the rule of *kalathesa* (time and place) operates. That is, the tactics employed by Western LGBT movements might not be working in Thai contexts. Chira is cautious about gay rights movements in Thailand. He says:

“Thai people accept gay men to a certain level. If we demanded too much like the *farang* (Westerners), they (Thai heterosexual people) would dislike (*mansai* - หมั่นไส้) us.”

Chira also acknowledges that *kalathesa* would importantly contribute to the negotiation for the social acceptance of homosexuality. He puts it:

“I think for Thai gays, we don’t need to come out to demand gay rights as in Western countries. The most important thing is to know how and when to behave according to *kalathesa* (time and place).”

Although Rot is certain that his colleagues accept that he is gay, he concedes that he, too, has to conform to the heteronormative values on certain occasions. Rot says:

“I think everyone can accept it (that I’m gay). I dress normally like everybody else. My clothes are rather polite and I think everyone seems fine with them. They treat me nicely. There might be some occasions that I have to take extra care when visitors are coming. On those occasions, I’d put on...and wrap up my mannerisms since they (non-normative gender expressions) affect the reputation of the university. ”

For Phat, he has been living with his boyfriend for almost 8 years. His relationship with his boyfriend, Alex is going well and his family members know Alex and treat him as a family member. Similar to Chira and Rot, Phat also shares similar views about the restricted degree of social tolerance of homosexuality in Thailand. Phat comments on this issue that:

“So far I think I’m still in the closet. I don’t think there’s something wrong with my relationship. I just want my relationship to be recognised by the society. Kissing and holding hands in the public...in certain places, for example, in the temple, offices are still inappropriate. Not in the gay bars, of course not! We should know *kalathesa*. I think *kalathesa* is important because it puts things in the right place. It makes things in order. It shows that we care for others as members of the society.”

Khen married his German partner in Munich in 2008 but he is planning to relocate back to Bangkok, but his same-sex civil partnership, registered in Germany, is not legally recognised by Thai laws. Khen expresses his views regarding the social tolerance of homosexuality and the cultural distinction that he sees it is still regarded as inappropriate for gay male couples to express their affection in public in our conversation as follows:

“Jaray: Today when we were walking in Munich city centre, we saw a male couple walked and held hands in the streets. Do you think it’ll be possible to see the same thing for Thailand?”

Khen: I think it’s possible. Today gay people have become increasingly visible day after day. But, I don’t mean that...it’s difficult to say...It’s very difficult to do this (holding hands affectionately) in public. Even straight couples don’t kiss in public. *Farang* (Westerners) people may think it’s o.k. to express their love in public. Although Thai people consider heterosexuality normal, they still condemn *farang* who kiss in public in Thailand. I heard some people said, ‘Look! They kissed! How dare they!’

Jaray: But, it’s o.k. just holding hands.

Khen: Yes, it’s o.k. for holding hands. People might think that this couple is cute.

Jaray: But, I've never seen a male couple hold hands¹⁶⁰.

Khen: There is no (gay) male couple (who hold hands in Thai public), but there might be in the future. Who knows? When it's become more common...But, we have to wait and see since our culture is different. Farang regard this kind of things as their privacy. As long as it doesn't violate the laws, they don't mind. But, for Thais, there are moral laws upholding or suppressing... There might be (some gay couples holding hands in Thailand in the future) but (I think it's) very difficult.

Jaray: Is it because it's not between men and women so it's unnatural for Thais?

Khen: It's the morality...no, it's our old traditions. We feel that men and men... *lenphuean*.

Jaray: *lensawat*

Khen: Yes, *lensawat* is abnormal. And for Thais, two men hold hands or being lovers is unnatural. The contemporary 'modern' Thais might better accept and understand (homosexuality) in the next 10 years. I think that Thai society doesn't accept homosexuality for now.

Jaray: If one day you live in Thailand and have a boyfriend, what would you do? Would you think that having a boyfriend is your privacy and won't be open about it?

Khen: If the society is open at that time, I'll probably do it. But, speaking from the present social point of view that we (Thais) don't excessively kiss in public or holding hands...it depends on the place as well. I think holding hands is quite 'normal' but we don't excessively kiss even straight people wouldn't do it. Thus, expressing one's affection in public is quite difficult. In the future, when I'm getting older, I might not do this kind of bodily expressions anymore. I don't mean I want to keep it secretly, but if the society is ready for it, I'll do it. If I can't do it, I don't have any feelings that it's 'abnormal' not to do it."

According to Jackson (1995a: 42), the concern of being disliked because of their 'inappropriate' behaviour is much more than an embarrassment for *kathoey* and gay men. Once a *kathoey* or gay man becomes socially disliked, their non-normative gender and sexual practices are likely to draw criticisms from

¹⁶⁰ Holding hands in this conversation refers to an act of romantic couples who hold each other hand for a period of time in the public. Although Thai male friends can be seen holding hands in the public (for a short period of time), they do not hold hands passionately and romantically like heterosexual couples who tend to linger the act of holding hands to express their mutual affection in public.

the public. Having discussed in Chapter three and five, most research participants felt that they were disliked when they were young but when they have proved that they are doing well either in their studies or their subsequent professions, their families, friends and colleagues accept them for who they are. However, this acceptance does not mean that their homosexuality is accepted, but rather their self-discipline and determination is being admired.

It is, therefore, crucial for people with non-conformist sexuality to prove that they are worthy of being accepted. The fact that the *Satri Lek* team had won the volleyball championship was the self-evidence that their determination and their volleyball skills have not been compromised by their non-normative gender and sexual expressions. Not only did *Satri Lek* team prove themselves to be worthy of the championship but also “their charisma captivated audiences, both in the gymnasium and on live TV broadcasts of their matches,” asserts (Rakkit Rattachumpoth (1999: xiv).

However, for most gay men I have interviewed, they appear to remain vigilant to maintain the social tolerance of their homosexuality despite having proved that they could succeed in both university education and professional advances. Chira is cautious to participate in the gay rights rally in Thailand if it ever happens. Chira says:

“We’d better not make a move. We can benefit from the present system. It is unnecessary to take risk.”

The benefit of the present system, according to Chira, is the ambiguity about homosexual status in Thai society. That is, Thai gay men are spared from the social intervention into their homosexuality due to the unspeakable status of

sex and sexuality in Thai society. Since sex and sexuality are often regarded as 'private,' 'impolite' and 'shameful' as I have explored in Chapter four and five, Thai gay men can avoid social criticisms of their homosexuality as long as their heteronormative image is intact. However, by failing to bring the discussion of same-sex relations into the public space, it would not be probable for Thai gay men's existence to be legally recognised.

Saem speculates that it would take quite some times for Thai gay men to enjoy similar legal benefits compared to European gay men. Saem points out that:

"Personally, I'd love to see the laws that give us the same equality such as civil partnership, adoption...but I doubt that it'd be anytime soon...10 years maybe?"

Khen also shares a similar doubt with Saem about the legal recognition of same-sex relations in Thailand but Khen sees the change of laws for homosexual equality would also complicate the current legal systems and he is not sure if the legal change for a particular group in society would be a good idea. He says,

"There might be 20 per cent possibility or lower (to have the legal recognition of same-sex relations in Thailand) but (it's) very difficult. There would be some legal complications. What should we do with the post-op transgenders? Would we allow them to change title to Miss or Mrs? There would be another problem... For *farang*, there are few post-op drag queens but in Thailand, there are plenty of *kathoey*. If we had the law allowing same-sex marriage, it'll become very complicated. For example, people who had the sex-reassignment operations would rather want to change their title from Mr. to Miss. When we talk about one issue, it's almost impossible not to talk about other connected issues. Then, there would be no ending problems keep coming up. I think for every government, these problems are so fussy that I believe the government has other more important things to take care of, such as poverty, economics and so on. Just only one group of society, I think it's very difficult."

Having mentioned about his critical view on the Western style *gay* identity in Chapter three, Phaen is always sceptical about *gay*. Phaen says,

“I’d sign the petitions for lesbian, *kathoey* and (straight) women. I think (straight) women, lesbians and *kathoey* are more socially disadvantaged, compared to gay guys and (straight) men. I might sign the petitions for *gay* too, but they have to be very persuasive.

Phat considers himself politically passive. Although he agrees with the principle of equal rights to homosexuals, he is willing to compromise as he says he still needs to earn himself a living. Phat says,

“I agree with full *gay* rights but I know that the majority of people still disagree. I treat *gay* and straight couples equally. I don’t think they are different. They are human beings. I will just accept the non-recognition of *gay* rights in Thailand because I still need to work for living. Who knows! If I’m rich enough, I might come out and argue for my rights. I still wonder what next after society recognises us. I don’t know what I can do about these things. I’m more passive in terms of politics. However, I’ll sign the petition if there are some established *gay* organisations. If people want to interview me, I’m o.k. I don’t mind telling to the world about my sexuality but if I have to initiate campaigns, I won’t do it. And I think my boyfriend doesn’t agree about the *gay* rights.”

The Cinematic Representation of Homosexuality and Social Acceptance

Despite aspiring for the social acceptance of their homosexuality, my research participants seem reluctant to directly engage in the *gay* politics. Phat and Chira have identified *kalathesa* as one of the main reasons why Thai *gay* men should not challenge the established institution of heteronormativity as this would make *gay* being ‘disliked.’

With this mindset in place, it can be argued that the campaign for social acceptance of Thai *gay* men in Thai contexts is likely to be done implicitly or subtly. In *Satri Lek*, the aspiration for social acceptance is expressed in the lip-sync performance of *Satri Lek* team members. Aimed to celebrate Coach Bi’s

birthday (โค้ยบ่), *Satri Lek* team members put on costumes and performed a show, but the lyric of the song, explicitly ask for social understanding and acceptance of non-normative gender and sexual identities.

The song lyric are as follows:

“Take a good look at me if you want.
 Some people like to gossip behind my back.
 Look at me from my heels to my head.
 But, you’ve never looked into my heart.
 I may not be what make you happy.
 But, it doesn’t mean I’m bad.
 Open your heart and take a good look at me.
 We were born like this, we had no choice.
 Accept me for what I am.
 All I ask is acceptance.
 You don’t have to hate me. You don’t have to love me.
 Either way is o.k. Give me a chance is all I ask.
 Who knows? You might find...my heart’s no different from yours.
 I may not be what make you happy.
 But, it doesn’t mean I’m bad.
 Open your heart and take a good look at me.
 We were born like this, we had no choice.
 Accept me for what I am.
 All I ask is acceptance.”

Satri Lek characters have shown that they are not just ‘loud and effeminate,’ but also have both good and bad attributes like their heteronormative counterparts. After the final match ended with the triumph of the *Satri Lek* team, one of the commentators jokingly states that

“We should really make this international year of *kathoey*.”

He was shortly interrupted by a *kathoey* spectator who grasped the microphone from him and corrected his statement that:

“We just want this year to be the year of acceptance, o.k. everyone?”

In the end, everyone was happy. The hetero and homo audiences who watch the match rejoiced at the victory of the *Satri Lek* team and all the conflicts

seemed to be reconciled for that moment. Despite being repeatedly reiterated throughout the film, the definition of 'acceptance,' the film has argued for the homosexuals, still remains 'unclear.' To what extent, Thai homosexuals have hoped to be accepted? Does being accepted means Thai homosexuals have to conform to the heteronormative values and continue to negotiate their appropriation into the public space as my research participants and the quoted three gay public figures have stressed? *Satri Lek* argues for social acceptance of homosexuality but also reproduces all social negative impressions of *kathoeys* and gay men.

Contrary to the happy ending of *Satri Lek*, *Sat Pralat* challenges the social misperception of normative masculine homosexuals, often reproduced in the mainstream media (including *Satri Lek*). The film, to an extent, introduces a more realist representation of Thai *chairakchai* and related issues such as the family's and social tolerance of homosexuality as I have explored in previous sections.

The film can be separated into two different parts: 'the day' part and 'the night' part. 'The day' part presents the ordinary love story of Keng and Tong. The film, however, shifts its tone to the dark side when Tong eventually expressed his passionate feelings towards Keng by licking his fist thoroughly and later disappeared in the dark. The second part promptly begins with the mysterious disappearance of Tong. Keng embarked on a journey into the jungle to look for Tong who was suspected of turning into the tiger monster. Keng spent most of the time in the second part searching for tracks of Tong or the tiger monster. He eventually met the naked Tong but Tong escaped and ran away. Keng

eventually came to meet his destiny, the tiger monster, waiting to consume his body and spirit.

Pointed out by the director, Apichatpong, 'the night' metaphor represents the process of self-discovery of homosexuality. (*The Nation* May 18, 2004) That is, the night, in this sense, epitomises the 'coming out' process of most gay men who have encountered the mysterious side of homosexuality and particularly gay lifestyles. The night is also crucial for the character's mindset as the night provides the anonymity Keng has required to shield him from the piecing sun ray of heteronormativity during the day time. The moment when Tong was walking deep into the dark can be interpreted that Tong eventually determined to 'come out' and live as a gay man while Keng was left behind under the light from the light pole or in this case under the restraints of heteronormative discourses. The fighting scene between Keng and Tong, the monster, at the edge of the jungle can also be compared to the argument that a gay couple might have had when one partner wants their relationship to be known (by families and friends) but the other still wants to keep it under wraps. It can be argued that the transformation of Tong into *Sat Pralat* or tiger monster, hunting cows in the village, poses the threat to the survival of the village. In other words, the 'coming out' of Tong can be said to destabilise the heteronormative masculinity and this is believed to dehumanise Tong into a murderous monster, the deviant from the normative discourse of 'proper' sexuality.

It can also be argued that Apichatpong has chosen not to explicitly discuss homosexuality, but rather implicitly approach the issue through the coded symbolism. Throughout the second part of the film there were no actual

dialogues between the human characters: Keng and Tong, respectively, as they no longer spoke the same language. The story was then unfolded by the narrator and short descriptions were sometimes used to explain the situation. The events happening in the second part of the film were rather surreal as they had not actually happened in the real world. The scene he was fighting with Tong, the tiger monster, can be said to portray Keng's psychological conflict whether he would accept his homosexuality. Keng's conversation with the wild monkey when searching for Tong in the jungle also reveals Keng's confusion:

“Monkey: Soldier! The tiger trails you like a shadow. His spirit is starving and lonesome. I see you as his prey and his companion. He can smell you from mountains away. And soon you will feel the same. Kill him to free him from the ghost world. Or let him devour you and enter his world.”

The monkey represents the Keng's subconscious that kept warning him how hard to live as a gay man as he might feel solitude from the 'normal' world. But, his other sub-conscious also reminded Keng about his feeling towards Tong and offered him two choices whether to break up with Tong or let his heart lead the way to be with Tong.

The last scene in which Keng encountered the tiger monster was a very powerful scene. Keng was confronted with the monster which frightened to death, but he was also searching for it. It was a very decisive moment when Keng had to choose whether to run away from it or let it devour him. At the moment of death or live, the tiger spoke to Keng that:

“And now, I see myself here. My mother. My father. Fear. Sadness. It was all so real...so real that...they brought me to life. Once I've devoured your soul, we are neither animal nor human. Stop breathing. I miss you, soldier.”

After facing his utmost fear of his life, Keng replied:

“Monster, I give you my spirit, my flesh...and my memories.”

He cried and said:

“Every drop of my blood sings our song. A song of happiness. There...Do you hear it?”



Figure 23 Keng is confronting the tiger monster. *Sat Pralat* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004), courtesy of Anna Sanders Films

It was a moment when Keng was confronted with his fear of accepting his homosexuality. That is, he had to prepare himself for the changes in his life and bid farewell to the protection of his straight mask, which used to fend himself from the heteronormative sanctions. In the end, it seemed that Keng had chosen to ‘come out’ and hoped for a happy life with Tong.

It can be argued that *Sat Pralat* is the first Thai gay themed film as its story depicts the lives and minds of gender normative homosexuals which do not conform to the popular representation of non-normative gender and sexual minorities, often portrayed as ‘camp’ or ‘gender inappropriate’ in the mainstream media. Unlike *Satri Lek*, *Sat Pralat* presents the concept of ‘coming out’,

arguably leading to personal acceptance of homosexuality. The character's 'coming out' process, illustrated in the film as transforming into the monster, underlines the fact that 'coming out' is rather an alien conception in Thai society.

Sat Pralat, to an extent, reflects the struggle of many Thai homosexuals who have to lead double lives due to the social sanctions against sexual non-conformists. According to its director (op. cit), *Sat Pralat* is his personal film in which his narrative and his presentation do not conform to the conventional way of film making. It is also his personal experiment to convey messages from the monster's point of view about the personal transformation into the socially peripheral space. However, it is still debatable if the notion of *kalathesa*, or 'contextual appropriateness,' to some extent, plays a decisive part in Apichatpong's use of symbolism, rather than direct discussion, to challenge the popular misperception of homosexuals in the Thai society.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the notion of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity still remains a crucial factor for the appropriation of the public space by gender and sexual minorities in Thailand. Although there has been a significant increase in the representation of non-normative gender and sexual minorities in the mainstream media since 1965, the popular misperception of *kathoey* and gay men as being 'loud,' 'sexually promiscuous,' 'camp' and so forth is discursively reproduced by the Thai media. The study of the proliferation of Thai *kathoey* and/or gay themed films since the success of the film *Satri Lek* (2000) also

demonstrates that the misperception of *kathoey* and gay men largely remains unchanged.

My investigation has also revealed that Thai gay men acknowledge these negative impressions, socially associated with their non-normative gender expressions and sexual practices in Thai public discourses. Rather than challenging the socially constructed negativity, Thai gay celebrities and my research participants indicate that those gay men who behave 'inappropriately' and disregard the social norms should be blamed for tarnishing the image of gay communities. They also address that it is necessary for gay men to prove their worth to be accepted into the mainstream society.

The interviews with research participants have also highlighted that Thai gay men are fully informed of *kalathesa*. They share similar views on the respect towards the established institution of heteronormativity. They argue that gay men should know what is appropriate for different places and time. This recognition of *kalathesa* suggests that homosexuality is assigned its peripheral status in Thai sex/gender system. The interviews also show the objection to the direct challenge of the heteronormative values as a number of participants express concerns of being 'disliked' if approaches for gay rights movements similar to those in the West have been appropriated in Thailand.

In this chapter, I have also comparatively analysed two Thai language *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films: 1) *Satri Lek* 2) *Sat Pralat*. These films depict the lives of ordinary *kathoey* and gay men in contemporary contexts. While *Satri Lek* shows the struggle of *kathoey* and gay men against social discrimination and prejudices, *Sat Pralat* highlights the alienation of normative masculine

homosexuals from popular misperception, socially attached to their sexual identity.

Studying the representation of *kathoey* and gay men in *Satri Lek* suggests that Thai non-normative gender and sexual minorities have adopted the non-confrontational approach in negotiating for the social inclusion. The direct message, asking for social acceptance of homosexuality has been reiterated throughout the film. But, while arguing for social recognition of homosexuality, *Satri Lek*, similar to the mainstream Thai media, has unwittingly used the 'eccentricity' of the characters such as the exaggeration of the feminine mannerisms and so on as the selling point of the films.

The study of symbolism used in *Sat Pralat* reveal the attempt of normative masculine *chairakchai* to disengage themselves from the popular misperception of homosexuality. *Sat Pralat* illustrates the process of 'coming out' as the way forward for personal acceptance of one's homosexuality. However, the film also depicts the difficulties gay men might have gone through to accept their sexual orientation.

Chapter 7: Exposing the Myth of Thailand's Gay Paradise

In Chapter one, I have highlighted the ambiguous rhetoric of social inclusion and equal rights of LGBT people in Thailand's new constitution. I have argued that the rhetoric of the memorandum of the 2007 constitution, which extends the meaning of 'sex' to include 'sexual diversity,' does not actually guarantee the social acceptance of people with non-conventional gender expressions and sexualities. The constitution still defines 'sexual diversity' as the sexual deviancy from the 'original' sex/gender and sexuality, officially acquired from birth. I have also listed the Thai vocabulary of non-normative gender expressions and sexual identities in Thailand. This list, to some extent, introduces the conceptualisation of same-sex eroticism in the Thai sex/gender system, arguably intersected by the cultural sensitivity and the way Thais regard sex and sexuality as 'private' matters. I have discussed my theoretical conceptualisation of the thesis, outlining the insights of Michel Foucault on power relations as the starting point for investigating discursive networks of power operating upon homosexual individuals. I have also cited Judith Butler's influential theory of performativity as essential analytical tools for deconstructing the social construction of Thai homosexual identities. In Chapter one, I have also outlined key issues from Thai and English texts on Thai gender and gay studies, providing the indispensable foundation to this research.

Chapter two discusses the inter-disciplinary research methods of the discourse analysis and ethnographic interview I have used for this thesis. I have argued that the diverse research materials I have examined are vital to the investigation of networks of power relations, pointed out by Foucault, in the

emergence of modern homosexual identities in Thailand. I have also highlighted the significant role of broadband Internet, enabling me to conduct the empirical research on Thai gay men while living and writing this thesis mostly in London. Not only does the Internet provide up-to-date information regarding the movement and social activities of LGBT groups in Thailand, the internet also serves as a communicating portal, directly channeling me and my research participants who are living in different cities in Europe and in Thailand. I have also discussed the issue of 'cultural translation' which poses a substantial challenge for me as a non-English researcher to reinterpret the findings in Thai back into English.

In Chapter three, I have focused on discussions of same-sex relations in Thailand's sex/gender system in relation to the emergence of *gay* identity in Thailand in 1965. I have examined the myth of 'global queering' which suggests that the proliferation of modern homosexual identities in non-Western societies is the corollary of globalisation of Western socio-economic development. I have pointed out that the model of universal gayness risks overwriting the diversity of LGBT people in Asia without taking into accounts how the identity *gay* has been adopted and redefined differently from the West. To investigate the power relations of non-normative gender and sexual identities in the Thai public space, I have drawn the attention to the socio-linguistic history of *kathoey* and the construction of *gay* identity in Thai public discourses. I have pointed out that by identifying with the *gay* identity, Thai gender normative homosexuals situate themselves in direct opposition to the effeminate *kathoey*. Therefore, the identity *gay* can be considered the gender identity. I have also included personal narratives of my research participants in relation to social attitudes towards these

non-normative sex/gender categories. I have argued that identifying with the label *gay* is still considered problematic for some gender-normative homosexuals who resent the negative images, socially attached to the *gay* identity.

Reviewing references to non-normative gender and sexual identities, documented in the traditional legal and Buddhist texts in Chapter four, suggests that the discriminatory attitudes towards homosexuality in contemporary Thailand are not by-products of Thais' adoption of the Victorian morality in the nineteenth century but rather the combination of Buddhism's disdainful attitudes towards sex as sensual cravings, which are theoretically believed to prevent the enlightenment and Thai patriarchal heterosexist attitudes. Studying these public discourses also highlights the discrepancies between the social tolerance of homosexuality and the social exclusion of non-normative genders and sexualities. Although homosexuality is not criminalised by traditional Thai laws or condemned by Thai Theravada Buddhist authorities, people with non-conventional gender expressions and sexual practices are not regarded as equally valued members of the society as they are not considered 'proper' or 'suitable' candidates to become Buddhist monks and witnesses for legal disputes. The Buddhist belief of *kamma* can also be said to contribute to the social tolerance and compassion towards these social gender/sexual minorities as transgenderisms and homosexuality are religiously thought as a punishment from misdeeds, committed in previous lives. Through reviewing the traditional acknowledgement of same-sex relations in literary texts, I have also examined power relations of homoeroticism in the Thai sex/gender system. The texts show that homosexual relations are traditionally regarded as an 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour. The texts also indicate that homosexual relations are traditionally

seen as 'verbs' or 'actions' and therefore have little to do with individuals' respective gender identities.

Apart from the Buddhist influences on the social tolerance and compassion towards non-normative gender and sexual minorities, in Chapter five, I have examined the Thai etiquette of *kalathesa* or the 'contextual sensitivity' in relation to the Thai taboo on public discussions of sex and sexuality which can also be said to contribute to Thailand's relaxed attitudes towards homosexuality. As sex and sexuality are often regarded as 'shameful,' 'dirty' in Thai society, they should not be theoretically included in topics of public discussions, and are therefore considered private. Data drawn from interviews with research participants have indicated that the contextual sensitivity, to an extent, affects Thai gay men's personal acceptance of their homosexuality as some find the notion of 'coming out' inappropriate as 'coming out' would violate this cultural taboo on public discussions of sex and sexuality while a number of interviewees also consider the concept of 'coming out' unnecessary due to the perspective that their sexual lives are 'private.' But, the perception that sex and sexuality should be regarded as private matters helps Thai gay men avoid confronting the social pressure, demanding them to conform to heteronormative images. That is, as long as Thai gay men retain the presentation of having normative gender and sexual practices at least in the public space, their private homosexual relations can largely remain unsanctioned.

I have discussed Thai gay men's negotiation for social acceptance in relation to the popular representation of non-normative gender and sexual identities in the mainstream media in Chapter six. I have included the analysis of

two Thai language films 1) *Satri Lek* (2000) and 2) *Sat Pralat* (2004), respectively, in order to highlight Thai gay men's negotiation for social inclusivity and the peripheral position of people with non-normative gender and sexual identities in Thai society. Although there has been a significant increase of *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films for mainstream cinema goers since the year 2000, the stereotypical misperception of people with non-normative gender expressions and sexualities is still not uncommon in Thai popular discourses. I have also drawn attention to the substantial role of *kalathesa* in Thai gay men's appropriation of the public space in interviews with my research participants. My investigation has shown that Thai gay men are aware of this misrepresentation and are negotiating for the 'acceptable' gayness while also resisting the association with these negative images. According to research participants, the acknowledgement of *kalathesa*, to some extent, can be said to facilitate the social negotiation for acceptance but also restrict their public revelation of their homosexuality. Thanks to this cultural sensitivity, I have also argued that Thai gay men's unassertiveness on the issue of social equality, on the one hand, helps lessen the anti-homosexual sentiments in Thai society, on the other hand, fails to challenge the social discriminations against same-sex relations.

In this chapter, I return to re-examine the myth of 'gay paradise,' which I have briefly discussed in Chapter one and Chapter three, respectively, in relation to my argument that homosexuality is still socially excluded although Thailand is internationally noted for its tolerance of same-sex relations. I investigate the public expressions of anti-homosexual sentiments in the Thai press, regarding the public debate about social acceptance of same-sex relations. I also discuss the recent political movements of Thai LGBT rights groups to open up the public

discussion for further social inclusions of 'sexual diversity' in Thailand. I highlight the politics of negotiation that Thai LGBT groups have engaged in order to overcome Thai public discriminations over their homosexual relations.

Thailand: Gay Paradise Lost?

"Homophobia just doesn't seem to exist. Since homosexuality isn't thought of as remotely strange or unusual, there's a relaxed feeling to being gay you just don't get anywhere else in the world. Ladyboys even work in the banks, how cool is that?"

Charlie West, 'Benders Break' in *Boyz*¹⁶¹ (05.07.03, p. 78)

Having been globally imbued by prominent images of prostitution, sex tourism and ladyboys (*kathoey*), Thailand has long mystified foreign visitors. The popular representation of the country in the media as the land of sexual excessiveness where sexual morals seem loosely controlled. Thais' socially displayed tolerance of homosexual and transgendered people is often simply misinterpreted that Thailand provides "the last refuge for perverse" (*ibid.*). The noted tolerance enjoyed by Thai homo-minorities ostensibly fuels the popular perception that Thai society recognises the existence of its gay communities. The worldwide media coverage of internationally famous transgendered Thai boxer, Parinya Chareonpol, to some extent, depicts Thailand as a safe haven for gays where homosexuality is accepted in Thai culture (Matzner 1998: 1-2, Storer 1999: 7-9). The substantial proliferation of Thai *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films since the year 2000 seemingly asserts Thailand's reputation as a gay paradise where sexual minorities seem to have harmoniously integrated into the mainstream Thai society.

¹⁶¹ *Boyz* is a weekly free magazine targeting London gay men. It provides the information about general gay lifestyles and the lists of night venues, activities, special events and campaigns on weekly basis.

Irrespective of the popular image of Thailand as a 'gay Mecca', homosexuality is still considered as an 'inappropriate' behaviour and many Thai gay men are still reluctant to 'come out' publicly for fear of social criticisms due to their violation of heterosexist norms (Jackson 1999c: 240). There is no doubt that homosexuality has neither been criminalised by Thai laws, nor directly condemned by Thai Theravada Buddhism (Jackson 1989: 24, Jackson 1995b: 41, Jackson 1999c: 227, Matzner 1998: 2).

Yet, asserting that homosexuality is accepted in this conservative country could distort the pervasively popular and official discourses, often critical and occasionally intolerant of non-normative sex/gender behaviours.

Pointed out in Chapter one, not only has homosexuality been discursively described in Thai public discourses as a perversion, disease, or illness, which should be corrected or cured, but also regarded as 'insignificant' and 'unworthy' of research inquiry by Thai academics. (Jackson 1999c pp. 227-278) Homosexuals are often stigmatised as 'hot tempered,' 'loud,' 'un-Thai,' particularly in the popular representation in Thai soap operas. They are socially perceived as improper role models for 'impressionable youths' by the concerned Thai public.

The Rajabhat Council's prohibition of 'sexually abnormal' students to enrol in teacher training programmes in all 36 Rajabhat colleges in 1998 demonstrates the deep rooted homophobia in the country's academic institutions. (Sinnott in IIAS Newsletter, November 2002). This ban was silently lifted after strict enforcement for several years.

After 5 years of the implementation of the 1997 'people's constitution'¹⁶², dubbed as the most democratic constitution in Thai political history, the Thai government re-fashioned the social order campaigns which authorised a series of raids on gay saunas, bars, and nightclubs by the 'vice squads' between 2003 and 2004. (*The Nation* July 9, 2004)¹⁶³. On June 4, 2004, Kla Somtrakun (กล้า สมตระกูล), the deputy permanent secretary to the cultural ministry, was publicly criticised for his attempt to ban employing homosexuals to work for the ministry. (*Thairath* (ไทยรัฐ) June 4, 2004) He was quoted that:

"The cultural ministry will vigorously campaign about homosexual behaviour. Although we are not legally empowered to imprison these people (homosexuals) like the case of obscene materials, we will ask the public to join our anti-homosexual campaigns to stop the further proliferation of homosexuality. This will also include the ban of the representation of homosexuality in the media. The cultural ministry will issue the letter to all television stations for their cooperation (to enforce the ban). We will discipline our officials who have that kind of behaviour at the ministry and we will not recruit people with that behaviour to work with us." (*Thairath* June 4, 2004)¹⁶⁴

The following year (2005) saw a heated exchange in the Thai press between Natee Teerarojanapongs (นที ธีระโรจนพงษ์), the leader of gay political group and Montri Sinthawichai (มนตรี สันทวิชัย), a well-known children rights and welfare NGO Thai activist, about the inclusion of 'gay studies' in the teaching at Bangkok administrative primary schools. The plan to teach gay studies was so controversial that the Bangkok Administrative Deputy Governor eventually

¹⁶² The 1997 constitution was drafted by publicly elected representatives from all sectors of Thai society. The constitution indiscriminately guaranteed universal human rights, free speech, and most importantly the right to be treated with respect to 'human dignity'. There were 39 articles in section 3 of the constitution that described rights and freedom of Thai citizens.

¹⁶³ Details can be found at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/option/print.php?newsid=102462>.

¹⁶⁴ Full story can be retrieved from http://www.thairath.co.th/thairath1/2547/page1/jun/04/p1_1.php.

decided to cancel the City's agreement with the gay political group. (*Phuchatkan* March 18, 2005)¹⁶⁵

All the above incidents doubtlessly underline the prevailing prejudices against homosexuality in Thailand despite the popular image of the country as a 'gay paradise.' However, the lack of legal and religious prosecutions against same-sex relations in Thailand might have displayed Thailand as a unique tolerance of non-normative gender expressions and sexual diversity, but if tolerance means a respect to equality disregarding differences, the cases I have outlined above may have presented the conflicting accounts of the disrespect and intolerance of non-heteronormative relations in Thai society.

Thai Gay Politics?

The political strategies of gay rights activists in Thailand can be considered less assertive, compared to their Western counterparts, such as Outrage, Queer Nation and so forth. Unlike their Western counterparts, Thai gay men are less politically active. Thai lesbian rights activists, on the contrary, have been more engaged in promoting equal rights of Thailand's LGBT people since the establishment of the Thai *yingrakyong* (หญิงรักหญิง – lit. women (who) love women) group, called *Anjaree* (อันจารี) in 1986¹⁶⁶. *Anjaree's* redefinition of female homosexuals as *yingrakyong* can be said to underline Thai lesbian group's strategic attempt to integrate into mainstream Thai society where the taboo regarding public discussion of sex and sexuality remains strong. Having discussed in Chapter three, the newly coined *yingrakyong* identity is aimed to

¹⁶⁵ Full coverage is available at <http://www.manager.co.th/QOL/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9480000038002>.

¹⁶⁶ See the history of *Anjaree*, the Thai lesbian organisation at http://www.lgbrpcv.org/pdf/02_99.pdf.

replace the English term 'lesbians' which have been socially loaded with negative images such as having excessive sexual desires and so on. The new term for female homosexuals, in fact, shifts the central point from having female same-sex erotic desires to being an ordinary woman who engages in a romantic relationship with another ordinary woman. It might not be wrong to say that *Anjaree's* redefining of female homosexuality was so influential that the term *chairakchai* (ชายรักชาย – men (who) love men) was later adopted by Thai gay men in the 1990s.

Anjaree was the only LGBT group at that time that intensively campaigned for the removal of homosexuality from the country's official list of mental disorders in December 2002 (*The Nation*, December 27, 2002)¹⁶⁷. Aimed to reduce social discrimination and stigma, which homosexuals and transgenders in Thailand are facing, the official endorsement from the Mental Health Department was perceived as the mile-stone victory for Thai homosexual rights activists. (Vittal Katikireddi, *Student British Medical Journal*, November 1, 2003, p. 42)

Disregarding the reproduction of the popular misperception of homosexuality as a 'sexual disorder' in public discourses, particularly in the mainstream media, the Thai government's affirmation that homosexuality is not a mental disease can be said to officially mark the new beginning of people with homosexual inclination as from now onwards their sexual orientation is officially recognised in Thai public discourses. Compared to their European counterparts, the success of Thai homosexual communities may not be seen as socially

¹⁶⁷ Cited in http://www.suphawut.com/gvb/gayly/thai_gay_cultures_gays_not_sick.htm.

progressive since the substantial legal provisions and social acceptance have yet to materialise in contemporary Thai contexts.

The official announcement by the Mental Health Department in December 2002 should have sent a clear message about the necessity to stop social sanctions and discriminations against people on the grounds of a different sexual orientation, but homosexual men and women still experience social prejudices and discrimination. Despite the legal prohibition of any forms of discrimination by the 1997 constitution and the removal of homosexuality from the national list of mental disorders which came into effect in December 2002, the Thai media revelations on June 4, 2004 regarding the cultural ministry's infamous plans to stop employing people with 'homosexual behaviour' and to discipline its homosexual officials who fail to conform to the heteronormative presentation as well as the ministry's subsequent request to Thai television stations to curb homosexual messages on the television programmes indicate that the heterosexual majority continue to stigmatise and discriminate against same-sex relations.

Despite these antipathetic attitudes against homosexuality in the Thai public space, it can be said that these sensationalised stories have actually brought the gay issues to public attention and perhaps have awakened Thai gay and lesbian communities to fight back against the social hostilities towards homosexuals. The news of the cultural ministry's attempt to ban homosexuals from working for the ministry unexpectedly prompted the outrage in the LGBT communities. Thai gay men's organisations i.e. Rainbow Sky (ฟ้าสีรุ้ง -

Fasirung)¹⁶⁸ and Bangkok Rainbow (บางกอกเรนโบว์ – *Bangkok Renbo*)¹⁶⁹, which had formerly focused on the HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual health campaigns, joined the Thai lesbian rights group, *Anjaree* (อันญจารี) in protesting against the official ban of homosexuals. It can be said that not only the LGBT rights groups but also the general Thai public were galvanised by this outright homophobic statement. This incident instigated the public discussions of human rights and equality and subsequently led to the public pressure being put on the Thai government to fully respect human rights, guaranteed by Thailand's 1997 constitution.

After the public exposé, causing the public outrage, Mr. Kla Somtrakun later retracted his statement and blamed the Thai press for miscommunication.

He is quoted saying that:

“I am confirming my principle that they (homosexuals) have the right to consider or to behave according to their sexual orientation. There are no laws or clauses in the constitution that forbid this kind of person from civil services and I do not have the view that these people are disgusting.”

(*Kaosot* (ข่าวสด) June 5, 2004)¹⁷⁰

Mr. Kla, however, states that homosexuality is still ‘social unaccepted.’ He says:

“Nevertheless, although there are no rules prohibiting the recruitment of homosexuals (in the civil services), I’d like them to realise that it (homosexuality) is a (sexual) disorder behaviour which is not yet accepted by the society. Therefore, if (they) want to do something, they should exercise their careful consideration. I would also like to ask their cooperation not to organise any provocative activities that would give bad examples (to the impressionable youths). They’d be better to help develop our society.”

(*Komchatluek* (คมชัดลึก) June 5, 2004)¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ The Rainbow Sky Organisation of Thailand (*Samakom Fasirung Haeng Prathet Thai* – สมาคมฟ้าสีรุ้งแห่งประเทศไทย)

¹⁶⁹ Bangkok Rainbow Organisation (*Ongkon Bangkok Renbo* – องค์การบางกอกเรนโบว์)

¹⁷⁰ Cited in Chalidaporn Songsampan (2004)

This scandal lasted only a few days. Thai lesbian and gay rights groups seemed content with Mr. Kla's public rejection of the media report that he would ban homosexuals from working in the ministry. If this happened in Europe, the senior ranking governmental official, like Mr. Kla, would have probably been forced to resign from his position. But, this did not happen in Thailand. I personally sent another complaint to the then prime minister urging him to at least discipline this senior public servant for violating the constitution. I also sent another electronic letter to both gay organisations: Bangkok Rainbow and Rainbow Sky about the matter, but I did not receive anything back from either of them. It seems that the gay rights groups appear to be content with the resolved situation that no homosexuals were barred from working for the ministry of culture. They did not challenge the establishment of heteronormative values that view homosexuality as a distortion of heterosexual norms.

This might be said to reaffirm my argument that there is an on-going negotiation between the Thai hetero-majority (in this case, it is the Thai authority) and the homo-minority for the social recognition of same-sex relations. However, the gay rights activists are applying self-restraints as well as compromising with the heteronormative values as they do not attempt to radically challenge the norms but rather attempt to accommodate and integrate into the mainstream heteronormative Thai society as I have discussed in Chapter six, regarding the awareness of *kalathesa* in the public appropriation of Thai gay men. That is, Thai gay men acknowledge that their homosexuality can be socially tolerant as long as they do not radically challenge the hetero-norms and are willing to integrate into the mainstream society in which any reference to sexuality should be

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

avoided. This cultural sensitivity is perfectly shown in the redefinition of female and male homosexual identities to *yingrakying* and *chairakchai*, respectively.

Another perfect example is the public reaction towards the famous Thai gay rights activist, Natee Teerarojjanapongs. For more than two decades, Natee Teerarojjanapongs is regarded as the most active gay rights activist in Thailand. In 1987, he started the gay acting and dancing group, called *Klum Sen Si Khao* (กลุ่มเส้นสีขาว – The White Line Dance Troupe), to promote the safe-sex awareness for Thai homosexuals and teenagers. He later coordinated with a number of gay businesses and international and national agencies to raise the social awareness of HIV/AIDS and to promote the good image of Thai gay men. The group was later renamed to *Paradonphap Yapyung Rok Et Haeng Prathet Thai* (ภราดรภาพยับยั้งโรคเอดส์แห่งประเทศไทย – Fraternity for AIDS Cessation in Thailand or F.A.C.T.) His writings include *Kunla Gay* (กุลเกย์ – lit. good gay), the pamphlet to promote how to be a good gay man, *Khwa Cha Kao Kham Sen Si Khao* (กว่าจะก้าวข้ามเส้นสีขาว - lit. *Before crossing the white line*) to encourage Thai gay men to 'come out' (*The Nation Weekend* June 21-27 2004).

Although Natee and his like minded activists have successively campaigned for the social acceptance of homosexuality in Thai society, their strategic negotiation for the social integration of Thai gay men i.e. *kunla gay*, 'gay studies' for primary school children are not well received not only by the Thai public but also by the gay communities. Natee's statement, calling Thai gay men to behave themselves and to become good gays (*kunla gay* – กุลเกย์) as I have discussed in Chapter six, is often accused of misleading impressionable Thai youths to become *gay* by conservative Thai public figures such as Montri Sinthawichai,

the children rights and welfare activist. Natee's successive calls for public attention are also despised by many Thai gay men who blame him for the increasing intolerance of homosexuality in the Thai public sphere in recent years.

'Lady Y' (pseudonym) comments on Natee's public campaigns for social acceptance of homosexuality on the *Phuchatkan's* public web board regarding the article, *Mahakap Khon(yak)dang Natee Teerarojjanapongs (1) Khae "Wupneung" Khong Wongkan Gay* (มหากาพย์คน (อยาก) ดัง นที ชีระโรจนพงษ์ (1): แค่ "วูบหนึ่ง" ของวงการเกย์' – lit. The Epic of Wannabe Famous Natee Teerarojjanapongs (1) just a flash in the gay communities) that:

"I think you (Natee) are the one who has made the society dislikes us. (I think he is the one that has given us a bad name.) Stop! Stop sabotage our people. Please!"
(Comment No. 67 on *Phuchatkarn* September 15, 2009)¹⁷²

'xxxx@hotmail.com' (pseudonym) also expresses his disagreement with Natee's tactic for public attention that:

"Gay Natee, are you sure that what you have done are for the benefit of the gay communities? The way you have brought the public attention by presenting yourself at every opportunity is no different from leeches which take the advantage... You present yourself without being invited and appointed yourself with that idiot title (the president of the gay political group). You are always critical of other people's action. Your annoyance will degrade the gay communities."
(Comment No. 63, *ibid.*)¹⁷³

Although Natee's good intentions to expose the Thai mainstream public to the gayness may not have been well received by some Thai gay men, it is undeniable that his tactics and strategies can be considered effective in bringing the issue of gay rights into public discussions. He considers his personal

¹⁷² This comment can be retrieved from <http://www.manager.co.th/Entertainment/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9520000107328>.

¹⁷³ This comment can also be retrieved from <http://www.manager.co.th/Entertainment/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9520000107328>.

preference to be identified as 'gay Natee' by the press as a way to challenge the social skepticism and negative attitudes towards homosexuality. He says:

"I usually refer to myself by using the word 'gay' in front of my name to show others that there is nothing wrong with being gay. To me, it's one way to deal with social prejudice. And I think it works, at least psychologically."

(*Bangkok Post* (Outlook section) October 27, 2008)

His active involvements in Thai public discussions, concerning gay issues have inevitably drawn criticisms, particularly from some Thai gay men who view that Natee's tactics of bringing gay issues into the public space risk upsetting the Thai public, and this would make gay men being 'disliked' as I have discussed in the interviews with Chira and Khen in Chapter six.

Since Natee's *kunla gay* (a good gay) campaign in the 1980s, he has always encouraged Thai gay men to 'come out of the closet.' He (ibid.) believes that the personal acceptance of Thai gay men's homosexuality is "the most powerful weapon to raise the gay community's negotiation power, which will eventually lead to the acceptance by other people in the society." Natee stresses that:

"For those gay men who are considering coming out, I would encourage them to say 'yes' quickly because, after all is said and done, there is nothing wrong with being gay. Some people may think of me as a dictator who keeps telling others to do this and that...but revealing one's own sexual identity is simply just telling the truth and does not make him a liar. In my opinion, when we gay men come out and show society that we have a firm standpoint, it is like giving ourselves and society an opinion. To me, to have an option means to have a way to survive." (ibid.)

Having discussed in Chapter five and six, 'coming out of the closet,' particularly to the heteronormative public, may have caused the unforeseen distress not only to the homosexual individuals but also their respective families.

Unlike the three gay public figures i.e. Natee Teerarojanapong, Wirot Tangvanij and Varayuth Milintajinda whom I have mentioned in Chapter six, Thai gay men who have yet to afford the financial stability and social independence continue to play down their sexuality, especially in the public area.

Anuchit Sapanpong (อนุชิต สพันธุ์พงษ์), a Thai actor whose acting role in *Hom Rong* (a.k.a. *The Overture* – โหมโรง - Ittisoontorn Vichailak (อิทธิสุนทร วิชัยลักษณ์) 2004) made him famous, publicly confessed with a reporter from *TVPool* (ทีวีพูล), a celebrity gossip magazine, when being asked if he was gay that:

“Yes. I don’t deny it. I don’t know why I should deny it because the truth is always the truth and I also have many friends who are like this (who are gays). I think our society has changed a lot (I think it is o.k. to be gay in Thailand). Not all gays are bad persons. There are many talented third sex people not only in the entertainment business but also other parts of our society.”
(*TVPool* 23-29 April 2004, p. 39, cited in *Phuchatkan* April 23, 2004)¹⁷⁴

However, *TVPool* also published Anuchit’s statement, denying that he had said that he was gay but it was located in the different page (p.83). He stressed that:

“I don’t know how that the rumour saying I’m gay has been circulated. Within the same day and same newspapers, they said that there are reports that I was dating a girl. So what do they want me to be?” (ibid.)

Phuchatkan columnists question the validity of these two pieces of interviews, published in *TVPool* but also revealed that they were informed by the actor that he had been instructed by his affiliated music company, Grammy, not to further comment on the rumour (*Phuchatkan* April 28, 2004)¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷⁴ See details at <http://www.manager.co.th/Entertainment/EntView.asp?NewsID=2000000054973>.

¹⁷⁵ See details at <http://www.manager.co.th/Entertainment/EntView.asp?NewsID=4726396767496>.

It is understandable that Anuchit might be personally comfortable with his homosexuality but had to retract his public admittance of his homosexuality since it would likely have jeopardised his future career in the entertainment business. Anuchit's first interview scripts also reflect his awareness of *kalathesa* that direct references to sexuality should be avoided as he described that he had many friends who are 'like this' (ที่เป็นอย่างนี้ - *thipenyangni*). That is, rather than directly admitting his same-sex attraction, he carefully crafted his wording so as not to explicitly confirm the rumour but to point out the positivity of 'third sex' (เพศที่สาม *phetthisam*) people.

Anuchit's reluctant 'coming out' is not uncommon. Some of my research participants i.e. Kit, O, Saem and Wira, who are still either dependent on the financial or emotional support from their respective families, have also shown their indecisiveness to directly discuss their homosexuality with their families. Thanks to the Thai sensitivity regarding public discussions of sex and sexuality, some participants i.e. Paen, Chira, Pom, and Khen find 'coming out' unnecessary as they believe that their occasional non-normative gender expressions and their same-sex attraction are already acknowledged by their respective families and colleagues.

Nevertheless, It can be said that Thai gay men have become progressively self-aware of their constitutional rights thanks to the introduction of the 'People's Constitution' in 1997 and the successive homophobic sentiments during the past 10 years as I have outlined above. During the past decade, two gay men's organisations were formed. Initially aimed to promote safe-sex practices and prevention of HIV infection, the Rainbow Sky Organisation of

Thailand (*Samakom Fasirung Haeng Prathet Thai* – สมาคมฟ้าสีรุ้งแห่งประเทศไทย) was founded in 2001. (Surapong et al. 2006:4) In 2002, a group of middle class Thai homosexuals formed the Bangkok Rainbow Organisation (*Ongkon Bangkok Renbo* - องค์การบางกอกเรนโบว์) to promote the social understanding and genuine acceptance of homosexuality in Thailand (ibid., p. 5). Natee Teerarojjanapongs also formed another gay group in 2005 to provide a space for people with sexual diversity to take part in political activities, called Gay Political Group of Thailand or G.P.G.T. (*Klum Gay Kanmueang Thai* - กลุ่มเกย์การเมืองไทย). He also campaigned for the Bangkok senator election in 2006 but was not successful.

Between 1997 and 2007, the 1997 constitution can be said to have opened up the political platform for Thai LGBT rights activists to have publicly and sometimes legally challenged cases of homophobic discrimination as I have outlined above. Although the coup d'état on September 19, 2006 by the Council of National Security brought an end to the 1997 'People's Constitution,' the coup presented an opportunity for the LGBT rights activists to mobilise the political support for the official recognition of 'sexual diversity' in the new constitution. Between 2006 and 2007, *Anjaree*, the Thai women (who) love women group, the two Thai gay men organisations: 1) the Bangkok Rainbow; 2) the Rainbow Sky and Natee's Gay Political Group formed the coalition of 'sexual diversity' (*Krueakhai Khwam Laklai Thang Phet* - เครือข่ายความหลากหลายทางเพศ) in campaigning for the inclusion of the category of sexual diversity into the 2007 constitution. They held discussions with the commissioners for human rights and members of the constitution drafting council who are known to sympathise with LGBT causes such as Jermsak Pinthong. Having discussed in the prologue of Chapter one, the extension of the meaning of 'sex' in the article 30, clause 3 of

the 2007 constitution to include the category of 'sexual diversity' may have been symbolically seen as a significant gain for Thai LGBT people, but this constitutional inclusion is still meaningless without further legal recognition of same-sex relations such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage or civil partnership which would enable LGBT people to imagine their social existence and equality with their straight counterparts. This legal materialisation of LGBT equality remains to be seen in Thai society.

Are Same-Sex Relationships Becoming Socially and Legally Validated?

The reports of ceremonial marriages between same-sex couples in Thailand often attract the media attention. For example, *Thairath* (ไทยรัฐ) on April 25, 2004¹⁷⁶, published the picture and the story of matrimonial ceremony between Worawit Pon-on (วรวิทย์ พลฉอฉน), 25, Thai and Nathaniel Dickson, 40, American. The paper noted that the parents of Worawit and Dickson's mother, who flew from the U.S. to attend this ceremony in Khon Kaen (ขอนแก่น), a province in the Northeast of Thailand, happily recognised the marriage of the couple. *Thairath* detailed not only the description of the Thai-style ceremony but also the exact amount of money that Dickson had given Worawit's parents according to Thai custom. The paper also noted that Worawit's parents had invited a local district administrative counsellor as an honourable guest to witness the matrimony of the couple. Despite the fact that the couple were wearing normative male clothes in the wedding, *Thairath* identified the Thai partner as 'the bride' and his American partner as 'the groom,' respectively.

¹⁷⁶ See the full report at *Thairath* on-line retrieved on April 25, 2004 from http://www.thairath.co.th/thairath1/page1/apr/25/pl_7.php.

Thairath reported that Dickson met Worawit in a restaurant in Phatthaya where Worawit was working for four months prior to the wedding.

Matichon (มติชน) on May 9, 2008¹⁷⁷ described the marriage ceremony between Wanlop Khontrong (วัลลก คนตรง), 29, Thai and Robert Richer, 64, Dutch. The ceremony took place at Wanlop's parental house in Nakhon Rachasima (นครราชสีมา), a province in the Northeastern region of Thailand. Similar to the previous ceremony, *Matichon* noted of the blessing of Wanlop's parents. It highlighted the wealth of the Dutch partner and portrayed the wedding ceremony as 'big' with more than 500 invited guests. Wanlop's mother also revealed to the reporter that:

"I am very happy that my son is married today. I am o.k. with his love although it is a love between a man and another man. The relatives are also fine with it and they are happy for them. They are also attending this wedding. However, I don't care if anyone will think that this love is unnatural as I take it is my son's happiness. I am content as long as the married couple understand, love each other and they have enough money so that they don't have to struggle financially. I am very happy for my son. I know that he has a woman's heart since he was young. As the eldest, my son has always been the breadwinner of the family."

Khaosot (ข่าวสด) on August 16, 2008¹⁷⁸ sensationally published the story of male-male (*chai-chai* Th. ชาย-ชาย) wedding ceremony between Wutthipong Arayathamsophon (วุฒิพงษ์ อารยะธรรมโสภณ), 30, Thai and his German partner of 9 years, Dirk Viber who is 25 years old in Chiang Mai (เชียงใหม่), the biggest city in the North of Thailand. *Khaosot* stated that the couple had met and been working together in Germany. The newspaper also mentioned that the couple had registered their partnership in Germany but just came back to Thailand to have the Northern Thai-style wedding ceremony. As usual, the paper included

¹⁷⁷ The full story can be retrieved from http://news.sanook.com/social/social_270609.php.

¹⁷⁸ The full story can be retrieved from http://news.sanook.com/region/region_297561.php.

the itemised list of cash and gifts such as gold necklaces, diamond rings, a car and a house that the couple had presented for the customary dowry payment during the wedding ceremony. Unlike the previous two marriages, *Khaosot* emphasised that neither of the partners was 'the bride.'

Although the newspaper highlighted the fact that their parents and their communities had blessed the couple, these 'private' matrimonyes are not socially common. Pointed out by Mr. Wanlop's mother, this same-sex love is still socially considered as 'unnatural.' These private ceremonial arrangements by same-sex individuals are neither sanctioned nor recognised for their legality by the Thai authority. In other words, they are culturally and socially tolerated but are still not accepted. The commonalities shared by the three couples, reported by the three papers are 1) they are cross-national/cultural couples; 2) one of the partners (the Western ones) or both partners are financially independent from their respective families and often play a vital part in the families' financial stability.

Similar to the lives of my research participants whom I have discussed in Chapter five and six, these three Thai gay men have had to negotiate the 'acceptable' public images with the consideration of their respective families and Thai society. Some participants i.e. Chira, Khen have expressed their concerns over being 'socially disliked' if gay people keep demanding too much and also indicated that gay people have to prove that they are equally valued members of the society through their educational and professional achievements. It is the second aspect of having secure financial status, emphasised by the three papers, which might have contributed to the social and family's tolerance of the couples' same-sex relations. The three Thai men can be considered as socially

successful in terms of having married wealthy Western gay men, who are more or less expected to financially support the Thai guys' families. Due to this respect, these three Thai men have fulfilled their moral obligation to uphold their family names even though their same-sex relations may be perceived as socially 'unnatural.'

It is worth noting that the media coverage of the same-sex marriage ceremonies is itself an indicator that these events are not ordinary social events but are rather presented as 'weird' or unusual news by the papers.

However, unlike the civil same-sex partnerships or gay marriages in the West, Thai same-sex marriages are more like social events in which same-sex couples announce their romantic relationships not only to their families and friends, but also to their local communities and the general public. Their relationships are not, however, legally recognised unlike their heterosexual counterparts and do not entail any transferrable welfare benefits or the right of being the next of kin to the same-sex couples.

There have been several public announcements by the public figures regarding the legalisation of same-sex marriage but nothing has yet been materialised. On April 12, 2001, Purachai Piamsombun (ประชัย เปี่ยมสมบูรณ์), then the Interior Minister, was publicly quoted of his support for the legalisation of same-sex marriage. However, his idea was opposed by Thaksin Shinawatra (ทักษิณ ชินวัตร), then the Prime Minister who viewed that homosexuality was a form of emotional disorder. (*Bangkok Post* (บางกอกโพสต์) April 12, 2001)¹⁷⁹ On July 5, 2005, Wirot Tangvanij, the president of the Rainbow Sky Organisation

¹⁷⁹ Cited in <http://www.globalgayz.com/country/Thailand/view/THA/gay-thailand-news-and-reports--4>.

addressed his intention to run for the senator position in 2006 and to rally for the legislation of same-sex marriages in Thailand. (*Phuchatkan* (ผู้จัดการ) July 6, 2005)¹⁸⁰ On the same evening of the matrimonial ceremony between Mr. Wutthipong and Viber in Chiang Mai, Natee Teerarojjanapongs also informed the reporter from *Khaosot* that:

“The marriage between two men is not illegal. Both men are proud of their same-sex love and are brave to reveal it. The couple’s openness (about their love) is crucial in providing the social understanding of same-sex love and is likely to contribute to the future social acceptance.” (op.cit.)

Mr. Wutthipong, one of the grooms, also stressed that he had realised that:

“I understand that Thailand is not open to same-sex marriages but I will sign up the petition with the ‘Gay Political Group’ to present it to both representatives and senators to consider the issue of rights, freedom and equality because we are not breaking any laws.”

On October 4, 2008, Natee Teerarojjanapongs announced in the academic conference, titled *the Media of Gay and Kathoey in Thai Society*, that the coalition of sexual diversity would start signing up at least 20,000 signatures to petition the parliament to legislate the same-sex marriages (*Matichon* October 6, 2008)¹⁸¹.

The movement for legalisation of same-sex marriage by Thai LGBT right activists seems to have been put on hold for the time being due to the political unrest in Thailand for the past 3 years. The cultural tolerance of homosexuality in Thailand can be said to have substantially contributed the negotiated public space of Thai LGBT people in Thai society. Since 1997, the implementation of

¹⁸⁰ The full report can be retrieved from http://news.sanook.com/crime/crime_14626.php.

¹⁸¹ The full report can be retrieved from http://www.matichon.co.th/matichon/view_news.php?newsid=01p0121051051.

the People's Constitution which introduced the concept of equality and respect to human dignity has also enable Thai gay men to exercise their rights to be treated equally with their straight counterparts, but further social and legal progresses are yet to materialise the imaginable equality for Thai LGBT people.

Conclusion

Disregarding the social tolerance of homosexuality, Thai homosexuals are still subjected to social prejudices and often socially collective pressure to conform to the heteronormative gender/sexual values. However, there are certain indications marking the gradual changing attitudes towards homosexuality. Crucially, there is a noticeable sign that not only Thai gay men but also Thai straight men and women have developed an awareness of their entitlement to human rights. These changes, to some extent, may be seen as the result of the Thai state's successful campaigns to modernise its citizens through the successive selective adoption of Western education and culture since the nineteenth century, as I have previously discussed Chapter five. However, compared to their Western counterparts, Thai homosexual men and women have yet to achieve the genuine social recognition of their same-sex relations. Despite the guarantee of equality and non-discriminatory treatments by the 1997 constitution and the successive 2007 constitution which extends the definition of sex to include a diverse range of sex, gender and sexuality, Thai gay men and women still do not legally exist.

Up until now, there are no laws supporting equal rights of Thai homosexuals, for example, civil partnerships, the right to the next of kin and so forth. Socially, homosexual behaviours are often criticised by Thai authoritative

figures as I have discussed earlier in the case of the cultural ministry. Although Thai society is 'quite open' for people with non-normative genders and sexualities to share the public space, these gender and sexual minorities are constantly subjected to indirect social pressure to redefine their gender expressions and sexualities within the heteronormative frameworks in the public space. The Thai LGBT organisations also seem reluctant and, to an extent, self-restrained to push forward the political agenda for the development of equal gay rights into the Thai legal system and to challenge the heteronormative values. Their strategic negotiation with mainstream society, having earlier discussed, seems to epitomise the contextual sensitivity or *kalathesa* that requires the smooth transition without direct confrontation.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Demystifying the Social Tolerance of Homosexuality

Epilogue

On December 18, 2008, the Argentinean ambassador, Jorge Arguello, read out a statement of the draft declaration on sexual orientation and gender identity on behalf of 66 signatory countries at the United Nations General Assembly. The statement, initiated by France and the Netherlands, reaffirms the principle of the universality of human rights, established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and calls for non-discrimination regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. The document says,

“We urge states to take all the necessary measures, in particular legislative or administrative, to ensure that sexual orientation or gender identity may under no circumstances be the basis for criminal penalties, in particular executions, arrests or detention.”(P.26, UN GA/10801)¹⁸²

The unprecedented submission of the gay rights declaration to the General Assembly of 192 member states, reported by the international press¹⁸³, prompted the swift opposition from 57 countries, also co-sponsoring the rival statement. The Syrian representative read out the opposing statement which says:

“We note with the concern the attempts to create ‘new rights’ or ‘new standards,’ by misinterpreting the Universal Declaration and International Treaties to include such notions that were never articulated nor agree by the general membership.” (*Reuters* December 18, 2008)¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² The full press report of the 63rd United Nations General Assembly Plenary Session, 70th & 71st Meetings can be retrieved from <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/ga10801.doc.htm>.

¹⁸³ The press reports of the General Assembly meetings on gay rights resolution can be retrieved from the following new agencies:

- 1) Reuters at <http://www.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=USTRE4BH7EW20081218>;
- 2) France24 at <http://www.france24.com/en/20081219-UN-homosexuality-gay-rights-discriminisation-human-rights>.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

The press also reported that the 66 signatories of the draft declaration included member states of the European Union, Brazil, Japan, Israel, Canada, Australia, but China, Russia and the United States refused to endorse the declaration. (*France24* December 19, 2008)¹⁸⁵ Thailand was one of the 69 United Nations member states that abstained from signing the United Nations General Assembly statement calling for the world-wide decriminalisation of homosexuality (Paisarn Likhitpreechakul (ไพศาล เลิศลิขิตปรีชากุล) *The Nation* January 9, 2009 and April 3, 2009)¹⁸⁶. It is worth noting that the United States, under the present administration, decided to reverse its predecessor's policy and joined the other 66 countries which supported the U.N. statement, condemning human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity on March 18, 2009 (*Reuters* March 18, 2009)¹⁸⁷.

Despite the article 30 of Thailand's present constitution, prohibiting the discrimination on the basis of sex, including sexual diversity and gender identity, there are still no laws or legislative movement to ensure the equality and non-discrimination of LGBT people in Thailand. Although the coalition of sexual diversity had submitted the formal petition to the Foreign Affairs Ministry to sign up to the proposed human rights declaration on 4 December 2008¹⁸⁸, Thai government's refusal to accede the United Nations General Assembly statement calling the decriminalisation of homosexuality and non-discrimination based on

¹⁸⁵ op.cit.

¹⁸⁶ Paisarn Likhitpreechakul's article, called 'No to Non-discrimination is a Silent Nod to Violence,' published in *The Nation* on January 2009 can be retrieved from <http://www.sapaan.org/article/80.html>; while his other article, called 'Without equality, tolerance for gays is just a myth,' publishing in *The Nation* on April 3, 2009 can be retrieved from <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/print.php?newsid=30099543>.

¹⁸⁷ The full report can be retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/domesticNews/idUSTRE52H5CK20090318>.

¹⁸⁸ Pictures and details of the meeting between representatives of the coalition of sexual diversity and officials from the Foreign Affairs Ministry can be seen on <http://sapaan.org>.

sexual orientation and gender identity can be said to show that the so-called Thailand's tolerance of homosexuality may be just a myth, noted by Pisarn Likhitpreechakul (op. cit.).

Demystifying Thai Social Tolerance of Homosexuality

Although Thai LGBT groups have been substantially campaigning for social acceptance of homosexuality in Thailand for the past decade, a tangible achievement is yet to be seen. Having discussed in the epilogue, the failure of Thai government to support the proposed UN declaration of universal human rights on sexual orientation and gender identity can be interpreted that Thai authorities are not ready to honour the constitutional equality of people with non-normative gender and sexual identities. The extended meaning of 'sex' in the article 30 clause 3 of the 2007 constitution to include 'sexual identity' and 'sexual diversity' appears rather meaningless without any laws or legislative initiations to recognise the equality of non-normative gender and sexual identities by Thai authorities and most importantly Thai society. After talking with foreign ministry officials regarding the Thai government's position not to support the gay declaration, the coalition of sexual diversity was informed that the decision not to support the draft declaration was made because the Thai government had recognised the sensitivity of this issue among 'Muslim nations' and therefore decided not to endorse the declaration. (Personal communication with a staff of the coalition of sexual diversity on 3 April 2010)

If 'social tolerance' (Thai – *kan/khwam otthon otklan thang sangkom* – การ/ความ อดทน อดกลั้น ทางสังคม or *khantitham thang sangkom* – ขันติธรรมทางสังคม) means a social attitude which allows the existence of diversity or

differences from the mainstream, Thailand's abstention from voting on the gay declaration as well as the decision not to include sexual diversity in the main body of the article 30 clause 3 of the 2007 constitution can be argued that Thai society is not actually tolerant of differences, particularly sexual diversity. The incidents I have discussed in the prologue and the epilogue might be said to affirm this observation. Regardless of the increasing visibility of sexual minorities in Thai public arena during the past three decades, homosexuality is still not socially accepted and therefore is not allowed the official recognition in Thai public discourses.

Having discussed in Chapter four, Thailand's superficially observed tolerance of *kathoey* and gay men might be said to have derived from the Thai Theravada Buddhist influence of non-confrontational attitude. Although the popular Buddhist belief that being born with homosexual inclination and/or transgenderism is considered as a repercussion from past misdeeds can be argued to contribute to social compassion for ill-fated sexual minorities in Thailand, the Buddhist assumption that these people deserve a low social status because of their sexual misconducts in past lives, to some extent, emphasises the social disapproval of same-sex relations. In other words, it is not because of the same-sex attraction these sexual minorities were born with, but rather the failure to conform to heteronormative sexual practices that is being criticised.

Disadvantages of Sexual Identity Politics in Thai Society

It is undeniable that Thai LGBT right groups have drawn their political inspiration from their Western counterparts. However, political campaigns for social acceptance by Thai LGBT rights groups as I have discussed earlier

emphasise an influential aspect of *kalathesa* or contextual sensitivity in the negotiation for social inclusivity of sexual minorities. That is, unlike Western LGBT rights activists, Thai LGBT rights groups do not explicitly challenge the heteronormative supremacy but rather ask for social acceptance and understanding of people with non-normative gender expressions and sexual identities as discussed in Chapter six and Chapter seven.

Since its emergence in Thai society in 1965, the self-identifying label *gay* remains problematic due to its negative association with prostitution and the murder case of Darrell Berrigan as noted in Chapter three. *Gay* has also become a colloquial word for excessive sexual desires in the contemporary popular discourse. As sex and sexuality are regarded as 'unsuitable' topics for public discussions in Thai society, publicly identifying as *gay* would breach this cultural norm due to the negative sexual imagery attached to *gay* identity.

In Chapter seven, I have shown that Natee Teerarojjanapongs' public campaigns for social acceptance attract not only public attention to social inequality and discrimination, Thai gay men have faced, but also criticisms from conservative Thais and some Thai gay men, who blame Natee's public campaigns for an increasing intolerance of homosexuality. Natee's preference to be referred to by the press as 'gay Natee' is often criticised as his desire to become famous. To some extent, his tactic to be publicly labelled *gay* violates a Thai sensitivity regarding a taboo against public discussions of sex and sexuality. His public reference as *gay* Natee intentionally brings the usually unspeakable issue back into the spotlight. This probably causes the social 'dislike' or *mansai* (หมั่นไส้) against him and more or less gay men in general.

Having discussed in Chapter six, the public image or *phaplak* (ภาพลักษณ์) of being a good person can be said to further the social tolerance of same-sex relations in Thailand. Natee's early social project, *kunla gay*, or good gay, to some extent, exemplifies this observation. Natee often emphasises his belief with the press that the social acceptance of homosexuality can be achieved by the positive presentation of gay men in the public space. Natee often expresses his disapproval of some gay men who publicly display hyper-effeminacy as he claims that non-normative gender expressions are considered 'inappropriate' in the public space. However, his rigid definitions of how to be a good gay highlight his intolerance of the diversity of gender expressions among gay-identified men.

The invention of new terms for homosexuals i.e. *yingrakyiing*, coined by *Anjaree*, the Thai lesbian group, in the 1980s and *chairakchai*, adopted by a Thai gay men in the 1990s, respectively, can be argued to reflect Thai lesbians and gay men's adherence to Thai cultural sensitivity in negotiating their social acceptance. By using the word *rak* (lit. love), Thai lesbians and gay men implicitly challenge social prejudices against same-sex relations that they can also form long lasting and romantic relationships like their heterosexual counterparts and most importantly avoid any negative sexual imagery, associated with lesbian and gay identities.

Whilst calling for social acceptance of Thai LGBT people, Thai LGBT right activists sometimes risk losing the social compassion for same-sex relations if they publicly challenge Thailand's heteronormative discourses. Yonlada

Koekkong¹⁸⁹ (ยลดา เกริกก้อง), the president of Transfemale Alliance of Thailand (*Krueakhai Satri Kham Phet Haeng Prathet Thai* - เครือข่ายสตรีข้ามเพศแห่งประเทศไทย) lost her cool image while participating in a television talk show, called *Woody Koetma Khui* (วุฒดี เกิดมาคุย) in February 2010¹⁹⁰. Her preference to be called *phuying kham phet* (ผู้หญิงข้ามเพศ) or *satri kham phet* (สตรีข้ามเพศ), to some extent, caused sensational debates not only among television viewers but also among Thai Internet users.¹⁹¹ Rather than identifying herself as *kathoey* (กะเทย) or *saoprophet song* (สาวประเภทสอง) which are more familiar to most Thais, Yonlada explained that she was born a woman but was 'sick' (*puai* - ป่วย) because she was born with male genitalia. She stressed that she was completely 'cured' (*dairap kanraksa haikhat* - ได้รับการรักษาหายขาด) after her sex-reassignment operation. Yonlada also asserted that she was a 'complete woman' or *phuying doi sombun* (ผู้หญิงโดยสมบูรณ์). Her notion of *phuying kham phet* is considered new and unfamiliar for Thais. The host of the programme, Wuttitorn Milintaiinda (วุฒิทร มิลินทจินดา) asked Yonlada if she wanted to be famous or *yak dang* (อยากดัง). Yonlada replied that: "certainly, I want what I have said to be heard...I want everybody to understand what *phuying kham phet* is" (*naenon kha* Nok (her nickname) *yak hai sing thi Nok phut dang kha...Nok*

¹⁸⁹ Apart from being the president of the Transfemale Alliance of Thailand, Yonlada is a successful business person. She is a jewellery designer and owns a cable T.V. channel, called Jewellery Channel. She graduated from Thammasat University. She was a singer in a girl band, called *Venus Fly Trap* and awarded the title of Miss Alcazar in 2005. Miss Alcazar beauty contest is one of several beauty contests for Thai transgenders and transsexuals.

¹⁹⁰ The first episode was broadcasted on February 21, 2010 at 10.30 p.m. and the second episode was broadcasted on February 28, 2010 at 10.30, respectively on Thailand's Modern Nine T.V.

¹⁹¹ On nights of February 21 and 28, 2010, a number of discussion threads on *facebook*, an Internet social networking site, regarding Yonlada's standpoint of being *satri kham phet*, not *kathoey*, received overwhelming attention. A lot of my facebook friends widely participated in the discussions. Most people questioned whether the category of *phuying kham phet* actually exists.

yakhai thukkhon ru wa phuying kham phet keu aria – แน่นอนคะ นกอยากให้สิ่งที่นกพูดดังคะ นกอยากให้ทุกคนรู้ว่า ผู้หญิงข้ามเพศคืออะไร).

Yonlada explained that she too identified herself as *kathoey* or *saopraphetsong* when she was younger but the reason she now called herself *satri kham phet* was because she did not want to be associated with socially negative images i.e. flirtatiously stutty or *raed* (แรด), attached to *kathoey* and *saopraphetsong*. Yonlada was also challenged by a transgender viewer in the studio who asked how Yonlada could claim that she was currently a woman since she did not have her menstruation nor she could have a baby. Yonlada quickly responded by asking that viewer if she thought women who entered the menopause and infertile women should have been called men. Yonlada was swiftly cautioned by another talk show participant, Mum Laconic (มัม ลาโคนิค), a transgender singer who identifies herself as *kathoey*, that Yonlada was too stubborn (*danthurang* - ดันทุรัง). Yonlada's position of being a woman since she was born was also questioned by another participant, Chim Sara (จิม ชาร่า) or Nopparat Nilswan (นพรัตน์ นิลสุวรรณ), a Thai transsexual performer who identifies herself as *saopraphetsong* or *kathoey*. She told Yonlada that she should have been called transmale not transfemale since she was born a male and later became a female after the operation. Unlike Yonlada, she argued that she did not think that she was sick since she viewed her transsexualism was not a disease. Yonlada aggressively replied that Chim Sara was wrong and should have written to W.H.O. (World Health Organisation) to tell them that they were wrong. Until the end of the programme, Yonlada's position was repeatedly discredited by talk show participants and the host regarding this issue of

'genuine' womanhood although the show participants and the host eventually agreed that Thai society should have been more open-minded and should have recognised the gender and sexual diversity. (*Woody Koetma Khui*, February 21 and 28, 2010)

It is unfortunate that Yonlada's aim to bring public attention to social discrimination against *satri kham phet* was overshadowed by her 'aggressive' and 'stubborn' responses on this television programme. Although Yonlada's arguments are reasonable and well-founded, Yonlada mistakenly raised her voice aggressively and insisted on her superior reference from W.H.O. Having discussed in Chapter five, Chapter six and Chapter seven regarding the notion of *kalathesa*, Yonlada lost her temper in the public discussion and therefore did not present a positive image of *satri kham phet* to the general public. If she had been able to control her voice, the audiences might have been prepared to listen to her standpoint.

The notion of *satri kham phet* seems rather confusing for the talk show participants and viewers due to Thai notion of *phet* as I have discussed in Chapter three. Yonlada should have been more specific that she was born with female gender identity or female gender perception, which did not correspond to her biological sex and genitalia (gender dysphoria), and therefore she was treated for gender identity disorder.

Similar to *gay* Natee's tactic, Yonlada's presentation on television has raised public attention to social issues of sexual and gender peripheries but has also stirred up controversial debates regarding Thai heteronormativity. The discussions on this television programme regarding the genuine qualification of

womanhood underlines what I have pointed out in Chapter six about the rigid definition of ‘genuine’ womanhood that focuses on not only biologically female genitalia but also the reproduction ability discussed by the talk show participants.

It might not be wrong to say that Natee and Yonlada share similar tactics of assimilations. They both attempt to keep in line with the social expectation of gender normative expressions and thus unwittingly exclude certain gay men, *kathoey* and *saopraphetsong* who view that there is nothing wrong with their non-normative gender performances since they would fail to meet specifications of being *kunla gay* and respectable *satri kham phet*, set out by Natee and Yonlada, respectively.

The increasing representation of non-normative gender expressions and sexual identities in the mainstream media during the past decade does not mean that homosexuality is becoming accepted. The proliferation of *kathoey* and *gay* characters in Thai cinemas and television series often draws criticisms from conservative Thais who critique the public display of sexual minorities as ‘inappropriate’ since their ‘misgendered’ representation may confuse ‘impressionable’ Thai youths. Having mentioned in Chapter six, a number of publicly ‘open’ Thai gay celebrities criticise Thai gay men’s public display of non-normative gender behaviours but encourage Thai gay men to positively behave themselves for becoming equally valued members of Thai society.

It might not be wrong to say that while Thai LGBT have increasingly appropriated Thai public discourses, the presence of sexual minorities might be said to provoke the social ‘dislike’ or *mansai* (หมั่นไส้). The critical comment made by Phon (พน – pseudonym) in *Lae Nangthai* (แลหนั่งไทย - lit. watching

Thai films), a film review column in *Matichon Sutsapda* (มติชนสุดสัปดาห์ - *Matichon Weekend*) issue 1429 on January 4, 2008¹⁹², perfectly describes the anti-homosexual sentiments in Thai society. In his article, 'Love of Siam: (I) have questions along the way' (รักแห่งสยามมีคำถามตลอดทาง – *Rak Haeng Sayam: Mi Khamtham Talodthang*), Phon is very critical of the film, particularly the controversial scene in which two teenage male protagonists passionately kissed each other. Phon asserts that:

“I do not have personal bias against these people. I enjoy gossiping with kathoey friends because I really like their rich and fun vocabulary. Their over-feminine behaviours often make me laugh because they can do what I want to do but I do not dare to do it. They can talk on issues that I only dream about but I am not brave enough to speak about it. I can be friends with kathoey, gays and lesbians. I do not discriminate against them. They do not disgust me as long as our 'homosexual' friends do not behave in such a way that threatens social principle. However, Thailand is not such a place where these misgendered people (*phuak phit phet* - พวกผิดเพศ) can announce that we are such a place...If there is any place suitable for being the capital of third sex people, that place is not Thailand, or Siam as many *farang* (Westerners) know. Similar to the majority of Thai people, I can accept this misgendered issue. It does not disgust me. But, of course between the normal and the abnormal, I would rather feel more comfortable with the first category.”

Phon's emphasis of having no 'personal' bias against homosexuals reflects Thais' attitudes towards sexual minorities. Unlike homophobic abuse in other societies, violent attacks on *kathoey* or gay men are rare in Thailand. The proliferation of comedy or horror Thai *kathoey* and/or *gay* themed films as I have discussed in Chapter six, epitomises what Phon said about his friendships with *kathoey* friends whose gossiping and over-feminine characters have made him laugh. For Phon, as long as *kathoey* and/or gay men maintain the social expectation of being 'camp', sexually adventurous, etc, he would be content to tolerate the socially 'abnormal behaviours'. However, once these sexual

¹⁹² Cited in <http://www.sapaan.org/article/76.htm>.

minorities behave like 'normal' people, for example, falling in love, publicly expressing same-sex affection such as kissing or forming a monogamous relationship, Phon would not hesitate to criticise what he sees as destabilising the heteronormativity. Nevertheless, as Phon has explained, Thais are not yet ready to imagine the existence of homosexuals as a 'social group' who is equally valued as heterosexual men and women.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that Thailand's popular image of being a gay paradise is a myth. I have shown that the increasing visibility of Thai gay men in the public space does not mean that homosexuality is socially accepted in Thailand. Although Thais are reputedly tolerant of same-sex relations, Thai gay men are often subjected to social pressures, demanding them to conform to the public presentation of hetero-normative gender and sexual identities.

In this thesis, I have investigated the discursive power relations in the construction and reproduction of male homosexual identities in Thai public discourses. By examining the institutionalisation of sexual periphery of same-sex eroticism in the Thai sex/gender paradigm, I have also argued that rather than applying direct challenges against the social misrepresentation of homosexuality and demanding the legal recognition of same-sex relations as their Western counterparts would have done, Thai gay men appear to be content to negotiate the social integration within the heteronormative framework. It can be contended that Thai gay men's politics of negotiation has substantially opened up a discussion for social acceptance of homosexuality but has also unwittingly

hindered a full social dialogue regarding the materialisation of equality for people with non-normative gender and sexual identities.

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