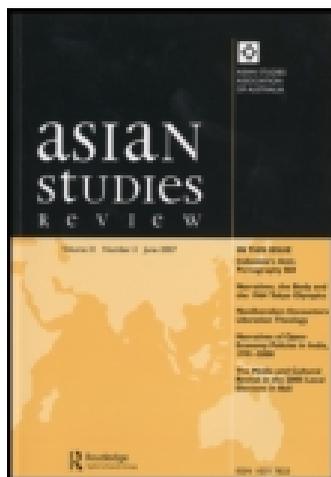


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# *Kathoey* “In Trend”: Emergent Genderscapes, National Anxieties and the Re-Signification of Male-Bodied Effeminacy in Thailand<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *In Thailand, genderscapes, or the terrain of gender and sexuality, continue to evolve quickly, with male-to-female transgenderisms and effeminate gay identities proliferating alongside masculine ones. The previous coding of kathoey in popular discourse as being traditional is shifting to one that identifies “kathoeyness”, or male effeminacy, with modernity. Recent incidents point to a discursive shift based on a purified nostalgia for Thai “tradition”, which excises kathoey presence. In this article, I consider how social evaluation and moral legitimacy underscore the contemporary terrain of gender/sexuality and contradictory attitudes towards kathoeyness. I describe how the increasing visibility of male effeminacy provokes national anxiety, becomes associated with degeneracy, and is used to excise non-normative gender from recent reconstructions of Thainess.*

**Keywords:** *Thailand, male effeminacy, transgenderism, homosexuality, gender panic, modernity, tradition*

The blockbuster film *Iron Ladies* (2000, dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon), about a team of *gay* and *kathoey* (male-to-female transgender) players that won the national men’s volleyball championship, kick-started an explosion in the portrayal of male effeminacy in the Thai media.<sup>2</sup> The state, previously self-conscious about the androgyny of its female population (see Jackson, 2003), is now discomfited about a male population that is deemed too feminine. In the following, I document the way in which elite discourses delimit gender diversity, associate male effeminacy with indecency, and continue to promote standardisation into two gender-normative sexes.<sup>3</sup>

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In exploring the cultural politics of naming and transformations in meaning ascribed to people identified as *kathoey*, I provisionally use the term “kathoeyness” to refer to transgender women and effeminate *gay*, or male-bodied effeminacy, more broadly.<sup>4</sup> First, I describe the contemporary “genderscape”, or the conceptual distribution of gender/sexuality forms in fields of uneven power. I contend that genderscapes provide a better conceptualisation of how gender categories are grounded but also fluid in everyday life. The lines between the categories *tom*:*woman*:*kathoey*:*gay*:*man* are neither clear nor fixed, but coalesce around these key formations.<sup>5</sup> I also argue that social evaluation and moral legitimacy underscore the contemporary terrain of gender/sexuality. Then, I examine contradictory attitudes towards kathoeyness. I focus on the social anxiety around kathoeyness because those born male who show effeminacy (อภิศาร: *ork-sao*) are the subject of government and media censure.<sup>6</sup> The increasing visibility and acceptance of kathoeyness incite and enable conservative attacks because effeminate males are viewed as detrimental to national identity and reproduction.

### Contemporary Thai Gender and Sexuality

In this section, I review the literature on the Thai gender and sexuality system and propose conceptualising it as a “genderscape”. Gender/sexuality categories are neither essential nor constant arrangements. They are culturally and historically specific, socially structured and structuring, but also tactically employed, resisted and manipulated. Furthermore, gender does not operate in isolation, but interacts with other forms of social difference. Class, moral status and experience need to be highlighted in understanding Thai gender/sexuality because they shape the legitimacy afforded to various forms and everyday practices.

Morris (1994) contrasts a traditional Thai three-sex system with a modern four sexuality system. She argues that the Thai ternary of man, woman and *kathoey* (กะเทย) is increasingly being replaced by four modern Western sexualities based on the two binaries of male:female and homosexual:heterosexual, which create the four positions of female-heterosexual, female-homosexual, male-heterosexual and male-homosexual. According to Morris, these systems coexist but are incommensurable, and thus the “modern” system is replacing the “traditional” one. In contrast, Jackson and Sinnott argue that Western sexual identities are indigenised through local conceptualisations of gender, thereby multiplying gender categories.<sup>7</sup> They emphasise that sexual desire is an extension of gender identification rather than there being separate domains of gender and sexual orientation.

Based on the historical analysis of texts, Jackson (2000) asserts that there are at least ten gender terms commonly used in contemporary Thai discourse. He charts how the three categories of man, *kathoey* and woman have proliferated into man, *seua bai* (male bisexual); *gay king*, *gay queen*, *kathoey* (transgender), *kathoey plaeng phet* (transsexual), *khon sorng phet* (hermaphrodite), *tom*; *dee*, and woman respectively. Yet, the categories of salience that I documented in everyday talk are those that are visibly distinguishable by outward appearance, namely: man, effeminate *gay*, *kathoey*, *tom*, woman. For *kathoey*, transgenderism is made visible via sartorial practice, cosmetic use, bodily comportment and language (Thai uses gendered particles that mark the speaker as male or female). Bisexual men are

generally said to be *gay*, but ashamed (อับอาย: *ap-ai*) to identify themselves in that manner. *Dee* and masculine *gay* express gender normativity. Thus *dee* are only discernible when with their *tom* (masculine female) partners and masculine *gay* are said not to “show” (แสดงออก: *sadaeng-ork*). That is, their gender conformity masks same-sex preference. Importantly, as public display of affection is considered impolite, non-normative sexuality is generally not apparent while non-normative gender presentation is. Thus, only effeminate *gay*, *kathoey* and *tom* noticeably do not conform to gender norms; and among them, *kathoey* are the most stigmatised.<sup>8</sup>

In Thai, *kathoey* is a general term encompassing all third gender categories, theoretically referencing all non-normative gender presentations and sexualities beyond heterosexual male and female. But in practice, *kathoey* seldom refers to female-bodied individuals, regardless of their gender expression. In cosmopolitan Bangkok, among the middle classes, *kathoey* only refers to male-to-female transgender persons – that is, transgender women.<sup>9</sup> *Gay* are typically offended when others refer to them as *kathoey*, though the term is used for in-group joking and accepted when outside Bangkok, as rural individuals are considered not to know better. People identified as *kathoey* may also be offended by the term as it can be used as a put-down. There are numerous words that are considered more polite or respectful. Thus, if a person who is not *kathoey* is in the presence of one, she might use a term like สาวประเภทสอง (*sao praphet-sorng*: second category woman). As discussed below, in February 2010, the term ผู้หญิงข้ามเพศ (*phuying kham-phet*: transsexual woman) was promulgated.<sup>10</sup> However, most *kathoey* use the term among themselves or simply use สาว (*sao*: young woman).<sup>11</sup> The borrowed English term “ladyboy” refers to *kathoey* who are cabaret performers, beauty pageant contestants and bar-based sex workers. Some *kathoey* consider “ladyboy” distasteful as it upholds the stereotype that they are prostitutes and thus inherently indecent and criminal. *Kathoey* are also differentiated by their operative status. But many *kathoey* consider it offensive to be asked whether they have had sexual reassignment or gender confirmation surgery because they feel their identity does not need to follow their genitalia.

*Gay* are further characterised by age and effeminacy (ตุ๊ด: *tut*, sissy or queen; ตั๋ว: *taeo*, sissy; สาวๆ: *sao-sao*, girly; อีแอม: *ee-aep*, a feminine person who presents masculinely in public). These terms are usually not labels of self-identity but are used as insults or for in-group joking. Use of the terms “king” and “queen” in relation to *gay* is now considered passé, perhaps because gender presentation has become independent of preferred sexual positioning (แบบ: *baep*) and *baep* is often flexible depending on the partner.<sup>12</sup> *Gay* rather matter-of-factly disclose their *baep* (รุก: *ruk*, penetrate; รับ: *rap*, receive; โป๊ท *bot*, versatile; สลับ: *salap*, reciprocate or alternate) as most Thais would their age. These are among the first questions one might be asked upon meeting a stranger in a *gay* venue or online. However, *baep* does not constitute a public identity.

Along the continuum of *kathoey-gay*, distinction making occurs at both ends. Masculine *gay* refer to effeminate *gay* as *tut*, *kathoey* or *ee-aep*, individuals who would be *kathoey* given the opportunity. Post-operative transsexuals differentiate themselves from those who have not had surgery. They say they have already become women and often assume they pass (even when they do not), confident in the alignment of their essentially female mind and body. At the same time, there is

fluidity between *gay* and *kathoey* categories, both in identity and sartorial practice. *Kathoey-noi* (กะเทยน้อย: little *kathoey* or just a little transgendered), for instance, use make-up like women but dress in men's clothing. *Kathoey-noi* are not transgender; they are not *gay*; they are an in-between category.<sup>13</sup> Some *kathoey* become *gay* and vice versa, though the former is more prevalent. As *kathoey-kathoey*, *gay-kathoey* and effeminate *gay* pairings become more common, the disgust associated with similar-gender coupling is diminishing. New terms such as *sao-siap* (สาวเสียบ: penetrating girl, referring to *kathoey* who are active in anal intercourse) and *tom-gay* (a *tom*, masculine female, in a relationship with another *tom*) describe variations that incorporate putatively discordant gender expression and sexual practice. These changes point to the breakdown of the heterogender sexual matrix, in which only sex between individuals of “opposite” genders is socially acceptable.<sup>14</sup>

Everyday Thai does not distinguish between sex, gender and sexuality (เพศ: *phet*). In English we say “gay man”, with “gay” sexuality modifying “man”. But in Thai, “gay” is already a noun so that one is either “gay” or “man”. Thus, one can say “I am a gay” or “I am a man”. However, these are not exclusive categories and there is a recognition that sexual desire does not have to follow gender identification.<sup>15</sup> For example, one can say the two in sequence, as in *ผมเป็นเกย์ ผมเป็นแมน* (*phom pen gay phom pen maen*) to emphasise that one is a masculine gay man. Bee, who is *gay*, once told me: *ผมไม่เป็นเกย์ ผมเป็นแมน* (*phom mai pen gay phom pen maen*: literally “I am not gay. I am a man”; Personal communication, 29 July 2004) to stress that he does not see himself as effeminate at all, since the term “gay” can suggest effeminacy, as in *เกย์มากเกินไป* (*gay mak-koen-pai*: too gay). In the statement *ไม่เป็นรุกไม่เป็นรับเป็นเกย์* (*mai pen ruk mai pen rap pen gay*: He's not top or bottom, he's gay) the term is referencing sexual versatility. Thus the term “gay” is polysemic in everyday use, variously referencing effeminacy, masculinity or sexual versatility in different contexts. These examples show that while gender and sexuality are linked, they can be distinguished from one another. Further, *phet* terms are not isomorphic with identities. Neologisms and variants do not necessarily constitute new forms; they can be situationally employed or used to label others and make fine distinctions.

Class, education, geography and *phet*-identification also affect how people conceptualise gender/sexuality categories. In particular, moral stance can override other classificatory schemes, as was evident from a pile sort exercise I conducted.<sup>16</sup> Respondents were asked to think aloud while making their taxonomic decisions. Individuals used a variety of factors in creating groups: anatomy, gender expression on a male-female continuum, romantic attraction, common/normal/natural status, and personal experience. I was not surprised when an early free list by a man in his 50s returned two items: man and woman. I was, however, taken aback when he created two piles: man and woman in one called “normal” and the rest in another called “abnormal” (*ผิดปกติ*: *phit-pakati*). I had erroneously assumed that man and woman were counterparts and would remain in separate piles because I failed to account for the moral valence attached to *phet* categories.

Gender classification is not an amoral process. *Phet* are defined by factors that are variously invoked by different people, situationally dependent and experientially based. Instead of seeing Morris's, Jackson's and Sinnott's interpretations as orthogonal, I suggest that the three are complementary. Class, generation, rural/urban upbringing, moral stance, personal experience and context mediate how the

local repertoire of gender/sexuality is practised and labelled in relation to differential exposure to market mechanisms, bureaucratic institutions and cultural forms.<sup>17</sup> That is, social positioning and life opportunities condition how Thais inhabit *phet*. Furthermore, I argue that gender forms are increasingly interpolated by the moral valence attached to their normativity. These concerns not only expand the terrain of gender/sexuality but also force a reconsideration of their topography. I suggest that *phet* should not be enumerated individually. That is, gender/sexuality categories are not fixed to four modern sexual positions. Nor are they proliferating with each new addition of a term. Rather, *phet* cluster around several key forms (man, woman, *kathoey*, *gay* and *tom*), which may or may not be publicly visible, and which shift over time. Furthermore, as Thais use different criteria to assess *phet* (e.g. anatomy, sartorial presentation, desired partner, normality, personal experience), their classifications vary widely, and the boundaries between groups overlap. For example, *phuying kham-phet* (transsexual women) are variously grouped with men (based on anatomy at birth), women (based on post-operative anatomy, social presentation or desired partner), or *kathoey* (based on their being transgender or “not-normal”). Conceptually, the framework Thais use to think about these differences is conditioned by social experience. There are multiple stances and layers to the evaluation and categorisation of gender/sexuality. Thus, I argue that the multidimensional nature of Thai *phet* is best conceptualised as a localised genderscape, a terrain of archetypes in which fields of power, morality and experience shape its continually shifting boundaries over time. And, at this moment, male effeminacy is considered a threat to Thainess (ความเป็นไทย: *khwam-pen-thai*).

#### “In Trend”: New and On the Rise

A precursory *kathoey* form of some kind predates *gay*. However, as Jackson (1997a; 1999a; 2003; 2009) has argued, the modern *kathoey* is not a predecessor to *gay* but emerged concurrently vis-à-vis the regulation of Thai gender norms, particularly in dress. The Thai state proffered and enforced sexual differentiation as a means to show its civilisational status and to resist colonial encroachment (van Esterik, 2000). In particular, the androgyny of Thai women in Western eyes compelled the state to require their feminisation in dress, hair and behaviour (Jackson, 2003). This polarisation of femininity and masculinity is the very mechanism of bio-power that makes cross-dressing and transgending more legible. That is, the fixing of masculinity and femininity enables greater possibilities for their transgression.

*Kathoey* today are clearly a different form of transgender personage from that which existed in the past. Yet middle-class urban Thais consider the *kathoey* form an archaic predecessor to *gay* in Thai culture, possessing an indigenous quality of local distinction. In particular, “ladyboy” cabarets are commodified by government and private agencies for foreign tourists to demonstrate the “amazing” character of Thainess, an exotic place with an institutionalised third gender. However, as *kathoey* themselves note, their beauty often requires the utilisation of modern medical technology such as hormones, Botox and surgery. Younger urban *kathoey* refer to themselves as กะเทยสมัยใหม่ (*kathoey samai-mai*: modern *kathoey*) in contrast to กะเทยควาย (*kathoey khwai*: country bumpkin *kathoey*) – older, more androgynous

*kathoey* who are not as graceful and polished in the arts of modern feminine expression. These comments suggest that a discursive shift is occurring in the way in which kathoeyness is construed in popular media and everyday life. Increasingly, *kathoey* are being referred to as new and modern rather than traditional and anachronistic.

When I started preliminary fieldwork in 2004, middle-class heterosexuals would often refer to *kathoey* as strange and embarrassing. I would often ask people the question: how many *phet* (gender/sex) are there in Thailand? They would look at me as if I had just landed from the moon. The response was invariably two. When I followed up with a question about *kathoey*, the response was often, “Oh yes, there are those people, ha, ha, ha”. Such discussion would often elicit giggles among women. If I asked for any other *phet*, a short list of gender/sexuality types would emerge, typically including *gay* and *tom*, but not *dee*. Thais readily acknowledged that Thailand is known for having a large transgender population, often citing the North as a region with a particularly large number. Among middle-class Thais, there was some embarrassment about having so many *kathoey*, a sense that kathoeyness was backward compared to being *gay*, another feature that showed Thailand lagging developmentally behind other countries.<sup>18</sup> In their minds, the presence of *kathoey* literally demonstrated that Thailand had not succeeded in civilising gender.

For the middle class, modern *gayness*, which is often said not to “show” because of its normative masculinity, was clearly more cosmopolitan than kathoeyness. *Kathoey* are almost always portrayed as comic, criminal or tragic in the media, as if those are the only life trajectories possible for them. However, since the September 2006 military coup that toppled the government of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, which attempted to censor kathoeyness on television, there has been an explosion of more balanced and humane representations of *kathoey*.<sup>19</sup> For example, in the summer of 2009, the Rainbow Moon (พระจันทร์สีรุ้ง: *phrajan si-rung*) drama series focused on a storyline in which a *kathoey* raises a child. In order to give the son a better life, she sacrifices her transgender identity by reverting to living as an effeminate man. *Kathoey* are increasingly participating in talk shows, not as eccentric personalities but as able advocates for greater social understanding and human rights. The new representational diversity creates a more positive valence to kathoeyness by constructing a new “stage” (เวที: *wethi*) or observational framework and social space (พื้นที่: *pheun-thi*).<sup>20</sup>

This expansion of sympathetic *kathoey* representation is not uncontested. The increase in depictions of kathoeyness is assumed by most Thais to reflect their increasing numbers in society, though this media presence more likely reflects greater openness to alternate gender expressions. In the Thai context, public surfaces and face are highly valued and regulated without the need to refer to private behaviour, interiority or truth (Mulder, 1997; Morris, 2000). Ousted Prime Minister Thaksin had many social campaigns to recreate Thai society. In 2004, his Minister of Education stated that the number of *kathoey* on television should be limited. Similar restrictions were proposed in the 1990s and have been implemented in the latter part of the twentieth century (see Jackson, 2002; 2004). Popular media images that do not uphold Thai respectability or values are often suppressed by government censors.<sup>21</sup>

Kathoeyness is said to endanger the very existence of society. The fertility rate is lower in Thailand than in the United States, China and all other developing countries in Asia. Paired with the onslaught of media from Korea and economic liberalisation, elite commentators enflamed a gender panic proposing that Thai society and culture are threatened by *kathoey*. In nationalistic discourse, the expansion of kathoeyness is linked to a pathologising discourse, expressed as a loss of Thainess and the inability of Thai society to reproduce itself. The historical legacy of anti-imperialist national projects continues to act as a regulatory force of sex normalisation. However, now the concern is with the virilisation of masculinity.

### **Best Friends: The Dearth of Men**

Current discourse about kathoeyness resonates differently for women. Middle-class women seek *kathoey* companionship and style, but at the same time identify them with the general demise of suitable romantic partners. This ambivalence reflects the multifaceted aspects of kathoeyness in contemporary Thai culture. Many creative industries such as design and personal beautification are dominated by *kathoey* and effeminate *gay*, who are perceived as artistic and innovative, generating new trends in fashion, entertainment and slang. Kathoeyness is also essential to heterosexual romance. Weddings, for example, are said to be better if *kathoey/gay* are involved in designing costumes, doing hair and make-up, making decorations and preparing food. *Kathoey* also provide relationship advice for women, who say that *kathoey* understand both sides of a partnership and thus offer better counsel.

Nevertheless, heterosexual women also experience *kathoey* trendiness as a problem on a personal level. In Thailand, female labour participation is nearly equal to that of men. There are many single women who are working to financially support themselves, and often their parents and younger siblings. This is particularly true of migrant women from less developed areas of the country (Muecke, 1984; Mills, 1999). Many of these women are surrounded by *gay/kathoey* friends and rely on kathoeyness for their beautification practices. However, women note the difficulty this creates in finding a husband, as kathoeyness reduces the eligible pool.<sup>22</sup> According to Ple, a teacher in her late 20s who is anxious about getting married:

It's hard to find a husband. There are no men available. If you take out those who are already partnered to women, those who are *gay* [the estimates I get are typically in the 20–30 per cent range], those who are physically maimed or mentally disabled, those who are monks, and those who are conscripted into the military, who is left? (Interview, 11 May 2009).

The increasing popularity of kathoeyness is said to produce a shortage of *ผู้ชายแท้* (*phucha thae*: real men).<sup>23</sup> Additionally, *gayness* is seen as easily adopted. Cake, the manager of a small hotel who frequents *gay* bars, states:

It's easy to be *gay* now. Some *gay* people are born that way, but most are not. They are attracted to being *gay*. It's a glamorous lifestyle, so people want to try. They wear nice clothes; they go to Silom [an area of Bangkok with an international *gay* clientele]; they see how easy it is to find a partner. They try it

out and think: I like this, I can do this. So they become *gay*, especially if they are from the North [looking over at her *gay* friend from the North]. Northerners are softer anyway, so they produce more *gays*. In some villages, half the men are *gay* (Personal communication, 3 May 2009).

In this description, being *gay* is easy, fun, popular and freely-chosen, qualities that facilitate sexual re-orientation. Cake articulates that *gay* identity is socially produced through experimental enactments and trials in a metropolitan context in which being *gay* is fashionable. Additionally, Cake suggests that being *gay* is culturally facilitated by a pre-existing “soft” Northern masculinity.<sup>24</sup> Her narrative represents the views of many women who feel that the bachelor pool is declining because of the proliferation of *kathoey*ness. However, an account of male sexual fluidity also leaves open the hope for the possibility of converting *gay* into boyfriends.

The reduction in the pool of eligible men is especially bitter since heterosexual women suggest that *gay* would be ideal romantic partners, except for their sexuality. Furthermore, *gay*ness is problematic in that it does not necessarily “show”. So *gay* can use women to maintain their gender normativity by maintaining girlfriends and families. Kate, a recent MBA graduate in marketing, states:

You can't tell who is *gay*. I told my friend to be careful, because, it could be like in the movie *Metrosexual*.<sup>25</sup> Many of her friends think that her boyfriend is *gay* but she refuses to believe us. We are just trying to protect her from being hurt (Interview, 4 August 2009).

When I asked Kate how you can tell if someone is *gay*, she replied that there are numerous signs a woman can look for. Being *เรียบร้อย* (*riap-roi*: polite, well groomed), paying attention to detail, particularly in relation to clothing, and having good manners are the most prominent. Kate also describes two other strong indicators of *gay*ness: performance and gym membership. Being a singer, dancer, actor, model, presenter or show contestant and wittiness are associated with *gay*ness, as *gay* are generally considered better with entertainment and repartee than heterosexual men. Regarding the gym, Kate rhetorically asks: “Why would a [straight] man want to go to the gym? Who's going to be looking at you?”<sup>26</sup> Kate, like many other women, portrays *gay* as an idealised partner, a man who is “too perfect”. This status, however, is experienced as a loss. Many women believe that *gay*ness is a desirable identity for men, one that is actively chosen. But as *gay* popularity increases, the pool of potential marriage partners for heterosexual women decreases.

### ***Kathoey* Rising: Visibility, Normalisation, Backlash**

Thais, regardless of gender/sexuality, say that there is a massive proliferation of *gay*, *kathoey* and *tom*. One of my best friends, Wan, a *kathoey* in her mid-30s from Isan (the Northeast region), often states that “I was the first *kathoey* in my village”. This assertion struck me as strange because I imagined there must have been *kathoey* who preceded her since there is a history of *kathoey* in Thailand. I have travelled with her to her home village three times, and people have confirmed that she was the first

*kathoey* that they can remember. Before, villagers were quite hostile to *kathoey*, until Wan and a few others showed themselves as *kathoey*, dressing and living as women.<sup>27</sup> Now there are approximately 10 adult *kathoey* in her village, one of whom was married to a man in 2009 in a day-long celebration attended by several hundred guests. Both sets of parents gave speeches about their happiness during the wedding. There are also several *kathoey* children. When I asked one 10 year-old's mother when her male child had started expressing herself as a girl, the mother replied: "Since birth. When s/he started talking, s/he used 'คะ'" (*kha*: the female polite particle; Personal communication, 24 October 2010).<sup>28</sup> But this increased acceptance has only occurred since around 2000. Wan only began to live as a *kathoey* after the death of her father, who was a respected village leader. Others soon followed, and transgenderism became a visible part of village life. Thus, Wan feels that the situation for *kathoey* is improving rapidly.

Wan also notes that the number of *gay* in her village is increasing, though their normative masculinity renders them relatively invisible and uncontroversial. Villagers simply refer to men and women; the distinction between the two is based on outward presentation. However, when someone is verbally identified as *gay*, the reaction is often: "I didn't know s/he was a woman". Such comments show that villagers perceive sexuality in terms of a gendered desire. For most villagers, a *gay* is someone who appears like a man, but is actually a woman based on their จิตใจ (*jit-jai*: mind/heart or inner being), their desire for male partners. One of Wan's friends, who used to be *kathoey* when living in the provinces but has since become *gay* after moving to Bangkok, overheard our discussion. He commented: "Before, things were bad for us, but now it is getting much better" (Personal communication, 19 June 2009). The repetition of an improved situation for the "third gender" has become a refrain among Thais of all genders.

When Thais are asked why there are so many *kathoey* in Thailand, the typical response is that Thai society accepts (ยอมรับ: *yom-rap*) them.<sup>29</sup> When asked why *kathoey* are accepted, the typical response is that there are so many of them. This appears to be circular logic. But, I argue that such comments describe a ratcheting up effect. That is, as the number of *kathoey* increase and their representations proliferate, they become socially normalised. With an increasing number of media representations of specialised events such as *kathoey* beauty contests and commonplace interactions with *kathoey* in daily life, Thais, both urban and rural, have become accustomed to seeing and being around *kathoey*. With their increased visibility and occupation of social space, more *kathoey* are daring or courageous (กล้า: *kla*) to "show" themselves, to literally wear their identity on their bodies. Indeed, while there is relatively little political activism among gender minorities in Thailand given their numbers, effeminate *gay*, *kathoey* and masculine *tom* engage in a form of personal activism in presenting themselves as gender non-normative. This "showing" expands civic tolerance (เปิดกว้าง: *poet kwang*) but comes with social and material consequences, such as potential peer and family rejection (especially among Sino-Thais and Muslims) and workplace discrimination.

Despite improving social acceptance, the increased visibility of *kathoey* incites gender panic, a backlash in disciplinary discourses and institutional practices, which attempt to standardise two heterosexual sexes, such as an attempted prohibition on *kathoey* teachers (Morris, 1997; Sinnott, 2000). Recent news reports often suggest

that the trendiness of being *kathoey* is contagious and linked to the ruin of nature and the upending of the natural, a consequence of modern problems such as environmental degradation and the breakdown of the family. Such discourses shift the aetiology of transgenderism from religion to popular science. Historically, being *kathoey*, *gay* or *tom* was understood in Theravada Buddhist terms. Being differently-gendered was not considered a lifestyle choice but the consequence of previous karmic infractions, most notably adultery (see Jackson, 1998). Thus the *kathoey* must suffer in this lifetime. This karmic view is a widely held belief among most Thais, including *kathoey/gay/tom* themselves. Media widely consumed by educated and middle-class Thais, however, are increasingly locating the source of kathoeyness in “science”, or popular interpretations of findings that are more often misappropriations and sensationalistic renderings. The discourse on science typically starts with newspaper reports and is then widely circulated via radio, television, film and online. This media suggests that kathoeyness is a genetically or hormonally based condition based on “natural” variation or, more often, environmental causes, including toxins in the water, air pollution and overuse of plastic. The social causes of kathoeyness include lack of a father-figure, over-attachment to mothers and sisters, lack of warmth (ความอบอุ่น: *khvam-op-un*) in the family, going to an all-boy school (where romantic experimentation with other boys can occur), habituation through sex work with men, and watching too much television at a young age. An early sign of kathoeyness is said to be the desire to play with girls rather than boys in childhood, often described as a preference for dolls over balls (sports). Generally, Thais consider these factors to be out of the control of the “mis-gendered” (ผิดเพศ: *phit-phet*) individual, as opposed to the trendiness and experimentation noted by Cake above. However, poor parenting and lack of appropriate role models are often blamed. *Kathoey* and *gay* sometimes subscribe to the karmic and environmental causes of their effeminacy, although they often state that they themselves do not have any of these risk factors and are more likely to consider their kathoeyness genetic, based on either their desire to be intimate with men or their early exhibition of feminine behaviour.

### “Wonder Gay”: Mitigating Contagious Sissyness

In Thailand, there is a widespread belief that media have a strong influence on shaping social norms. Government policy encourages sanitising visual representations in the hopes of moulding normative behaviour. Practices that cause harm are considered contagious, particularly among youth, as characters on screen are associated with glamour and star power. Television and film are thus rated according to age. Certain behaviours are censored or masked (digitally distorted). When characters smoke or drink alcohol, the objects are visible, but when characters place the items against their mouths, the contact is blurred.

The Ministry of Culture (MOC), which is responsible for rating and monitoring film, television and the Internet, believes that viewers will unquestioningly imitate what they see. Sacrilegious, politically sensitive and culturally inappropriate themes (e.g. nakedness, walking over furniture) are concealed. In 2010, the MOC Film Board banned *Insects in the Backyard* (2010, dir. Tanwarin Sukhapisit), which

focused on a *kathoey* father and her children, for being against “public morals” (i.e. male frontal nudity, matri/patricidal ideation, and prostitution). In rejecting the request for a 20<sup>+</sup> age rating, MOC officials told Tanwarin that Thais are not able to think for themselves at any age. The Ministry rejects the idea that viewers have the capacity to interpret or resist media messages.

In the discourse on communicable kathoeyness, males are thought to have little resistance to becoming effeminate or homosexual, which justifies the bureaucratic regulation of “infectious” imagery. The case of Wonder Gay is particularly salient. In 2009, a group of five high-school students from an all-boy school, who self-identify as *tut* (sissies), created a video for the popular song ‘Nobody’ for a contest to win free tickets to the sold-out Wonder Girls’ concert in Bangkok (Interview, 12 February 2011).<sup>30</sup> Pai, the leader of the group, posted the video on YouTube to share with friends and it went viral, becoming the most popular YouTube cover song from Thailand to date with nearly five million hits.<sup>31</sup> The popularity of the video attracted the attention of Zheza Records, one of Thailand’s two major record labels. Wonder Gay signed a record contract and promoted themselves through a national concert tour. Yet their popularity provoked criticism that such displays encourage other boys to become effeminate.

In an interview on the influential Channel 3 *Breaking News* talk show (เจาะข่าวเด่น: *kor khao den*, 2 June 2009), which was widely re-circulated via newspapers, television news clips, and online, the host highlights many of the social concerns of Wonder Gay critics, namely that they are inappropriately representing Thainess and that their popularity will encourage other boys to become sissy like them. The host then establishes that they are good students, which suggests that they are good teenagers and good role models. But the focus on academic performance as a measure of “goodness” presumes that their effeminacy is already corrupt and that what is at stake is Thai masculinity. The interview goes on to discuss the setting of the YouTube clip. In the video, Wonder Gay are wearing public school uniforms on a school stage in front of the flagpole. This site is used daily for students to receive announcements and sing the national anthem. The stage is a sacralised site that holds special honour and inculcates national pride.

The host then asks about the social acceptance of their behaviour:

Interviewer: Do you think society can accept this?

Pai : There is a good and bad side. We tried to do our best; we just did what we like to do. We didn’t ask anyone to copy us.

Interviewer: Some may say that your behaviour is very shameless [shows that you are *gay*] and children may copy you. What do you think Drive [another member of the group]?

...

Interviewer: What did your parents say?

Mix: Yes they did say something. But they still know that we are good students, we are not addicted to drugs or computer games. After school, we still do our homework and hang out with friends and practise our dance.<sup>32</sup>

In this exchange, what is important is that the boys assert their morality through being good students. They are not delinquents and are not promoting their gender/

sexuality. Subsequently, they note that they do not have the full support of their parents in being *gay*. But they do have the support of their school in their dance activities, as physical recreation is a productive use of their free time.

The students also state that, having signed a record deal, they need to improve their singing and make their dancing “more masculine”. Wonder Gay understand that people criticise the way they dance. But they respond that: “We don’t care; we just think we use our free time well. And we don’t cause any problems”. Thereby, they establish their morality as good teenagers. The interviewer then continues to ask about their school scores and their career aspirations. Again, such responses affirm that the boys are upright. They have career aspirations outside the entertainment industry, which is morally suspect. They emphasise that their dance activities do not interfere with their studies because they practise on their days off. The host concludes with the statement: “This group is still young. They don’t look very mature like in their clip. They just get together and do what they like and now it depends on society whether to accept them or not”. The show ends with a performance by Wonder Gay. The *Breaking News* show affirms Wonder Gay as proper boys via their academic achievements while at the same time condemning them for their gender performance. Thus, the show reiterates their ambivalent status as “good gays” – homosexual individuals who use their moral standing to achieve individual social acceptance independent of a communal gay identity (Jackson, 1995).

Following a reflexive model of media, *Breaking News* suggests that Wonder Gay’s popularity will encourage other boys to become effeminate: you become what you see. People on television are stars, so everyone will want to copy them. Additionally, Wonder Gay are performing in school uniform, on a school stage, in front of the Thai flagpole, so their behaviour is considered representative of the nation. Finally, their performance is not just effeminate but mimics Korean femininity. That is, Wonder Gay imitate a foreign style, which perpetuates Thai anxiety around lack of originality and masculinity. Their actions are said to inappropriately represent Thainess and devalue the image of Thais in the eyes of foreigners, who are also consuming the YouTube video. Many comments about the clip are concerned about the demasculinisation of the nation in international eyes. Using terminology reminiscent of the “Korean Wave” (กระแสเกาหลี: *krasae kaoli*), the opening credit sequence of *Breaking News* refers to Wonder Gay as the “Third Gender Wave” (กระแสเพศที่ 3: *krasae phet-thi 3*). In this sense, the loss of Thai masculinity is linked to globalisation and a lack of national development, where Thailand is positioned as the recipient of foreign cultural flows. In elite nationalist and political discourse, male effeminacy is considered oppositional to Thai tradition, a form of modern degeneracy that is abnormal and foreign in origin.

### “I’m Sick”: Therapeutic Citizenship among Transsexual Ladies

For more than two decades Thai activists have mobilised, using various strategies, to secure sexual diversity rights. In a turn of events, after years of work on depathologising homosexuality and disassociating it from HIV/AIDS, Nok Yollada is using medicalisation as a new tactic.<sup>33</sup> Nok is a beauty pageant winner and television personality turned celebrity activist. She has started a foundation called

the Trans Female Association of Thailand (สมาคมสตรีข้ามเพศแห่งประเทศไทย: *sama-khom satri kham-phet haeng prathet-thai*), which provides funding for gender confirmation surgery and advocates on behalf of post-operative transsexual women's rights, specifically in regard to changing sex designation on national identification cards. Nok has become a controversial figure among *kathoey* because she is promoting the term *phuying kham-phet*, which she defines as “trans[sexual] female”, and the idea that transsexualism is a disease.<sup>34</sup> Nok promulgated her neologism on a two-part program of the popular *Woody Talk Show* (วู้ดดี้เกิดมาคุย: *wutdi koet-ma khui*) that aired on Channel 9 on 21 and 28 February 2010.<sup>35</sup> Citing the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases, she argues that she suffers from gender identity disorder: she is transsexual and the treatment for this disease is gender surgery, which she has undergone. Thus, Nok argues that she should be recognised as a complete woman.

Nok promotes this medical model to assert that transsexuals are not sick in the sense that they are degenerate but rather are disabled and therefore entitled to certain rights. The right to officially change one's sex would allow *kathoey* to legally marry and adopt children and facilitate international travel. In part, Nok's argument rests on the claim that Thailand is backward because it does not accept the legitimacy of this disease, unlike other less developed or more conservative countries in the region, which officially recognise sexual reassignment.<sup>36</sup> Though gender variation was considered in the re-writing of the last Constitution (2007),<sup>37</sup> the Thai government continues to recognise only two sexes, assigned at birth and unalterable.

In private, Nok has told other activists that she does not believe she has a disease, but she is using therapeutic citizenship as her political strategy to get rights from the state (Personal communication with Hua Boonyapisompan, 2 March 2010).<sup>38</sup> Her argument shifts the discourse from minoritarian rights to medical treatment and health rights. Yet, this rationale simultaneously reinforces the hegemonic state institutionalisation of two sexes. Donut, who is a member of Nok's foundation, prefers to be called *phuying kham-phet* because it recognises her current post-operative status. After she married her husband (socially not legally), his parents paid for her gender surgery. Surgery legitimises their relationship by re-signifying her as a “real” woman.

This political strategy has caused controversy among *kathoey* because groups such as Thai Transgender Alliance or Thai TGA (เครือข่ายเพื่อนกะเทยไทย: *khreua-khai pheuan kathoey thai*) are working to de-list gender dysphoria from US and international psychological diagnostic criteria (as homosexuality has been), which are currently under revision.<sup>39</sup> At its founding meeting, after a long debate, Thai TGA consciously chose the term *kathoey* because of its broad applicability and as a means of reclaiming a positive valence for the term (Observations, 28 February–2 March 2010). In particular, the network resisted the term *phuying kham-phet*, arguing that it is based on a medical model in which a disorder requires psychotherapeutic, pharmaceutical and surgical intervention. Hence it pathologises transgender identity. Thai TGA has hosted several events that aim to respond to Nok's refashioning of transsexuality, although they have received less media attention. A common protest sign during gender rights marches reads: *kathoey* are not mentally ill (กะเทยไม่ใช่โรคจิต: *kathoey mai chai rok-jit*). However, Nok's formulation of transsexuality has changed the ideoscape of *kathoeyness*.

In promoting the new term *phuying kham-phet* or *satri kham-phet* (transsexual lady), Nok is attempting to remove transsexualism from moralist discourses in favour of medical ones. The goal is to conceptually move *phuying kham-phet* from the sphere of *kathoey* to that of women. This framing overlooks a cultural history of transgenderism specific to Thailand and instead seeks its legitimacy via international bodies such as the World Health Organisation. Doing so solidifies a new kind of *kathoey*, the transsexual, with purely modern roots based in human genetics and psychiatric guidelines, thereby deserving “universal” human rights. *Phuying kham-phet* is potentially more inclusive than *kathoey plaeng-phet* (post-operative *kathoey*) because it incorporates a pre-operative state. Yet, recasting transsexualism as a health condition requires Nok to create a clear boundary between transsexual and transgender, of which only the former can be helped medically. Furthermore, the rights Nok is seeking are reserved for those who are post-operative, leaving behind those transgendered individuals who do not seek surgery or those who cannot afford it (in 2011, her foundation paid for five surgeries). Re-signifying the *kathoey* as “lady” obfuscates its negative moral valence while simultaneously supporting the modernist institutionalisation of two sexes.

### Erasing *Kathoey* from Tradition

This medicalisation of transsexuality seeks to create new associations that are based on disease and not on morality. Another shift in cultural discourse on *kathoey* is as a new, almost foreign, form of degeneracy, in contrast to a traditional role. *Kathoey* origins, both mythological and historical, are often associated with Lanna, the Northern region of Thailand. Yet, cultural and political organisations fervently dispute the appropriateness of *kathoey*ness in Chiang Mai, the heart of Lanna. Three major incidents indicative of the attempts to excise *kathoey* from Thai tradition took place in the course of approximately one month in February 2009.

The first issue concerns queeny monks and sissy novices (พระตุ๊ดเณรแต่ัว: *phra tut nen tao*).<sup>40</sup> Scandals arose over allegations that monks were having sex with novices, novices were prostituting themselves to *kathoey*, and novices were acting too effeminately. The monkhood is sacrosanct in Thailand. While monk practices are being reinterpreted for contemporary circumstances, it remains a conservative institution. Thai monks follow 227 rules of conduct, while novices follow 10. All males are expected to ordain for at least a short time to garner merit for their mothers to go to heaven. Additionally, men become monks in specific circumstances, such as when a close relative dies, to help them in their next re-birth. Although sexual misconduct is a major infraction, the focus of reports was on the inappropriate adornment of the novices. Neither monks nor novices are allowed to wear ornaments or use cosmetics. Less attention was paid to allegations of intergenerational sex or sex trade.

Sensational stories about monks' sexual activities have become standard fare in the news. However, this was not a story about an incident of misconduct, but rather a class of people who were debasing the institution of monkhood, which in Thailand is limited to men.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the behaviour was often publicly visible. Many Thais were outraged when print and television news showed pictures of sissy novices that were posted on the Internet and sent to friends via mass email. Novices were

sporting pink bags (as opposed to orange or brown ones) and tying their robes to produce empire and kimono-style waistlines. The inappropriate behaviour of these flamboyant novices extended to effeminate gestures and salacious poses in secluded areas or private rooms. There were newspaper reports, without accompanying photographs, of novices wearing false eyelashes, blush and lipstick. What was considered appalling about the images circulating on television and on the Internet was the visible effeminacy of the novices. The response was partially fuelled by the fact that the novices were observed by lay people, who often registered their disgust on web forums.

Natee Teerarotjanapongs exposed this story to the media at a press conference sponsored by the Task Force for the Preservation of Civilisation. Paradoxically, Natee is widely considered the father and spokesperson of the gay rights movement and an early leader in HIV/AIDS work with *gay*. From Natee's perspective, such behaviour both demeans traditional religious institutions and portrays *gay* negatively, as irresponsible citizens without religious propriety.<sup>42</sup> This media coverage, however, is problematic because it limits the opportunities of effeminate males to fulfil familial obligations to their parents via ordination. The result, collectively, is that effeminate boys and men come to constitute a class of individuals in need of gender rehabilitation. That is, *kathoey*ness is not simply a personal characteristic but a type that needs recuperation via disciplinary intervention.

In another incident that occurred at around the same time, *kathoey* were barred from riding floats during the Chiang Mai flower festival. Opponents to their participation stated that foreigners focus on *kathoey* in parades and associate them with Thai tradition. That is, in the international gaze, *kathoey*ness, among other characteristics, represents Thainess, or what makes Thai culture unique. This is thus confronted with the question of why there are so many *kathoey* in Thailand.<sup>43</sup> Alternatively, *kathoey* note that the "tradition" of a flower festival in Chiang Mai is only about 30 years old, and they are the ones who decorate the floats, as the wider community generally believes that their decorative skills are superior. In practice, parade rules restricting *kathoey* participation are typically not enforced. However, these regulations encapsulate symbolic battles over the legitimacy of *kathoey* in representing local traditions. The following year, *kathoey* were barred from participating in the Yi Peng/Loy Krathong festival. Natee sued the Chiang Mai municipality, stating that the policy was discriminatory. The local court agreed and overturned this regulation, stating that it violated human rights.

In the most violent confrontation, the second gay pride march in Chiang Mai in 2009 was attacked by a group of Red Shirt protesters under the name Rak Chiang Mai 51. The Red Shirts (UDD: National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship) are a popular political group, consisting mostly of the rural and urban poor, that supports former Prime Minister Thaksin. They claim the Abhisit administration came to power illegitimately and have thus called for the dissolution of the government and new elections. Allegedly, the gay activist Natee tipped off the UDD to this event. Counter-protesters carried their own banner saying: "Gay parade get out! Don't destroy our beautiful culture". Organisers were forced to take refuge in a nearby temple and the march was cancelled. Both Rak Chiang Mai 51 leader Petchawat Wattanapongsirikul and Natee stated that such events tarnished the city's historic culture and reputation.

The claim that is being made is that *kathoey* have no place in Lanna tradition or Northern Thai culture, and that kathoeyness is inherently debauched. In a televised debate with gay activist Pongthorn Chanlearn, Natee shocked other activists when he stated that the event would promote transgenderism and encourage the imitation of kathoeyness more broadly because of the lure of colourful costumes during the parade and a beauty contest afterwards. Natee argued that the contest, open to participants aged 15 and over, would influence the minds of young participants who were not able to think for themselves.

These controversies produce national identity as articulated through a reinforcement of traditionalised religion and morality, thereby policing gender expression and sexuality based on a heteronormative standard that did not previously exist (Morris, 2000; van Esterik, 2000; Jackson, 2003; Loos, 2006). In the pursuit of a nostalgic Thai culture, the past is being sanitised. Kathoeyness is said to be a part of contemporary Thai culture (วัฒนธรรม: *watthanatham*) but not part of Thai tradition (ประเพณี: *prapheni*). Excised from tradition, kathoeyness is being re-signified as modern degeneracy.

*Kathoey* are only one node in the Thai genderscape, and not the only “mis-gendered” category. Yet kathoeyness, in particular, is seen as a threat to the very reproduction of Thai society. Recent rhetoric expunges kathoeyness from the past, from Thai “tradition”, and renders it debased. Thus, while the contemporary existence of transgenderism is made possible through modern state intervention, constructed notions of tradition are used to delegitimise the very gender difference incited by such nationalist projects. Thai *kathoey*, rather than being an exemplar of a “traditional” or institutionalised third gender in Southeast Asia, are a shifting category good to think with regarding the cultural limits of gender pluralism (see Peletz, 2009). In the context of anxieties prompted by a perceived excessive national effeminacy, the re-signification of kathoeyness as a form of modern degeneracy reveals the moral contours of contemporary Thai genderscapes and their cultural politics.

## Notes

1. “In trend” (อินเทรนด์: *in-tharen*) is Thai slang meaning trendy, fashionable or popular. The term suggests that a style or phenomenon is expanding, but that it is not expected to be a permanent fixture of social life. “In trend” is the opposite of “out” (เอาท์: *ao*), and contrasts with terms such as *choei* (เชย: dated, uninteresting) and *ban-nok* (บ้านนอก: uncultivated, bumpkin).
2. *Iron Ladies* was the highest grossing Thai film at the time of its release.
3. This research is part of a larger project comparing how class structures Thai *kathoey* and *gay* men’s life opportunities, romantic partner preferences, and risk of HIV. Anthropological fieldwork consisting of participant observation, in-depth interviews and discourse analysis of media was conducted for 42 months between 2004 and 2011 with approximately 300 *gay/kathoey* informants and their families and friends. Emphasis was placed on Asian regionalism and East Asian cultural flows. The author is of Korean descent.
4. I use “male” and “male-bodied” to refer to the sex of individuals who were born male, regardless of gender expression or surgical status. “Transgender woman” refers to an individual who was born male but perceives of and presents herself as a woman.
5. “*Tom*” refers to masculine women who engage in same-sex relationships. Their counterparts are “*dee*”, feminine women in relationships with “*tom*”. The terms are derived from the English “tomboy” and “lady”.

Nouns from Thai are not modified to express plural form. That is, like the English word “sheep”, which variously denotes both singular and plural forms, the plural of “*kathoey*” is

“*kathoey*”. Thai transliteration is rendered in a modified version of the Royal Institute system unless a common or preferred rendering exists.

6. The media is not homogeneous or monolithic. For example, *kathoeyness* can be depicted positively in soap operas while being repudiated in news talk shows.
7. Jackson (2003) uses the term “eroticised genders” and Sinnott (2004) uses the term “gendered sexualities”.
8. While sexuality is understood as private and thus not subject to social condemnation, for gender non-normative individuals, sexuality is presumed to be an extension of their gender. With growing use of surgery, *kathoey* visibility is also decreasing as they increasingly pass as women.
9. Sinnott (2007) and Jackson (2000) have also documented the limited use of the term “*kathoey*”. Thai academics often refer to gender “fluidity”, as identities follow a developmental trajectory and situational positioning. Ocha (2008) differentiates between “half and half” (those who have either breast implants or neo-vaginas but not both) and “fully transformed” transgender sex workers. Prempreeda (2008) identifies five types of *kathoey*: post-operative transgender, pre-operative transgender, drag queen, penetrating-girl (active in sexual intercourse), and those who live part-time as transgender and part-time as men.
10. The earliest use of *kham-phet* to refer to transgender/transsexual individuals I have documented is from 2001. The term was popularised in academic and activist circles by Prempreeda at the 2005 Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: 1st International Conference of Asian Queer Studies. Subsequently, the term has been included in Thai dictionaries to refer to transgender individuals (คนข้ามเพศ: *khon kham-phet*) and biomedical gender transformation procedures and sex change operations (e.g. การกินฮอร์โมนข้ามเพศ: *kan-kin homon kham-phet*, taking hormones to change sex).
11. The term สาวทีจี (*sao thi-ji*: transgender woman), borrowing from the English abbreviation “TG”, appeared on the Thai Internet by 2008. The Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand publicly started to use the term in 2010. It is associated with activism, and particularly, HIV prevention work targeting MSM and TG (men who have sex with men and transgender women) in a public health context with development funding from Western nations.
12. *King* and *queen* have been taken up by lesbians in *les king* and *les queen*. See Sinnott, this volume.
13. *Kathoey-noi* are not uncommon. They are generally young, around 16 to 26, and are often said to be transitioning into a *kathoey* lifestyle.
14. For a discussion of the heterogender matrix, see Peletz (2006).
15. See also Storer (1999).
16. Pile sorts are a cognitive mapping procedure to understand how community members think about and attach meaning to different items within a conceptual domain. I began the exercise with a free list to identify the *phet* respondents conceived of as most salient. Up to 22 terms were then sorted based on similarity. If there were more than three initial piles, I asked participants to subsequently sort into three piles and then two piles, as I wanted to see if the 3-sex system would be reproduced and how genders in the third category, especially *kathoey*, would be categorised as males or females. There were 37 participants.
17. Van Esterik (2000) notes how working-class women avoided and resisted Thai bureaucratic pressures to conform to ideals of Western femininity.
18. This attitude is particularly prevalent among those educated in English-language medium international schools or abroad.
19. For a discussion of *kathoey* in Thai media, see Morris (1997), Sinnott (2000) and Käng (2011).
20. A parallel proliferation in representation has not occurred for *tom-dee*. At least in Bangkok, one could argue that *tom-dee* are more visible than *kathoey* and *gay*, in that they are often seen publicly holding hands as couples. They are, however, generally not considered threatening to normative gender in the same way that male same-sex couples are. For the ubiquitous presence of *tom-dee* in shopping malls, see Wilson (2004). *Yes or No* (dir. Sarasawade Wongsompetch), the first *tom-dee* romantic comedy, was released in December 2010.
21. The suppression of images often ultimately proliferates them through discussion of their censorship in newspapers, television and online. However, many representations continue to be expunged. Television producers self-censor because they can be fined retrospectively. Art films banned in Thailand are seen primarily by foreign audiences. The government routinely blocks

- websites deemed to threaten the monarchy, religion, social order or public morals. Pornography is illegal but distributed through black market channels.
22. *Kathoey*, however, are not considered direct competition for men. From the perspective of heterosexual men, *kathoey* are considered mistress material, not marriage material.
  23. My research project (Gender Pluralism, Social Status, and Asian Regionalism in Bangkok, Thailand) was approved by the Thai government. During a visit to the office, I was asked by the director to talk with her about my research. She stated that in Thailand only 70 per cent of the population were “real” men and women, while 10 per cent of females and 20 per cent of males were “not normal”. She suggested that my research on *gay/kathoey* would be better if I figured out a way to reduce their numbers. For population estimates see Käng (2011).
  24. Northerners are said to be soft and light-skinned, both of which are associated with femininity. Northerners are considered robust, dark-skinned and the most impoverished. Southerners are deemed hard, dark-skinned and often Muslim. This arrangement positions Central Thais as the norm.
  25. *Metrosexual* (2006, dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon) is a Thai film in which a group of women tries to prove to their friend that her fiancée, who is too perfect to be heterosexual, must be *gay*. The Thai title is แก๊งชายนีกับอีแอบ (*kaeng chani kap ee-aep*: Gang of Girls and the Closet Case). In Thai, “metrosexual” refers to *gay*.
  26. As gyms often have dedicated spaces for women, the main areas become highly homosocial. One of the most popular Thai *gay* websites, palm-plaza.com, accessed 10 February 2009, has a forum dedicated to discussion about gyms and the sexual activities that occur there.
  27. As in other parts of Asia, there is not an emphasis on “coming out” in Thailand. However, there is less emphasis on hiding one’s gender/sexual non-conformity than there is in Confucian Asian societies. Effeminate *gay* will often state that people know about their sexual orientation, even if they have not been told, because they “show” themselves.
  28. The third person singular pronoun in Thai is gender neutral.
  29. For a discussion of tolerance and acceptance, see Jackson (1999b).
  30. The Wonder Girls are an award-winning Korean girl band that swept the charts in many Asian countries in 2008.
  31. ‘Nobody – Ouz Wonder Girls (cover)’, posted by OuzKorPai on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=031N31B4EvM>, accessed 13 October 2011.
  32. The televised interview was recorded by the author. Translation of the interview is by the author and research assistant Ronnapoom Suparasamee.
  33. For a history of pathologising discourses on homosexuality and transgenderism between 1956 and 1994 in Thailand, see Jackson (1997b).
  34. Both *satri* and *phuying* mean “woman”. As *satri* is more formal and incorporates a sense of cultivation, I have translated it as “lady”. The important component of these terms is the use of *kham-phet* to mean “transsexual”.
  35. The second episode was watched by the author with a group of activists during the inaugural meeting of the Thai Transgender Alliance at a retreat on the outskirts of Bangkok.
  36. Nok claims that all other countries in Southeast Asia apart from Myanmar recognise sex change and that Thailand lags behind less developed countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia as well as more conservative countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. Positing Thailand as similar to Myanmar, which many Thais consider to be their national arch-enemy, plays on historical emotions.
  37. For more detailed analysis of legal issues, see Sanders (2011).
  38. I borrow the term “therapeutic citizenship” from Nguyen (2005) to describe human rights claims made on the state based on disease status.
  39. The Ministry of Public Health considered homosexuality a mental illness until 2002. In 2011, the military revised the language for *kathoey* exemption from conscription from “severe mental illness” to “gender does not correspond with the sex at birth”.
  40. Monks (*phra*) must be at least 20 years old and fully ordained. Those under 20 are referred to as novices (*nen*).
  41. Female monks in Thailand are not officially recognised by the *sangha*.
  42. Ordination rituals in some regions of Thailand use cosmetics. One monk has argued in lectures and on the *Pink Mango* cable television program (29 August 2010) that monks have historically

been able to wear a wide variety of garments. He uses historical photos of famous monks to show that the robes of these maligned novices are within acceptable limits.

43. Although the question can be framed with a positive valence (e.g. showcasing the tolerance of Thai society), typically it insinuates that Thailand is deficient in masculinity.

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