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Vernacularizing Trans Thailand

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02q5540s>

Journal

TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly, 5(3)

ISSN

2328-9252

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Publication Date

2018-08-01

DOI

10.1215/23289252-6901342

Peer reviewed

Vernacularizing Trans Thailand

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Queer Bangkok: Twenty-First-Century Markets, Media, and Rights

Edited by Peter A. Jackson

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. 320 pp.

Bangkok is a queer site good to think with. The Thai capital has one of the largest and most vibrant LGBT communities in the world, long in history and diverse in subcultures. The scene is simultaneously familiar and incomprehensible to foreigners. This makes Bangkok unique yet compelling for comparison. *Queer Bangkok: Twenty-First-Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, edited by Peter A. Jackson, is an important and exciting publication from the Hong Kong University Press Queer Asia Series. Jackson, whose work pioneered Thai sexuality studies, is both an editor of the series and a professor emeritus of Thai cultural studies at the Australian National University. The chapters are drawn from papers presented in the genders and sexualities stream of the Tenth International Conference of Thai Studies held in Bangkok in 2008. Contributors to the volume hail from ten countries (only one chapter is by scholars based in Thailand), with significant representation from junior scholars.

Queer Bangkok includes an introduction and thirteen chapters organized into three parts. Topics and methodologies include activism, ethnography, film and literary studies, legal analysis, attitudinal surveys, and public health intervention research. Part 1 tracks how market forces and media have buoyed and transformed Bangkok at the turn of the century into Southeast Asia's "gay capital." As Jackson notes, the dramatic expansion of queer (mostly gay) commercial spaces in Bangkok has occurred outside tourist zones. This makes the boom relatively invisible to foreign, and especially Western, observers. Part 2 examines Bangkok's central position in regional and global networks, as both a receiver and source of queer cultural transformations in Asia and beyond. This section astutely

recognizes that, in the early twenty-first century, LGBT inter-Asian connections and regional networks have become more important than ties and influence from the West. Part 3 addresses issues of social inequality and organizing around LGBT rights. This section highlights the persistence of discrimination and the limitations of sexual diversity organizing under Thailand's volatile political situation. A key goal of the book is to problematize the stereotype of a Thai "gay paradise" accepting open homosexuality, gender variance, and sex work.

Queer Bangkok outlines contemporary shifts in queer cultures, particularly in relation to the "Asianization" of queer Bangkok, or the increasing mutual influences of other parts of East and Southeast Asia on the political, economic, and symbolic realms of everyday life. Alex Au, for example, describes the essential role of Bangkok in the organizing and development of the gay community in Singapore. Bangkok has become the crucial node linking LGBT people in the region. But this is not just a matter of community size. Rather, it is about dynamic changes in the reorganization of Asia and the role of Asia in the world. *Queer Bangkok* thus emphasizes the processes of "glocal queering" in "Thai vernacular queer modernity," or the particularities of queer life that on the surface seem the same everywhere but in fact are highly localized. Nikos Dacanay, for example, describes the class and racial dynamics of gay cruising in saunas. In these spaces, middle-class Thai men may specifically avoid the advances of *farang* (Caucasian) men to avoid interpellation as sex workers. Thai genders, sexualities, and desires are not simply borrowings from "the West" (or East), nor resistant to them, but are dialogically engaged hybrid practices shaped by colonial-era and contemporary power relations, national discourses, and cultural resilience. This resonates with recent scholarship in queer Asian studies that explores cross-border, regional, and diasporic phenomena rather than modernization or Westernization (Wilson 2006; Sinnott 2010). *Queer Bangkok* exemplifies this trend in contemporary research.

Queer Bangkok builds on scholarship that decenters the West as the locus of progressive trans viability while interrogating the notion of a trans paradise and an essentialist trans solidarity across national, racial, and class divides. If studies of gay men are the foundation of Western queer theory, studies of *kathoeys* (the "third sex" and, especially, trans women) are a cornerstone of Thai queer studies. This is reflected in *Queer Bangkok*. Of the thirteen chapters, three focus on transgender issues and another five chapters explicitly include trans in the analysis. What is underrepresented is female-bodied genders and eroticisms, including *dee*, *les*, *tom*, and trans masculinities. Jackson notes that this reflects the underdevelopment of academic research on these subjects. Megan Sinnott's and Douglas Sanders' contributions do show that lesbian organizations, in particular, have been critical to LGBT activism in Thailand. In the remainder of this review, I highlight the primary contributions this anthology makes to transgender studies.

Thailand's "amazing" status includes its large, visible, and often spectacular transgender population, including kathoey kickboxing stars. Stéphane Rennesson's contribution, "Competing Cultures of Masculinity: When Thai Transgender Bodies Go through Muay Thai," argues that the popularity and mediatization of two kathoey *muay* Thai boxers in the late 1990s signifies the continuing self-civilizing management of gendered Thai bodies within Thailand and in the international gaze. Rennesson suggests that the participation of kathoey, who are more androgynous during their gender transition, in a hypermasculine sport, personifies contradictory cultural attitudes toward masculinity. Kathoey can exemplify both artistry in the beautiful management of bodies and morality in the control of male violence. Furthermore, as kathoey are seen as a national idiosyncrasy that differentiates Thais from the world, their boxing prowess can represent self-defense of the nation. Views toward kathoey may have evolved since this time. I have found that Thai attitudes toward kathoey are more ambivalent (Kang 2012). Kathoey, as a national idiosyncrasy, are also a national embarrassment, particularly in masculinist discourses about the strength of the nation. Serhat Ünaldi's assessment of the representations of kathoey in this volume also suggests that portrayals of kathoey in Thai cinema are becoming more positive.

Bangkok is the world leader in gender reassignment surgery (GRS) and a hub of medical tourism. In "The Romance of the Amazing Scalpel: 'Race,' Labour, and Affect in Thai Gender Reassignment Clinics," Aren Z. Aizura provides a highly nuanced account of GRS targeting foreigners. In addition to beliefs about the superior skills of Thai GRS surgeons, non-Thai trans women's Orientalist fantasies of Thailand and Thai women's ultra-femininity (promoted by clinic advertisements) might make a client believe that her transformation "over there" will be more successful, that she will become more beautiful. The care, nurturing, and transmission of affect provided to Caucasian patients facilitates "feminine-feeling" (147). However, the same level of service might not be provided to Thai and other Asian patients. Some racialized trans bodies carry more value and are provided more attentive service. The affective labor of producing trans subjectivities in these clinics thus brings nation, class, and race to the fore as they intersect with tourism, cross-cultural gender norms, and local histories of GRS. Aizura also complicates the exploitation of third-world caregivers and situates the study within a larger context of trans bodily autonomy, neoliberal health care, and Euro-American surgical cultures. Aizura acknowledges the variation in GRS clinics, including elite establishments (where he primarily conducted fieldwork), the only public hospital still providing GRS, and shop houses popular with Thais. Indeed, there is a three-tier system of (1) "international" grade, hospital-based, GRS and cosmetic services targeted toward foreigners from developed countries and wealthy Thais; (2) legitimate clinics that cater to Thais and lower-income

foreigners from places such as China, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Asia, and Africa; and (3) unlicensed practitioners that serve low-income Thais. Future research could include a comparison with the second tier, which caters primarily to Thais and trans women from developing countries, especially in relation to the use of affective labor.

Thai trans social psychiatrics are complex. Aizura notes that while GRS in Thailand does not require psychiatric assessment, surgeons catering to a foreign client base may require evidence of it to legitimize their practice along international WPATH Standards of Care. Yet, as both Sinnott and Sanders note in this volume, homosexuality has previously been classified as a psychological disorder and social problem. The Thai military stopped labeling trans women as severely and permanently mentally ill on *Sor Dor* 43, the military conscription fulfillment certificate, only in 2011 (the same year as the publication of this anthology). In “Transpeople (*Khon kham-phet*) in Thailand: Transprejudice, Exclusion, and the Presumption of Mental Illness,” Sam Winter asserts that the presumption of mental illness supports and promotes prejudice against trans people. Winter reports on research he has published on the attitudes and beliefs of undergraduate students in the Bangkok area. The figures he provides are surprisingly unsupportive of trans people in what is considered a relatively trans-tolerant society. Winter identifies the obvious bias of a young, educated, urban sample, but, as he also notes, in Thailand it cannot be assumed that this group is more open to transgender issues than other populations. Winter’s survey research, conducted in collaboration with other researchers in seven countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand), correlates the presumption of mental pathology with prejudicial attitudes and discrimination against trans women. The Thai sample follows this trend. Winter also reports on legal issues that affect trans people, especially trans women. The inability to reclassify their sex on identity documents proscribes marriage with partners of the same sex assigned at birth and the adoption of children, and it leads to employment discrimination.

Winter’s chapter, however, makes claims that are sometimes overly broad. He assumes that trans people cannot hide their identity the same way that gays and lesbians can. However, *tom* (masculine women who desire relationships with other women), *tut* (sissy or queen), and other gender-expansive individuals who “show out” (*sadaeng ork*) are also highly visible. Open gender nonnormativity, and subsequent social sanction, are not limited to trans people. Trans women in urban Thailand have experienced high rates of HIV, but since the mid-2000s the rates have been lower than those of gay men. At least two organizations, Sisters and SWING, have consistently targeted trans women, especially sex workers, with HIV prevention for over a decade. Winter questions where the presumption of

mental illness comes from but does not summarize its institutionalization and dissemination in Thailand and does not problematize Thailand's "gender pluralist" past. Without situating this history, a comparison with the West in which the former diagnosis of gender identity disorder was being increasingly scrutinized, Thailand is set up as "behind." Winter notes that Judeo-Christian and Islamic religion plays a role in trans prejudice in other parts of the world but changes topics before mentioning the role of Buddhism. Finally, Winter pays scant attention to trans women's organizing. Overall, the chapter gives the impression that Thailand is lacking on trans issues without providing adequate context (some of which appears in the preceding chapters by Sinnott and Sanders) to evaluate its specificity.

Queer Bangkok is a superb contribution to queer Asian studies. Its foremost contribution is its decentering of the West as the locus of queer globalization, cultural evolution, and political progress, especially through the elaboration of inter-Asian regionalism. Thailand remains a key site for trans studies. Cases in this anthology on sports, GRS, and mental illness expand our understanding of Thai trans issues locally and in transnational context. Aizura's contribution, in particular, is groundbreaking and provides a new model for theoretical innovation by employing intersectional analysis and affect theory in transnational contact zones. Potential Thai trans research could examine the regionalization of trans identities, media, politics, and practices. *Queer Bangkok* would be a particularly useful text to teach regarding non-Western trans and queer studies in addition to global and inter-Asia sexual flows. Individual chapters would also be particularly useful in covering topics such as capitalism and sexuality, ethnography of media, and the juxtaposition of nationalism and global forces in contemporary queer life.

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