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Eastern orientations: Thai middle-class gay desire for ‘white Asians’

Dredge Byung’chu Kang

ABSTRACT

Romantic partnerships affect local ways of thinking about and experiencing the self amid rapid economic, social and political change. In evaluating social status, Thais are reconciling local mores, Western gazes, and Asian cultural flows that shape sensibilities, aesthetics and desires. I show how middle-class gay men negotiate romantic partner preferences with East Asians or ‘white Asians’. While there is a body of scholarship that addresses Western influences on Thai gender and sexuality, little is known about the impact of East Asia. Following Ara Wilson’s (2004. *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City*. Berkeley: University of California Press) ‘intimate economies’ and her (2006. ‘Queering Asia’. *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context* N:14. Available online: intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html (accessed 15 March 2010)) call for studies addressing connections within Asia, I use macrosocial and ethnographic data to argue that Thailand’s geopolitical position, situated between wealthier and poorer countries in the region, constrains and enables new partner preferences. Specifically, there is a racialisation of Asianness and reorientation of desire away from Caucasian partners towards East Asian ones.

I’m sitting on the BTS, Bangkok’s Skytrain. The doors open. An older, large-bodied *farang* (ฝรั่ง white person)¹ enters and sits next to a young Thai woman across from me. She turns her body away from his, searches in her purse for her *ya dom* (ยาดม inhaler), and takes a deep sniff. She puts the inhaler back in her purse, tilts her body toward the Thai woman next to her, and looks down at the floor.²

How can we read her actions? Her turning away from the *farang* is a physical disassociation with him. The movement shows her unwillingness to be considered by others to be

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¹*Farang* is sometimes used more broadly to mean ‘foreigner’ (ชาวต่างชาติ *chao-tang-chat*), but typically refers to a Caucasian person. The term is least likely to be used for East and Southeast Asians, who are called ‘Asian’ or are referred to based on their country of origin. *Farang* is related to the Thai word for French (ฝรั่งเทศ *farangset*), numerous fruits and vegetables such as guava, asparagus, and potato that were introduced by European traders, and words used in languages such as Farsi, Arabic and Hindi that are derived from ‘Frank’ to denote European. A neutral term, *farang*, can also be used as a slur by itself or in compound words. For example, ฝรั่งขี้ถ่าย (*farang-khi-nok*, literally ‘bird shit *farang*’), refers to shabby-looking or ‘shoestring budget’ Caucasian tourists, such as backpackers. The term can also be used as a slur against another Thai in compounds like ฝรั่งจ๋า (*farang-ja*), which means a Thai who only likes Western culture or acts as if they are *farang*.

²Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 15 June 2006. I witnessed this behaviour many times. I also witnessed sex workers whose comportment (e.g., contorting their bodies to lean away from their partners) and affect (e.g., looking down, making sad eyes) demonstrated their displeasure in being with Caucasian clients compared to Asian ones.

his partner. When she inhales her *ya dom*, she is demonstrating her displeasure and stress in having been assaulted by the *farang's* proximity. Additionally, the use of an inhaler can be seen as a reference to her dislike of his scent. *Farang*, it is said, exude an odour. Like South Asians, their racial difference makes them inassimilable in the imagined Thai national body.³ Such behaviour exemplifies attitudes among middle-class Thais, a group striving to prove their status within the context of a middle-income country that has been labelled the 'brothel to the world'.

The new anthropology of love: Relationships across racial, class, and national borders

I came to this topic through earlier research on US 'rice queens', or gay men, typically coded as white, who have a strong and persistent attraction to Asian men. In earlier work, I triangulated data from participant observations, text sources such as online personal ads, and in-depth interviews to show how young rice queens portrayed themselves in idealised ways that are inconsistent with their behaviour (Kang 2005a, 2005b, 2006). Young white men often denied power differentials in their relationships by conceptualising power in terms of equity in beauty. Equivalences of beauty were the standard by which equivalences of power were naturalised. Partnerships of equal attractiveness were considered egalitarian, in contrast to couples where white partners were considered significantly older or less attractive. Yet these young rice queens failed to account for the fact that being Caucasian made them more desirable in the broader gay sexual marketplace than their Asian partners. Most importantly for them, young rice queens actively differentiated themselves from the stereotype of a rice queen, which typically referenced 'old, fat, bald' men who are caricatured as sex tourists, paedophiles and predators of young Asian men.

Given the stereotype of rice queens as sex tourists and the popular gay literature on Bangkok, I started to conduct research on sexpatriates – those rice queens who were so dedicated to their love of Asian men that they moved to Thailand. An early assumption I made was that Thai gay men would desire relationships with white foreigners, as is often reported in the personal accounts of rice queens themselves (Kang 2011), and is the dominant representation outside of Thailand. However, this proved not to be the case, especially among middle-class Thai men, who stated preferences for East Asians, as partnerships with Caucasians can mark Thais as low status (i.e., they are publicly interpellated as paid companions), while East Asian partners are associated with racial similarity, high economic status and new forms of Asian modernity.⁴ I thus began to refocus my research on class differences and how social status concerns mediate racialised dating preferences.

My project thus evolved to focus on how gay men and *kathoey* in Bangkok, Thailand, experience and negotiate romantic partner preferences in a globalising, and increasingly multipolar, world. Single Thais are often preoccupied with finding and maintaining *romantik*

³There is a significant population of Indians and other populations from South and Southwest Asia in Thailand. Many have risen to economic prominence, though few have participated in electoral politics. There are, however, many Thais who have extremely negative views of Indian people, while even at the same time following Hindu, Brahman, or other religious practices associated with India. Sex workers will sometimes refuse to serve South Asian clients. There is a common saying: 'If you run into a snake and an Indian in the road, deal with the Indian first.'

⁴Fieldnotes, Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, June–August 2004, June–July 2005, May–August 2006.

relationships. As male same-sex relationships typically do not involve child-rearing, the implication is that they are based solely on physical and emotional attraction free from family intervention. Yet, these partnerships remain acutely tied to kinship and status concerns. Affectional practices are not 'natural' or 'hard-wired' but rather shaped by shifting geopolitical alignments, economic development, national and foreign media, and travel and migration patterns; they are also negotiated through local conceptualizations of 'face', honour and family reputation (Ukosakul 2005b, 2005a). The desirability of particular kinds of partners is constructed through established social categories and hierarchies. I focus on how class-mediated interactions with foreigners (especially where the interaction is not with white Westerners but with other South East and East Asians) and discourses around relationships with foreigners constrain and enable new sexual subjectivities and social mobilities.

I have situated this work primarily within the new anthropology of love, which explores everyday practices of sexuality in constant negotiation with global capitalist processes drawing upon fields such as kinship, transnational migration and sex tourism (Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Padilla et al. 2007; Jankowiak 2008). Social position and geography play a strong role in structuring desire for heterosexual Japanese in the crafting of selves. New self-making opportunities and the desire to escape local gender constraints motivate Japanese women to travel overseas and to seek white male partners both at home and abroad (Kelsky 2001). Women's 'occidental longings' are thus simultaneously shaped by resistance to local gender hierarchies and recognition of global white male hegemony. From the Japanese perspective, the only way for a woman to marry up the global order is to marry Caucasian. All other Asians, being from countries less developed than Japan, are considered less desirable mates. Japanese women thus participate in an imagined international sphere, where Japanese are the only non-Caucasian participants. 'Their agency in "choosing" [white men] is always mediated by larger forces of attraction and repulsion that increasingly operate through the mechanisms of the global marketplace', vis-à-vis advertising, media, women's personal narratives, discourses on the inadequacy of Asian men, experiences of local gender oppression, and desires for social advancement (Kelsky 2001: 10). On the other hand, rural Japanese men have come to idealise Filipinas as model brides, who are more traditionally Japanese in values than contemporary Japanese women (Faier 2009). As Japanese women seek opportunities away from rural lives and have taken on modern attitudes towards relationships and family, Filipinas come to represent a nostalgic Japanese past. Indeed, formerly disparaged as prostitutes working in hostess bars and entertainment venues, Filipinas have become marriage-worthy. More recently, following the Korean wave, Japanese women have come to idealize relationships with Korean men (Creighton 2009). This reverses prior trends observed by Kelsky (2001) less than a decade prior. Japanese acceptance of Filipina and Korean partners demonstrates the malleability of racialised desires.

Much of the recent anthropological literature on sex, romance and love describes transnational and interracial hypergamy (women 'marrying up') and geopolitically feminised subjects. In this sense, I use 'gaypergamy' to refer to the Thai gay male desire for partners from more developed countries.⁵ Gaypergamy does not assume that the Thai partner is

⁵I thank Nguyen Tan Hoang for suggesting this term.

coded as feminine compared to the foreign partner. Rather, I suggest that gaypergamy functions like hypergamy because geopolitical relations between countries render third-world populations as feminized subjects (Enloe 1990). At the same time, desire for Caucasian male partners is not inevitable. For example, Rofel (2007) describes how Chinese gay men in the mainland avoid white Western partners to demonstrate a belonging to the nation. Furthermore, their simultaneous denigration of ‘money boys’ (male sex workers) for being low ‘quality’ indicates that they are appropriately urban Chinese and globally gay (Rofel 2010). The economic rise of China also resignifies relationships between Chinese women and white men. Chinese women married to Caucasian men are no longer stereotyped as those looking for a better life elsewhere, but rather as individuals who have vital kinship connections and other resources in China that are important to foreigners (Farrer 2008). That is, the relative position of nations and class backgrounds affects how relationships are evaluated. One way my project continues to move the literature forward is by accounting for how locally inflected class difference and moral evaluation shapes the habitus and trajectories of desire (Bourdieu 1987). Symbolic struggles are one mechanism through which social status is naturalised within the social hierarchy. Tastes, in the form of aesthetic preferences, embodied postures and competence in the implicit codes relevant to one’s position and its life course, mark class distinction. The routinisation of different praxes, mapped onto social hierarchies, reproduces the relative ordering as self-evident. Thus, the middle classes are particularly anxious to distinguish themselves from those below.

Intimate economies: Sex tourism and Thai face

Thais express tremendous concern over ‘face’ – i.e., public respectability and status (Ukosakul 2005b). Indeed, external surfaces are not expected to convey an interior truth (Van Esterik 2000). Rather, the surface performance stands in for and acts as the real. In Thailand, people readily identify with class status, especially the impoverished (คนจน *khon-jon*) and the wealthy (ไฮโซ *hai-so*). The labels for the poor and rich are terms of self-identity in everyday use, whereas the term for middle class (ชนชั้นกลาง *chon-chan-klang*) is more academic.⁶ There is still no good definition for middle-class status in Thailand (Ockey 1999); however, many people simply refer to themselves as average or normal (ธรรมดา *thammada*), implying that they are typical rather than extreme. Each has a different relationship to foreigners, and *farang* in particular. For the poor, any relationship with foreigners conveys status and has the potential to provide an economic benefit. Rural people, for example, will prominently display photos with foreigners and pass them around in social gatherings. Having foreigners attend large celebrations such as weddings is considered auspicious. Foreigner presence points to the wider social connections one has, which can possibly be mobilised into financial resources during times of need (Lapanun 2012). Foreign men are often offered daughters for marriage, to seal relationships and ensure regular support. This is predicated on the fact that foreigners are rare

⁶I have previously defined this as a monthly income of approximately 7,000 to 70,000 THB (250 to 2,250 USD) (Ezra Kyrrill Erker 2011). The low end represents the starting salary of civil servants. The experiential bottom line is working in an air-conditioned environment. Post-secondary vocational education or a college degree seems secondary. Many occupations that surpass this income threshold, such as selling noodles on the street, or street-based sex work, are not considered ‘middle class’. However, selling noodles in a shopping mall or being an institutionally based sex worker can command both the income and cultural capital of middle classness.

in such environments, though this is becoming less true, especially in areas of the North-east where many rural Thai women have married *farang*.⁷

In contrast, wealthy Thais, particularly in urban areas, are expected to have many foreign connections. The race/nationality of the connection is of little concern, though their individual respectability and ethnic distinctions are considered. Indeed, one of my *hai-so* friends referred to *farang* as ‘necessary accessories like a handbag’ for any large size group, and noted that ‘some brands are better than others’.⁸ It is, for example, more elite to speak French than English, the common tongue for international gatherings. Furthermore, *hai-so* Thais are very perceptive to class distinctions. While they will accept middle-class foreigners, they will be clearly dismayed by individuals who dress and groom inappropriately for the situation. Wealthy Thais have the elite cultural capital to differentiate brand name products from copies, different status valences in English accents, the relative importance of home cities, and other cosmopolitan references that are not readily legible to those without extensive resources. Rich Thais have typically travelled extensively and are often educated abroad. Thus, they have extensive experiences with foreigners, most often in Western countries, and are used to the company of *farang*. Moreover, they are, for the most part, ‘above’ status concerns. Being driven by one’s chauffeur to a high-end hotel restaurant in a Mercedes with a well-dressed *farang* friend or partner creates an impression that insulates one from questions about status. The same is not true for middle-class people who arrive in a taxi.

Middle-class Thais are obviously situated between poor and wealthy ones. However, their position, which needs to be differentiated from the poor, makes them particularly concerned about their status (Bourdieu 1987). Furthermore, the relative positioning of the country coupled with anxiety about the legitimacy of sexual commerce mediates the desire for *farang* among the middle classes. Thais have been engaging in sexual relations with foreigners at least since the early modern period (Andaya 1998). As the ‘Thai economic miracle’ was built on sex (rest and recuperation) sold to the US military during the American War in South East Asia and, subsequently, to tourists, sexual commerce continues to shape national ideologies of gender, sexuality and individual agency (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Jeffrey 2002). This type of interaction is racialised such that companionship with *farang* (and *farang-dam*) is often interpellated as sex work or paid companionship. Thus, one means for middle-class individuals to simultaneously seek higher-status partners and avoid such stigma is to orient their desires on East Asians.

This is not only an individual but also a national concern. On Alphadesigners’s viral 2010 map ‘The World According to Americans’, Thailand is simply labelled ‘Brothel’.⁹ Reminiscent of the *Longman Dictionary of English and Culture* (Summers 1993), which

⁷I agree with Patcharin (2012) that monetary and romantic motivations for transnational relationships are intimately entwined. Desires for *farang* partners engage globalised ideas about love, egalitarianism, modernity and cosmopolitanism (like in the Japanese context). Yet, I would suggest that the context of a rural village is different than that of metropolises like Bangkok. In urban spaces, an Isan woman with a *farang* husband, particularly an older one, is likely to be interpellated as a sex worker, whether or not that is the circumstance of their original meeting (which is often the case). Additionally, the issue of egalitarian gender relations is quite complex in the Thai context and should be investigated thoroughly, with particular attention paid to differences in class, region, religion and other factors.

⁸Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 16 June 2009.

⁹See alphadesigner.com/mapping-stereotypes/. The updated 2012 map combines Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into an area called ‘Sex Slaves’. The change in moniker suggests a more empathetic stance, but refers to victims of slavery. This problematically equates sex work with human trafficking and denies the agency of those who choose sex work as a profession, given the options available to them.

defined Bangkok as a city known for temples and prostitution, this appellation comes as no surprise. Alphadesigner's project is, after all, about mapping stereotypes. However, something that can be read as comedic in the West can be devastating to Thais. These depictions metonymically crack Thai faces (หน้าแตก *na-taek*) and bring shame upon the nation. Moreover, such portrayals are an ongoing PR problem for the Thai state, particularly its tourism authority, and Thai people who want to distance themselves from such an image. Thailand wants to be the Riviera of South East Asia. Indeed, the government does not want foreigners to linger. Short-term, high-end resort tourists, epitomised by the Japanese golfer, are preferred over long-term, low-end backpackers, sexpatriates, criminals and other undesirables. Though tourism statistics and their associated economic impact are routine news items, Thai pundits downplay the role of tourism in the economy, focusing instead on car and electronics manufacturing, technological innovation and creative industries. Thus, with new heights of economic development, those who have benefited from the growth can look down and misrecognise those still working in an unseemly profession. Indeed, in Suphawong Janthawanit's 1991 (cited in Ockey 1999) study of occupational status among urban Thai respondents, 'service woman, e.g. masseuse, "partner"' ranked 89th, the lowest position. However, the country cannot so easily erase its intimacy with an industry redeveloped to capitalise on the American War in South East Asia. Indeed, military sex tourism has created the infrastructure for sex tourism, and other types of tourism more broadly (Bishop and Robinson 1998). Thailand's international reputation and national identity continue to be haunted by this relationship.

However, race provides a key optic in how sex is viewed. Sex tourism, for example, is racially and ethnically spatialised. The most visible red light districts cater to *farang*, Russians and Middle Easterners in 'entertainment zones' consisting primarily of bar venues. Somewhat less visible red light districts cater to the Japanese in karaoke and massage parlours. Yet the huge explosion in services for Korean and Chinese men has occurred mostly undetected as they have integrated within the sex venues catering to middle-class Thai men in large-scale massage parlours outside central tourist zones. It is a key contention of this paper that racial differences make certain interracial relationships visible, indeed hyper-visible, while rendering others invisible to the untrained eye. I refer to this as 'inter-racial optics'.

This argument rests on the idea that status is a serious concern. Social status is the honour or prestige associated with one's subject position or standing. It encompasses more than economic class and is closely associated with consumption practices (Bourdieu 1987). Status is also a more sensitive indicator of differential value compared to power, the ability to influence others' behaviour (Ortner 2006). Ethical concerns impact both the status of individuals and the legitimacy of groups. Moral evaluation is strongly linked to social status in Thailand (Mulder 1996). Furthermore, gender and sexual practices are intimately tied to status vis-à-vis stigma and the politics of appearances (Goffman 1986).

Emphasis on local moral worlds (Kleinman 1995), or the intersubjective relationships that mediate individual experience and socio-cultural structures in everyday life, point to the normative aspects of lifestyles and their relative social value, particularly the affective valence and subsequent status effects attached to real, presumed and imagined sexual practices. Gender and sexuality are but one set of axes through which social status is produced. Age, economic position, kinship group and religious merit, among other factors,

are also important for social ranking in Thai social hierarchies (Mulder 1996). Boellstorff (2005) notes that sexuality is always defined in terms of gender, nation, race, class and other social categories, and thus argues for the use of intersectional theories that place the understanding of sexuality at the juncture of multiple cultural logics. Reddy (2005) shows how *hijras* (religiously specialized transgender people in South Asia) exceed current analytical frameworks for gender and argues that *hijras* cultivate claims to respect through religious, sexual, kinship, class and other factors, as these are the important morally evaluated differences. In particular, given Thailand's reputation for prostitution in the international media, there is great stigma attached to international sex work, which is highly visible via racial difference. While Thailand is often portrayed as a country that is 'culturally' tolerant of sexual commerce, transgenderism and homosexuality, in actuality, the situation is much more complex. In Jackson's (1999) terms, Thailand is tolerant but not accepting of gay men. The same can be said about transgenderism and sex work (Jackson and Sullivan 1999; Jeffrey 2002; Kang 2012). There is thus status inconsistency for sex workers who earn a relatively high income but maintain a low-status position.

Jackson (1995: 113) observes that the term '*kunla-gay*', referring to a "decent" or "respectable" gay man' has been coined to describe the 'gay man who earns acceptance of his sexuality by contributing positively to his family and to the wider society'. Such men act better than expected in order to make up for the 'deficiency' in being gay. Gay men can reduce the stigma of being gay through honourable action, though wider beliefs and attitudes are often left intact. This includes distinguishing themselves from more maligned *kathoey* (male-to-female transgender persons), with whom they are often associated (Kang 2012, 2014).¹⁰ In relation to sex work, they are both resisting their interpolation as sex workers in the global gaze, as well as stigmatising those who are sex workers or otherwise in inferior positions. That is, status and moral self-making are performed and negotiated in webs of intimate and public relationships that both contest and collude with different sets of normative values. Thai middle-class gay men occupy a medial position of struggle and complicity. Local moral worlds are key to understanding lived experience, patterns of social interaction and their cultural evaluation.

'White Asians': The contemporary racialization of skin colour, economic development and Asian regionalism

Notions of race are always historically and culturally specific. A principal indicator of social status in Thailand is beauty, and particularly the whiteness and clarity of skin (Van Esterik 2000). I use the term 'white Asian' to highlight the racialisation processes related to economic development and cultural orientations currently taking shape in Thailand. In Thailand, race and ethnicity are primarily associated with national or regional origin, though clearly, physical factors like eye shape, skin and hair colour, and body size and hairiness are used to categorise groups. Cultural values also mould how race/ethnicity are viewed. Thais differentiate between the race of a person and their skin colour, though the two are also linked. That is, there are *farang* (Caucasians) and there are

¹⁰The term '*kathoey*' is quite broad. In contemporary urban Thailand, the term is most often used for transgender women but can also refer to effeminate gay men and sissies.

those who are *phio khao* (white-skinned). The reference to white skin is frequently used with Thais of Chinese descent and East or white Asians, namely Japanese; Korean; those I refer to as ‘tropical Chinese’ coming from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and other parts of South East Asia; and to a lesser extent Vietnamese and mainland Chinese. Thus, ‘white Asian’ here encapsulates a cluster of associations including skin colour, advanced economic development (as a nation or as a minority), cultural proximity and Thai imaginings of what ‘Asia’ and cosmopolitan ‘Asians’ look like.

There is no denying that white skin is considered beautiful in Thailand and linked to social standing. It is difficult to find cosmetics and everyday cleansers that do not include at least one whitening agent. Whiteness is powerful as an indicator of social status and reproduces the naturalisation of this social fact through its material effects. Job applications, for example, require photos. Of course, these are typically lightened when photos are taken at portrait studios. However, whiteness and ‘white people’ does not have to reference European descent.¹¹ Importantly, Thais (or other Asians) never consider their skin to be yellow, as Asians are often described in Euro-American contexts. Rather, skin is typically thought of as either ‘white’ or ‘black’ (ดำ *dam*). It can be more polite to refer to someone as ‘dark’ (เข้ม *khem*). Some Thais will also use terms such as ‘sugar’ (น้ำตาล *nam-tan*, referring the light brown colour of palm sugar) or the English loan word ‘tan’ (แทน *thaen*). Indeed, there is a common misperception among foreign observers that whitening products show Thai desires to look Caucasian. In fact, users of such products generally desire to look East Asian, or what I refer to as ‘white Asian’. In this sense, I follow Aizura (2009) and Saraswati (2010) in arguing that desire for whiteness is not the same as desire for European or Caucasian whiteness. In the Thai context, the whiteness being accessed is not a deracinated cosmopolitan whiteness, but whiteness associated with certain ethnicities, most notably Sino-Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. White Asian groups represent aspirations for the developmental future of Thailand’s economic trajectory. That is, white Asians represent modernity and middle-class consumerism specifically tied to the Asian region and Asian bodies.

In December 2010, Oishi (a major Thai brand of restaurants, food and beverages, named after the Japanese word for delicious) released a large campaign for their Amino Plus Brightenn skin-whitening (‘brightening’) beverage. A coordinated marketing campaign targeted television, billboards and other media. Their use of BTS Skytrain spaces was particularly significant. The company completely wrapped numerous stations and trains with its ad campaign. This meant, for example, that at the Phaya Thai train station next to where I lived at the time, every advertisement in the station was for the Brightenn campaign. Signage on billboards, columns, walls and barriers were all coordinated. Additionally, some train carriages were completely wrapped on the outside, with corresponding advertising on video monitors and signage on the inside. The campaign featured an incredibly white Sino-Thai couple and their pet fish. Most of the ads featured the woman, as women are the target for such campaigns. Another recurrent set of images featured a large white goldfish partially swallowing a small pink goldfish. This related to

¹¹The term คนขาว (*khon-khao*) or ‘white person’ first appeared in Thai Google searches in November 2005. In the popular historical film *Yamada The Samurai of Ayothaya* (2010), the Japanese character is referred to as ‘white face’ (หน้าขาว *na khao*).

one of the taglines: ผิวขาวอมชมพู (*phio khao-om-chomphu*: skin that is white with a touch of pink, literally, ‘white sucking pink’). This was the ideal skin colour being promoted, the claim being that drinking Amino would produce this white-with-a-touch-of-pink result.¹²

The Oishi Amino Plus Brightenn campaign lasted several months. However, part of the campaign attracted controversy and was rescinded. In February 2011, signage was placed above rows of seats inside the train carriages. The sign read ‘สำรองที่นั่งสำหรับ ... คนขาว’ (*samrong thinang samrap ... khon-khao*: seats reserved for ... white people).¹³ The slogan was a parody of signs on all forms of public transportation that request passengers to give up their seats for monks, disabled people, pregnant women, the elderly, young children and others in need. The use of ‘white people’ did not refer to *farang*, as some *farang* thought. Not unsurprisingly, Thai Netizens posted criticism of this ‘racist and classist’ campaign, starting 21 February 2011, on the popular site pantip.com.¹⁴ Posters felt offended by the sign, comparing it to apartheid and caste segregation. Some posts suggested suing the company for insulting passengers. Though the campaign continued, these specific ‘seats reserved for ... white people’ signs were removed within two days. Netizen complaints vociferously stated that the ads promoted inappropriate ideas around skin colour. However, the fact that the campaign existed, and that the drink continues to be sold, points to the popularity of whitening products and the fact that many people seek them.¹⁵ The imagined foil for these ads is the rural farmer, the antithesis of an urban professional class whose white skin both points to distance from outdoor physical labour and recently idealised Chinese heritage.

Thai heartthrobs (that is, singers, actors, models and other stars) clearly exemplify the desire for whiteness. The four stars most often mentioned in interviews during my primary fieldwork (2009–2011) were Nichkun Horvejkul (US-born, Sino-Thai, K-pop star and model), ‘Dome’ Pakorn Lum (German and Thai-Singaporean, pop star and actor), Mario Maurer (Sino-Thai and German actor and model), and ‘Barry’ Nadech Kukimiya (Sino-Thai and Austrian, actor and model). It is important to note that none of them look ‘really Thai’ (ไทยแท้ *thai-thae*, e.g., having tan skin and robust features). All of them are light skinned, having Chinese and/or Caucasian lineage.¹⁶ The case of Nadech Kukimiya is particularly interesting. A contemporary of Mario, he had always stated that his father is Japanese. However, a gossip magazine uncovered that his biological

¹²The drink has 450 mgs of amino acid. The ‘plus’ active ingredient for whitening is glutathione (75 mg). The drink also has 1,000 mgs of collagen to promote smooth skin. Glutathione is a skin-depigmenting agent that works as a melanin inhibitor. By decreasing melanin production, it reduces the dark coloration of skin, though its effects when ingested are unproven.

¹³A photo of the ‘seats reserved for ... white people’ ad in a train car can be seen at: <http://easternorientations.blogspot.com/2011/02/amino-plus-brightenn-bts-train-ads.html>.

¹⁴เมื่อโฆษณา “ที่นั่งสำรองสำหรับ ... คนขาว” บนรถไฟใต้ดิน ถูกชาวเน็ตครุ่นถล่มทะ ลามถึง “เหยียดผิว-แบ่งชนชั้น” (When the Advertisement for ‘Seats Reserved for White People’ on the Skytrain Caved in to Claims of ‘Racism and Classism’ on the Net), Matichon, 24 February 2011 (2554), www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1298534576&gprid=01&catid=01.

¹⁵Many of my friends expressed anger over this ad, but as one stated: ‘That’s wrong. Wait, I shouldn’t care. I could sit there.’ Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 8 March 2011.

¹⁶*Luk-khreung* (ลูกครึ่ง literally ‘half-child’) can be used for any racial/ethnic mix, but is most often associated with mixed parentage that ‘shows’; e.g., with white or black parents. The term is not used for Sino-Thais and rarely with other Asians (e.g., Thai-Japanese, Thai-Korean, Thai-Vietnamese). This points to the idea that other Asians are racially similar and more readily assimilable within the notion of Thainess. Nevertheless, all *luk-khreung* who grow up in Thailand speaking Thai are more or less accepted as Thai without question. Previously, *luk-khreung* were stigmatised as the children of Thai prostitutes and US soldiers during the American war. However, with the development of the Thai economy, light-skinned *luk-khreung* have become resignified as beautiful. That is, while in the past *luk-khreung* were more often imagined as the children of prostitutes and soldiers, now they are often the children of middle-class/wealthy women and foreign businessmen. Both *luk-khreung* and Sino-Thais are greatly overrepresented in Thai visual media.

father is actually Austrian; his step-father, who raised him, is Japanese. This revelation was considered a devaluation of his ethnic heritage.¹⁷ That is, Thais considered it better, or at least more interesting, to have a white Asian father rather than a Caucasian one. Nadech nevertheless continued to be a spokesperson for the Oishi brand, playing Japanese roles. He was forgiven by his fans, who often made statements like: 'It doesn't matter, because he's cute.' That is, being attractive was the most important factor in maintaining his status.

Within Thai gay media, the image of ideal male bodies is contracting. Previously, there was a range of body types. Models could be light or dark skinned, slim or muscular, and have rugged or fine facial features. Duangwises (n.d.) marks a shift in the late 1980s/early 1990s among models in gay magazines from '*Thai Thai*' (ไทยไทย) to '*Ti*' (ตี, a Chinese loan word meaning young man, in Thai referring to Thais with Chinese heritage and referencing light skin and Sinitic facial features) look. This more generally references the changes in tastes associated with the development of a middle-class gay community in which dark skin becomes associated with farmers and labourers, who can also be fetishised for their low-class masculine status. Thai sex workers also state that the *Thai Thai* look is popular with *farang*. Indeed, dark-skinned sex workers market themselves to Caucasians, believing that other Asians will not be interested in them.¹⁸ A pornographer I interviewed targeted different markets based on the skin colour and ethnicity of his models.¹⁹ According to this interviewee, Western audiences preferred men who were young, skinny and looked like they were farm boys from Isan. However, he used muscular Japanese and Korean models to attract Thai, Japanese and other Asian viewers.

There are two major aesthetic strains among middle-class Thai gay men. Both are considered international, in contrast to 'local' (low-class) style. All three are also hybridised to varying extents. For the sake of a more distinctive typology, I describe the two middle-class 'inter' styles in more oppositional terms. The first is a Sinicized-American style. The focus is on muscular bodies, athleticism, and jock fashion brands like Abercrombie & Fitch or Hollister. A singlet (tank top) with baggy cargo shorts and sneakers epitomise this look. This style is similar to mainstream American gay styles and is most clearly associated in Bangkok with Singaporean gay men and the internationalised gay zone of Silom. The second is a Japanized/Koreanised continental European style, focused on slim tone (taught but not muscular) bodies, trendy and tight-fitting clothing, coiffed hair and sometimes cosmetics use, including BB cream (foundation), lip gloss, eyeliner and mascara used to darken and highlight the eyebrows. This look, which incorporates European high fashion, is more distinctly 'Asian' in that it is associated with K-pop idols. The look is also more common in everyday life and popular among gay men outside of the Silom area, where the majority of gay venues are actually located. Nevertheless, the masculine style has representational domination in gay media. I would suggest this is the case because the Asian style is often associated with sissies and queens, who themselves often idealise masculine partners (though this is also changing as feminised homogender relationships are becoming more commonplace).

Sinicised American aesthetics converge with masculine gay imagery from East Asia, like in the Taiwanese physique magazine *M1*. As in the popular women's features Ishiguro

¹⁷Mae Moo, 'The game's up, Tasteless remarks, Fair-but-not-weak, Who's your daddy now?', *Bangkok Post*, 20 March 2011.

¹⁸Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, March 2010.

¹⁹Dave, interview by the author, Bangkok, Thailand, August 4, 2009.

(2009) describes of Japanese faces on Western bodies, these models have East Asian faces with bodies that approximate muscular North Atlantic gay ideals. Since 2011, the British gay magazine *Attitude* has been publishing a Thai edition, their only international edition. This is currently the only regularly published mainstream (i.e., modelling upper-middle-class sensibilities) gay magazine in Thailand, and thus has a great deal of influence in regards to fashion and lifestyle tastes. Approximately 70 per cent of *Attitude's* Thailand content is a direct translation of *Attitude* articles, which often does not make sense in the local context. The rest of the magazine is specifically written for a Thai readership. The cover and photographic editorials are also produced in Thailand. The cover model is always a Thai star, Sino-Thai, *luk-khreung* or white Asian. The only cover model identified by ethnicity in the first year of publication was the Korean, Jiho Lee (January 2012). Lee was also voted by readers as the 'Straight Guy We Love' for the year. He posed again for the September 2012 cover with Singaporean fitness model Jason Chee.²⁰ Chee won the 'Straight Guy We Love' title in the second year. Both models, photographed and promoted by Haruehun Airry Noppawan, represent ideal male beauty in the contemporary Thai context among internationalised middle-class gay men. In an interview for *BK Magazine*, *Attitude* editor, Thawatchai Deepatana, noted that Chinese, Korean and Japanese are the favourite looks among Thai gays (Koaysomboon 2011).

Locating desires: Bangkok at the heart of gay Asia

Bangkok is a large metropolitan hub with significant foreign-worker (both migrant and professional), expatriate and tourist populations. Social spaces are often segregated in terms of their accessibility and appeal to foreigners of differing nationalities. The confluence of factors that places Thailand between its poorer and richer neighbours provides a context in which a wide range of partner choices is possible. The largest group of foreigners in Thailand, by far, are migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Their labour, however, is rendered relatively invisible and they are routinely primitivised in public discourse. Many sex workers are from these groups and upland ethnic minorities. For the poor, sex work, any transnational relationships and same-sex marriage in Western nations do provide channels for socio-economic mobility and migration. However, many middle-class people look down on such forms of mobility.

Bangkok has one of the largest gay scenes in the world, and likely the largest in Asia. Bangkok also hosts the largest gay circuit parties in Asia, gCircuit's annual Songkran (Thai New Year) parties. However, the vast majority of gay venues in Bangkok are rarely accessed by foreigners. With few exceptions, only the bars, clubs and saunas in the Silom area cater to international visitors. Clubs throughout the rest of the city operate on a very different table system than that of the West or East Asia. Most importantly, these venues provide whisky bottle service, which lends itself to group sharing. Though a number of Asian expats and visitors participate in these venues, *farang* rarely do. Many online sites warn Westerners not to go to local venues, especially on their own. *Farang* are often avoided in these spaces, though there may be some curious Thais who are willing to interact with Caucasians. Most Asians who do attend such

²⁰The cover of *Attitude Magazine*, September 2012 (Models: Jiho Lee and Jason Chee) can be viewed at: easternorientations.blogspot.com/2012/09/attitude.html.

venues go with Thai friends. However, it is not uncommon to encounter groups of Koreans, Taiwanese, mainland Chinese or ethnically mixed groups of Asians who have found the venues online.

Class distinction plays a significant role in the structuring of desire among middle-class Thais. Romantic Caucasian partners are increasingly less desirable. I am repeatedly told that white Asian partners are favoured, and informants are increasingly in such relationships. At the same time, 'Asia' is a geography in progress. Myanmar does not register as 'Asia'. Early on, I was met with shock when I revealed that my long-term partner is Vietnamese-American – that is, ethnically Vietnamese.²¹

Some specialised gay venues cater to white Asian travellers and the Thais who seek their partnership. An advertisement for Chakran Sauna from a free monthly gay magazine exemplifies how 'Asians' are racialised in contemporary Thai discourses.²² The model for the ad appears to be Sino-Thai or *luk-khreung*. Importantly, his skin is white and his body is muscular. The combination signifies new middle-class gay subcultural styles that emphasise masculinity and fitness. Working out at the gym indicates economic status that becomes materially embodied in the flesh. Text exists in both Thai and English. The tagline, in Thai, translates to 'The Meeting Place for Asians'. Being in Thai, it is clearly addressing Thai men who are interested in meeting Asians. (Other Chakran ads also state this in English, Chinese and Japanese.) The Thai text also describes discounts for those under 25 years old on weekdays [Figure 1](#).

Most importantly, the advertisement defines who these 'Asians' one will meet at Chakran are. The countries listed on the map (in clockwise order in [Figure 1](#)) are China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore – that is, the groups I have been arguing constitute white Asians. It is also important to note that in the context of gay communities, Malaysia and Singapore are reduced to Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore. Those of Malay and Indian descent would not be thought of as 'Malaysian' or 'Singaporean' without some ethnic modifier. They are relatively rare in Thai gay venues.

On the map, Bangkok is situated at the heart of gay Asia, where people from these other countries converge. The map schematically outlines the central role of Bangkok in the inter-Asia gay scene and hails only white Asians as belonging to this space. This construction of Bangkok and gay Asia is radically different from what would be expected from a Western perspective. In the Western popular imagination, Thailand is a place of sexual commerce and liberty that caters to them. For these gay men, Bangkok is a 'gay paradise', and specifically a city that affords cheap and easy access to exotic 'boys'. This reputation for sex tourism, as well as a cultural tolerance for homosexuality and transgenderism, is a common representation of queer Bangkok in English-language media ([Kang 2011](#)). Yet, Western gazes that depict Thailand as especially sexually tolerant, a land of smiling sex workers, actually inhibit its social acceptability among Thais striving to distance themselves from an industry associated with lack of development. This is a critical distinction

²¹This attitude has changed significantly in the last decade with the rapid development of Vietnam. In contemporary Thai discourse, there is great anxiety that Vietnam will surpass Thailand economically, as Malaysia has. Indeed, Ho Chi Minh City is now more expensive than Bangkok. Because of discount international airlines, it has become cheaper for gay men in Vietnam to go to Bangkok for a vacation than to go between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

²²I collected several different versions of Chakran Sauna advertisements showing this position of Bangkok from a number of free magazines and tourist maps.

for sex tourism and is most readily felt by Thais in racially sexualised contact zones. At the same time, interracial optics render relationships with other Asians un-noteworthy.

(In)visibility politics are of prime concern. Face does not have to reference truth, but rather the surface of social phenomenon and their historical traces. Beyond the question of the archives, what is socially and politically relevant orients the gaze to particular objects over others. A key parallel here is with ‘international marriage’ in colonial South East Asia. Loos (2008) questions the fixation of postcolonial historical texts on the intimate unions between colonial European men and South East Asian women. During the colonial period in South East Asia, the vast majority of cross-border marriages were between South East Asian women and lower-class Asian men from China and India, not between Caucasians and Asians. Intra-Asian marriages were not registered or regulated because they did not threaten colonial rule, the racial purity of white women, or the legitimacy of white class differences in imperial metropolises. That is, cross-border marriages were only regulated when the ethno-racial difference was consequential to governmentality.

In contemporary Thailand, East Asian–South East Asian couplings continue to be unthreatening. This also translates to homosexual dyads. Given Thai homosocial norms, Asian–Asian same-sex couples are virtually invisible to the untrained eye. That is, for most people, a Chinese/Japanese/Korean and Thai same-sex couple does not stand out. They exist under the radar of discernibility, in contrast to *farang*–Thai couples. Racial difference in the latter relationships not only code the participants as potentially engaged in sexual commerce, but also as homosexual. While I would argue that the majority of sex tourists in contemporary Thailand are Asian, the stereotype of the Western sex tourist is also a misapprehension of these racialised visibility politics. East and South East Asians constitute a majority of tourists to Thailand.²³ However, interpersonal interactions between Thais and other Asians are not as often interpreted as sex work, even if sex work is what they are. There are red light districts that specifically cater to Japanese tourists in Soi Thaniya and several Sukhumvit sois between Phrom Phong and Ekkamai. Additionally, many hotel-sized massage parlours (อาบ อบ นวด *ap-op-nuat*) in the Ratchada area cater to Thai, Japanese, Korean and Chinese men.²⁴ Other large establishments can be found throughout the city, particularly along New Phetchaburi and Rama IX Roads. These establishments tend to be significantly larger and much more expensive than the go-go bars that cater to *farang*. Yet, as they are considered banal establishments catering to Thais and other Asians and are generally less sexually explicit (they tend to have large ads with bikini-clad women on the front of the building rather than actual sex workers visible from the outside), they generate less stigma for the establishments, clients and workers. In particular, at massage

²³This assumes that the rates of sex tourism among men are similar from sending countries. In 2010, 51.25 per cent of international tourists came from East Asia (which includes South East Asia), followed by Europe at 27.88 per cent, South Asia at 6.25 per cent, The Americas at 5.30 per cent, Oceania at 4.95 per cent (primarily Australia), the Middle East at 3.57 per cent, and Africa at 0.80 per cent (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2011). This does not include citizens of Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Malaysia, who can cross land borders.

²⁴There are temples open 24 hours in this area for Thai women who work in this industry. Non-Thai/Chinese/Japanese/Korean men (generally *farang* and Indians) who visit such establishments are sometimes subject to a 500–1000 THB surcharge for a service that is 2000–6000 THB. However, given the surcharges that Thais/Asians are expected pay (snacks, parking, tips for managers, etc.) the price is often closer to 10,000 THB for regular Thai customers. These establishments also have Russian masseuses, who are working illegally but not in the open, like in Pattaya.

establishments, all intimate activity between service provider and client occurs out of public sight. The system is even more anonymous at gay massage venues, as there is no signage that identifies it with sexual activity. Even when Asians visit go-go bars that require leaving the premises ('offing'), there is less stigma for the companions of Asians.

In the cultural logics of assimilability and appropriate public appearance, being seen in public with another Asian attracts less attention and is less likely to be associated with sex work or paid companionship. At the same time, the figuring and enactment of desire for white Asian partners has been enabled by the economic clout of East Asia (which both makes East Asians more desirable partners and allows them greater access to travel), the regional circulation of media that promotes East Asian beauty ideals, Internet sites such as *fridae.asia* that link gay Thais to other Asians, and the proliferation of regional discount airlines that facilitate travel. Bangkok is a top international travel destination, the regional hub for gay tourism, and remains a relatively cheap destination in Asia. These factors situate it at the heart of an emergent gay 'Asia', created through the cosmopolitan mobility of middle-class gay men from developed nations.

Strategic relations: Managing status and avoiding stigma

My argument has been that middle-class Thais often avoid relationships with *farang* in order to prevent a devaluation of status based on the stigma associated with being interpellated as a sex worker coupled with a simultaneous emergent desire for white Asian partners. This can entail a rejection of *farang* as potential lovers. (Sex behind closed doors is another matter.) It can also include the avoidance of being seen in public with *farang*, in situations that could be interpreted as paid companionship. For instance, being in a mixed group of Thais, Asians and *farang* would not look suspicious. In the internationalised Thai gay scene, this is a common feature. Furthermore, groups are interpreted as friends. However, being alone with a *farang*, which can make the pair look like a sex-worker-client couple, can be damning. Breaking cultural rules about public displays of affection can point to paid companionship. This includes kissing in public, intimately embracing one another, and even holding hands: all considered inappropriate behaviours in Thai public space. Other factors, in particular the age difference between an older *farang* and a younger Thai, exacerbate the presumption of sex work. An older Asian and a younger Thai can look like they are related kin in mainstream spaces. Yet, in gay venues, this is still interpreted as unseemly. Many Thais with older East Asian boyfriends told me, 'He looks like my uncle'; however, this age difference can be frowned upon by others. Thais would joke: 'Is he your uncle?' pointing to the age difference and the assumption that the younger Thai is being taken care of by the older East Asian. By contrast, it is quite rare to encounter Thai-*farang* couples of the same age in gay spaces. Thus, what looks unseemly moulds middle-class gay desires away from *farang*. Here, I provide a few examples of experiences with, attitudes towards and strategies in dealing with Caucasian partners.

Even when middle-class Thais have *farang* partners, they often hide this fact from family or friends. Dome, a very fair, upper-middle-class friend who was educated in Europe, states: 'I couldn't ever take Matthias home with me. What would my parents think? They would think we are lovers. They would know. But someone like you or

Tony [a Chinese Singaporean], we could be friends.’²⁵ Though Dome is highly effeminate, part of this concern rests in his being ‘outed’ as gay to his parents. That is, other Asians can be interpreted as friends while *farang* are more likely coded as sexual partners. *Farang* are sexualised via the very Western gazes that sexualise Thais. Alternatively, relationships with other Asians do not carry the same significations. Thus, for Thai gay men, interracial relationships can point to their homosexuality and make this a visibly explicit social fact. The high degree of homosociality in Thailand often masks homosexuality, but this framing is disrupted by racial difference.

Jack is a graduate student who has studied in two European countries. He has a Spanish boyfriend, whom he met during his studies. They send text messages to each other constantly and talk on the phone once a day. However, having a *farang* boyfriend limits what Jack can do in Bangkok when he visits. One day, I was drinking with Jack in Silom Soi 4, a gay alley that caters to foreigners and has many money boys. I was asking Jack about where he takes his boyfriend when he visits Bangkok. Jack noted: ‘I could not come here with my boyfriend. What would others think?’²⁶ According to Jack, having a *farang* boyfriend makes social life more complicated because certain spaces, especially gay zones, are not appropriate for them to appear as a couple. Jack’s prior boyfriend was Korean, and he expresses no concern about the public significance of that coupling. That is, others would interpret a young Thai man with a *farang* boyfriend as a paid companion when the same association does not apply to Asian boyfriends. Jack subsequently paired up with a Japanese expat.

Middle-class Thais remain acutely aware of their depiction as sexualised subjects. They thus avoid situations that potentially mark them as sex workers and thereby lower their social standing. Thai women, in particular, complain about being mistaken for sex workers when in the company of a *farang*; for example, being questioned about their intentions when entering a hotel with a Caucasian boyfriend or husband. Some hotels have ‘No Thai’ policies to prevent sex worker entry (for example, see Kang 2011: 183). As people often assume that I am Thai, when I visit friends at their hotel rooms when they come to Bangkok, I am often asked to deposit my *bat prachachon* (national ID card). Typically, the ID number and time of entry and exit is logged in a ledger. This policy is designed to prevent sex workers from stealing money or other valuables from their clients.

Thais will often put a large spatial distance between them and a *farang* to indicate that they are not together. Furthermore, Thais will often speak English loudly to other Thai service workers to show that they are of a cosmopolitan status, rather than ‘local’ Thais who could be mistaken as paid companions. Dew, a real estate agent who comes from a relatively wealthy family that owns an apartment building in an exclusive neighbourhood and has two master’s degrees from the US, complains often about how he is treated when he is seen with white men. Dew went to the Oriental Hotel (which was for nearly two decades considered the best hotel in the world) for a drink with a *farang* he was dating. He was served ‘cheap nuts’ (fried broad beans) with his cocktail, and when Dew asked the waiter for cashews, the waiter replied in Thai, *Tong khit tang* (ต้องคิดดั่งนี้ ‘You have to think about the price’). Dew took this as an indication that he could not afford cashews

²⁵Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 25 December 2009.

²⁶Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 25 July 2009.

himself, that he is a money boy or kept boy accompanying the *farang*. So Dew handed the waiter his credit card and replied loudly in English: 'Don't worry, just charge it. I don't care how much it costs. I can pay.' Soon after this incident, Dew went shopping at the Night Bazaar with a *farang* who bought his condo in Hua Hin, Thailand's Hamptons. He was looking at something he wanted to buy. The shopkeeper said in Thai: 'You don't have to think about money, just buy it. Your boyfriend will pay for it.' Dew, offended by this assumption, stated loudly in English.

'I have a good job. I have an education. I have my own money He is not my boyfriend. I do not date people who are as old as my uncle . . . I don't want this anymore, you can keep it.'

He then walked away. Dew, although wealthy, must constantly perform his social standing for others. As a mutual friend noted, 'Because Dew is dark, he looks like he is from Isan [the poor Northeastern region of Thailand], he looks like he could be a money boy.'²⁷

Wit, who recently completed a biology PhD in Taipei, recounts a situation in which he met his Belgian boyfriend at the Malaysia Hotel, a hotel popular with low-end Western gay tourists in the international district. Wit was waiting in the lobby for his boyfriend to come down. When his boyfriend arrived, another *farang* gave Wit a piece of paper with his phone number written on it. Then, speaking to Wit's boyfriend in English (as if Wit did not speak English or could not make decisions for himself), he asked: 'When you get bored with him, can you pass him on to me next?' When I asked Wit to reflect on this situation, he says.

'Money boys target *farang*, so if you are seen with a *farang*, you are like a money boy. An Asian can pass as a friend, even if he is not, because it is assumed that money boys will be with *farang*.' That is, *farang* and money boys are symbolically linked such that association with *farang* makes one appear to be a money boy.

Concern over the bodily inscription of these relationships is not limited to Thais. Many of my *farang* friends who teach in schools and colleges in Thailand note their uneasiness at being seen in public with their students, as they can be seen as predatory ('old pervert') *farang*. This is operationalised through the Thai politics of appearance. Thai students, through their undergraduate college careers, are required to wear uniforms. Thus, they are easily distinguishable in public space. Several of my friends have taught at Chulalongkorn University and at language schools such as American University Alumni and Wall Street. With locations near Siam, the central shopping district and the transfer point for the Skytrain lines, it is quite likely that they run into students at nearby malls or on the train itself. With regular news reports about *farang* paedophiles and English teachers engaging in inappropriate sexual relations with their students, my Caucasian friends note their unease at Thai interpretations of their behaviour when interacting with students in public spaces. Again, truth is less important than the surface image produced. Additionally, the politics of national assimilability, where reputed racial and cultural similarity makes some groups incorporable into the national body and others not, plays a role. *Farang* are thought of as perpetual outsiders.

Finally, while I have been talking about the avoidance of looking like a sex worker, Thai sex workers also feel the stigma of being with Caucasian clients. Pom worked for over a

²⁷Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 30 May 2010.

decade as a go-go boy and coyote in Soi Twilight, and as a freelance masseur.²⁸ That is, he was a sex worker. He described himself as someone who sells his body (เด็กราบตัว *dek-khai-tua*) and is one of the more open (about his profession) sex workers that I know in Thailand. I first met Pom in 2006, when he joined my English class at SWING (Service Workers in Group, a non-governmental organisation that works with sex workers in Thailand). I have been in regular contact with him since then, visiting him at work and during his days off. Pom gives two reasons for preferring Asian clients. Pom says he prefers Asian customers, even though they often pay less than Caucasian ones, because Asians are usually younger, more attractive, and have better bodies.²⁹ That is, he is more physically attracted to them and this makes the labour of sex work easier. *Farang* customers, he contends, tend to be old and fat. Yet, they also take better ‘care’ (provide money, gifts and otherwise show appreciation) of Pom because they are really happy to be with a young Thai man. Caucasian (as well as some Thai) customers also are more likely to want a relationship or to spend more time together doing daytime activities (Rofel 2010; Huang 2011). However, Pom says he feels ashamed, because when he is with a *farang*, he looks like a money boy. For example, when a *farang* customer takes him to MBK (the most popular mall in Bangkok), other Thais will see him as a *dek-liang farang* (เด็กเลี้ยงฝรั่ง boy supported financially by a *farang*). Additionally, only Caucasian customers will ask Pom to kiss him in public, which he will allow. But he says this is not appropriate behaviour outside of DJ Station (the most popular gay club for foreigners in Bangkok). Pom says that this is extremely embarrassing. It points to being both gay and a sex worker. He does it reluctantly because it is his job and he wants to make his customers happy, so that they like him and so that they appreciate and come back to Thailand. According to Pom, as long as other Thais do not hear his Asian customers speak, they will think they are just other Thais because they have ‘the same hair and skin’. Yet, being with a *farang* customer is always conspicuous and attracts ‘dirty looks’. As a relatively successful paid companion, Pom prefers the less lucrative but more fun and anonymous situation of serving Asian clients. Being seen in public together with Caucasian clients ‘outs’ his profession and sexuality.

In the Thai context, sex work is a foil that needs to be hidden or managed. It points to a lack of national and individual development. Eak is a school teacher at one of the most elite private schools in Thailand (measured by the number of students who are accepted

²⁸A go-go (sometimes referred to as a-go-go) boy is a sex worker in gay bars that work on the ‘off’ system, where the client pays a fee to the bar to take the go-go boy out of the bar. Go-go boys wear bikinis with small numbers pinned to them so that customers can request them without pointing, which would be rude. Go-go boys are required to present themselves on stage, usually by standing in rotating formations at prescribed times, to allow customers to examine them.

A coyote is a sex worker who dances to music on stage in a bar. The genre of coyote dance is quite distinctive. The movements are fast and jerky. This contrasts with ‘macho’ dance, a genre performed by some go-go boys, which is slow and fluid. Clients who are interested can ‘off’ coyotes but they also function like a show. Coyotes can wear bikinis or be fully dressed depending on the situation. Typically, the amount of clothing decreases over the course of a night.

‘Freelance’ refers to work that does not occur in an establishment, such as a massage parlour. Freelance massage is primarily marketed on online gay cruising sites. In the public health literature on sex work, freelance would be referred to as ‘direct’ sex work, where the sex worker and the client do not engage each other through an institutionalised intermediary such as a bar or brothel. In contrast, those who work through establishments are referred to as ‘indirect’ sex workers.

²⁹Payment is in the form of ‘tips’, that are mandatory but variable. There is generally a minimum tip, explicit or not. Tips are generally left up to the client as long as they meet the minimum a sex worker expects (in Bangkok, in an establishment with foreign clients, usually 1000–1500 THB for a short term and 1500–2000 THB for the night). Tips can also be negotiated. Although sex workers state that they have an absolute minimum tip, this is often not enforced given the circumstances (e.g., what services were rendered, how far they have to travel, how attracted they are to the client).

to study medicine in college). Like many middle-class Thais, he refuses to date a *farang* and is very straightforward about his situation. When I asked, ‘Why don’t you like to date *farang*?’ He replied frankly, ‘Why would I want a *farang*? I have a job’.³⁰ That is, Eak associates being partnered with a *farang* with money boys and kept boys, men who are generally from poor rural backgrounds. When I asked why he preferred to go to mixed discos rather than gay bars, he remarked that being seen at a gay venue would out him and that the customers are only *farang* and the Thai money boys who want to live off *farang*. At the same time, Eak has no interest in other Thais. This is a common trend among professional Thai gay men. They often state that they are ‘bored’ with Thais (that Thai partners have nothing new or exciting to offer them), or that Thais bring too much ‘drama’, are jealous or have broken their hearts. Their professed desire is often only for white Asians. A hierarchical list of national partner preferences closely mirrors the economic status of its citizens, such that Japanese and Koreans are prioritised over Hong Kongers, (Chinese) Singaporeans, and Taiwanese, who are preferred to (Chinese) Malaysians, mainland Chinese and Vietnamese. These are the groups identified as ‘Asian’ on Chakran’s map. Indeed, when I ask Thais what kind of partner they are interested in, the answer is often ‘Asian’. If I follow up with a probe, ‘like Cambodians or Burmese?’ the answer is almost always a strong rebuttal. ‘Oh no! Not those!’ Other Asians, especially Burmese and Cambodians, are considered revolting. Lao are very similar to Thais, especially those from Isan, and are typically fluent in Thai. Thus, they constitute a less desirable but familiar group. Though Thai language, culture and religion borrow heavily from Indian precedents, South Asians are generally not conceptualised by Thais as Asian. For many Thais, they are detested compared to *farang*. Thus, in the imagination of middle-class gay Thais, preferred partners are white Asian or Sino-Thai. They are followed by central Thais, other Thais and *farang*. Other racial partners are generally abhorrent or unimaginable.

As I often passed for Thai (Sino-Thai or เด็กนอก *dek-nok*, Thai educated overseas), many Thais paid no particular attention to me. However, their affect often changed dramatically when a friend or I would state that I am Korean.³¹ This fact was often met with disbelief. Some Thais assumed that I or my friend was lying. It was common during my field work for Thais to take on playful Korean nicknames, use Korean names on their Facebook profiles, and to pretend that they were Korean. When the fact of my Koreanness was confirmed by others, this often led to a re-evaluation of my status and desirability. Thais who previously had no interest in me would re-orient their gaze and pay close attention. This often led to Thais practicing their Korean on me (사랑해요 *sarangheyo*, I love you, being the most common phrase they would use, sometimes accompanied by a body tilt with an arms-over-the-head heart gesture), talking about their favourite Korean dramas and stars, and generally holding me in greater esteem. They would also name all the other gay Koreans they knew in Bangkok, assuming that we would know each other. I met a number of individuals who had Korean-language aids that they carried with them. That is, they carried small notebooks, cards, papers and installed phone apps that

³⁰Fieldnotes, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 28 July 2004.

³¹Initially, during my fieldwork I stated that I was ‘Korean-American’. However, this was usually taken to mean that I was *luk-khreung*. Thais assumed that my mother was Korean and that my father was (white) American. I subsequently described myself as a Korean who was born in Korea but grew up in the US.

they could use to communicate with the Koreans they hoped to meet. Rarely, they also carried Japanese-language materials.

Even while middle-class gay Thai men profess a desire for white Asian partners, they often do not have the opportunity to enact, or are unsatisfied with, these relationships. Not surprisingly, most often these gay men end up with other Thais. When Thais do have relationships with East Asians, they are often disappointed. While I know many happy Thai–Thai, Thai–Asian, and Thai–*farang* couples (both in Bangkok and long distance), people tend to focus on and report negative emotional incidents. Thai–Asian relationships are not exempt from cultural misunderstandings because of regional proximity or presumed Asian similarity. Stereotypes about national character and imaginings created by the profusion of regional media abound. For example, Miu notes that in Korean soap operas, the men are all soft, sweet and romantic. But having dated two Korean men, he sees them as brash and stubborn.³²

Koreans cannot wait. When they order food they expect it to come out fast and eat it immediately. The soup comes out still boiling in the stone bowl. You can see the bubbles. Koreans will start eating the soup that way. Thais cannot do that, it is too hot. We will wait until the soup cools down and then eat it. Then when Koreans ask for the check, they expect it to be ready already. They don't want to wait for it to be calculated.

Korean temperament is commonly referred to by Thais as 'hot-hearted' (ใจร้อน *jai-ron*). Many of my friends noted that when they visited Korea, they were disappointed. Koreans were not all dressed liked K-drama and K-pop stars. Sadly, they looked like normal people.

Japanese, on the other hand, have a reputation for being cold and distant. Jew had been studying Japanese for many years and routinely dated Japanese men. As Jew noted, 'they are always busy and more interested in work than social life. They work all the time and then go out with their co-workers.' He was very disappointed in his most recent relationship of a year and a half with a Japanese man. 'If you call a Japanese to go out to dinner tonight, they will say they have plans to do the laundry or something like that, how about next month.'³³ Indeed, even though they were living in the same city, Jew said that he rarely saw his boyfriend and never felt he got to know him. After two such relationships, he wondered if Thais and Japanese were compatible. However, he still expressed interest in dating Japanese men.

Singaporeans, who were very popular in my preliminary fieldwork (2004–2006), generally became devalued over time in favour of Taiwanese partners. Singaporeans are reputedly selfish and conceited. As Mark noted, 'twenty years ago they were a NIC [newly industrialised country] too, now they are feeling better than us'.³⁴ As the most common of the white Asians in the Bangkok internationalised gay scene, Mark felt that there were already too many of them. Once, just before the drag show at DJ Station, when a large group of Singaporeans entered, he quipped 'the Chinese army has arrived'. For Mark, gay Singaporeans treated Bangkok as an extension of Singapore's Chinatown,

³²Miu, interview by the author, Bangkok, Thailand, 12 September 2010.

³³Fieldnotes, Bangkok, Thailand, 16 January 2010.

³⁴Mark, interview by the author, Bangkok, Thailand, 11 January, 2009.

where the gay scene is concentrated. Yet they disrespected Thais and ‘act like the *soi* belongs to them’. With the changing profile of the Asian gay scene, Taiwanese became popular partners. They are considered the easiest-going among the tropical Chinese, with a character most similar to Thais. Nevertheless, regardless of negative personal experiences, white Asians remain highly desirable partners.

The turn toward white Asian partners among middle-class Thai gay men is enabled by four major factors: (1) regional flows of media and commodities, (2) the Internet and new telecommunications technologies, (3) a proliferation in discount airlines and (4) regional alignments and politics. These factors operate within the developmental trajectories of Asian nations, as well as the context of Thai national confidence and status concerns. Thailand, and some other nations, turned away from the West after the 1997 Asian IMF financial debt crisis, as Western (and especially US) financial speculation was blamed for the situation. The devaluation of the Thai Baht on 2 July 1997 also meant that Thais were less able to afford American commodities, including media products. This provided an opening for less expensive Korean goods, as Korea was also experiencing the financial crisis. The situation gave a foothold to the ‘Korean Wave’, which is moulding aesthetic preferences among Thais of all classes and producing desires for the commodities associated with middle-class ‘Asian’ lifestyles that are imagined to circumvent the West.

The Internet has also dramatically affected access to potential partners across national boundaries. Two in particular are used by Thai gay men to find foreign partners: Berlin-based/Amsterdam-run gayromeo.com (which supports 20 languages) provides avenues for Thai–Thai, Thai–*farang* and Thai–Asian interaction, while the Hong Kong-registered/Singapore-based fridae.asia (which supports English, traditional and modified Chinese scripts and Japanese) is used primarily by Thais to interact with Asians, particularly the tropical Chinese. Since its inception in 2000, fridae has had a reputation for promoting Asian–Asian or ‘sticky’ interactions. These sites differentiate audiences along the lines of race, ethnicity, geography and language. They also provide venues to meet subcultural groups, such as Taiwanese bears, who have become trendy partners. Smartphone apps also mould partner preferences. In Thailand, Grindr is thought of as Western, while Jack’d and Hornet are Asian, 9 Monsters is Japanese and Korean and Blued is Chinese. These distinctions follow over into chat platforms such as Line (Thai and Japanese), Kakaotalk (Korean) and WeChat (Chinese). ‘Western’ apps such as WhatsApp, Skype, Yahoo and MSN have all become passé. Not only do new technologies allow for greater communication and the maintenance of long-distance relationships, they have become increasingly narrow in focus. While it is easy to have all of them, seeing what apps a person has loaded or regularly uses is a basic indicator of their racialised desires.

The proliferation of discount airlines in the region has made travel more affordable, and, for the first time, within the reach of many middle-class Thais. Air Asia in particular has expanded the reach of Thais to other countries. Their frequent promotions mean that round-trip fares booked well in advance to other countries are often under \$100 (round-trip travel to places as distant as Japan can cost around \$300). This has combined with expanded gay tourism in the region, including large circuit parties that link Bangkok with South East and East Asian cities including Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, and attract thousands of participants. Singapore was an early leader

in this area. However, with government suppression of the events, the circuit parties were moved to Thailand. More recently, Taipei has become a new frontrunner in regional gay tourism. This has led to a subsequent desirability of Taiwanese partners and subcultural influence – for example, in the use of terms such as ‘bear’ and ‘monkey’ to refer to middle-aged chubby men and young skinny men.

Proving White Asianness: Class, race and sexuality in the age of Asian regionalism

This paper aims to understand how racialised desire is shaped by geopolitics as they are refracted through local moral worlds, or the immediate everyday relationships that both organise experience and reproduce social structures. Intimate desires, while naturalised, are always already fashioned through political economies of the erotic. The relative national positions of tourist-receiving and -sending countries also affect the meanings and opportunities attached to sexual subjectivities and practices in those places (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). Gay men in Thailand imagine and use transnational relationships to elevate their socio-economic status and produce class distinctions. Transnational partner preferences for East Asians among middle-class gay men perform the function of maintaining face and signalling aspirations for development in a regionalist Asian trajectory. These partner choices reveal how new political-economic and socio-cultural alignments in Asia figure within Thailand.

Rather than being a unifying teleological force, globalisation also produces local difference. Elaborating on D’Emilio’s (1993) assertion that capitalism enables gay identity, Altman (2001) argues that the spread of capitalism has created a global gay identity outside the North Atlantic region. Yet, this approach does not account for the contemporary diversification of sexual identities in Asia. Outside influences are always absorbed through existing cultural schemes, including modes not associated with ‘modern’ and ‘egalitarian’ forms of homosexuality (Murray 2002). Wilson (2004), for example, describes the production of new non-Western sexual subjectivities in Thailand, such as *tom* and *dee* (masculine and feminine partners in female same-sex relationships), through the same market mechanisms that create ‘global gays’. Indeed, the anthropological and sociological literature points to the modern development of a heterogender-based Asian model of same-sex female sexuality throughout South East Asia and Greater China, which is constructed against their understandings of homogender Western lesbianism (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Leung 2002; Sinott 2004; Tang 2011; Kam 2012). Geopolitical inequalities, refracted through local moral logics, shape sexual desires and their social evaluation. With this research, I hope to contribute to our current understanding of sexuality and globalisation by focusing on the effects of Asian regionalism, and, in particular, by detailing new subjectivities that may initially be tied to the West, but are increasingly independent and in contradistinction.

Ara Wilson (2006) calls for studies that highlight the regional influences that Asian nations exert on each other, rather than positioning Asia as a recipient of flows from the West. This article explores contemporary shifts in the experience of Thai sexual subjectivity and desires through a critical regionalism that situates Thailand as a zone of interaction between South East and East Asia, thus excavating the inter-Asian queerness that

posits an alternative capitalist modernity to the West (Johnson et al. 2000).³⁵ Except for Megan Sinnott's work on *tom* (masculine female same-sex sexuality) and Peter Jackson's recent edited volume *Queer Bangkok*, existing accounts of gender, sexuality and sex work in Thailand focus on the interaction between autochthonous, national, and Western influences (Jackson 2011; Sinnott 2004). South East Asian regionalism and the growing impact of East Asian capital, media and tourists are now paramount to understanding Thai gender and sexuality. Japanese foreign investment in Thailand is more than double that of all European, North American and Australasian countries combined. 'Soft power' is dramatically shaping Thai desires. Thailand increasingly imports media, cosmetics and fashions from Korea and Japan, associating these nationalities with wealth, beauty and modernity (Iwabuchi 2002; Chua 2012). Middle-class consumption patterns include eating Japanese food, listening to Korean popular music, watching Japanese anime and Korean drama series, wearing Korean clothing and using Korean cosmetics.

Here, I attempt to present an argument that makes sense of Thai gay lifeworlds and the context through which cultural logics become comprehensible. As a Korean-born, Western-educated Asian-American trained in American anthropology, I make no claims to decolonise the framework from which I make my assertions. I accept that I cannot think outside the epistemologies and disciplinary prejudices of my background. Rather, I use a critical perspective from this standpoint, as well as my own situated positionality, to engage material that is of interest to intellectual movements such as inter-Asian studies. Indeed, it is my training and sexual-racial subjectivity that orients me to certain questions over others. I am attuned to see and highlight that which might pass under the radar of those paying attention to other details. I highly qualify that this study pertains to middle-class gay Thais because the same desires are not present among Thais of all sexual and gender identifications or class positions.³⁶ I also underscore that this is an emergent process, perhaps most suitably framed as a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1997). In Raymond Williams' terms, a structure of feeling is a class-differentiated sentiment, based on the cultural and material conditions of everyday experiences that characterize a particular time and place. As these sentiments are in flux, a structure of feeling does not precipitate into a formal worldview or ideology. Thus, formations like the desire for white Asians may not enter into history, but rather shift quietly into new affective processes.

³⁵'Asian values' discourse, particularly as they have been espoused from Malaysia and Singapore, posits that there is a pan-Asian/pan-religious culture with common values distinct from Western ones (Ong 1999, 2006). Thus, the economic, social and political development of Asia should not ape Western nations. Asian institutions are justified in implementing authoritarian policies and practices that, in a Western context, would infringe upon personal civil liberties or human rights because Asian societies express greater collectivism. Much of these so-called values are derived from Chinese and Japanese sources. 'Asian values' nations are nearly isomorphic with my concept of 'white Asian', as both map onto Confucianism. Former Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew (Singapore) and Mahathir Mohammad (Malaysia) are most closely associated with this line of thought. Countries such as China continue to employ this ideological framework to deflect Western criticism, which is considered ideological imperialism inappropriate for a new multi-polar world order.

³⁶In the broader project, I address the particularities of the gay community that crystalize such desires and note differences among *kathoey*, *tom*, and heterosexual Thais. I also note that my fieldwork is spread among various subpopulations of gay men including academics, activists, artists, NGO workers, and sex workers. However, these groups are not representative of a 'general' gay community. Thus my analysis focuses on individuals I interacted with through gay venues such as bars, clubs, saunas, online websites and smartphone apps. Additionally, the majority of my fieldwork took place outside the internationalised gay triangle centered on Silom Road approximately bounded by Sathorn Road/Soi Ngamduplee, Surawongse Road/Soi Pratuchai and Siam Paragon.

Within contemporary structures of feeling, I argue that middle-class Thai gay men remain acutely sensitive to their depiction as sexualised subjects in the Western gaze and as sex workers in Thailand. They thus avoid situations that potentially mark them as sex workers and thereby lower their social standing. I am repeatedly told by middle-class informants that Caucasian partners were not desirable, precisely because they represent economic opportunities at the expense of social status. That is, public interactions with *farang* have the potential to mark a Thai as a current or former paid companion. This has been corroborated by my *farang* friends, who note that Thais are increasingly less interested in them as partners. Coupled with new technologies of communication and travel, as well as increased regional integration, middle-class Thai gay men are orienting their desires eastward, toward white Asians. What this points to, however, is the pervasiveness of capitalism, empire and social inequalities. While middle-class Thai gay men do not subscribe to a putatively hegemonic desire for Caucasian aesthetics or partners, Thai yearnings to join a cosmopolitan 'Asia' perpetuates the marginalisation of people with dark skin, sex workers and migrant workers. Finally, I also want to emphasise that these aspirations are shaped by national hierarchies where the middle class in a middle-income country are particularly susceptible to the perceptions of others.

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