

Effeminacy and Masculinity in Thai Gay Culture: Language, Contextuality and the Enactment of Gender Plurality

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Abstract

Based on Judith Butler's account of the performative construction of gender, this study uses a qualitative research method to analyse genderings performed by Thai gay men. The key finding is that Thai gay men are especially flexible in their gender play and performances of both effeminacy and masculinity in the various social situations in their daily lives as well as in their romantic relationships and sexual encounters. In addition to gendered forms of comportment and behaviour, a further important dimension of Thai gay men's multiple performances of gender is through the use of masculine and feminine forms of language. Thai gay men use gendered language forms to communicate and express both effeminacy and masculinity within their circles of gay friends and acquaintances. This study broadens our understanding of how gay Thai men exhibit differently gendered identities from Western gay men. It also counters the stereotypical negative image by which gay men are often stigmatised and labeled as not being masculine. Thai gay male identity is not based on a firm separation of femininity from masculinity. Rather, alternation between masculine and feminine forms of behaviour and language permits Thai gay men to adapt their public social and private sexual relations according to the different kinds of people they meet and interact with in the different domains of their lives.

Keywords: Gay, Effeminacy, Masculinity, Gender play, Thai language

Introduction

Sao Taek and Aep Man: Central terms in Thai gay gender play

In Thai gay culture it is widely believed that every gay man has a feminine part. (Duangwises, 2010; Saisuwan, 2016) The enactment of often humorous gay effeminacy - which is variously called *khwam-sao*, "girliness", or more jocularly *taek sao*, "to break out one's [inner] girl", or *sao taek* "for one's [inner] girl to break out" - is a form of in-group social play that works as a tool in making and maintaining relationships among gay friends. The most common expression used by gay men to describe this situation is *sao taek*. Compared to

khwam-pen-ying, “femininity”, which is a formal technical term, *khwam-sao* is informal with a more intimate and “cute” (*na-rak*) or “sweet” (*wan*) sense. Humorous expressions formed with *taek*, “to break” or “to break out”, suggest that a gay man either intentionally expresses his inner femininity, *taek sao*, or that his femininity breaks out, *sao taek*, perhaps unintentionally or despite attempts to be masculine. In expressions of male femininity or effeminacy, the term *ying*, which denotes a mature woman of marriageable age, conveys somewhat formal yet nonetheless polite nuances, while *sao*, which denotes a young woman, has a nice, sweet sense. Thai gay effeminacy is not permanent but rather is a temporary contextual or situational form of acting and language use that is expressed in private social spaces and at special events such as gay parties or clubs.

In contrast, Thai gay masculinity, *khwam-pen-chai*, is enacted in sexual and romantic situations. Gay men also perform a more conventional masculine identity in the family and in public settings within heterosexual institutions. *Aep man* is the most common contemporary Thai gay idiom for masculine “straight acting” and can have either a playful sense or a derogatory meaning of putting on airs and pretending to be butch but in fact having an inner “girl” (*sao*) and being effeminate in other settings. Both sets of expressions, *taek sao/sao taek* and *aep man*, which respectively denote feminine and masculine acting by gay men, can be used either to express gay in-group camaraderie in friendly banter or as derogatively bitchy put downs. Each Thai gay man has his own distinctive mix of effeminate and masculine performances in varying degrees. Thai gay men alternate between masculine and feminine performance depending on whether they are in a public or private context. *Taek sao* denotes social femininity expressed during socialising among gay friends, while *aep man* is the situational masculinity performed in public as well as privately when seeking out a sexual partner. Public here means within heteronormative settings including within the family, at work and in everyday life in society.

There are differences in the performance and languaging of masculinity among gay men, straight men and masculine-identified *tom boy* female-to-male transgenders. Furthermore, there are also differences in the performance of femininity between gay men, women and transgender *kathoeys*. That is, there are distinctive cultures of masculine gendering among heterosexual men, gay men and *tom boys*, and also distinctive cultures and styles of femininity among heterosexual women, gay men and *kathoeys*. And within each of the gender cultures for these different gender/sex identities, there are also distinctive class-based forms of gendering. Gay men thus stand at the intersection of Thailand’s multiple cultures of masculinity and femininity, variously enacting distinctive forms of both masculine and feminine genders depending on the context and setting. Learning and developing skill in these different performances of masculinity and effeminacy is very important for successful socialising and in establishing sexual and romantic relationships in Thai gay communities. The nuanced and often complex expression of gender pastiche of both masculinity and femininity found in Thai gay language use reflects gay men’s ability to adapt to the contextual demands imposed on them by the dominant modern gender/sex heteronormative regime (Jackson, 2020). Thai gay language also reveals an indigenous view of non-essential gendering, that is, of feminine and

masculine genders as enacted, with the feminine expression *sao taek* and the masculine *aep man* both emphasizing notions of gender affectation or pretence. In this article we emphasise that the flexible masculine-feminine gender play and representation of Thai gay men differs from the forms of gendering found in Western gay cultures. In Thai society, which places significant value on the presentation and maintenance of positive public images (Jackson, 2004a), Thai gay men are capable of using both masculinity and femininity to create respected and expected images in different social situations in the wider society and among gay peers.

Methodology and conceptual framework

The study draws on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity as its conceptual framework (Butler, 1988; 1990; 1993). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) argues that gender is a kind of enforced cultural performance, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality. Butler regards gender identity to be a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanctions and taboos. Rather than expressing an inner core or pre-given identity, gender is performative (Jagger, 2008, p. 20). Butler's account of the performativity of gender is based upon a notion of speech acts and a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity. She focuses on the practices that endow particular bodies with social and symbolic meanings and which structure the everyday actions of embodied subjects. These kinds of practices are the constituting acts that create gendered subjectivity (Jagger, 2008, p. 23).

Gender is a matter of the repetition of gendered acts. Gender acts are what constitute embodied beings as gendered subjects in keeping with the norms of compulsory heterosexuality and the cultural field of the gender hierarchy. The process of gendered acts involves an on-going repetition through which individual subjects act out their masculine and/or feminine gender in a "stylised repetition of acts" that involves bodily movements and gestures. The regulation of gender is thus socially approved and politically controlled rather than being dictated by some kind of internal nature. For Butler, gender is a kind of corporeal enactment that is historically contingent. She observes, "These styles are never fully self-styled, for styles have a history and those histories condition and limit the possibilities." (Butler, 1990, p. 139) Gender emerges from an enacted fantasy or incorporation in which acts, gestures and desires produce the effect of an internal gendered core or substance. Butler explains that these acts and gestures of articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core, an illusion that is discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, p. 136). From Butler's account, we analyse the gender performativity of Thai gay men as a social practice that gives them a recognised image in different situations.

This study also draws upon a multidisciplinary research method. We began by studying printed textual sources in gay documents and publications, especially Thai gay magazines from the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s that included historical information on community building, sexual identity, social relationships and sexual experiences. Beginning in 2012, we then explored and undertook searches of the internet and social media. From Thai-language gay websites, chatrooms, discussion boards and mobile phone applications we analysed messages

and reports of experiences that gay men shared in describing their sexual activities, gender identity and perceptions of masculinity and femininity both in themselves and their sexual and romantic partners. Thirdly, we drew on participant observation from our experiences as gay scholars who have participated in networks of gay friends and attended gay social events in Bangkok over recent decades. We have drawn on our experiences and understanding as insider researchers in interpreting Thai gay thinking and behavior in different contexts based on interviews and discussions to exchange ideas with many gay men. To ensure informant confidentiality assumed names are used in all cases. These three methods of textual study, online ethnography and face-to-face interviews and discussions have provided the foundation of the key findings reported in this study.

Considering western stereotypes of effeminate gay men

It is instructive to compare attitudes to effeminate behavior in Western gay communities with those in Thailand. As in Thailand, male homosexuality and effeminacy in the West have become indelibly associated, sometimes even becoming synonymous. Coston and Kimmel (2012) observed that male homosexuality has long been associated with effeminacy (i.e. not being a real man) throughout the history of Western societies. The English language is fraught with examples equating men's sexual desire for other men with femininity: molly and nancy-boy in 18th-century England; buttercup, pansy and she-man of early 20th-century America; and the present-day sissy, fairy, queen and faggot (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 183). George Chauncey (1994) points out that masculine-identified homosexual men who lived in early twentieth-century New York detested the fairies or effeminate men that they nonetheless had sex with. Manly homosexual men looked down upon fairies or effeminate men and instead identified themselves as queer. These different homosexual identities of fairy and queer emphasised the valorisation of masculinity and the denigration of femininity.

In Western gay cultures the embodiment of masculinity and femininity has at times become embroiled in vehement rhetoric and cultural politics. Some masculine-identified gay activists have argued for a separation of feminine gay men out from masculine gay society. In *Androphilia: A Manifesto* Jack Malebranche (2006, p. 48) argues that in the West homosexuality attributes a stigma of innate femininity to all men who engage in sex acts with other men. In order to resist this stereotypical attribution of effeminacy by which gay men are not perceived as real men, Malebranche argues that males who love other males should live their lives away from effeminate gay culture. Malebranche terms masculine loving between men as "androphilia", which means a man who loves manliness in other men. Malebranche challenges the view that taking the receptive role and being penetrated by another man involves a loss of masculinity, critiquing stereotypical attitudes in which sexual role is central to affirming masculine authority and virility. He contends that anal sex is an accommodation that does not have to be viewed according to the masculine/feminine polarities and can instead be seen as an exchange of masculinity wherein both participants remain men (Malebranche, 2006, p. 53). However, Malebranche's sex/gender politics involves setting up a boundary between masculinity and femininity in gay culture, so that love between men can be re-imagined in

terms of masculine ideals such as hard work, courage and personal sacrifice to resist the feminisation of gay men as superficial, childlike and weak.

The cultural politics of excluding feminine men has been challenged. In *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior*, Tim Bergling (2001) details Western gay discrimination against effeminacy and the valorisation of “straight acting”. Bergling argues that prejudice against and disparagement of feminine gay men is rooted in a misogynistic culture in which men look down upon womanly behaviours. These attitudes come from a gender hierarchy that positions men above women. Taywaditep (2001) contends that the ideology of hegemonic masculinity is built upon a value system in which men and masculinity are considered superior to women and femininity. Peter Hennen (2008) argues that negative attitudes towards unmanly gays, which he terms “the effeminacy effect”, emerge from a discursive force that disciplines male gender by locating it in opposition to the gender of women and effeminate homosexual men. Coston and Kimmel (2012) point out that gay men who conform to hegemonic norms, secure their position in the gender power hierarchy by adopting the heterosexual masculine role and subordinating both women and effeminate gay men. This separation of marginalised effeminate gay traits from a new hegemonic masculine gay identity involves a politics of identity in which mainstream gay culture collaborates with patriarchy (Messner, 1997, p. 83). The politics of masculine gay identity reproduces the duality of oppositional genders, and Kimmel contends that this understanding of gay manhood is born from a renunciation of the feminine (Kimmel, 1994). The at times rancorous separation between femme and macho gay men that began during the gay liberation era reflects the politics of gender conformity in many Western gay communities.

The differentiation between Thai and Western attitudes and representation of effeminacy can be understood in terms of the different socio-political contexts of gay identity in both cultures. It can also be observed that depictions of both gay femininity and masculinity are common in market-based settings of global gay consumerism. The everyday strategic practices of feminine and masculine behaviour of gay men in different societies need to be distinguished, with a key issue to be explored being how gay men in local settings incorporate masculinity and femininity into their social relations in the different modern societies within which they grew up.

The changing gendering of Thai gay men’s sex

Jackson and Sullivan (1999) reported that in the decades following World War II, Thai homosexual men increasingly sought to distinguish themselves from *kathoey*s by seeking to pass as men in order to avoid social sanctions. Gay men remained invisible to other people behind the performance of normative masculinity. Jackson (1995) argues that at that time, Thai men with same-sex feelings could not express their sexuality or sexual identity. Thai homosexual men were constrained by social norms of appropriateness, needing to conform to accepted norms of behaviour, dress, speech and appearance for men (Jackson, 1995, p. 41) and obscuring their homosexual feelings behind their male gender role and masculine performance. The 1970s was the decade when a modern gay culture first emerged widely in Thai society. At

that time, urban gay men learned about gay life and identity from the first generation of gay publications and gay consumerism (Duangwises, 2010). This was a transitional period during which Thai homosexual men began to become more confident in identifying themselves as gay.

The 1970s saw the transformative influence of print media when many Thai homosexual men learned about modern gay life and identity from the lonely-hearts column, *Chiwit Sao Chao Gay* (“The Sad Life of Gays”), penned by an agony uncle who wrote under the pen name of Go Pak-nam in the nationally distributed sensationalist fortnightly magazines *Plaek* (“Strange”) and *Mahatsajan* (“Miraculous”) (see Jackson, 2016). The following decade of the 1980s saw Thailand’s first commercially successful gay magazines, such as *Mithuna Junior* and *Neon*. These gay publications introduced increasing numbers of middle-class homosexual men to the expanding commercial scene of gay bars, pubs and massage parlours in Bangkok and Chiang Mai as well as the tourist cities of Pattaya and Phuket. This decade saw changing attitudes about being gay and the performance of manhood. It was still the case that most Thai homosexual men felt that they could only identify as gay when in private spaces while they should act like a heterosexual man when they were in public places. The first experiences of many middle-class Thai gay men in visiting gay venues, especially gay bars, was to meet young straight men who worked as male sex workers. At this time, homosexual men who identified as gay usually took a sexually receptive position, called *gay queen* in the Thai gayspeak of the period. That is, gay-identified men were usually expected to take the receptive role in anal intercourse with a male sex worker, who was expected to play the active role, which was labelled as *king* or *gay king*. The *gay queen* identity and personality of this period was widely taken as being defined as an effeminate gay person who expressed his sexual desire through engaging in receptive anal intercourse.

It is interesting to investigate this transformation and the development of the opposite paired sexual roles of *gay queen* and *gay king*. Jackson and Sullivan (1999) observe that these identities based on sexual roles reflect the diversity of understandings of *phet*, the local discourse of gender and sexuality, which in gay cultures of the period was realised through different degrees of masculine and feminine expression and under which gendered being was most important in regulating and classifying sexual status. The 1970s Thai gay terms *gay king* and *gay queen* reflected how normative masculine and feminine gender roles were interpreted and evaluated within homosexual practices. At this time, many homosexual men perceived their sexual identity in terms of this binary model of masculine insertive and feminine receptive sexual relations. If they preferred to be the receptive sexual partner, they called themselves *gay queen*, while those homosexual men who preferred the active and insertive role in anal sex were called *gay king*. These two sexual roles, *gay king* and *gay queen*, exemplified the normative male and female gendering of gay relationships and identities in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the receptive *gay queen* was regarded as being identified by feminine characteristics, while the insertive *gay king* was regarded as expressing masculinity.

The terms *gay king* and *gay queen* are now outdated among younger generations of gay men because they reflect the way that gay identity was restricted by heteronormative gender roles in earlier decades. Since the 1990s, sexual roles have become increasingly delinked from gendered expression, with gay men who are the receptive partners expressing masculinity in equal degree to those who take the insertive role. The terms *king* and *queen* have become old fashioned because they denoted a masculine/feminine binary in gay sexual relations. Since the 1990s, gay men have increasingly come to see themselves as masculine whatever their sexual role in bed. The gendered associations of the sexually receptive *gay queen* as feminine and the sexually insertive *gay king* as masculine are now avoided by a newer set of terminologies that describe sexual roles without implying any sense of gendering. As detailed further below, the terms *ruk*, “to advance, invade”, and *rap*, “to receive”, are now respectively preferred instead of *king* and *queen*. The terms *ruk* and *rap* may have been borrowed from the masculine sport of Muay Thai, Thai boxing, in which offensive punches are called *fai ruk* and defensive positions are called *fai rap* (Kantamara, 2010).

The opening of significant numbers of gay saunas in Bangkok in the 1990s provided large numbers of gay men in the capital with expanded opportunities for sexual experimentation with multiple partners. Saunas were especially important sexual spaces for urban gay men to learn how to transcend stereotypes of gay effeminacy and behave in masculine or gender-neutral ways in romantic and sexual relationships with other men. In the 1990s, it became increasingly common for gay men to say that *gay queens* could change and play an insertive role, *fai ruk*, in anal sexual intercourse, just as a *gay king* could be the receptive partner, *fai rap*. Sometimes, both *queens* and *kings* could be both receptive and insertive, now known in Thai as either “can do everything” (*dai mot*) or by the English term *both*. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the gendering of sexual roles in Thai gay culture declined, the terms *king* and *queen* became increasingly obsolete, being replaced by expressions that denote preferred sexual activity – *ruk* “insertive”; *rap* “receptive”; *both* “versatile” – without ascribing either masculine or feminine gendering to any of these sexual positions. Nonetheless, it is still the case that in Thai gay culture the insertive partner or *fai ruk* may also playfully be called a “husband” (*phua*) while receptive partner or *fai rap* can be called a “wife” or *mia*.

Perhaps one of the most notable transformations in Thai gay culture has been the widespread acknowledgement that effeminate gay men can take any role in bed and that being either top or bottom in sexual relations may be unrelated to either masculine or feminine presentation or behaviour. The Thai gay and transgender communities now use the playful expression *sao siap*, “a penetrating girl”, to refer to effeminate gay men who can play the insertive role. This term was first used in the *kathoey* community to denote pre-operative transsexual women who play the insertive role in anal sex with male partners, and subsequently spread to be used among gay men. *Sao siap* is an especially interesting expression in understanding Thai gay femininity and we discuss this term further below.

As Thailand’s commercial gay scene of bars, pubs, discotheques and saunas expanded in the later decades of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of homosexual men were able to meet others in safe, private spaces that provided them with opportunities to learn how to

identify as gay and to differentiate themselves from traditional images of the cross-gender *kathoey*. They were also able to express their sexual desires and engage in forms of sociality with gay friends by adopting and negotiating characteristics of both masculinity and femininity. This flexible and adaptable appropriation of both masculine and feminine ways of acting and speaking in specific social and sexual contexts is a local cultural strategy of Thai gays. It would be a mistake to define modern Thai gay identity in terms of Western patterns of gay masculinity as Thai homosexual men have their own perceptions of gay identity. Thai gays are flexible in managing their masculine and feminine mannerisms in different situations, and almost all Thai gay men are able to cross over these two sets of gendered characteristics.

Contextualised social and cultural spaces, called *kala-thesa* (“time and place”) in Thai (Esterik, 1999, 2000), are important for Thai homosexual men to learn about the different situations in which masculinity and femininity may respectively be expressed. Among gay friends, gay men can express feminine actions and language. However, in public areas such as workplaces, Thai gays act like a heterosexual man and uphold their masculine image in order to avoid social discrimination. Among Thai gay men, femininity and effeminacy are not the sole foundations of gendered identity or being, as is the case among transgender and transsexual *kathoeyes*. Rather, gay men alternate between feminine and masculine performances depending on the *kala-thesa* social context, often expressing feminine and effeminate characteristics in paradoxical relationship with masculine expression. For Thai gay men, effeminacy and femininity are more matters of play than of gendered identity. Thai gays understand their sexual characteristics and gendered mannerisms through social activities, with different social arenas of gay life reflecting different degrees of feminine and masculine expression and disclosure. Thai gays usually express feminine emotions, feeling, language and mannerism in the context of social activities rather than in sexual relationships and we discuss this further below.

Thai gays and the language of effeminacy

In the modern national language of Thailand, based on the dialect of the country’s central region surrounding Bangkok, pronouns, particles and other parts of speech are highly diversified in terms of expressing different nuances of masculine and feminine gender norms. Men and women each have their own distinctive ways of speaking that both demonstrate and specify their respective sexual and gender identities. This gendering of the language has come to reflect the modern forms of sexuality and the gender ideals that have been promoted since the period of Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram during World War II. Since then, the Thai nation state has socialised and regulated its citizens under a patriarchal heteronormative ideology as part of a nationalist paradigm for engendering forms of sexual civilisation that it was believed would enable Thailand to compete against Western colonialism (Reynolds, 1999; Kavinrawikul, 2002; Jackson, 2003). The social control of the binary gendering of men and women has now permeated every dimension of Thai social life, with state gender controls being found in family law, dress and clothing, body language and mannerism, forms of intimacy and sexual relations as well as language.

Thailand's gendered national language is structured primarily in terms of heterosexual norms. Men and woman have their own gendered vocabularies and associated forms of bodily comportment that are linked with speech norms. Thai also has politeness particles that are used at the end of sentences as well as to express agreement, that is, to say "Yes". In polite speech, men use the sentence particle *khrap* while women use *kha* at the end of sentences and to agree with another speaker. These two particles respectively mark the masculine or feminine identity of the speaker. *Khrap* is also used by masculine-identified butch lesbians or *tom boys* and *kha* is used by feminine-identified transgender *kathoeys*. Among masculine-identified Thai men, regardless of their sexuality as either straight or gay, gendered pronouns and sentence particles are formalised expressions of masculine identity and behaviours. Masculine-identified Thai men do not use speech forms that are employed by women.

Among Thai gay men, both masculine and feminine gendered terms are used in different situations. Thai gays select gendered words to identify both themselves and their friends with either masculine or feminine characteristics, and language use is a primary field for the expression of effeminacy among homosexual men. Feminine mannerisms and ways of speaking used among gay friends are described as *sao taek*, or in more informal speech as *taeo taek*. These expressions describe situations where a gay man's inner "girl" (*sao*) or "faggot" (*taeo*) "breaks out" (*taek*) through the public performance of normative masculinity, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Contextualised acting and speaking in feminine ways in contexts of *sao taek* is very common in Thai gay culture because these forms of effeminacy are widely accepted as humorous expressions of ingroup solidarity among friends.

In private settings a gay man may use the polite feminine first-person pronouns *dichan* or *chan*, the female sentence particle *kha* and refer to gay friends by feminine third person pronouns such as *lon*, *chi* or *thoe*, all of which can be translated in English as "she/her". It is especially common for gay men to use terms that relate and refer to woman-like and feminine characteristics in conversation with other gay friends. However, feminine forms of speech will usually only be used in private settings with close friends or those they are familiar with. Effeminate speech forms are not used with strangers or in public settings where a gay man wishes to present a masculine persona.

It is especially common for gay men to refer to other gay men by female third person pronouns such as *lon*, *she* (from English), *thoe* and *nang*, all of which denote "she/her" in dominant forms of speech. The feminine title *Ee* is also often used before a gay friend's name, so a male gay friend named *Ek* may be called *Ee Ek*, "Missy Ek", which means he is regarded as expressing feminine characteristics. Gay friends can also be referred to as *pheuan sao*, "girl friends". Conversation between close gay friends is often permeated with terms that refer to women and femininity. Sentences will be ended with feminine particles such as *kha* and *ya*, the latter being used informally by Thai woman. In situations of surprise or excitement, Thai gays may use female interjections, such as *Wai!*, which is an exclamation used by women to express fright or strong displeasure. When they have a private party, some gay men may cross-dress, and if they are pretty their friends will praise them as being "beautiful" (*suai*), "attractive" (*ngam*) or, more informally, as *roet*, which is a slang term that also means to be

pretty or beautiful. If they powder their face, their friends may tease them with terms such as *deng* or *na deng*, which mean to have a powdered, whitened face.

Thai gays are especially adept in using feminine forms of disparagement to engage in playful bitchiness. While feminine terms of disparagement used by women usually reflect anger or disapproval, when used by gay men among friends these same terms may not necessarily carry any negative connotation. Among close friends, Thai gays transform female terms of disparagement into amusing expressions of camaraderie and intimacy. An example of a jocular or humorous conversation would be when a gay man sees a handsome guy walking by and makes an observation such as “So cute” (*na-rak chang*) or “So good looking” (*lo chang*). Friends overhearing his comments might jokingly retort, “*Raet*”, “*Ee raet*”, or “*Dok-thong*”, all of which are bitchy, slang terms that in this context mean “You slut!”. If the gay man expresses a desire to sleep with the handsome guy, his friends might exclaim “*Hi khan*”, “You’ve got an itchy cunt!”, which is similar to a derogatory misogynistic expression that may be used of a woman who is regarded as showing too much interest in sex. If it is known that a gay man has slept with many men, his friends might describe him as “*Kari*”, or “Whore”. While these are all highly derogatory terms when used of women, and would never be used in public settings or in formal conversation, when used within circles of gay friends they are more terms of amusement that reflect friendship and engender gay in-group camaraderie, rarely if ever inciting an angry response.

The feminine acting of *taek sao* involves a process of cultural learning, in which Thai gays can negotiate public masculinity with private expressions of feminine emotion, language and mannerisms. These effeminate expressions reflect local understandings in Thai gay cultures that “female emotions” or *arom ying* reside in their male bodies. Some Thai gay men in online web-board conversations say that all gays have feminine characteristics. In a 2008 online discussion on the topic of whether two effeminate gay men could be lovers that was conducted on the *pha.narak.com* web-board, one contributor commented that gay men’s masculine bodies may be strong and tough but their feelings are feminine (Taong, 2008) while another commented that gay men express their femininity to a greater or lesser degree according to different social situations (Nok-yung, 2008). Feminine emotions may be aroused and temporarily revealed as part of the masculine-feminine continuum of Thai gay sexual and gendered experiences. The practice of using feminine speech forms reflects close relations between gay people. In Table 1 we list some of the female words in different categories of parts of speech that are commonly used by Thai gay men.

Table 1 Thai gay men's language of femininity and effeminacy

Category of Words	Language of Effeminacy
First Person Pronouns	<i>Dichan</i> (I/me - woman) <i>Dian</i> (I/me - woman) (Informal form of <i>dichan</i>)
Second Person Pronouns	<i>Nu</i> ("Little girl"; she/her, used of younger gay men) <i>Lon</i> (She/her)
Third Person Pronouns (She/Her)	<i>Chi</i> (From English "she"; She) <i>Thoe</i> (She) <i>Nang</i> ("Miss", she)
Feminine Gender Titles	<i>Ee</i> (she) – A colloquial title used before women's names and nicknames, which gay men also often use before the names and nicknames of other gay men, especially if they are effeminate, or regarded as <i>ab man</i> or excessively affecting masculinity.
Feminine Sentence Particles	<i>Kha</i> (Yes - polite) <i>Chao kha</i> (Yes – very formal) <i>Ya</i> (Yes - informal) <i>Na ya</i> (Yes - informal) <i>Phekha</i> (Yes – used by women when replying to a member of Thai royalty)
Adjectives and Verbs	<i>Sao</i> (A young woman; to be feminine acting) <i>Sao taek</i> (Exposure or revelation of femininity) <i>Taek sao</i> (Expression femininity) <i>Taeo taek, tut taek</i> (Feminine acting) <i>Suai</i> (Beautiful) <i>Ngam</i> (Pretty) <i>Roet</i> (Perfect, gorgeous, fantastic, fabulous) <i>Deng</i> (To wear face-brightening powder or make up, literally "Bouncy") <i>Phraeo</i> (Bright) <i>Ke</i> (Pretty, smart, charming, chic) <i>Khan hi</i> (To be horny, literally "My cunt is itching") <i>Chik kat</i> (To be bitchy, literally "to peck and bite")
Interjections	<i>Wai!</i> (Scream of fright or shock) <i>Taai tai!</i> (Scream of surprise) <i>Ui!</i> (Scream of excitement) <i>Ee!</i> (Scream of fear)
Expletives and Bitchy Scolding	<i>Ee dok</i> (You bitch! You slut!) <i>Torlae</i> (To lie, to bullshit) <i>Dok-thong</i> (You bitch! You slut!)

Category of Words	Language of Effeminacy
	<i>Ee sat</i> (You cheat!)
	<i>Kari</i> (You whore!)
	<i>Ee pluak</i> (Damn you! Literally, “You termite!”)
	<i>Raet</i> (To be slutty)
	<i>Ee raet</i> (You slut!)
	<i>Ee ran</i> (You slut)
	<i>Datcharit</i> (To be affected, pretentious)
	<i>Kadae</i> (To show off)
	<i>Hi khan</i> (To be slutty, literally, “To have an itchy cunt”)
	<i>Na hi</i> (Cunt face, extremely disparaging)

The language of masculinity in gay men, straight men and tom boys

Thai gay men are also concerned to present a masculine image and care about others' perception of their manliness. Among gay men, the tactics of not expressing feminine characteristics and instead acting like a man are called *mai sadaeng ok*, which literally means not to show or demonstrate femininity or effeminacy in public. The opposite of *mai sadaeng ok* is *sadaeng ok*, which is to publicly express the femininity or effeminacy that is stereotypically viewed as the hallmark of a *kathoey* and which is often highly stigmatised among masculine-identified males, both straight and gay. It is also widely understood that those gay men who express their feminine characteristics are the ones who dare to come out and present themselves as gay in public. When Thai gay men express effeminacy, *sadaeng ok*, to other men and women, it means they are prepared to come out, and other people will understand these feminine characteristics as a prime indicator of their being gay. This contrasts with those gay men who represent themselves as straight by conforming to masculine images and who are described by the idiom “I can't tell [that he's gay]” (*du mai ok*). Effeminacy in speech and behaviour is a form of social acting and play practised by Thai gay men for the dual purposes of establishing and maintaining social relations within their groups of friends and acquaintances and indicating gay identity in public.

In accord with heterosexual gender norms, the majority of Thai gay men seek to embody male gender roles in public settings where they use the language of masculinity. In public settings, gay men refer to themselves as *phom* (I/me), the same first-person pronoun used by straight men. They also use the same masculine sentence particles as straight men: *khrap* in everyday situations; *khraphom* in formal settings and *ha* or *wa* in informal speech. *Khrap* and *khraphom* are sentence particles that Thai men use when speaking politely with others, both male and female, and these terms indicate both masculine identity and gender role.

When Thai gay men wish to present themselves in a masculine way when speaking with other gay people, they will address their interlocutors as *nai*, which means ‘You’, if they are of the same age. If the person spoken to is older, they will call him *phi*, “older brother” or *nong*, “younger brother”, if the other is younger. Like straight men, in informal settings close gay friends who present a masculine persona may also call themselves *ku* (I) while addressing

to the person spoken to as *meung* (You). When referring to a straight or gay male viewed in a masculine way the third person pronoun *khao*, “He/him”, and the masculine title *ai* (“Him”) may be used before the man’s name or nickname. *Ku* (“I”), *meung* (“You”) and *ai* (pronominal male title) are all impolite when used with people who are not close acquaintances, but among both male and female friends they are used to express camaraderie and friendship. The pronouns *ku* and *meung* can be used by either men or women when speaking with an interlocutor of any gender. Unlike personal pronouns such as *dichan* and *phom*, which respectively mark a speaker as feminine or masculine, *ku* and its paired second person pronoun *meung* do not mark the speaker as identifying with any particular gender.

Interestingly, Thai gay men and masculine-identified lesbian *tomboys* share the sentence particle *khrap* and the first-person pronoun *phom* with straight men. Some *tomboys* may also use the more informal sentence particle *ha* to demonstrate their masculine identity. When gay men and *tomboys* use these words, they do not act merely as a medium of communication but also demonstrate the masculine identity and sense of manliness of the speaker. The interjection and exclamation *Hoei* “Hey!” is used by masculine speakers and Thai also has a wide range of expletives used by men. *Ai ha* “Damn you!” (literally “You pestilent plague!”), *Ai hia* “Damn you!” (literally “You monitor lizard”) and *Ai sat* “Damn you!” (literally “You animal!”) are all extremely strong swear terms that are likely elicit a strong, if not violent, response from the person they are directed to. *Khuai* “Damn!”, is a common Thai slang term for “cock” or “penis”. *Maeng* has the strong sense of “You motherfucker!” or “That motherfucker!” and is abbreviated from *yet mae meung* “Fuck your mother!”

Significantly, the language of masculinity in Thai is smaller when compared with the significantly larger number of terms that express femininity. The expression of maleness and masculinity takes place more within the domain of embodied action, that is, acting like a man, than within the field of language. While masculinity is indeed also expressed through distinctively masculine speech forms, the domain of language is proportionally more important for marking and expressing femininity than it is for characterising and denoting masculinity.

Gay men’s bodily expression of femininity and effeminacy in private spaces

Thai gay men have distinctive cultural and social activities that are associated with sexual and gendered roles, and the gay male body can be a platform for feminine expression and performance. Thai gay men imitate female mannerisms and emotions through their nonverbal modes of social acting, such as affecting the *haute couture* walking style of female fashion models on the catwalk or posing like a female model working on a fashion photo shoot. These humorous expressions of acting are common on special occasions such as birthday parties, weekend get-togethers and holiday trips.

Gay men learn to express effeminate mannerisms and emotions by controlling and regulating the male body. For example, they may place their hands on the waist in a gesture called *thao eo* “Foot waist”, which means to strike a pose like a female fashion model on the catwalk. They may point their index finger to the front, an action known as *chi niw*, “finger pointing”, which is regarded as a feminine form of body language. In Thai gender stereotypes,

women are regarding as showing their feelings with expressive movements of the hands and fingers to stress anger or unpleasant emotions. Thai gays will also act like this when they want to make something clear and specific, such as pointing something out to their friends. (Saisuwan, 2016) In other situations, Thai gays may point their foot in front of the body in a feminine expression known as *poi(nt) thao*, an idiom that combines an abbreviation of the English word “point” and the Thai term for “foot”, and which refers to imitating the pose of a female model who points a foot forward to give a better display of her dress or skirt.

In humorous situations of cross-dressing, *taeng ying*, “to dress as a woman”, Thai gays often express feminine characteristics such as applying makeup or wearing a longhair wig, which is known as *chik wik*, “to throw on a wig”. In crossdressing it is important to hide any visible sign of the penis beneath the underwear, a technique that is called *taep*. This term may be derived from the English words “tab” or “tape”, as crossdressing drag performers often use tape to hold the penis close against the body so it is not visible when wearing tight-fitting clothes.

Some of our gay informants told us that their feminine characteristics changed through time. When they were young, their sense of being different led them to think that they were not a man. They could not identify with any of the socially constructed forms of masculine gendering they found in their home, school or other local environments. In this difficult personal situation they learned how to be themselves by respectively acting both like a man and a woman in different situations as defined by their sexual lifestyle. Their experimenting with feminine expression was not regulated by the social norms of what are regarded as proper forms of behaviour for women but rather were negotiated through personal development and adaptation. This involved variously acting both like a slut, *raet*, and a good woman who behaves properly (*riap-roi*). The experience of femininity among Thai gay men then does not reproduce the female gender roles found in everyday Thai practices. Rather, it is a rearrangement of fashion, body language and speech forms in which Thai gays meld both feminine and masculine characteristics to create a specifically gendered body. Thai gay effeminacy is thus beyond both normative male and female gender roles.

Thai gay men’s negative attitudes to public expressions of effeminacy

While effeminate expression is common among many groups of Thai gay men, some gay men nonetheless hold negative attitudes towards effeminate gays. For these men, the preferable person must be a *man*, that is, a masculine gay who acts and talks like a *man* in everyday life. The English word “man” has been borrowed into Thai gay-speak to denote acting in a masculine way. *Man* describes a masculine presentation of either gay-identified or heterosexual males and contrasts with the Thai term *phu-chai*, which also translates as “man” but is used in the specific sense of denoting the gender role of a heterosexually identified male. Many Thai gays believe that effeminate gay men, or *gay sao*, will experience discrimination and prejudice because of their feminine characteristics and behaviours. Thai gays also think that performing gender-normative forms of manhood are useful in establishing sexual and romantic relations with other gays. These expectations are associated with the culture of

images, known in Thai as *phap-phot* (Jackson, 2004a), by which many homosexual men feel compelled to act in accord with normative male gender roles. Under the Thai regime of masculine images, many gay men behave like a *man* in public spaces. If a male in their vicinity acts like a woman, they may feel uncomfortable and become anxious about possibly being accused as gay.

Even though many gay men act effeminately in private social settings, masculine characteristics are nonetheless valorised in Thai gay communities. Expressing masculine characteristics reflects the need for social conformity for Thai gays who have experienced or observed discrimination against homosexual behaviors.

In heteronormative stereotypes, acting like a woman is a primary indicator of being homosexual. Thai gay men who seek to challenge this stereotype and those who are anxious about their social standing seek to distance themselves from feminine mannerisms and emotions. For this reason, many gays do not want to find sexual partners or lovers who are effeminate. On the contrary, they seek a masculine gay partner who confirms their desired male gender image and who upholds the image of masculinity in public. When gathering information from Thai gay web-boards- including gay.postjung.com, thaiboyslove.com and msgaythai.com - and gay dating applications, such as Blued and Hornet, for the research for this study, we found that the overwhelming majority of Thai gay men on these dating sites both described themselves and those they were looking for as masculine gay men described as *mai sadaeng ok*, that is, who are straight acting or able to pass as heterosexual. Many also described themselves with the English-derived expression *bi-man*, which denotes a masculine bisexual man. A sample of the typically brief messages from gay dating web-boards that emphasise masculinity are summarised below:

I'm a sportsman, good body. Looking for a receptive (*rap*) cute *bi-man*.

I'm a Chinese-looking *man*, good body, play football and work out. Looking for top gay men (*gay ruk*).

I'm a *man*. Nobody knows [I'm gay]. Looking for a male friend to work out together.

I'm a boxer, good physique, dark, handsome. Looking for a masculine boyfriend.

The above messages reflect how masculine images and manliness predominate over effeminacy in gay dating contexts. In sexual contact and situations of intimacy, Thai gay men present and express masculine characteristics in order to attract other gay men. If they represent themselves in masculine terms as either *man* or *bi* -- both terms are borrowed from English -- they will be acceptable to other gay men as sexual partners. In these settings, effeminacy or feminine mannerisms identified by the terms *sao* or *taeo* will be considered strongly undesirable. In dating and finding sexual partners gay men often feel a need to identify as a *man* even if they are bottom (*gay rap*) in sexual relations. In addition to emphasising the strong preference for masculine-identified partners, messages posted on the msgaythai.com web-board in 2012 also reflected prejudice against effeminate gays or *gay sao* in sexual contexts:

I'm looking for a friend. I'm a versatile bottom (*both rap*). They mustn't be too old or effeminate (*sao*). I'd like to meet a gay *man*.

I'm a *man*, only looking for a masculine boyfriend. Don't be older or effeminate.

I'm looking for an insertive handsome *bi-man* only. I don't like effeminate gay bottoms.

In many gay web-boards and dating apps the majority of gay men seeking partners state that they want to contact a masculine *gay man* and describe themselves as a *gay man*, using terms that reflect manliness. No-one on these dating sites says that they are effeminate. They may state that they are sexually receptive (*rap*) and like to be a bottom in anal intercourse. But these sexually receptive gay men will nonetheless affirm that they are masculine and do not express effeminacy. They will describe themselves as *gay man rap*, that is, a masculine gay man who prefers the receptive role. In conducting online research for this study, we did not find any web-board user looking for a lover who explicitly described himself as an effeminate gay, although some users did admit that they acted a little effeminate.

In romantic and sexual settings, Thai gay men express masculine characteristics and manliness and also seek out a masculine boyfriend who presents an image as a *man*. The masculine image of the *man* is perceived as a sexual and romantic ideal. Thai gay men learn that the process of initiating erotic and sexual relations with other gays is facilitated by acting like a *man*. This masculine beginning is crucial. In attracting a masculine gay partner, Thai gay men take pains to ensure that first impressions in dates and hook ups do not convey any sense of effeminacy. They think that effeminacy will destroy any chance of success in establishing a sexual relationship. When chatting up or flirting with a masculine gay man they must present a masculine image. This is an interesting strategy in Thai gay sexual relations because, by comparison, heterosexual men do not need to regulate their masculinity when they approach a woman.

If a Thai gay man fails in his attempts to establish sexual intimacy because his desired partner perceives him as being too effeminate, or not being masculine enough, this will be described as *ab mai nian*, which is an abbreviation of *ab man mai nian*, to be unsuccessful at straight-acting. It is also called *sao taek*, for one's girlie effeminacy to break out. Judging whether a gay man is effeminate is a central element of sexual socialising in gay events and venues such as dance parties, pubs and discotheques. Thai gay men learn to identify those who are *sao*, "girlie" effeminate or feminine, by looking at their dance movements. *Gay sao* will be seen as expressing effeminacy through their dance steps or *tha ten*. Gays who visit pubs and discotheques sometimes lighten their faces with powder and darken their eyebrows to give them confidence with a more prominent appearance. This may indicate that these gay men are expressing femininity and could be labeled as *gay sao*.

Behaving like a *man* and concealing femininity is a matter of individual learning. Each gay man has different techniques to perform masculinity in front of lovers and sexual partners. For example, they may ensure that they use the masculine sentence particle *khrap* in conversation and control their voice in a bass tone. They may also control their body movements by staying still and not acting in a feminine way. Each gay man knows his own limitations and ability to act either like a man or a woman. The different degrees of feminine characteristics or *khwan-sao* come to be appreciated through personal experience. Some gay

men accept effeminate gays who can control and suppress their femininity, but those who express themselves in an especially feminine way will be discriminated against in dating and sexual contexts.

For example, in an online interview, Tom, a 32-year-old gay man living in Bangkok, related that he was interested in cute gay men who look like young Japanese or Korean men. However, Tom stated that he does not like obviously feminine gay men whose manner makes them look like a *kathoey*, such as having dyed hair or flamboyant clothing. He criticised obviously feminine gays as “acting more feminine than a woman” (*mi charit koen ying*). He thought that this behaviour was unattractive and felt it was unpleasant when feminine gay men joined him in public spaces.

In extreme cases, *gay sao* can be ridiculed by other gay men as *tut*, *taeo* or *kathoey*, which exemplifies the extent to which effeminate gays may be discriminated against in the Thai gay community. In fact, *gay sao* differ from *kathoeyes* in that they do not desire to be a woman and do not dress like a woman. They still appreciate their male body and the male sexual organ. Furthermore, *kathoeyes* do not seek out a gay man as a lover or sexual partner. A key difference between *gay sao* and *kathoey* is that *gay sao* typically seek another gay man as their sexual and romantic partner while transgender *kathoey* usually seek a heterosexually identified man or *phu-chai* as a partner. However, there may be exceptions where *kathoey* may have sexual relationships with people of all genders. We recognise that in daily practices gender identity is not necessarily a determinant of sexual desire and relationships.

Nonetheless, some *gay sao* may flirt with straight men when they accompany their *kathoey* friends. *Gay sao* and *kathoey* are thus flexible in their sexual desire and gendered acting, being interested in both straight men and gay men. The characteristics of *gay sao* are represented in shades of grey that include both masculine and feminine elements. *Gay sao* and queer identified people occupy the middle of the Thai gender spectrum. In contrast, transsexual *kathoeyes* are on the feminine end of the spectrum of gay and transgender gendering while hyper-masculine gays are on the other, masculine end of the gay/trans gender spectrum. Along the Thai gender spectrum, *gay sao* can adapt and vary their expressions of both effeminacy and masculinity. They can act like a woman when in the company of *kathoey* and effeminate gay friends. They can also act like a *man* when they approach masculine gay men and may flirt with either straight men or masculine gay men. It is through this skill in the situational adaptability of their gendering and sexual preference that *gay sao* find their place in Thailand’s modern Thai homosexual community.

Nevertheless, many urban gay men regard the gender-blending of *gay sao* -- who may powder their face but use masculine speech forms such as the sentence particle *khrap* -- in negative terms as a contradiction. The multiple gender presentation of an effeminate gay man – visually effeminate but discursively masculine -- is not accepted by many masculine Thai gay men because they do not expect *gay sao* to express masculinity in any way, whether behaviourally or linguistically. If effeminate gays try to act like a *man* in public, they may be ridiculed by masculine gay men and disparaged for faking a preference for the insertive (*ruk*) role in bed. Even within groups of *gay sao* friends and acquaintances, there may be some who

do not believe that an effeminate friend could take the insertive role. They think that *gay sao* can only enjoy sex by taking the receptive role. Within *gay sao* social groups, gossip and disparaging comments about other effeminate gays is very common. The prejudice against *gay sao*, both by masculine gay men and within *gay sao* groups, develops within a gay culture that is dominated by masculine images promoted by gay marketing and media. In commercial gay media and marketing images of masculine bodies and masculine characteristics are the idealised representations.

Multiple gendering and diverse sexual roles in Thai gay sexual relations

The complex and multiple blending of gay gender presentation, as either masculine or feminine, and preferred sexual role, as either top or bottom, is represented by a range of gender-sex compound expressions that Thai gay men use on gay dating webboards and dating applications and in conversation in everyday life. These expressions all begin with the identity label *gay*, which distinguishes these men from transgender *kathoey*. The expressions then add a gender term, either *sao* for feminine-acting gay men or *man* for a masculine-presenting gay man. Finally, a third term for preferred sexual position is added: *ruk* for active or insertive; *rap* for receptive; *both* or *dai mot* for sexual versatility. This fine nuancing of Thai gay terminology indicates the importance of both gender presentation and sexual preference or sexual role in Thai gay culture.

Table 2 Thai gays and multiple gendering and diverse sexual roles

Gender Presentation & Sexual Role	Thai Term
Masculine Sexually Insertive	<i>Gay man ruk</i>
Effeminate Sexually Insertive	<i>Sao siap</i>
Masculine Sexually Receptive	<i>Gay man rap</i>
Effeminate Sexually Receptive	<i>Gay sao rap</i>
Masculine Sexually Versatile	<i>Gay man both, Dai mot</i>
Effeminate Sexually Versatile	<i>Gay sao both, Dai mot</i>

Note that given the importance of masculine presentation in sexual contexts, Thai gays do not use the term *sao* to identify themselves when they are communicating and using webboards or social media, even if they may be effeminate. While the term *sao siap* may be used to describe an effeminate gay man who is sexually insertive, this term is not used as an identity label in sexual settings.

Thai gays have learned to adapt their sexual repertoires by separating gender norms enacted in public from sexual positions adopted in private encounters. While muscular and mustached masculine gay men can alternate their sexual activity from the usually expected role of being a top to also be a bottom, feminine gays who are expected to be a bottom can also learn to take the insertive role in anal intercourse. Some gay men may prefer a feminine gay sexual partner, depending on experience and personal taste. In addition, in establishing and

negotiating a sexual relationship, the members of a gay couple will each reflect on and assess how masculine or feminine their partner is. The quotes from conversations among gay men found on the gay web-board *thaiboyslove.com* discussing sexual experiences about *gay sao* exemplify the complex intersection of gender presentation and sexual role in Thailand's gay communities today, for example:

“If my partner is more feminine (*gay sao*) than me, I will be active (*ruk*). Of course, when I find a masculine gay man (*gay ruk*), I will be the bottom (*rap*). It depends on different gay characteristics.” (May 6, 2012).

Having a masculine body and a good physique is important for many gay men. Although a gay man may be an effeminate *gay sao* in his behaviour and presentation he can nonetheless take the insertive role in anal sex. In sexual intercourse, the receptive and insertive roles are not necessarily related to the masculinity or femininity, respectively, of a gay man's presentation. In the private setting of sex, pleasure may override the gender that a gay man enacts in public. There is therefore a division between public and private contexts in Thai gay culture. Public roles are subject to the norms of masculine and feminine gender performance, while in sexual practice these gender roles can be forgotten when a desire for sexual pleasure becomes more important. In contemporary Thai gay culture, sexual role is determined more by personal preferences in varieties of sexual pleasure than by gender role. While the gender stereotype of an effeminate *gay sao* is that, like a woman, he will take the receptive role, in many cases he may be a *sao siap* in bed, where his active sexual role is determined by private experience and preference in varieties of sexual pleasure.

Thai gay culture is constituted at the intersection of public forms of masculine and feminine gendering, and private sexual preferences marked by the exploration of sexual pleasure. In the private domain, the exploration of pleasurable sexual experiences becomes the dominant determinant of actual forms of sexual activity, which may bear little relationship to public gender performance or stereotypical normative expectations of what sexual roles are appropriate for a given gender presentation. This again indicates the contextualisation of Thai gender and sexual culture, and Thai gay men's ability to move between public and private contexts in which radically different normative expectations may operate. The fine nuancing of Thai gay terminology -- which combines terms for sexual identity, gender presentation and preferred sexual role -- reflects the explicit awareness and acknowledgement of the complexity and situational specificity of Thai gay gender/sex culture. It also confirms Jackson's (2004b, 2003) observation that the Thai field of *phet*, the term by which the multiple phenomena detailed in this study are understood, needs to be considered as an imbricated gender/sex domain, rather than as distinct fields of gender or sexuality.

Conclusion: Judith Butler and Thai gay effeminacy and masculinity as gender play

In contrast to the more polarised separation of masculinity and femininity in some Western gay cultures, Thai gay culture is constituted more as a practice of gender pastiche that draws on both masculine and feminine characteristics. This gender pastiche -- in which effeminate gays play with both feminine and masculine traits and negotiate womanly and

manly behaviors in various social situations -- is an extremely common form of gender nonconformity in Thailand. The distinction between Thai and Western attitudes of gay effeminacy can be understood in terms of the different political contexts of gay identity in both cultures. Western gay cultures have been strongly influenced by the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, in which many gay activists argued that achieving political and legal rights required a separation of gay masculinity from the stigmatised effeminacy that dominated stereotypes within heterosexual culture. Bergling (2001) argues that in this context many "straight-acting" gay men came to see effeminate gay men as slowing the process towards achieving equal rights and manly gays needed to equate themselves with heterosexual men.

Thai gay men do not consider their masculine and feminine acting and emotions to be separated from each other. They learn to express masculine and feminine characteristics in different social situations. In the Thai gay community, the male body serves as a platform for performing and acting both like a man and woman. Although Thai gays identify with and operate within the idealised forms of the heterosexual gender binary, they can modify and adapt their masculine and feminine acting in alternative ways. When we consider masculine and feminine characteristics among Thai gay men, we cannot fully evaluate their behaviour or language in terms of mainstream normative gender roles. They exercise agency in presenting their behaviour and feelings depending upon their diverse public social and private sexual relations. They can borrow masculine and feminine characteristics to apply to their personal practices. We can say that masculine and feminine mannerisms practised by Thai gay men are forms of social acting and playing.

The boundaries of the masculine and feminine poles of the heteronormative gender continuum are blended within the physiology of the gay male body. Thai gays have the ability to negotiate and control their body and emotions in relation to various social activities. Their feminine or effeminate acting is not permanent but rather is expressed temporarily in the context of socialising with friends and in group activities. Among Thai gays, it is usual to express and act like a woman when gay friends meet and create social relationships. Their effeminacy and womanly acting are not seen as being in contradiction to social acceptance and the achievement of rights.

Thai gay men's dual acting and playing with feminine and masculine genders can be understood in terms of Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender. As for gay gendering, Butler argues that gay people demonstrate feminine and masculine gendering as a parody, which produces postures as an imitation. The social gender play by which Thai gays express their feminine gestures, speech and emotions can be understood in terms of Butler's concept of gender performativity as a parody of gender norms. Butler contends that gender norms are not stable and parody creates the possibility of new configurations. The masculine and feminine expression and practices found in the gay community represent a politics of gender parody. When Thai gay men enact effeminacy, they are practising gendered acts in which their body is a site of the citation and reiteration of femininity. These gender acts are materialised through their body with feminine language, feelings and mannerisms.

In considering the performance of drag queens, Butler (1990) argues that they represent the instability of the relationship between sex and gender and attest to the performative nature of masculine or feminine identity. The drag queen exposes gender as a cultural code which relies on imitation and practised repetition. We can draw on this account to understand the feminine acting practised by Thai gays, whose effeminacy playfully imitates dominant gender norms. However, in contrast to Butler's account, the feminine acts of Thai gays do not represent any challenge to or destruction of the regulatory regime of compulsory heterosexual genders. Rather, they are a means of social integration within groups of gay friends and a social indication of gay identity when enacted in the straight world. The performativity of effeminacy in Thai gay society is a form of cultural adaptation in which gay people use their respective enactment of femininity and masculinity for social gender playing such as joining in special events with their close friends and maintaining sexual relations with lovers and sexual partners. Butler's idea of performativity -- which understands gender not as a natural essence but rather as a social construct built upon individual practices of the body as an arena -- helps us understand Thai gay performances of masculinity and femininity as processes of production that are found in the flexible, contextually situated sex/gender culture of Thai gay men.

Thai gay effeminacy represents a form of gender play by which feminine expression is used to create social networks among close gay friends. At the same time, gay men negotiate both masculine and feminine expression in different contexts. This kind of contextualised social play of diversely gendered acts -- in terms of Butler's concept -- is important both in confirming gay identity and in exploring same-sex erotic pleasure and romance. It is significant that, in contrast to Butler's view of drag performances as a form of subversive gender politics that challenges heteronormative hierarchies, Thai gays use varieties of feminine and masculine expression for playing and acting socially. Thai gay gender play does not have a political goal but rather is a form of entertainment and expression in daily life and sexual contexts. In the West, masculine gay discrimination against effeminate gays has at times become part of a gender politics of asserting masculine status within a patriarchal homophobic culture. However, in Thailand gay gender roles are more about sexual pleasure and playful fun, *sanuk*, than gender politics. Although forms of social ridicule and sarcasm against effeminate gays or *gay sao* are common in Thai gay culture, Thai gay men do not discriminate against their effeminate gay acquaintances or exclude them from groups of gay friends after they have got to know each other. Within their groups of friends, they can express their feminine feelings, language and mannerisms confidently, which are termed *taek sao*. In contrast, in romantic settings and sexual contacts, Thai gay men express themselves in the masculine ways known as *ab man*. The social gender play of Thai gays, both effeminate *taek sao* and masculine *ab man*, are learned forms of cultural expression in Thai gay communities.

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