

A Homoerotic History of Bangkok's Gay Middle Class: Thai Gay Bars and Magazines in the 1980s and 1990s

Narupon Duangwises and Peter A. Jackson

Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre; Australian National University

ABSTRACT—Thailand is well known internationally for the size and vibrancy of its diverse and highly visible gay, lesbian and trans (*kathoey*) communities. In comparative studies of the histories of modern gay communities in Asian metropolises, such as Tokyo, Taipei and Bangkok, there has been considerable debate about whether local factors have been the driving forces in the rise of new same-sex cultures or whether Asian societies have borrowed or imported these novel cultural forms from the West. In this article, we argue that in the later decades of the 20th century, Bangkok's gay bars and magazines were significant local influences in the development of modern patterns of homoeroticism and gay culture in Thailand. We use Thailand's first commercially successful gay magazine, *Mithuna Junior*, as a source of historical information to understand the emergence of social and commercial connections between gay bars and urban middle-class gay men in Bangkok during the 1980s and 1990s. As Thailand's market economy grew rapidly from the 1980s, the size of the middle class and the urban area of Bangkok both expanded significantly. During this period, gay bars and commercial Thai-language gay magazines created both real and virtual social spaces for middle-class homosexual men to explore their sexual and romantic lives and to develop an enhanced sense of sexual identity based on same-sex preference. In this highly dynamic situation, the editors and publishers of *Mithuna Junior* magazine collaborated with gay bars to produce new forms of homoerotic consumption and socialisation in which gay patron-client relationships based on class stratification developed as a dominant pattern in modernised capitalist Thailand. The distinctiveness of Thailand's modern class-structured gay culture reflects the fact that it has emerged from the local conditions of Thai capitalism and domestic Thai-language print media.

Introduction

Thailand is well known internationally for the size and vibrancy of its diverse and highly visible gay, lesbian and trans (*kathoey*) communities. In recent decades, research on these same-sex and trans communities and cultures has expanded rapidly, both internationally and in Thailand.¹ In this article, we use the first generation of

¹ For accounts of research on sexual and gender diversity in Thailand, published in both Thai and English, see: Pimpawun Boonmongkon and Peter A. Jackson (eds), 2012; Narupon Duangwises and Peter A. Jackson (eds), 2013; Narupon Duangwises and Peter A. Jackson, 2017.

commercially successful gay magazines in Thailand, in particular *Mithuna Junior*, which was published between 1984 and 1997, as sources to analyse the development of the country's urban gay culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on *Mithuna Junior* and other early gay magazines, such as *Neon*, *Morakot* and *Midway*, which emerged as competitor commercial gay publications from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, we detail the emergence of commercial gay bars and spaces in Bangkok, as well as Thailand's stratified class-based gay sexual culture.²

In the Thai social context, gay bars differ from those in Western societies where gay men meet to socialise, dance and seek sex partners, as well as boyfriends and long-term relationships with other men (Chauncey, 1994; Cook, 2003). Gay bars in Western societies are thus venues for the creation of homosexual identity and also at times for instilling political awareness and engendering support for movements for gay rights (Carter, 2011). In contrast, Thai gay bars are commercial venues where young men provide sexual and other services for wealthy gay customers. Thai gay bars are commodified sexual spaces that are structured by class-based relationships between young, poorer male sex-workers, called *dek off* or *dek bar* in Thai, and better-off gay clients. The social and cultural patterns of homoeroticism that exist in Thai gay bars are located in a frame of patronage and economic reciprocity, and are not related to movements for sexual liberation or advocating for gay political rights. As detailed below, the advertisements and articles recommending Bangkok's gay bars, that were published in *Mithuna Junior* magazine, encouraged gay customers to buy sexual services from young male sex workers.

Mithuna Junior was published wholly in Thai and reflected the development of the commercial gay scene for Thai gay men. Significantly, apart from reports of gay events and activism overseas, there is a general absence in this magazine of accounts and images of Caucasian men, or of men from other major contemporary Asian gay cultures, such as Japan or Taiwan. The orientation of *Mithuna Junior* was overwhelmingly local, which contrasts with some stereotypes that the Thai gay scene developed from "importing" Western gay models and in response to Western gay tourism. In comparative studies of the histories of modern gay communities in Asian metropolises, such as Tokyo, Taipei and Bangkok, there has been considerable debate about whether local factors have been the driving forces in the rise of new same-sex cultures or, in contrast, Asian societies have borrowed or imported these novel cultural forms from the West. Denis Altman's (1996a, 1996b, 1997) accounts of the "global gay" and "global queering",

² Digital copies of these magazines were accessed online from the British Library's *Thai Rainbow Archive Project*. The *Thai Rainbow Archive Project: A Digitised Collection of Thai Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Publications* (EAP128) was funded by the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme in 2008 and was co-ordinated by Peter A. Jackson in collaboration with Narupon Duangwises and the Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok. This digital archive records over 1,000 Thai language gay magazines published from the 1980s to the early 2000s. These historically significant documentary sources on modern Thai gay history have not been collected or preserved by any library or academic institution in Thailand. Furthermore, Thai academic libraries have declined to accept donated copies of these magazines offered freely by Thai gay community organisations. As a result, the only substantial collection of Thai gay magazines is now held offshore in the United Kingdom in digital format. Full access to the Thai Rainbow Archive is available online at <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP128>

which positioned Western and predominantly American gay communities as sources of gay cultural globalisation, were widely critiqued as overlooking the local origins of the often-distinctive forms of modern gay identity in many non-Western societies (for example, see Chris Berry, 1998, Fran Martin, 1998). In this article, we argue that the distinctiveness of Thailand's modern class-structured gay culture reflects the fact that to a significant extent it has emerged from the local conditions of Thai capitalism and domestic Thai-language print media.³

The Thai gay man and class distinctions

Thailand's gay bars and magazines emerged at a time of rapid economic growth (Deininger and Squire, 1997; Pranee Tinnakorn and Chalongphob Sussangkarn, 1998) marked by an expansion of the Thai middle class and increasingly urban lifestyles (Funatsu and Kagoya, 2003). Thailand's National Statistics Office reported that in 1986, 5 million people were identified as belonging to the middle class out of a total population of 52 million. The numbers in the Thai middle class had increased to 28 million by 1996.⁴ These figures show that the Thai middle class grew exceptionally rapidly over the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when the country's economy grew at rates of over 10 per cent per annum. Across the decade from 1986 to 1996, the average daily wage of middle-class workers increased from 60 to 300 baht, or from 1,800 to 9,000 baht per month (Ikemoto and Uehara, 2000). While we have no way of knowing the numbers of Thai middle-class gay men at this time, we can nonetheless assume that, as the economy grew and incomes increased, this sector of homosexual men was increasingly able to pay for the services provided in commercial venues, such as gay bars and saunas.

Class formation and socio-economic stratification among urban Thai gay men is based on occupation and educational background. Three different classes can be identified within Bangkok's gay community. The first is working or lower-class gay men, who live in poor-standard housing, have low levels of education and earn their income from daily wage labour as construction workers, waiters, peddlers, hawkers, seasonal agricultural labourers and sex workers. The second sector is middle-class gay men, who generally live in good conditions, are well-educated and work in the business sector, education or in government service. Middle-class gay incomes are substantially higher than those of working-class gay men. The third group is a small, but influential, number of rich *hiso* (from the English "high society") gay men, who receive significant incomes from their own businesses or from inherited family estates. These *hiso* gay people are very small in number and typically socialise in their own private groups separate from the middle-class gay men, who patronise gay venues, and the working-class men, who work in bars and pubs as waiters and sex workers. *Mithuna Junior*

³ For further discussion of debates about whether modern Thai gay culture developed from local processes or by copying or importing Western patterns of homosexual lifestyle and culture, see Peter A. Jackson, 1999 and 2009.

⁴ National Statistical Office, <http://www.nso.go.th/> (accessed 25 July 2013).

magazine was founded at the very start of the take-off period of the Thai economy in the early 1980s, and its commercial success and that of the competitor gay magazines established later in the 1980s, as well as of the many gay venues that advertised in these publications, was based on the growing disposable incomes of the rapidly expanding Thai gay middle class.

In the 1970s and 1980s, working-class Thai homosexual men found their sexual partners from among members of their extended family and kin groups, as well as from cruising areas in public spaces, such as Bangkok's Lumpini Park, Wang Saranrom Park and Sanam Luang, the large open space near the old royal area of the city adjacent to the Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. These public spaces were all well-known homosexual cruising sites in the middle decades of the 20th century. Many Thai homosexual men went to these locations in search of the young men working there as casual sex workers. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it cost between 30 and 100 baht for sex with these informal sex workers. Bangkok's public cruising sites were not only places for commercial sex, but were also locales where sexual relationships and ongoing friendships were formed. The men who frequented these public cruising spaces formed their own social and sexual networks and coined their own idioms for the spaces in which they fashioned sexual and romantic lives. For example, an octagonal pavilion, that is still located in the centre of Lumpini Park and which was formerly hidden by thick shrubbery that made it an especially popular cruising spot, was colloquially called "the love nest halo" (*rang rak song klot*) (Narupon Duangwises, 2010).

It was in this period of economic and sociological transition that Thailand's gay middle class came to see themselves as masculine-identified men, who had sexual and emotional attachments with other masculine-identified men. Starting in the 1960s, this specifically gendered form of male sexual relationship came to be known as "gay" and was increasingly distinguished from the feminine transgender *kathoey*, with whom masculine gay men were often confused in mainstream discourses (see Jackson, 1989, 1995, 2016; Narupon Duangwises, 2010). In the 1980s and 1990s, masculine identity categories, such as *gay king*, *man* and *mai sadaeng ork*, which all refer to "straight acting", were of primary concern for these men. The earliest records of the borrowed English word "gay" being used in Thailand to refer to masculine homosexual men are in newspaper reports of the 1965 murder of Darrell Berrigan, the American-born editor of the *Bangkok World* newspaper (see Jackson, 1999). In the later 1970s, Thai gay usage came to distinguish between sexually receptive *gay queens* and sexually insertive *gay kings* (see Jackson, 2000). The English word, "man", was also borrowed to denote masculine presentation by homosexual men. "Man" was distinguished from the Thai term *phu-chai*, which came to have the specific meaning of a heterosexual male. In the 1980s, the expression *mai sadaeng ork*, literally "not expressing (gayness or effeminacy)" became the dominant Thai idiom for masculine presentation among gay men (see Jackson, 1995, 2016). That the members of the Thai gay middle class sought to communicate with other gay men in terms of masculine gender role expectations is confirmed by the analysis of *Mithuna Junior* magazine detailed below.

Among the Thai middle classes living in Bangkok were many gay men who sought out a different lifestyle in the city. We contend that Thailand's urban gay middle

class, formed amidst multiple social influences, were mediated by both commercial gay venues and print media. These locales and media contributed to the creation of homosexual spaces for the Thai gay middle class in two important ways. Firstly, gay bars and other venues served as sites of consumption where the male body was transformed into a sexual commodity. In these places, gay identity was performed through paying a price for the sexual services of working-class rent boys. Secondly, print media such as *Mithuna Junior* provided literate, educated gay men with ideas by which to imagine fashioning a gay lifestyle amidst the consumer culture of urban life. In the early 1980s, the urban lifestyle of Bangkok's gay middle class was built around the consumption of sexual commodities, such as rent boys, gay pornographic videos and photos of naked male models. These two spaces—one real and the other virtual—were both constituted as domains for the marketing of sexual commodities for gay people living in urban areas who had regular incomes. In summary, we can say that modern Thai gay culture has emerged from Thai capitalism at the intersection of local economic and media influences, which in the later decades of the 20th century supported the provision of services for the local gay market (see also Jackson, 2009).

In the early 1980s, Bangkok's largely closeted homosexual culture consisted of a small number of relatively expensive bars and pubs for well-off patrons and an extensive scene of public cruising venues for working- and lower-middle class men. Thai homosexual men from different social strata explored their sexuality in these largely separate domains. While middle-class gay men found partners in both gay bars and cruising areas, working-class men's sexual contacts were sought out with kin, friends and strangers. However, in both cases homosexual experiences were kept private. Both middle- and working-class homosexual men lived closeted lives where same-sex desire could not be openly acknowledged. It was in this context of secrecy and frustrated feelings that the lonely-hearts column of an agony uncle, who wrote under the pen name of Aa Go Paknam, or "Uncle Go Paknam", in the nationally distributed sensationalist magazine, *Plaek*, provided the first print media space of gay communication in the mid-1970s (Jackson, 1995, 2016). However, the formerly private and closeted world of Thai homosexual men changed rapidly with a significant public opening, both in print media and in lived spaces, following publication of *Mithuna Junior* as the country's first nationally distributed commercial gay magazine at the end of 1983. This was a major turning point in Thai gay history that supported the development of a modern public Thai gay identity, which had not previously coalesced around the same-sex activities and sexual desire expressed in earlier generations of gay bars and cruising sites in Bangkok.

Mithuna Junior was not the very first Thai gay magazine. *Cherngchai* ("manly") was published in 1982, but folded after only one issue. Furthermore, *Mithuna Junior* did not exist for long before a swathe of competitor magazines was published, capitalising on the market for gay publications that this path-breaking magazine had shown to exist. These early competitor magazines, and their years of publication, included: *Boy* (1983), *Neon* (1984-1995), *Morakot* (1985-1998), *Midway* (1986-2001) and *My Way* (1989). However, *Mithuna Junior* (1983-1997) was far and away the most influential and one of the longest-lasting gay magazines in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is for these reasons that we use it as the focus of analysis in this article.

Chomphunut Publications launched *Mithuna* magazine in 1983 under gay-identified executive manager and editor, Anan Thongthua, and was one of the first mass-circulation Thai publications to include full-colour centrefolds of male models.⁵ *Mithuna* began as a crossover magazine with its beefcake images of erotically-posed Thai male models being oriented to female readers as well as to gay men. This pattern of crossover marketing to both heterosexual female and gay readerships was reproduced by upmarket mainstream fashion magazines, such as *Phraeo*, *Image* and *Volume* in the later 1990s and early 2000s. The significant response from gay readers to the beefcake-style male centrefolds led the editor of *Mithuna* to realise that there was an unmet demand for a magazine oriented specifically to the sexual and social interests of gay men. In March 1984, the magazine was reoriented wholly to a gay readership, and to mark this repositioning, it was renamed *Mithuna Junior*. The first issue sold for 30 baht with an annual subscription of 12 issues costing 330 baht.

At the end of 1985, a new editor, Nukul Benchamat, took over the reins at *Mithuna Junior* for a short period after Anan Thongthua resigned in December that year. In January 1986, Surasarn Publications, owned by Surasak Chakkawanmongkol, took over the publication and a second-generation management team began running *Mithuna Junior*, with Prach Sathana becoming the new editorial director and Sakkarin Sirirak becoming the editor. In this period, *Mithuna Junior* placed an emphasis on publishing gay fiction, short stories and poetry that detailed same-sex love, friendship, relationships and homoerotic experiences. *Mithuna Junior* came under new management and editorship once again at the end of 1986. Lek Malee and Atthapol Phanbunlert came to work as editors under the new owner, Sitthichai Chavanothai, who had founded Him Studio, which published a range of other publications, including photo albums of male models. Dr. Seri Wongmontha, the well-known Thai gay media commentator and former Thammasat University lecturer in mass communications, became a regular columnist at this time. The magazine changed hands yet again in September 1987, with Chuchee Satitchai becoming the magazine's fourth editor in its short lifespan. This fourth and final generation of *Mithuna Junior* management included many regular contributions by Thai gay activist, Natee Teerarojjanapongs. Natee's significant input to *Mithuna Junior* changed the magazine from a broad-based lifestyle publication into a mouthpiece for promoting gay rights and supporting HIV/AIDS prevention and education campaigns in the gay community. Significantly, through all its changes of ownership and editorship, which reflected the difficulty of establishing a commercially viable gay magazine in Thailand in the 1980s, advertising from gay bars remained *Mithuna Junior*'s financial mainstay.

In addition to advertising by gay bars, *Mithuna Junior* also derived income from mail-order services for pornographic gay videos and nude albums of "secret" pictures of the male model centrefolds revealing their genitals. Because of censorship laws, full frontal nudity was not possible in the images printed in *Mithuna Junior*. However, the

⁵ *Mithuna* is the Thai term for the astrological sign, Gemini, represented by a symbol of male twins. Anan Thongthua, *Mithuna*'s founding executive manager, decided on this name for the magazine because he felt that common representations of Gemini's twins had homoerotic overtones (see Jackson, 2016).

magazine's publishers used this to financial advantage by making nude shots of the cover and centrefold models available for mail-order purchase. Historically, pornographic videos have not been available for sale openly in Thailand, leading to an extensive underground market. While the Thai police have periodically rounded up erotic videos and publications sold under the counter from a range of outlets across the country, including occasional raids on newsagents and bookstores stocking *Mithuna Junior* and other gay magazines, in general, the authorities have not stopped the advertising of otherwise banned materials for sale by mail order. *Mithuna Junior*'s income from these mail-order sales was considerably higher than that derived from the sale price of the magazine, with the sexual commodities advertised being very expensive. In the later 1980s, when the cover price of the magazine was increased to 40 baht, a gay video cost between 400 and 600 baht, while a set of nude photographs of the male cover and centrefold models cost 100 baht. At that time, the sexual services of a male sex worker working from a gay bar cost between 500 and 1,000 baht. The high prices of these sexual commodities meant that they were only accessible to privileged upper-class and higher-income gay men.

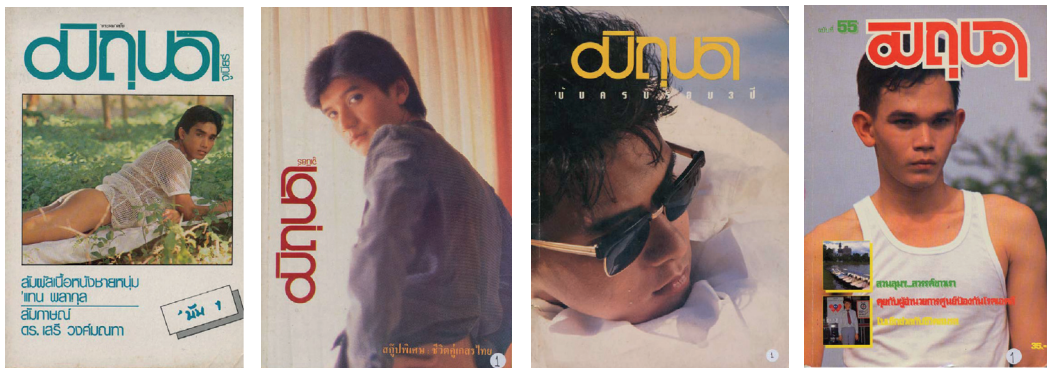


Figure 1. Sample covers of *Mithuna Junior* across its four editorial generations. Left to right: First issue of *Mithuna Junior* in 1984 under editor Anan Thorngthua; 1986 issue of *Mithuna Junior* under editor Sakkarin Sirirak; 1987 issue of *Mithuna Junior* under editors Lek Malee and Atthapol Phanbunlert; early 1990s issue of *Mithuna Junior* under editor Chuchee Satitchai.

Bangkok gay bars in the 1980s

According to the stories published in *Mithuna Junior*, the common international image of a gay bar was of a place where gay people come to drink and dance. However, since the 1980s, Thai gay bars have developed a different format from gay venues in Western countries. A distinguishing feature of most Thai gay bars has been the presence of male sex workers or rent boys, in Thai variously called *dek bar* (“young bar workers”), *dek off* (“young workers taken off premises”) or *dek nang drink* (“young workers to sit and drink with”), or in English called “bar boys” among tourists and expatriates. This pattern of sexual services in Bangkok’s gay bars began to become visible in the mid-1970s, with the Apollo Bar being the first venue to introduce the services of *dek bar*. Since the mid-1970s, many young men from poorer Thai families have come to work as bar boys in the capital’s gay venues because of the comparatively higher incomes they can obtain from gay customers. This kind of job does not require any educational

profile and many young men with little or no education have found work in Bangkok's gay bars. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bangkok's gay bars became venues where better-off, but closeted, Thai gay men, often represented as "lonely men" (*chai khi-ngao*) in search of a special male friend, purchased sexual services from younger, less well-off and often bisexually and heterosexually-identified *dek bar*. Bangkok's gay bars, and those which subsequently opened in other provinces around the country, reflected the class-based stratification of Thai society. Male sex workers, or *dek bar*, were usually working class, often rural-urban migrants, who came to work in Bangkok, while the bar owners and gay customers were middle-class, having higher incomes and good educations.

In the 1980s, Bangkok's gay bars developed the pattern of serving drinks and cocktails with songs and music playing in the background while several *dek bar* typically waited for customers on couches and sofas spread around the venue. Some gay bars had a small platform in a corner for *dek bar* to dance. Unlike the situation in gay venues in most Western countries, these spaces were not for customers to dance, but rather for *dek bar*, wearing only swimwear or underwear, to perform erotic moves to slow music and show off their bodies to potential customers. This kind of erotic dance to lure customers is called "Go Go" in Thai, following the English and French usage, and learning to move their bodies in sexually enticing ways was a work skill that successful *dek bar* needed to acquire. Handsome young men, aged between 18 and 22 years old, were especially favoured as bar boys, and once a customer had ordered a drink, he would typically choose one or more *dek bar* to start a conversation. If a *dek bar* provided good service and pleasant conversation, the customer would pay the bar manager a fee, called a "bar fine" in English, or in Thai *kha off*, that is, "a fee to take the *dek bar* off premises", typically to a hotel that rented short term rooms by the hour.

The bar owner, usually a Thai gay man, had the authority to control the activities of everybody working in the bar. He taught new *dek bar* about having sex and entertaining gay customers and also responded to customers' complaints of any unsatisfactory behaviour by a bar worker. Each *dek bar* was trained, monitored and controlled in order to please the gay customers. New recruits to a bar's group of *dek bar*, who were bar employees not freelance sex workers, were trained informally by the senior manager and captain (Thai: *kaptan*), who guided new workers in the ways of welcoming customers and the rules of the bar. *Dek bar* were trained to be welcoming to their gay customers, and it was typical for customers to socialise by sitting and drinking with *dek bar* rather than with other patrons. Bangkok's gay bars were not typically venues to meet other patrons, but rather sites of flirtation between younger male sex workers and more senior gay men, whose social interaction took the form of a class-structured and age-based patron-client relationship.

The bar captain was central to the process of arranging for a customer to choose a *dek bar* to take off premises. The captain would introduce and recommend *dek bar* to a customer, be responsible for negotiating the sexual services to be provided and encourage the customer to rent a bar boy. The captain was also responsible for the well-being of *dek bar*, often playing the role of an older brother (*phi*) to bar boys, who often lived and worked together like a family. Some gay bars had a small room that could be hired for sexual services on site. These rooms were typically cheaper than a room in a

short-term hotel. Some gay customers took *dek bar* out for a meal. Some did not have sex with the *dek bar*, but rather took them off premises to have a meal together or to go to a pub or discotheque. Spending time socialising with young men was the objective of some gay customers. Sometimes relationships formed between *dek bar* and customers, who invited a bar worker to whom they had become attached to live with them as a lover. However, many *dek bar* felt that living with a gay man was not easy, as it might limit their freedom to generate income from sleeping with other gay customers. It was more typical for gay customers, who came to like a particular *dek bar*, to return to the bar where they worked to rent them again.

The reports of Bangkok's gay bars, published in regular *Mithuna Junior* columns that introduced readers to newly opened venues, detailed further below, did not differentiate between venues providing services to gay tourists or to Thai gay men. It appears that the same procedures operated in most gay bars whatever the nationality of a customer. While gay tourists were important to the economic survival of Bangkok's first generation of gay bars, in this article we focus on the significance of these venues in the development of gay identity and culture among Thai men. Significantly, in contrast to gay bars, which provided services for tourists and expatriates as well as Thai gay men, *Mithuna Junior* and other Thai gay magazines focused exclusively on a local market. While Western tourists and expatriates have historically been visible presences in Bangkok's gay venues, they are almost wholly absent from the reports and images published in *Mithuna Junior*. The magazine often published reports of gay activism and events overseas, such as pride parades in Europe, North America or Australia, but its accounts and record of Bangkok's gay scene focus exclusively on the world of Thai gay men. This reflected the fact that very few expatriates or tourists spoke Thai well enough to participate in the local dimensions of the gay scene, and in the 1970s and 1980s few Thais spoke English or other Western languages well. This meant that while Western and middle-class Thai gay men occupied some of the same spaces in the bar and pub scene, the language barrier led to the two groups typically existing as distinct social and cultural worlds. As an exclusively Thai-language publication, *Mithuna Junior* provides a record of the Thai gay world of the later decades of the last century, even as that world existed in proximity to a culture of non-Thai-speaking Western and Asian gay men.

The pattern of Thai gay bars in the 1980s, operating as commercial sex venues for a middle-class clientele, developed in response to two main factors. Firstly, in this period most Thai gay men were closeted and not in, or seeking to establish, long-term relationships with another man. Their gay lives were often limited to seeking out casual sex with male partners. Secondly, the patron-client structure of middle-class customers paying for sex with working-class men reflected the economic disparities and class stratification of Thai society. This pattern of working-class men providing sexual and other services for middle-class gay consumers continues to this day. Significantly, *Mithuna Junior* also supported the development of a culture of gay relationships by publishing gay classifieds, and the fact that in the 1980s significant numbers of gay men were indeed looking for long-term romantic partners, and not merely casual sex, was indicated by the large numbers of men who placed advertisements and photos in the magazine's personal classifieds sections, as discussed further below.

The rise of Bangkok gay bars and venues after the publication of *Mithuna Junior*

Mithuna Junior had diverse influences. On the one hand, it reflected the generally closeted middle-class gay culture of the time and, to survive commercially in this milieu, it took advertising from the gay bars hosting the *dek bar*, who provided sexual services for middle-class men. In doing this, *Mithuna Junior* contributed to the further expansion of male commercial sex work and a growth in the number of gay bars in Bangkok and beyond, being the first media outlet to regularly advertise these venues and their workers. On the other hand, the magazine also provided spaces for the further development of gay culture beyond occasional commercial sex, promoting notions of gay pride and opportunities for gay men to seek long-term sexual and romantic partnerships with other gay men rather than with sex workers. *Mithuna Junior* thus sought out its commercial existence within the limitations of the closeted gay culture of the 1980s while at the same time providing a space for voices that sought to develop a Thai gay world outside the closet and beyond the bars.

Nonetheless, in both its conservative inscription within the closet and the world of commercial sex that it spawned, and in its more transgressive call for an open gay identity, *Mithuna Junior* reflected a middle-class outlook. The sale price of one issue was roughly equivalent to the daily income of a manual labourer. Nonetheless, a market in cheaper second-hand copies of *Mithuna Junior*, and other gay magazines, soon developed across Thailand. From the middle decades of the 20th century, markets across Thailand often included stalls selling second-hand books and magazines. In the later years of the 1980s, these book stalls typically stocked older issues of gay magazines that gay men with lower incomes could buy. *Mithuna Junior* thus had a life beyond the years it was published and an influence beyond the predominantly middle-class men, who could afford to buy new issues. Old issues of the magazine continued to circulate across the country for years after they were first published, with their contents continuing to echo and extend their influence beyond the urban middle-class.

Mithuna Junior reflected the mainstream of Bangkok's changing gay culture across the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. In this period, the magazine developed close commercial relations with Bangkok's gay bars to produce materials for middle-class gay men, such as erotic photo albums of male models and erotic stories, which provided platforms for new forms of social and sexual relations and classifications. The commercial gay print media and entertainment venues played major roles in encouraging the development of a sense of gay identity, together with associated notions of gay values and sexual activities, among modern Thai gay men. As Thailand's first commercially successful gay magazine, *Mithuna Junior* reinforced modern homosexual norms that organised masculinity and sexual commodities in Bangkok's gay community, and subsequently across the country.

The primary indicator of these new norms was manifested in forms of masculine commodification that encouraged homosexual men to identify as gay in the context of becoming consumers of sexualised representations of male bodies and participating in commercial sex. A second component of Thai gay culture in this period was the

construction of sexual relations through the performance of masculinity, by which gay people represented themselves as men, whose presentation and behaviour did not reveal their gay identity in the public sphere. This performance of masculinity, which was called *mai sadaeng ork* (“not expressing [gayness]”) in the 1990s, helped them to find friends, sex partners and lovers more easily. Maintaining a masculine image and presentation was very important for the Thai gay middle class, whose white-collar managerial, administrative and service sector occupations in Thailand’s expanding capitalist economy required them to conform socially to dominant male gender norms in public. The homoeroticism of gay identities and lifestyles represented in *Mithuna Junior* was imbricated with sexual commodities pervaded by masculine body images. This urban gay lifestyle emerged as a system of homosexual categorisation and classification that discriminated against and marginalised those gay men who were seen as embodying stigmatised feminine characteristics. More effeminate gay men were often labelled with part-humorous, part-derogatory expressions based on the term *sao*, “young woman”, such as *ork sao*, “to express girliness”, or *taek sao*, “for girliness to break out [through the performance of masculinity]”.

In the years immediately following *Mithuna Junior*’s publication, many new gay bars and venues opened around Bangkok and in the nearby resort city of Pattaya. While only fifteen gay bars had existed in the period until 1984, many of which were only short-lived, in 1984 and 1985 a total of twenty-one gay bars operated in the capital, while in 1986 alone thirteen new gay bars and venues opened. Over this three-year period, more new bars opened than had existed in all earlier years combined. All these new bar openings were reported in *Mithuna Junior* (see Table 1). In 1986, *Mithuna Junior* undertook a survey of gay venues in Bangkok and found that there were twenty-nine gay bars in the city. This growth of gay bars contrasted with the generally flat economy in the years leading to the take-off of Thailand’s economic boom in 1987. In 1984 and 1985, Thailand experienced 6 per cent annual GDP growth (Nikom Chantarawitton, 2007: 33), much the same as in previous decades. However, in these two years alone the number of gay bars almost doubled in comparison with earlier years. This suggests that the growth of Bangkok gay businesses in these years was not primarily driven by economic growth, but rather resulted from other factors.

The arrival of regularly published nationally distributed magazines, that for the first time were oriented specifically to gay readers and extensively reported and advertised gay bars, was a major factor that facilitated the rapid expansion of new gay venues. As detailed further below, the new gay magazines and gay bars formed a symbiotic commercial relationship. Gay bars were the main advertisers in Thai gay magazines, and the contents of the new gay print media often included extensive reports of new bars, special bar events such as parties, and interviews with bar workers. Perhaps even more important in the evolution of relations between gay magazines and gay bars was that the models for the covers and male centrefolds—prime features of each issue—were almost always *dek bar* sex workers, who were also interviewed and profiled. In a period when most gay-identified men were closeted, and posing naked or near-naked for a magazine cover and centrefold photo would be a source of shame in the bourgeois culture of middle-class gay men, it was typically lower-class men and male sex workers who were

photographed in gay magazines. In Bangkok's gay culture of the 1970s and 1980s, taking one's shirt off or wearing revealing shorts or briefs in public, other than when going swimming, was seen as low class or uncouth, even though as *Mithuna Junior* and other early gay magazines such as *Neon*, *Morakot* and *Midway* soon discovered, there was a massive market among middle-class gay men for images of exposed male flesh.

The predominating focus on gay bars in the content and advertising in the new gay magazines, and the photographic representation of scantily dressed *dek bar* as the dominant images of desirable masculinity, worked together to create the impression that gay men should visit gay bars and that participating in the services provided by these bars symbolised a core meaning of Thai gay identity. The message the magazines repeatedly conveyed, both in text and image, was that to be a modern Thai gay man was to go to a gay bar and socialise with *dek bar*.



Figure 2. Male models pictured in *Mithuna Junior*'s advertisements and columns in the 1980s. Left to right: A photo from the "Guy 88" (*num 88*) column with a model wearing a t-shirt with the distinctive logo of *Phraeo* fashion magazine, an example of cross-over marketing of women's fashion magazines to a gay readership; An advertisement for My Way gay bar in Bangkok; An advertisement for Domon men's underwear from the back cover of *Mithuna Junior*; A photo from the "Guy on the Last Page" (*num na sut-thai*) column featuring a worker from a Bangkok gay bar.

So many new gay venues opened in 1984 and 1985 that *Mithuna Junior* was able to initiate regular columns that reported in each monthly issue on new bars, cocktail lounges and saunas in either Bangkok or Pattaya. The titles of some of these columns were "Gay Bar News" (*khao-khrao gay*), "Favourite Gay Bars" (*gay bar thi na-thiao*, literally "gay bars worth visiting") and "Tip-toeing Out for Fun at Gay Bars" (*yong pai he thi gay bar*). The title of the last-mentioned column alluded to closeted gay men needing to sneak out of the heteronormative family and workplace to visit gay bars. These columns provided details of each highlighted bar's location, owner, manager, decoration, the *dek bar* available for customers and bar services provided, as well as special promotions and activities such as birthday parties, handsome man contests and other celebrations. In the mid-1980s, these columns, dedicated to reporting new bars, were the primary guides for urban gay life that were offered to readers.

In 1985, the editor of *Mithuna Junior* acknowledged that gay bars and gay magazines were good partners because his readers wanted to see erotic content in the magazine, which was provided in the columns about gay bars and in the photos of the *dek bar* working at these venues. The importance of these reports and images for promoting the

business of gay bars was further noted when *Mithuna Junior* reported that, after Adam Cocktail Lounge had been detailed in a previous issue, large numbers of new customers visited the venue and the manager had a hard time keeping up with welcoming all the new guests.

Table 1. New gay bars and other venues in Bangkok opened during 1984-1986

Location	1984	1985	1986
Sukhumvit Area	Inter Mustache House (bar)	Big Boy (bar) Studio 982 (bar) Boss (sauna)	The Log Cabin (bar) City Men (pub)
Silom Area	Super Lex (bar)	My Way (bar) Khrua Silom (pub) Garden Bar (bar) Zero Bar (bar)	Buddy (cocktail lounge) The Genesis (bar) Super A (bar) Jasmin (cocktail lounge)
Saphan Khwai Area	Adam (cocktail lounge)	Stax (cocktail lounge) Back Door (bar) Paradise (cocktail lounge) Laguszo (bar)	Arcadia (cocktail lounge)
Petchburi Area		Poppy (cocktail lounge)	Cottage (bar)
Pratunam Area		David (bar)	Second Tip (bar)
Ratchadamri Area		Happy Boy (bar)	Kor Kaew (bar)
Bangrak Area			Big Apple (bar)
Ramkhamhaeng Area		Alex (bar)	

Source: Information collated from multiple issues of *Mithuna Junior* magazine.

While significant numbers of bars had English names, this does not mean that they were necessarily oriented towards Western customers. For example, the bars in the Saphan Khwai area in the north of Bangkok were almost solely patronised by Thai customers, often middle-class men who lived in the many gated housing estates (*mu-ban jat-san*) built on the city's fringes since the 1980s.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Bangkok's gay community life had been limited to a small number of mostly secretive gay bars and venues where predominantly upper-class gay men accessed services and commodities. By the later 1980s and early 1990s, the gay community had expanded considerably, with concentrations of gay bars being found in several locations spread across the city, including the Silom, Surawong and Sukhumvit downtown areas, Pratunam in the inner north and the Suthisarn and Saphan Khwai areas further north. These areas all became known as places of gay nightlife.

Mithuna Junior magazine came to exist with the gay bars in a patron-client relationship. The bars advertised in the magazine, while the magazine was often available for sale in bars. In the early 1990s, *Mithuna Junior* carried an average of fifteen or sixteen pages, out of a total of 120 pages, advertising gay bars. This indicates that gay bars provided the prime source of advertising revenue for the magazine. The only other advertisers in *Mithuna Junior* during its first decade were gay saunas, which were much fewer in number than gay bars, and the Domon brand of men's underwear, which often included a colour advertisement of a man wearing Domon briefs on the back cover. Unlike the situation in the early 21st century, when many mainstream brands of products and services seek to reach a gay market by advertising in gay media, in this early period only a very small number of businesses were prepared to place advertisements in an openly gay publication.

In the era of the first generation of Thai magazines, the gay middle class, who were the prime audience for *Mithuna Junior*, learnt about gay lifestyles and gay identity through the lens of going to gay bars, pubs, saunas and cocktail lounges. This media-supported relationship between gay identity and urban commercial lifestyles reflects the patterns of social and cultural construction by which modern Thai gay identity formed in the realms of sexual ideology and practice. The intimate commercial and representational relationship between *Mithuna Junior* and gay bars influenced the direction of urban gay lifestyles towards forms of sexual identity based on consumption and nightlife.

Socialising the Thai gay middle class in *Mithuna Junior*

For the thirteen years of its publication, *Mithuna Junior* was widely regarded in the gay community as a good friend of Thai gay men, especially those from the middle class. Although *Mithuna Junior* changed its contents and columns, depending on the policy of different editors, the magazine attempted to appeal to its readers and support gay people to learn about the quality of life as a gay-identified man. However, publishing a gay magazine in Thailand was not an easy venture because the editors and publishers needed to confront a raft of problems, such as the high cost of printing as well as the ongoing threat of having the contents classified by the police as being pornographic and having issues confiscated from sales outlets. It was out of necessity, to solve financial problems, that *Mithuna Junior* was driven to co-operate with gay bars, thus encouraging them to place advertisements as a guaranteed regular source of income. To evade Thai censorship laws, *Mithuna Junior* also promoted direct sales through annual subscription to the magazine and mail-order sales of videos and nude photos of models.

Mithuna Junior also sought to find ways around the anti-pornography law by becoming a private members club and organising activities that helped readers meet new gay friends. In its first year of publication in 1984, the magazine's management organised a party called "Men friends meeting men friends" (*pheuan chai phop pheuan chai*) at the Super Star discotheque in Patpong, which many middle-class gays attended to see the evening highlights of "Handsome Guy" (*num lor*) and "Beautiful Guy" (*num suay*) competitions. The contestants in the handsome guy competition wore swimwear with a white ribbon and pink numbers around their wrists, while the contestants in the

beautiful guy competition appeared in fancy dress prepared according to their own imagination.

Also in 1984, *Mithuna Club* was established as a focus for social activity for readers. The first organised event of *Mithuna Club*, called “Meeting Friends Along the Way” (*nat phop pheuan ruam thang*), involved twenty-five readers, who joined a holiday trip to Samaesan Island in Chonburi province, a couple of hours east of Bangkok. The second event was a trip to Khao Yai National Park, north-east of the capital, in May 1985, attended by twenty-two readers for a cost of 200 baht. *Mithuna Club*’s third members’ trip was to Kanchanaburi, west of Bangkok, in June 1985, with a fourth trip organised to Koh Lan Island, east of Bangkok, in December 1985. In 1985, the magazine reported that there were 300 registered members of its *Mithuna Club* social organisation. In April 1987, *Mithuna Club* organised a trip to Koh Mun Nok Island in Rayong province, east of Bangkok, for a price of 1,000 baht, which some of *Mithuna Junior*’s male models joined. *Mithuna Club* members also met at several places in Bangkok, including at *Mithuna* house, and for their membership fee they received discounts on buying *Mithuna Junior* as well as at gay bars and venues that had deals with the magazine. *Mithuna Club*’s members came from both Bangkok and other provinces, and their ranks included teachers, civil servants, businessmen, actors and students. On 5 April 1985, *Mithuna Junior* held its first anniversary party at Bangkok’s Indra Hotel, which was attended by many famous gay people, such as Pan Bunnag, the hairdresser and media personality, as well as the editor of *Neon*, the competitor gay magazine, which began publication in late 1984. As had become the custom at many gay celebratory events in Bangkok in the 1980s, the anniversary party included a handsome man competition, with a prize awarded to the attendee judged to be the favourite handsome guy. On 18 August 1988, *Mithuna Junior* held a fifth anniversary party called “*Mithuna Night*” (*ratri mithuna*) on the Oriental Queen dinner cruise ship along the Chao Phraya River. Participants paid 500 baht for this party, which also included some of the magazine’s cover and centrefold male models.

Mithuna Junior also included personal classifieds to enable readers to advertise to meet friends and lovers. In the early years of publication, the personal classifieds section was called *Gemini Club* while in later years, this section was called *Samosorn Mithuna* or *Mithuna Club*. The personal classifieds included each advertiser’s name, nickname, age, address, telephone number, personal photo and a short message describing themselves and their sexual preferences. Unlike some of its competitor gay magazines, that began publication in the mid to late-1980s and charged readers a fee to place classified advertisements, personal classifieds in *Mithuna Junior* were free, and, as remarked by one reader, this column to help gay readers find a friend was an exemplary form of social service. The personal classifieds were an especially popular part of the magazine, with the *Samosorn Mithuna* column in the later years of *Mithuna Junior* publishing an average eighty personal advertisements in each issue. In 1991, *Mithuna Junior* added more pages to this column as demand increased; and in 1996, it published a special issue comprised solely of *Samosorn Mithuna* personal classifieds from more than 200 gay men.

The gay men who sought partners through *Mithuna Junior*'s classified advertisements usually had good careers and higher levels of education. In analysing 500 advertisements from gay men in the personal classifieds columns published between 1984 and 1997, we found that 280 lived in Bangkok and 220 in other provinces. Most were aged between 18 and 30 years old and had either completed high school or university. The majority worked in the public sector and state enterprises, including school teachers, university lecturers, soldiers and government officers.

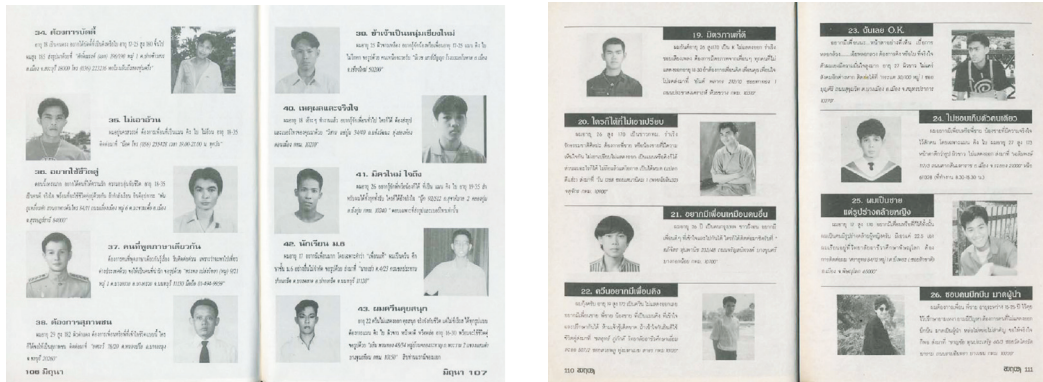


Figure 3. Thai gay men's personal classified advertisements in the *Samosorn Mithuna* (*Mithuna Club*) Column.

Homoeroticism as a Bangkok gay lifestyle

Mithuna Junior fostered ideas of love, friendship, sex and eroticism, as they could be found in gay bars, saunas and nightclubs, and as expressed in columns illustrated with images of naked male models. This kind of gay lifestyle focused on sexual desire and eroticism found in the company of male sex workers and as represented in homosexual pornography. This urban gay culture of bars, commercial sex and pornography expanded in the second half of the 1980s as the Thai economy boomed and the number of gay bars and other venues increased substantially. *Mithuna Junior* was both a witness and a contributor to the rapid changes in gay lifestyles in Bangkok over this period.

Gay social life in Thailand before the 1980s was severely restricted. After *Mithuna Junior* was published, many Thai gays learned more about gay commodities and had increased opportunities to meet other gay men. In particular, *Mithuna Junior* provided opportunities for younger urban Thai gay men to form social groups and meet other gays. The transition from the pre-*Mithuna* period to what some gay men now nostalgically remember as a golden age of Bangkok's gay bar scene—from the mid-1980s to early 1990s—saw dramatic changes in the forms of homosexual desire and activity as gay identity and lifestyles became increasingly prominent phenomena in major urban areas. Bangkok's gay scene also expanded to Pattaya, east of the capital, and subsequently to Chiang Mai in the north and Phuket in the south. As a nationally distributed magazine, *Mithuna Junior* was a medium for communicating ideas, outlooks and practices from the metropolitan centre of Bangkok to middle-class gay men in provincial urban centres

around the country, where gay lifestyles, similar to those forged in the capital, also became increasingly visible from the later years of the 1980s.

Conclusion

Mithuna Junior opened print media virtual spaces for representing homosexual desires expressed through gay commodities and generated social spaces for a new generation of younger urban Thai gay men to meet friends, lovers and sex partners. This led to the establishment of networks and groups with shared cultural understandings of gay identity. However, this modern gay social formation was based on the experiences of the urban gay middle class, whose lives and aspirations were forged in the consumer culture of late capitalism. In the 1980s, urban Thai gay men's expression of their homosexual feelings increasingly came to be regulated by the social and cultural patterns of late-modern consumer ideology. Modern Thai gay lifestyles and culture are not reflections of traditional Thai society, but rather are recent creations of consumer spaces formed by gay bars and gay magazines. *Mithuna Junior* sustained the implicit norms of the middle-class section of the Thai population, reflecting the class-based hierarchy of Thai society as well as supporting the bourgeois homonormative ethos of *mai sadaeng ork*, not revealing one's gayness, that valorised public performances of masculinity and minoritised behaviours and discourses that were too visibly feminine.

Normative masculinity within Thailand's urban gay community was significantly influenced by the growth of gay businesses and consumer culture in the 1980s. *Mithuna Junior* magazine manifested this relationship between, on the one hand, private commercial spaces of bars with rent boys and saunas for cruising and, on the other hand, the evolution of ideals of the masculine body that embody normative understandings of what it means to be a gay man in modern Thailand. The coeval evolution of these intersecting dual processes of sexual consumer lifestyles and masculine gender culture in the second half the 1980s demonstrates the formative influence of gay print media, such as *Mithuna Junior*, in the emergence of new forms of sexual and social relations. Thai gay print capitalism (see Anderson, 1983; Jackson, 2009) brought gay men from different places and different statuses together in a virtual community in which the sexualisation of masculinity formed the basis of personal identity, as well as the means to establish relations of sexual connection, intimacy and friendship.

Although the later issues of *Mithuna Junior* under the editorial guidance of the HIV/AIDS and rights activist, Natee Teerarojjanapongs, supported notions of the *kunla gay*, "the good gay man", this idea never gained significant traction or influence among Thai gay men. Being gay in Thailand's consumer culture is not a matter of sexual morality, as is the case in heteronormative discourses, but rather stresses the eroticisation of masculine body images. In Thailand's gay consumer culture of bars and other venues, large numbers of gay men came to understand their masculinity and sexual feelings without any anxiety about whether they were a "good gay person". *Mithuna Junior* sustained the homonormative forms of 1980s Thai gay consumer culture, which was structured by a gender hierarchy that valorised masculinity as the basis of both gay identity and gay sexual relations and minoritised feminine and effeminate gay men. As

a mediatised playground of Thailand's gay middle class, *Mithuna Junior* also supported the social and sexual stratification of the country's gay community between working-class sexual service providers and middle-class sexual consumers.

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