

Navigating Non-Equivalence: Translating the Thai Cultural Term *Kathoe* in Academic Titles and Abstracts

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Abstract

This study examines the translation of the Thai cultural term *กะเทย* (*kathoe*) into English within academic titles and abstracts. A corpus of 41 articles from a Thai-indexed database was analyzed. Grounded in queer translation theory and using Baker's (2018) taxonomy, this study identifies substitute terms and translation strategies. The findings show a diverse range of English terms used. While the loanword *kathoe* was the most frequent, *transgender* was also common. Critically, this study also identified significant patterns of problematic cultural substitutions, including the use of sexual orientation terms like *bisexual* for the gender identity *kathoe*. The analysis of translation strategies revealed that titles were dominated by three approaches—the loanword, the more general word, and, notably, cultural substitution. Abstracts employed a wider array of strategies, but cultural substitution remained a prominent and concerning finding. These results highlight a tension between preserving the cultural specificity of *kathoe* and ensuring global academic accessibility. This study emphasizes that translation choices significantly shape the representation of gender and sexual identities across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: academic titles and abstracts, *kathoe*, queer translation, translation strategies

In an increasingly globalized academia, the translation of culturally specific terms presents a significant challenge, involving not just words and grammar but also complex cultural nuances (Baker, 2018; Wongseeree, 2021). The issue is particularly acute in academic journals that must meet bilingual standards, such as those accredited by the Thai-Journal Citation Index (TCI), which mandates English titles and abstracts for all articles (Thai-Journal Citation Centre, 2023). The English titles and abstracts offer the first impressions of a research article and are governed by conventions of brevity and discoverability, forcing translators into high-stakes choices (Tullu, 2019).

This study deliberately focuses on academic titles and abstracts precisely because these genre conventions create a unique site of tension. It is here that the need to preserve the cultural specificity of *kathoey* collides most directly with the pressure to use globalized, searchable English terms for international accessibility. Rather than offering a broad, generalizable survey, this study provides a focused, exploratory analysis of the strategies employed within this specific, high-stakes context.

This study investigates this phenomenon through a qualitative case study of the Thai cultural term *กะเทย* (*kathoey*). *Kathoey* is a complex and historically layered term, broadly referring to transgender women and effeminate gay men (Jackson, 2016), which has been reclaimed as a key identity within Thailand's queer landscape. Its translation is fraught with potential discrepancies, as its meaning shifts depending on context and intent, for example, being rendered as *transgender woman* for accessibility, *hermaphrodite* in historical texts, or the loanword *kathoey* to preserve local specificity. This challenge mirrors the colonial erasure seen with other regional identities. For instance, Boellstorff (2004) notes that in Indonesia, the specific term *waria* (a male transvestite) is distinct from *banci* (an effeminate man), yet both are often problematically flattened into a single global category. This precisely parallels the risk this study investigates, where the specific Thai identity of *kathoey*—also distinct from local terms like *toot* (ตุ๋น)—is similarly flattened by substitution with the global term *transgender*.

Grounded in queer translation (QT) theory, this study examines how translation choices can either challenge or reinforce the hegemony of Western queer terminologies, potentially erasing local histories and specificities. It seeks to understand the ideological implications of rendering a non-normative identity like *kathoey* for a global academic audience. While translation strategies for general Thai cultural terms have been studied (e.g., Pormrat & Rakpa, 2022; Wongseree, 2021), a focused analysis of how queer cultural terms like *kathoey* are translated in the high-stakes, constrained genre of academic abstracts and titles remains a critical gap.

This study addresses how translating the cultural term *kathoey* impacts its representation, contributing to critical discourses on translation, cultural sensitivity, gender, and sexuality. Beyond academia, these translation choices shape global perceptions of Thai queer identities. Oversimplifying or wrongly equating *kathoey* representation risks entrenching significant misconceptions, which can subsequently influence international news, policy, and research.

To this end, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the terms used to substitute the term *kathoey* in titles and abstracts?

RQ2: How is the Thai term *kathoey* translated into English in academic titles and abstracts?

To answer these questions, this study first reviews the theoretical framework of queer translation and the complex history of the term *kathoei*. It then outlines the methodology used for data collection and analysis, followed by a presentation of the findings. Finally, the study discusses the implications of these findings and offers a concluding summary.

Theoretical Background

Queer Translation

This study is theoretically grounded in queer translation (hereafter, QT), a critical subfield that has emerged from the “cultural turn” in translation studies (Kedem, 2019). This framework has a dual focus: it involves analyzing the translation of non-normative genders and sexualities while also applying the disruptive potential of queer theory to interrogate the practice of translation itself (Epstein & Gillett, 2017; Kedem, 2019). This framework is therefore ideally suited for analyzing the translation of such a culturally specific and non-normative term as *kathoei*, as it provides the critical vocabulary to examine how its meaning is negotiated, represented, and altered when it moves from its local Thai context into global academic discourse.

Taking on Epstein and Gillett’s discussion, at its core, *queering translation* functions as a critical practice to destabilize traditional models of translation that rely on binary oppositions like source/target or original/copy. It challenges the assumption that translation is a transparent medium, instead exposing it as a site of othering, hegemony, and subalternity. This perspective questions the power dynamics and heteronormative ideologies that are often inherent in how texts are selected, translated, and received in different cultural contexts. The goal is to focus on the constructedness of representation and the politics that underpin it. In practice, this framework provides the tools to analyze how queer identities are treated during intercultural transfer. A central concern is the way queerness is often repressed, ignored, or made invisible in translated texts, whether through overt manipulation or subtle linguistic choices. Translators may domesticate a text by assimilating its queer elements into familiar, heteronormative terms. For example, strategies like eradication—where the radical nature of queerness is deliberately softened—may be used to make a text more palatable for a mainstream audience. Conversely, queer translation can be a form of activism; a translator can consciously subvert heterosexism by making a text’s queerness more visible, thereby creating a third space that challenges the target culture’s norms and enriches understanding.

Furthermore, based upon Baldo et al.’s (2023) perspectives, queer translation critically examines the globalization of sexualities and the complex negotiations between global and local identities. It acknowledges that imported or translated identities can unsettle or clash with existing and traditional homosexual

identities. This focus is crucial, as these scholars argue that the uncritical application of Western queer terminology to other cultures risks becoming another expression of colonialism by erasing local histories and specificities.

Kathoey

Jackson (2016) states that the sole premodern Thai terminology denoting those perceived as non-normative in their sexuality or gender presentation was *kathoey* and its Pali-derived equivalent *bandor* (Pali: *pandaka*). The initial meaning of *kathoey* was the Western-centric term *hermaphrodite* referring to the characterization of individuals possessing ambiguous or dual genitalia (Sulaiporn, 2008). Evidence from historical texts like the Three Seals Law (1805) and dictionaries from the mid-19th century confirms this early definition, describing a *kathoey* as a person who is neither distinctly male nor female (as cited in Terdsak, 2003). Over the last several decades, the definition broadened considerably, becoming an umbrella term for anyone who did not conform to traditional gender roles, including transgender individuals, cross-dressers, and even homosexual men who did not otherwise express a female identity. Today, while the Royal Institute Dictionary still includes the historical definition, the most common contemporary understanding of *kathoey* is a person born with a male physique who identifies and expresses themselves as female.

Despite its common usage, the term *kathoey* is often perceived as derogatory or mocking, leading to the creation and adoption of various other labels. Some of these terms, often created by mainstream society, carry negative connotations. For example, *toot* (ตุ๊ด), believed to be derived from the 1982 film *Tootsie*, is widely considered an insult. Similarly, the term *pratheuang* (ประเทือง) became a pejorative term after a popular song in 1998 used it to mock *kathoey* individuals. The use of these terms by outsiders often serves to belittle and stereotype the community.

In response, the community has developed and embraced its own terminology to articulate identity with more dignity and precision. The most widely preferred term is *sao praphet song* (สาวประเภทสอง). This term is considered more polite and respectful, aligning with the individual's female identity. In activist and rights-based contexts, the term *phu ying kham phet* (ผู้หญิงข้ามเพศ), or *transgender women*, is often used to assert a specific gender identity and advocate for legal recognition. Other self-identifiers include *ladyboy*, a term common in the cabaret scene and when interacting with foreigners (see Totman, 2011), and *TG* (an abbreviation for transgender). An affectionate, playful term, *nong toey* (น้องเทย), is also used as a cuter, less harsh derivative of *kathoey*.

Furthermore, according to Jackson (2016), the key distinction began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s with the introduction and adoption of Western-derived terms, most notably *gay*. Masculine-identified, same-sex attracted men

began to adopt the label *gay* to differentiate themselves from the effeminate and cross-gender identity associated with *kathoey*. This linguistic shift was crucial for establishing a modern gay identity that was based on sexual preference rather than gender presentation. As a result, the meaning of *kathoey* narrowed significantly, and by the mid-1970s, it was used almost exclusively to refer to effeminate men and male-to-female transgenders. In the current climate, the term *kathoey* has been positively reclaimed as self-identification within the community (see Rowlett et al., 2025) and broadly refers to transgender women regardless of sex reassignment surgery (Ocha, 2023) and effeminate gay men (Käng, 2012). Concerning the linguistic reclamation of the umbrella term for all non-normative people, the term *kathoey* may affirm the perception of “the iconic face of queer Thailand” (Jackson, 2011, p. 35).

Key Western Terminologies

Understanding the specific historical and cultural weight of the term *kathoey* is only one part of the equation. To analyze its translation, it is crucial to connect this local history back to the core warnings of queer translation (QT) theory. As this review has established, QT scholars caution that the uncritical application of Western queer terminology to other cultures risks becoming an expression of colonialism, thereby erasing local histories and specificities.

This study contends that the translation of *kathoey* is a prime example of this exact tension. The selection of an English equivalent, such as *transgender* or *homosexual*, is not an arbitrary or neutral act of substitution. Each of these Western terms carries its own distinct meaning and historical baggage, which often fails to align with the unique trajectory of *kathoey*. Using *transgender* risks the “domestication” that QT interrogates, assimilating *kathoey* into a familiar, globalized category. Using *homosexual* risks gross misrepresentation by applying a stigmatizing, outdated medical term for sexual attraction to what is a complex gender identity.

Therefore, the following overview of key Western terminology is presented not merely as a glossary but as the necessary toolkit to identify and critique the ideological implications of these high-stakes translation choices.

This section defines the key Western terminologies appearing in the findings, primarily drawing from Killermann’s (2019) guide, to understand their specific meanings within Western LGBTQ+ discourse. The broadest umbrella terms found were *LGBTG*, an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, and *Queer* used to describe individuals who do not identify as straight and/or cisgender. Several terms related to gender identity were present. *Transgender* is a broad term for anyone whose sex assigned at birth does not correspond with their gender identity. More specifically, a *transgender woman*—often abbreviated as MtF or male-to-female—is a person who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman. The data also included *transsexual*, a term for a

person who psychologically identifies as a gender other than the one assigned at birth and often wishes to undergo transformation, as well as the related nouns *transgenderism* and *transsexualism*. Terms for sexual orientation were also incorrectly used, including *gay* (a term for people attracted to members of the same gender) and *bisexual* (a person who experiences attraction to people of their gender and another gender). The term *homosexual* was also found, which defines a person attracted to the same sex/gender. However, Killermann (2019) notes its use is discouraged as it is considered a stigmatizing medical term from when it was classified as a mental disorder.

Translation Strategies

This study adopts the theoretical framework of Baker (2018), outlining strategies employed by professional translators to address issues of non-equivalence at the word level. This framework is particularly adept at handling the translation of culturally specific concepts—a common and significant challenge—where terms in a source language lack direct equivalents in a target language (Pormrat & Rakpa, 2022; Wongseree, 2021). The selection of Baker's taxonomy is substantiated by its extensive application in prior Thai-to-English translation research across diverse text types. Scholars have successfully used this framework to analyze literary works such as novels and poetry (e.g., Narata & Rakpa, 2021), business and tourism articles (e.g., Prayongsap, 2011), and academic abstracts (e.g., Pormrat & Rakpa, 2022), confirming its suitability and robustness for analyzing such translation problems.

From Baker's (2018) original eight strategies, the strategy of *translation by illustration* has been excluded from this study's analytical framework. This decision is based on the nature of the dataset, which consists entirely of written text from academic titles and abstracts. The illustration strategy, which involves the use of physical images or drawings to clarify meaning, is not applicable to this purely textual data. The inapplicability of this particular strategy in text-only analyses has been noted in several previous studies that also employed Baker's framework. For example, researchers analyzing translated articles, novels, and poetry found that this strategy was not used by the translators in their text-based corpora (e.g., Narata & Rakpa, 2021).

Consequently, this investigation will concentrate on the remaining seven strategies from Baker's taxonomy. These strategies provide a comprehensive set of tools for analyzing how translators navigate the complexities of rendering culturally bound terms from Thai into English within a textual medium. The specific strategies to be examined include translation by a more general word, a more neutral or less expressive word, cultural substitution, use of a loan word, paraphrase with a related word, paraphrase with an unrelated word, and omission. The application of these strategies will be detailed in the analysis that follows, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1*Translation strategies for dealing with non-equivalence at word level*

Strategy	Description
More general	Using a broader, less specific term (superordinate).
More neutral/less expressive	Choosing a word with less expressive or emotional meaning to avoid conveying an incorrect connotation.
Cultural substitution	Replacing a culture-specific item with one from the target culture that has a similar impact.
Loan word with optional explanation	Adopting the source language term directly, sometimes adding an explanation for clarity.
Paraphrase with a related word	Using a related, existing concept in the target language but in a different form.
Paraphrase with an unrelated word(s)	Explaining or unpacking the meaning of the source item when no direct equivalent exists.
Omission	Deleting a word or expression if it is not considered essential to the meaning of the text.

Methods

Data collection

This study analyzed the TCI-indexed research article titles and abstracts. It accessed the dataset via www.tci-thaijo.org using only the Thai search term *กะโหลก* (*kathoey*). Tellingly, no English search terms were used since the goal was to capture all articles discussing the concept from the Thai source, regardless of how they were eventually translated into English. Similarly, no date filters were applied to retrieve the broadest possible dataset. Therefore, the initial search yielded 41 articles (see Appendix) that contained the term *กะโหลก* (*kathoey*) in either the title or abstract.

Articles that did not include an English abstract or title were excluded from the relevant portion of the analysis. To be noted, while a methodology focused on achieving generalizable, quantitative results would necessitate a dataset comprised exclusively of articles with both a title and an abstract, such an approach was deemed counterproductive for this study. The research objective is not to measure the frequency distribution with statistical precision but rather to explore the qualitative breadth and heterogeneity of translation choices. Therefore, the analysis included every available instance of translation, regardless of whether the corresponding element was present, to avoid unnecessary data loss and ensure the most thorough exploration possible.

Table 2
Breakdown of collected research articles

Publication year	Numbers of articles	Emergence of the term ‘กะโหลก’ (<i>kathoey</i>)		
		Only in a title	Only in an abstract	Both
2012	2	-	1	1
2013	6	-	1	5
2015	1	-	-	1
2016	3	-	2	1
2017	1	-	1	-
2018	1	-	1	-
2019	3	-	2	1
2020	2	-	1	1
2021	1	-	-	1
2022	11	-	3	8
2023	4	-	2	2
2024	6	-	2	4
Total	41		16	25

Analysis

The first phase of the analysis focused on answering RQ1 to identify the full range of English lexical items used as equivalents for the Thai term กะโหลก (*kathoey*). The process involved a thorough review of all collected titles and abstracts. Each instance where the Thai term กะโหลก (*kathoey*) was translated was identified, and the corresponding English term was extracted. These terms were then compiled and tallied to create a frequency count, providing a quantitative overview of the most common substitutes. This process was performed separately for titles and abstracts to allow for a clear comparison of the terminology used in each element. During this process, minor variations in English romanization like *katoey* were observed and subsequently grouped with the canonical loanword *kathoey* for categorization.

The second phase addressed RQ2 by moving from identification to classification using Baker’s (2018) taxonomy of strategies for dealing with non-equivalence at the word level. Every substitute term was categorized into one of the seven relevant strategies (e.g., translation by loanword, by a more general word, or by cultural substitution). This categorization was also conducted separately for titles and abstracts, enabling a detailed comparison of the strategic choices made by authors and translators in each distinct academic context. The frequency of each strategy was then calculated to determine the dominant trends in how the Thai term กะโหลก (*kathoey*) was rendered into English.

To reduce biased outcomes, inter-coder reliability was conducted using a second independent coder trained on Baker's (2018) framework. Both researchers coded a randomly selected subset representing 23.81% of the data (20 instances from 41 total articles). Cohen's Kappa yielded $\kappa = 0.77$, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), with 85% simple agreement. Disagreements, which primarily involved distinctions between strategies like more neutral/less expressive word and cultural substitution, were resolved through discussion to refine the coding scheme. For example, a borderline case involved the term *ladyboy*. One coder initially argued it was a more neutral/less expressive word, softening the perceived force of *kathoe*. The other coder viewed it as cultural substitution, replacing the Thai term with a different, highly specific English-language concept tied to tourism and media. After deliberation, it was agreed to classify *ladyboy* as cultural substitution because its meaning is heavily embedded in a specific Western-facing discourse, making it a distinct cultural concept rather than a simple neutral descriptor. This consensus process was used to finalize the coding scheme, which was then applied to the remaining dataset by the primary researcher.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, addressing the two research questions, respectively.

RQ1: What are the terms used to substitute the Thai term *กะเทย* (*kathoe*) in titles and abstracts?

Table 3 demonstrates a detailed breakdown of these substitute terms and their respective frequencies of occurrence. The findings reveal that a diverse range of English terms is employed to substitute for the Thai term *กะเทย* (*kathoe*) in both academic titles and abstracts.

Table 3*Substitute Terms for Kathoey in Academic Titles and Abstracts*

Element	Evidence (Term and Frequency)
Title	<i>kathoey/s/ness/katoey</i> (16), transgender (5), transgenderism (1), transsexualism (1), homosexual (1), ladyboy/s (1), queer (1), bisexual (1), gay (1), hermaphrodite (1)
Abstract	<i>kathoey/s/ness/katoey</i> (22), transgender (8), hermaphrodite (3), bisexual (3), gay (2), homosexual/lity (2), queer (2), transgenderism (1), transsexualism (1), ladyboy/s (1), transsexual (1), LGBT (1)

Notably, the most recurrent term across both elements is the term *kathoey* per se, with the varying forms like the term *kathoey*s with the plural suffix *-s* and ‘*kathoey-ness*’ with the nominal formation suffix *-ness*, together with, notably, the different spelling of *katoey*. Following the term *kathoey* in frequency is the term *transgender*, serving as the second most common substitute in both titles and abstracts. In detail, there are three terms—two nouns: *transgenderism* and *transsexualism* and one adjective: *transsexual*—that are deemed identically morphological to the term *transgender*. Additionally, a variety of other labels, including *hermaphrodite*, *bisexual*, *gay*, *homosexual*, *queer*, and *ladyboy*, were also identified in both academic elements. Interestingly, the term *LGBT* was present in only an abstract.

Having identified the range of substitute terms for the Thai cultural term กะเทย in the initial stage of the analysis, the study now moves to a deeper level of investigation to understand how these translation choices are made.

RQ2: How is the Thai term *kathoey* translated into English in academic titles and abstracts?

In this stage, the analysis shifts from the identification of terms to the classification of translation strategies. As mentioned, each instance of translation was categorized according to Baker’s (2018) framework for dealing with non-equivalence at the word level. This approach allows for a systematic examination of the methods translators employ when rendering the culturally bound Thai term กะเทย (*kathoey*) into English. The findings for this analysis are presented in two parts, beginning with the strategies used in academic titles, followed by those found in the abstracts.

Analysis of Title

The findings for titles reveal that authors or translators negotiated between cultural specificity and international intelligibility under the genre’s tight space constraint. As shown in Table 4, four distinct translation strategies and one

combined pattern for the Thai term *กะเทย* (*kathoey*) were identified in the academic titles. The most common approach by a wide margin was the use of a loanword *kathoey* (14 instances; 51.9%), as seen in Example 1, Table 4: “*หุ้มกะเทย*” ไซมอน คาบาร็ต (“Simon Cabaret and ‘*Kathoey* Assemblage’”). This strategy preserves the Thai term’s cultural specificity and resists linguistic domestication, compelling readers to encounter the word as a Thai socio-cultural reality rather than a Western-defined category.

The second most frequent strategies were evenly split. The use of a *more general word* (5 instances; 18.5%), such as *transgender*, illustrated in Example 2, Table 4: “การต่อรองและการสร้างพื้นที่ทางสังคมของครูกะเทย” (“Bargaining and social space creation of *transgender* teachers”), prioritizes global accessibility and searchability. Significantly, *cultural substitution* was equally common (5 instances; 18.5%), including terms like *homosexual*, *bisexual*, *gay*, and *ladyboy*. For instance, Example 3, Table 4: “การแปลบทพูดกะเทยจากภาษาไทยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ” (“Translation of *Ladyboys*’ Dialogues from Thai into English”), carried Westernized tourist discourse.

The remaining strategies, like combined use of the *loanword* and *more general word* (2 instances; 7.4%) and the use of a *more neutral/less expressive word* *hermaphrodite* (1 instance; 3.7%), were rare.

Table 4

Distribution of translation strategies for the Thai term กะเทย in the titles

Strategy	Term	N. of articles	Percentage	Example
Loanword	<i>kathoey</i>	14	51.9%	(1) “ <i>หุ้มกะเทย</i> ” ไซมอน คาบาร็ต และการสถาปนาความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจในเครือข่ายทางสังคมใหม่ → Simon Cabaret and “ <i>Kathoey</i> Assemblage”: A Reconstruction of Power Relation in New Social Network
More general word	transgender, transgenderism, transsexualism, queer	5	18.5%	(2) การต่อรองและการสร้างพื้นที่ทางสังคมของครูกะเทยในบริบทจังหวัดชายแดนภาคใต้ → Bargaining and social space creation of <i>transgender</i> teachers in southern border provinces context
Cultural substitution	homosexual, ladyboy, bisexual, gay	5	18.5%	(3) การแปลบทพูดกะเทยจากภาษาไทยเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ: กรณีศึกษาภาพยนตร์เรื่อง “สตรีเหล็กภาค 1” และหนังสือรักจริงปิ้งถั่ว “Change: รัก...ไม่เปลี่ยน” → “Translation of <i>Ladyboys</i> ’ Dialogues from Thai into English: A Case Study of a Movie, the Iron Ladies 1, and a True Love, Fake Romance Short Film, Change: Love...As Always”

Combined between loanword and more general word	kathoey + transgender	2	7.4%	(4) ความเครียดและภาวะซึมเศร้าของเกย์ กะเทยไทย → Stress and Depression among Thai Gay, <i>Kathoey</i> (Transgender)
More neutral/less expressive word	hermaphrodite	1	3.7%	(5) “กะเทย” ในคัมภีร์พุทธศาสนา → “ <i>Hermaphrodite</i> ” in Buddhist Scriptures
Total		27	100%	

Analysis of Abstracts

As illustrated in Table 5, the translation of the Thai term กะเทย (*kathoey*) within abstracts demonstrates a broader and more varied set of strategies than titles, reflecting the greater textual freedom available to explain and contextualize the term. While the *loanword* *kathoey* remained the most frequent strategy (19 instances; 46.3%), as in Example 1, Table 5: “ภาวะซึมเศร้าของเกย์ กะเทย” (“stress coping strategies of Thai gay and *kathoey*”), its continued use signals a political choice to assert local identity within a global academic space.

The use of a *more general word* (7 instances; 17.1%) like *transgender* was common, as in Example 2, Table 5: “ระหว่างผู้ต้องขังกะเทยและเจ้าหน้าที่” (“between *transgender* inmates and correctional officers”). Matching this in frequency, *cultural substitution* was again a major finding (7 instances; 17.1%). Of this, the gender identity *kathoey* was translated into sexual orientation terms like *bisexual* or *homosexual*, as seen in Example 3, Table 5: “หรือกะเทยในสังคมอีสาน” (“or *bisexual* sex in Isaan society”).

Additionally, the abstracts featured strategies absent from titles, like *omission* (2 instances; 4.9%) and *combined strategies*: (1) between *more general* word and *loanword* and (2) between *more neutral* and *more general* (4 instances total; 9.7%). The *more neutral/less expressive word* *hermaphrodite*, as in Example 5, Table 5: “ที่สะท้อนถึงอัตลักษณ์ของกะเทย” (“that reflected the *hermaphrodite* identity”) was also used (2 instances; 4.9%).

Overall, this strategic diversity demonstrates that the abstract serves as a discursive space where authors or translators can experiment with explanation, redefinition, and ideological positioning—an opportunity that titles structurally constrain.

Table 5*Distribution of translation strategies for the Thai term ‘กะเทย’ in the abstracts*

Strategy	Term	N. of articles	Percentage	Example
Loanword	<i>kathoey</i>	19	46.3%	(1) การศึกษาความเครียดและภาวะซึมเศร้าของ เกย์ กะเทย... → This study was conducted to assess the stress, depression and stress coping strategies of Thai gay and <i>kathoey</i> .
More general word	transgender, queer, LGBT	7	17.1%	(2) บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อนำเสนอ ปฏิสัมพันธ์ของการจัดการเชิงสุขภาพในเรือนจำ ระหว่างผู้ต้องขังกะเทยและเจ้าหน้าที่ผู้ปฏิบัติ → This article aims to present the interaction of health management in prisons between <u>transgender</u> inmates and correctional officers.
Cultural substitution	bisexual, homosexual(ity), ladyboy, gay	7	17.1%	(3) ตั้งแต่ พ.ศ. 2540-2565 โดย ศึกษาเนื้อหา ของเพลงลูกทุ่งอีสานที่สะท้อนภาพลักษณ์ของเพศ ที่สาม หรือกะเทยในสังคมอีสาน → From 1997-2022, the songs of the Isaan throng reflected the image of third or <u>bisexual</u> sex in Isaan society.
<i>Combined between more general word and loanword</i>	transgender + <i>kathoey</i> , transgenderism/tra nssexualism + <i>kathoey</i>	3	7.3%	(4) บทความนี้วิเคราะห์และวิพากษ์ภาพแทนของ เพศสถานะและเพศวิถีทาง เลือกโดยเฉพาะอัต ลักษณ์ความเป็นกะเทย อันเกี่ยวเนื่องกับความเชื่อ และการตีความของศาสนาพุทธเถรวาทใน สังคมไทย → This paper explores and analyses cinematic portrayals of alternative genders and sexualities, especially <u>transgenderism/transsexualism</u> or the <i>kathoey</i> identity, in relation to the beliefs derived from Thai Theravada Buddhism.
More neutral/less expressive word	hermaphrodite	2	4.9%	(5) ...ผู้ออกแบบจึงนำเสนอแบบร่างของ เครื่องประดับอัญมณี ที่ความตามข้อสรุปโดย เลือกใช้องค์ประกอบในการออกแบบเชิงสัญลักษณ์ ที่สะท้อนถึงอัตลักษณ์ของกะเทยคือ... → ...the designer selected the symbolic design components that reflected the <u>hermaphrodite</u> identity which was self-change and female identity.

Omission		2	4.9%	(6) บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์คัลปีและศาสตร์การใช้อนามานา... “ระบบแม่” ของกะเทยอาวุโส... → This paper aims to analyze ‘Mother Clanship’ (X) in Thai society through the concept of Gramsci’s political-civil society.
<i>Combined between more neutral and more general</i>	hermaphrodite + transsexual	1	2.4%	(7) จึงเป็นเหตุให้บัณฑิตบางประเภท กะเทยแท้ กะเทยเทียมชายกะเทยไม่มีเพศ กะเทยแปลงเพศอย่างสมบูรณ์ รวมทั้งคนสองเพศ ไม่สามารถบวชได้เนื่องจากขาดลักษณะของบุรุษ → This leads to the refusal of ordination in the case of some types of Paṇḍaka, true <u>hermaphrodite</u> , neutral <u>hermaphrodite</u> , fully <u>transsexual</u> persons, and intersexual persons, due to their lack of male characteristics.
Total		41	100%	

Note.

Discussion

The translation patterns for the Thai term กะเทย (*kathoey*) in academic writing reveal a fundamental tension between preserving cultural specificity and ensuring global accessibility—a core concern within QT theory. The findings show that the individuals responsible for translation (whether authors themselves or designated translators) negotiate this tension through distinct strategic choices heavily influenced by the functional constraints of the academic genre in which they appear.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the context of these translations. As the full articles are in Thai, it is possible that the English titles and abstracts are provided primarily to satisfy the TCI's bilingual requirement rather than as a deliberate effort to engage a global, non-Thai-speaking audience. This possibility does not diminish the significance of the translation choices; on the contrary, it frames them as part of an academic practice where terms may be chosen for perceived compliance rather than communicative nuance. This study proceeds by analyzing the public-facing effect of these translations, regardless of the author's original intent.

The dominance of the loanword *kathoey* as the most frequent substitute term represents a significant act of cultural assertion. From a QT perspective, this strategy actively resists the erasure of a local identity by refusing to assimilate it into pre-existing Western categories. By retaining the original term, authors foreground its Thai cultural specificity, compelling an international audience to engage with a concept outside their norms. This choice honors the term's complex

history—evolving from a descriptor for ambiguous genitalia to a reclaimed identity for transgender women and effeminate gay men—preventing this rich background from being lost in translation.

Conversely, the frequent use of the general term, for example, *transgender* as the second most common substitute demonstrates a powerful counter-pressure toward globalization and domestication. While this strategy undoubtedly enhances accessibility for an international audience unfamiliar with Thai culture, it risks the unsettling of local identities by imported ones, a process that, as QT scholars warn, risks becoming a form of linguistic colonialism. The choice to use the term *transgender* thus exemplifies the pragmatic need for clear, searchable keywords in academic writing, but it also highlights the hegemonic influence of Western terminologies that QT seeks to interrogate. Additionally, when the Thai term *กะเทย* (*kathoe*) was translated with the term *transgender*, this term was used solely—even as an adjective to modify nouns (e.g., Example 2, Table 4)—without specifying *transgender woman* or MtF (male-to-female) (Killermann, 2019), suggesting the exceedingly broader perception among audiences. This lumping of *kathoe* into the broad transgender category is not an isolated issue—as noted in the introduction—it reflects the same pattern of colonial erasure Boellstorff (2004) identified with Indonesia’s distinct local identities.

The marked difference in strategic diversity between titles and abstracts further illuminates this negotiation. Titles, constrained by the need for brevity and immediate discoverability, rely almost exclusively on the two most direct strategies: the specificity of the loanword or the accessibility of the more general word. The abstract, however, functions as a space for greater nuance. The emergence of six main distinct strategies—including, interestingly, the two combined patterns of strategies—demonstrate that the authors and translators utilize the expanded textual space to navigate the term’s meaning more dynamically. This analysis confirms that the structural purpose of an academic element is a key determinant of the translation strategy employed; a translator might use paraphrase to unpack a specific nuance in the abstract that would be too cumbersome for a title.

Beyond this primary dichotomy, the other translation choices reveal significant patterns of cultural negotiation and misinterpretation. The choice of *hermaphrodite* in works concerning historical or religious texts, for example, suggests a conscious alignment with the term’s archaic origins (Sulaiporn, 2008; Jackson, 2016), potentially stripping it of its modern gender identity connotations, with referring to transgender women regardless of sex reassignment surgery or effeminate gay men (Käng, 2012; Ocha, 2023). Similarly, the appearance of *ladyboy* points to the influence of Western media and tourism discourse (Totman, 2011), suggesting that even in academic writing, these popular representations can shape translation choices.

However, the most problematic finding—now evident as a significant trend in both titles and abstracts—is the repeated use of cultural substitution to replace the gender identity *kathoey* with terms for sexual orientation. This category includes substituting *kathoey* with *bisexual*, *homosexual*, and *gay*. This study found instances where *kathoey* was translated as *bisexual*. This choice incorrectly conflates a specific gender identity with a sexual orientation, as *bisexual* refers to a pattern of attraction, not the complex gender identity of *kathoey*. Even more problematic is the substitution with *homosexual*. This choice is highly problematic because the term *homosexual* refers to sexual attraction, not gender identity. Its effect, intended or not, is to align the *kathoey* identity with a “stigmatizing medical term” associated with its past classification as a mental disorder (Killermann, 2019). The use of such a pathologizing label, even if unintentional, can have the impact of reinforcing transmisogynist ideas. Finally, translating *kathoey* as *gay* is misleading, as it ignores the crucial socio-political history in Thailand, where masculine-identified gay men actively differentiated themselves from the effeminate identity of *kathoey* (Jackson, 2016). This consistent pattern of substituting gender identity with terms for sexual orientation represents a significant and recurring misinterpretation in the academic record, one that flattens and misrepresents the specific identity of *kathoey*.

Despite the expanded scope of constructing *kathoey* identity in Thai-to-English translation, as viewed through a QT lens, it may not be a so-called ‘linguistic sandbox’ for uncritical lexical experimentation without accountability through explanation, potentially promoting controversial issues within the *kathoey* community per se. As evidenced by the literature review, the historical trajectory of the term *kathoey* demonstrates its changing application to non-normative people in Thai society through extensive discussion—resulting in the proliferation of novel terms intended to lessen oppression and marginalization, such as, these days, *transgender* or *ladyboy*. Arguably, the dearth of widespread recognition of this issue may stem from its prevalence in academic or specialized texts, rather than common everyday discourse. Only scholars or those specifically interested in research data typically encounter these nuances. This, however, does not imply that such translational diversity should not be questioned. Furthermore, the overlooked nature of this problem might be linked to insufficient attention given to the translation of titles and abstracts, despite their being required components for TCI (Thai-Journal Citation Index) indexing. Tellingly, this critique does not aim to assign blame, especially given the ambiguity surrounding whether the author and translator are the same individual. Instead, this research and critique seek to foster awareness regarding the translation of the Thai term *kathoey*—a complex term with a rich historical background and a long struggle against negative connotations (Rowlett et al., 2025). Such complexities warrant careful consideration before public dissemination, as the translated terms can shape public perception and, crucially, influence beliefs within the *kathoey* community.

In situations where the audience lacks critical discernment, what might be intended as linguistic diversity in describing *kathoeys* could become distorted, leading to the aforementioned confusion.

This study's findings thus have direct implications for queer translation as an activist practice. The choice to retain the term *kathoeys*, which this study found to be the most common strategy, can be read as a conscious political act of resistance against linguistic assimilation and the erasure of local identity. For authors and translators, the challenge is to navigate the tension between this local specificity and the need for international intelligibility. This study suggests that a practical activist approach may be what some authors already modeled (e.g., Example, 3, Table 4), using the accessible (but reductive) general term like *transgender* in the title for discoverability, while using the abstract to re-introduce the specific loanword *kathoeys* and provide the necessary cultural context. This 'title-for-access, abstract-for-education' approach could allow translators to strategically educate a global audience while simultaneously resisting full erasure.

Limitations and Recommendations

By focusing only on titles and abstracts, the study does not capture the full complexity of translation strategies that may be present in the full-text articles. While this study compares the aggregate strategies used in titles versus abstracts, it does not conduct a paired analysis to see if the same article employs different strategies in its title and abstract. Such a paired analysis could offer more definitive proof of the 'title-for-access, abstract-for-education' hypothesis suggested in the discussion. Future research could build on these findings by analyzing a non-translated corpus to compare the translation strategies identified here with the lexical choices made by authors writing originally in English about the Thai context. This would provide a valuable baseline for understanding how *kathoeys* is represented through both translation and original authorship in global academia. To complement this textual analysis, future research could conduct interviews with authors and translators to gain direct insight into their motivations and decision-making processes. Such interviews could also explore how the specific sub-genre of the research, like film studies or religious texts, influences term choice, and to what extent translators are consciously aware of the semantic differences between terms like *homosexual* and *transgender*.

Conclusion

This study systematically mapped the terms and strategies used to translate *กะเทย* (*kathoeys*) in Thai-English academic titles and abstracts. The findings reveal a translation landscape characterized by a duality: a strong tendency to preserve the culturally specific loanword *kathoeys* coexists with the widespread adoption of the globalized term *transgender* and *transgender women*. This reflects a core tension within queer translation studies between celebrating local specificity and the

demands of global academic communication. This study demonstrated that authors and translators are engaged in a constant negotiation, with their choices influenced by the academic elements of titles vs. abstracts, the specific context of the research, like historical texts vs. contemporary studies, and the perceived audience, like whether local or global. The greater strategic diversity found in abstracts compared to titles highlights that the translation of the Thai cultural term *กะเทย* (*kathoe*) is not a monolithic act but a dynamic process where different methods are employed even within the same text. By illuminating these practices, this study contributes to a critical understanding of how non-normative identities are represented, constructed, and potentially altered during their transfer from a local Thai context into the public-facing, bilingual record of Thai academia. Ultimately, the translation of a single word is shown to be a site of significant cultural and political work, shaping the visibility and understanding of gender diversity across linguistic boundaries.

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Appendix

Please refer to the following link to view the appendix of this study:
<https://tinyurl.com/yf6arkfa>