

Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia

The following is a condensed version of a seminar held at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies on February 2, 2108

Professor Peter A. Jackson (Australian National University) and Dr. Nguyen Thi Thu Huong (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU, Vietnam) are in the process of bringing together an edited collection on the topic of transgender ritual specialists in Southeast Asia. The book deals with the phenomenon during the past two decades of transgender, and sometimes gay, men taking roles in rituals that in the past were dominated by women. This transformation of the gendering, from female gender to transgender, is currently found in at least three countries in Southeast Asia—Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam.

From Premodern Androgyny to Modern Gender Binary: Semicolonialism and the Making of Gender in Thailand

Professor Peter A. Jackson

Thank you to the gender committee for very kindly arranging this special seminar.

My talk today is going back to ask the question: what is gender, and where did it come from? Gender has a history. Judith Butler, the very famous queer gender theorist, defined gender almost two decades ago as the repeated stylization of the body, repeated acts within a rigid frame over time to produce the appearance of substance. We tend to assume often in every day life that gender exists, that masculine and feminine are a given. Yet Judith Butler and other critical theorists have emphasized that the very notion of a binary between masculine and feminine is not natural. It is historical and cultural.

Is there a history of the duality between the sexes, between masculine and feminine? Is there a genealogy, using the Foucaultian word, that might expose the binary oppositions between masculine and feminine as having a history, not simply being there as a given? What I want to suggest is that there might be a history of the very category of gender itself. Maybe it did not always exist. Perhaps, rather, the opposition between masculine and feminine that we take as given came into being at a point in time or a place in space.

I will look specifically at 19th and early 20th century Siam. I use the word Siam because I focus on the area around Bangkok. I do not look at the northeast, or northern Thailand. I focus on the center of power, particularly in Bangkok.

I argue that forms of power that operated over the body in Siam during the last century were in response to Western criticisms and Western power. Although Siam/Thailand was not a direct colony of any Western power, it has been very deeply impacted by the West in many dimensions. Forms of self-colonization,

modernization, and Westernization have been very important parts of the political projects of Siamese/Thai governments ever since the 19th century.

One of the formidable types of power that Thai governments and Thai ruling elites have exercised over the population of Siam during the last 150 years is over gender, over the body. A legal form of power over how one dresses and how one wears one's hair is still pertinent today, particularly in the civil service, schools, and universities. This form of power over the human body has actually brought into being a stronger sense of the gender binary in Thailand than existed in the past.

Some domains of culture and life historically in Siam have always been very strongly divided along a male and female binary. If we take the monarchy for example, while there have been many wives of kings who are called "queens," there has never been a queen who has ruled like Queen Elizabeth, in her own right. All monarchs have been male. Also, if we look at sexual culture, there is a very strong male-female divide in terms of expectations of sexuality. In Thai sexual culture, men are given much freer opportunity for sexual experience than women are. If women have the same sort of sexual lives as men, they are often very strongly criticized.

"Universal androgyny"

There are, however, other areas of life in Thailand/Siam, both historically and today, that have not been strongly gendered and which Western visitors have found unusual. Until the middle of the 20th century, personal names in Siam did not have a strong gender. You would not necessarily know from someone's name alone if they were a man or a woman. Now names are quite strongly gendered in Thailand, but this came to be only after a government law that brought that into being.

Another area which in Siam was not strongly gendered, was fashion. The type of clothing that boys and girls, men and women, wore was not as strongly differentiated as it was in the West, in China, or even in Vietnam or other parts of Southeast Asia. Still today there are some areas of Thai life that are not gendered, for

example nicknames. In Thailand, nicknames are very important. People have official names, but often even good friends may not know somebody's real name. Everybody will use their nickname, and not many nicknames are gendered.

British visitors to Siam from the middle of the 19th to the early 20th century strongly criticized the country's gender culture. One of the strongest critiques was of the so-called "nakedness" of the Siamese populace. Bacon, a British visitor in the early 1890s, said, "when foreigners [meaning Westerners] first arrived in Siam, they are shocked almost beyond endurance of the nudity of the people. Not until Siam is clothed need she expect a place among respectable civilized nations." Historical photos of naked boatmen doing their work or women going to the market topless illustrate what Bacon witnessed. While it was simply the normal fashion of ordinary men and ordinary women in Siam at the time, Western visitors found it shocking. There was a strong criticism of the nakedness of the body, and a linking of nakedness to a lack of civilization, or semi-barbarism. In the eyes of Westerners, in order to meet the status of civilization, the Siamese population needed to wear more clothing, and that clothing needed to be differentiated between men and women.

Another very common comment in that period was of the "universal androgyny" of the Siamese. Visitors to Siam starting in the 1830s and going into the 1890s often found it difficult to tell the difference between men and women when they did wear clothes. Roberts, an American visitor to Bangkok in the 1830s, wrote back to America about a royal performance in Bangkok:

"As I cannot tell a Siamese man from a woman when numbers are seated together, it is out of my power to say whether any females were present in the audience. The hair of Siamese women is cut like men. The countenance of women is in fact more masculine than that of the males."

This is similar to a comment in 1902 from a British visitor, Campbell. He says:

“No one can have been many days in Bangkok without being struck by the robust physique and erect bearing of the ordinary women. It is by no means uncommon at first for a stranger, till quite close to them, to mistake them for men, the similarity of their dress and their short-cropped hair lending themselves to this deception. They do far more than their fair share of physical work.... [T]he average Siamese woman is often the better half of her husband.” [meaning that women were doing more work than men].

This was a common commentary: the relative inability to distinguish visually men from women.

Looking at two photographs of two children of King Mongkut (King Rama IV, r. 1851-1868), one can get a sense of the difficulty. [See PHOTOS ON SLIDE 10 of powerpoint] Both the boy and girl, aged eight, are dressed properly as royal children. Yet today, many Thai students cannot read the gender of their clothing, and have very different answers when asked which is the boy and which is the girl.

The crossing of gender and clothing has been a strong element in history and in performance; all-female and all-male genres of dramatic performance are both very strongly represented in Thai history. Of course men had to play female roles in certain genres, and women played male roles in other genres. This was not uncommon and includes strong performative element. This can even be seen in photos of the royal family.

[See PHOTOS ON SLIDE 12]

In a photograph of King Chulalongkorn, he is surrounded by some of his brothers who are all dressed as women in a dramatic performance of *Arabian Nights*. Within the royal palace, royal princes could cross dress as part of royal performances. The

king could not cross-dress, but this element of cross-dressing, of dramatic performance, was not something for the lower classes only.¹ The elites were also involved in theatrical cross-dressing. It was not unusual in the 1930s even for a royal prince in playing theatrical elements to cross genders in terms of fashion. The late King Bhumibol, as a child, was dressed in female theatrical dress.

It must be remembered, however, that not simply for Thailand or Siam, but for many parts of Southeast Asia during a certain period, including Java, class status was a more important determinant of fashion than gender. Royal elites, whether male or female, dressed in a certain way, and working class or labouring people dressed another way. Historically fashion was more important to mark one's class status than to mark your gender. Fashion to mark gender has been part of a more modern trend, but remains important in marking class status.

Notions of beauty

If you look at an “erotic” postcard that a Thai man would have bought in the 1890s to look at a pretty Thai woman, you will see that what was a beautiful Thai woman to Thai men's eyes in the 1890s was the type of woman who was being labeled as ugly and masculine by Western visitors. Campbell, in talking about the population, says:

“The flat nose, wide nostrils, large mouth, thick lips, and black bristly hair form an ensemble of which it is difficult to give an idea by means of the pen only. The natural plainness is even more marked in the women, among whom a pretty face is very rarely to be seen...”

¹ Here, a participant in the discussion reminded the audience that, “In the Thai context, sex has classes in a way that depends on who you are and how you interact according to your class. Although it seems from the historical photos that cross-dressing for the royal family was accepted, it is not clear if it was so for lower classes. This is an important reminder of the classification of the way people dress, and how it comes across as a lifestyle.”

Androgyny was in the eyes of Westerners, not in Thai eyes. And what I mean by androgyny here is, women did not look feminine. These Western visitors had a form of power at that point in time, and it was in response to that power and criticisms of androgyny (or, women looking masculine) that the Thai state reacted. Both the absolute monarchy and post revolutionary governments very strongly wanted to demonstrate the civilized status of Thailand, and one way that they did that was by bringing fashion to conform to Western notions. Fashion is critical to the presentation of the body and was therefore important to the creation of modern notions of what is gender, what is masculine, what is feminine.

Gendering Thailand in the name of civilization

In the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, Westerners universally described the women of Siam as ugly and masculine, and doing all sorts of work. These findings came together in the colonial period as a discourse, as a critique of semi-barbarism, as a lack of civilization of Siam. Such critiques impacted the ruling monarchy very strongly. They resented such criticism and very clearly wanted to represent themselves as civilized. They regarded themselves as having been civilized for several hundred years and to suddenly be told by these Westerners that they were lacking civilization was something that they needed to respond to.

And they did respond. King Chulalongkorn in particular, who reigned from 1868 to 1910, was deeply and negatively impacted by these critiques. He responded by ordering his wives to grow their hair long. Accordingly, beginning in the 1890s, female elites began to wear their hair long and also began to gradually change the clothing they wore. This re-fashioning of the female body took a number of decades.

The broader process of regendering Thailand also took quite some time. It was not only the absolute monarchy that engaged in this process. In the middle of the 20th century, under the fascist government of Phibun, the same attempts to represent civilization were very strong. A law promulgated in the early 1940s during the

Japanese occupation decreed that men's and women's names should have a proper gender. The inability to distinguish between male and female names was considered a lack of civilization. The government set up a committee of academics to draw up a list of all names and assign a proper gender to them. The list of names was then sent to all government officers, so that when mothers and fathers came to register their child for birth certificates, they were required to choose an appropriately gendered name.²

The process of gendering Thai names reverberates today. For example, today the name Somsak is a common name for a man in Thailand. Until the 1940s, Somsak was also a common name for a woman, but today no girl child would be named Somsak. That was a name that was re-gendered as male only.

Another element to the story is the effects of capitalism. Influences on the gendering of the population came from the forces of Western power through the market as well. In terms of the division of social roles, we can look to some of the early anthropological work done just after World War II, particularly *Bang Chan* out of Cornell. These studies emphasized, at least at the village level, a similarity of roles across the sexes. Men were looking after children and babies while women were working in the rice fields. At least in the eyes of postwar American academics, Thailand in the 1940s and 50s was much less gender divided than China or Japan. What has changed since then is the introduction of the market economy and the marketization of labor, which brought new types of gendering with new types of jobs, so that women became typists or office workers, for example. In petrol stations, the petrol station attendants were men; factory work in clothing became women's work. Once you move from subsistence rural economy into the modern urban economy, different factors come into play. New jobs arrived in Thailand already gendered.

² Although the prefixes *ee* and *ai* had been traditionally used to mark feminine and masculine gender, respectively, the Phibun government in the 1940s assigned a gender to proper names, which was new.

The cinema was also impacted. In the genres of live stage performance, we saw all kinds of male and female performances. But when Thailand started producing movies in the 1920s, only men played men's roles and only women played women's roles. In this type of modern performance, a gendering came through that was different from the past.

What I want to argue is that all of these examples represent different forms of power over the human body. The state exerted power over fashion; capitalism and the market economy brought other forms of power and gendering to bear over jobs and occupations; and the internationalizing or globalizing forces of media, and new media such as cinema, also brought forth forms of gendering. These forces together have radically transformed the gendering of the Thai body within a very short period of time.

In 1965, Apasra Hongsakula was the first Thai winner of the international Miss Universe beauty contest. Until then, Western women had usually been the winners. Upon her arrival back in Thailand, the king sent his own car to pick her up at the airport and to bring her into the city with flowers. It was a national success: the beauty of Thai women had been recognized internationally in the most important female beauty contest in the world. Once thought of as ugly, within 60 years Siamese women were recognized as beautiful by Western international standards. A radical transformation had taken place.

I would argue that this transformation is a response to forms of power, including state power. Within very few decades, the international stereotype of the Thai woman had been transformed completely. In this sense, the state-initiated project to re-gender primarily female bodies, but also male bodies, to conform to Western notions of gendering has been amazingly successful. The image of the beautiful Thai woman that is now marketed through travel literature is an invented tradition. The

notion of Siamese women as traditionally beautiful is a very recent invention as a response to semi-colonial influences in Thailand exercised by the government itself.

If one looks at postcards of heterosexual women sold for the pleasure of heterosexual men in 1890s Thailand, they look very similar to images of tomboys on teenage magazines in the 1990s.³ If we compare the hairstyle and other elements of style of the 20th-century modern Thai tomboy lesbian, they are quite similar to the 19th-century heterosexual woman. The masculine lesbian today looks very similar to the feminine heterosexual woman of the 19th-century as a response to all of the rapid changes.

Clearly another stereotype of modern Thailand is that it is a society with many male-to-female transgenders who are beautiful. They are beautiful, however, according to contemporary Western notions of femininity. In a sense they have only become beautiful in the transformation of the male body into female as part of this dramatic regendering process.

Dangers of Western historical data

Certain stereotypes are repeated in Western historical accounts and reports. In French accounts of Vietnam during the colonial period for example, the French repeatedly referred to Vietnamese men as effeminate and not very masculine according to European standards.⁴ None of the reports by the French or by the

³ A tomboy is the word for a masculine lesbian, or a woman who dresses in a more masculine way in a lesbian relationship.

⁴ According to Dr. Nguyen Thi Thu Huong, colonial constructions of femininities and masculinities in Vietnam followed similar patterns to those in Thailand. French writings from the colonial times also depicted Vietnamese women as ugly and masculine. In the case of Vietnam, however, she argues that another reason was in play: the French were trying to rationalize their own same-sex practices. When the French were found to be having same-sex relationships with the indigenous men (which happened often), they would explain that since Vietnamese women were so ugly and so masculine, they needed to substitute the women with men. Frank Proschan (2002)* has written extensively about that particular period of time .

*Proschan, F. 2002. Syphilis, opiomania, and pederasty: colonial constructions of Vietnamese (and French) social diseases. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11(4): 610-636.

British, however, refer to Thai men as effeminate. During the colonial period, certain stereotypes became repeated for different Asian countries, so that there was a certain stereotype of Vietnamese men that got repeated and a certain stereotype of Thai women that was repeated. It is therefore not clear whether these comments are based on real observations or are simply part of the stereotyping. Yet even if they are only a stereotype, it is interesting that we get different gendered stereotypes in different Southeast Asian countries. These forms of discourse and critique have different forms of influence in different countries, which is an interesting element to the story.

However, when you have this type of literature from the 19th century, you need to be very careful. These sources cannot necessarily be taken as accurate representations, because they are judgmental in nature. Notions of European superiority and what is civilized and what is not civilized based on Victorian-period values are the building blocks of the stereotypes. The literature therefore needs to be interpreted in terms of forms of stereotypes and forms of power.

That said, even if they were not accurate representations, they were indeed very powerful, because they criticized the culture, particularly the culture of the ruling elite. This was a time when the ruling elite in Thailand was worried about being conquered. After all, Burma had become British; Indochina had become French; Malaya was English. Siam was in the middle and the French had sent gunboats up the river in 1892. So when they were portrayed as not being civilized, they responded not simply to criticisms of their fashion, they were responding to potential colonization, because colonialism was justified in terms of bringing European civilization. Making the population look civilized by Western standards was therefore a strategy, partly a strategy of cultural power, to resist the colonialism of that period.

Language as a historical signpost in the construction of gender

There are very few primary sources that give us a picture of Thai gender culture before the 19th century; to study the history of gendering in Southeast Asia, to know for example what was gender culture in the Middle Ages, is extremely difficult. One of the few places that we can look for some information, however, is language. We have better historical information on the changes in languages than we do with culture.

One interesting term in the emergence of the category of gender in Thailand is *phê̂t* (เพศ), or sex, gender. It is a word that has only come to have this meaning during the last hundred years or so. This word is absolutely everywhere, it is a master term: anything to do with gender or sexuality, the word *phê̂t* is used, in popular discourse, in academic discourses, when talking about sex. In Thai academic discourses, the word *phê̂t* is part of gender studies, sexuality studies, sexology, and so on.

The etymology of this word is actually from Sanskrit and Pali. It goes back to old the Sanskrit, *veṣa* (वेष्ट) and in Pali, *vesa* (वेस), which literally means dress, apparel, exterior, assumed appearance. Not many people in Thailand know this, but actually the core word that is now used in Thai to refer to gender and sexuality comes from a very old Sanskrit/Pali word that means dress, or apparel, what one wears. It is interesting that even the discourses of gender and sexuality that are used in Thailand today relate back to notions of fashion and of how one presents the body.

This Sanskrit word *veṣa*, which becomes *phê̂t* in modern Thai, is related back to other words in Indo-European languages, for example the Latin word *vestis*. Even the word *vest* today, a man's vest, is from the same root word. The French *vêtements*, clothing, is from the same origin. In Gothic languages, in Germanic languages, it becomes *wasti*. It becomes Old Anglo-Saxon, *werian*, and the English word *wear* also has its etymological origins in the same Sanskrit term. There are ancient parallels between the English word *wear* and the Thai word *phê̂t* as the modern word for

gender, both of them having a sense of what one wears as defining one's gender. Historical linguistics, therefore, is one element to the story of the history of gender, and overall the element of international flows of power is very important to the history gender, the West, and Asia when writing a comparative history of gendering.

The very notion of gender as a broad category is a recent invention, even in Western languages. Historically, gender was only referred to in grammar. In Latin or French, for example, there are masculine and feminine nouns. This word from grammar, from linguistics, was then adopted by feminist critics to try to define a notion of gender as a cultural construction. There is nothing natural about the notion that a noun is masculine or feminine, it is simply a cultural phenomenon. Gender was used to signify the idea that masculinity and femininity were not natural, but rather cultural elements. In other words, the use of the word *phê*t to mean "gender" in the modern sense is a recent phenomenon just as the word "gender" is a recent usage in English.

An ongoing process

In Thailand, understanding gender or the appearance of gender, dress, or appearance changed within a very short period. This most probably happened and is happening in other countries as well. Today we have certain ideas about what is gender, what is male, what is female. Yet this is continuously changing all the time. For example, the global influence of youth fashion from Korea, from Japan, and gender representation in manga is having an impact on young people's notions of gender in other countries. The history of gender has not stopped, it is going to keep going, and it will have a future as well.