

## “Where Men Can Be Men”: Resituating Thai Masculinity

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### Abstract

“Thailand is the last place left in the world,” I was repeatedly told by the Western male sex tourists that I encountered in Thailand, “where men can be men.” Indeed, thousands of foreign men flock to this Southeast Asian country every year for its notorious supply of plentiful and inexpensive sex with local prostitutes. Does this mantra also apply to Thai men? This article explores the beginnings of a continuing research project into how the massive influx of foreign male sex tourists during the past forty years has influenced how Thai men perceive their own masculinity.

**Keywords:** Sex tourism, Thailand, Masculinity

On the global map of tourism and travel, Thailand, and particularly Bangkok, stands out as a locus of unrivaled sexual pleasure and consumption. The lyrics of Murray Head’s 1984 dance hit, “One Night in Bangkok,” reveal how strongly the image of the city and its tourist red-light districts have merged in the Western imagination:

One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster  
The bars are temples but the girls ain't free  
You'll find a god in every golden cloister  
And if you're lucky then the god's a she  
I can feel an angel sliding up to me

The strength of this global media-driven image of Bangkok was impressed upon the American public in 1993 when *Time* magazine, reporting on world prostitution, featured a front cover picture showing a Bangkok bar girl sitting in the lap of a Western male customer (Askew, 2002). Ever since, despite the efforts of the Thai government to counter these global stereotypes, the perception of Bangkok as the global sex capital persists.

This reputation is well deserved. Anybody who has spent any amount of time in Bangkok will surely notice the seemingly ubiquitous presence of sex tourists: old, overweight white men walking hand-in-hand with young, petite brown girls. Indeed, the couples appear to be a study in stark contrasts as these men are often as much as three times the age and weight of their companions. (I would learn later that some of the bar girls jokingly refer to them as “FOBUs,” which stands for “fat, old, bald, and ugly.”) Ironically, the starkest difference that separates the two individuals is also the one that brought them together. Without the glaring disparity in socioeconomic status between the consumer and the provider, sex tourism would be a marginal activity of a very different character.

As much as these men want to buy sex as a commodity, they do not want the exchange to be simply a contractual one. It is precisely the non-contractual nature of the prostitute-client exchange in Thailand that serves to conceal its commercial nature from the man. This aspect of Thai prostitution is absolutely central to most sex tourists, for it makes it possible for them to pay for sexual services without having to see themselves as the kind of men who use prostitutes.

Although I have no empirical data to support this claim, I would speculate that of the hundreds of thousands of foreign (or “falang” as they are called in Thai) men who visit prostitutes in Thailand every year, very few willingly and happily embrace the identity of a purchaser-of-sex. In fact, all of the men with whom I spoke admitted that they would never imagine buying sex in their home countries. A middle-aged gentleman from America that I befriended had this to say:

I don't really think of them as prostitutes. It's not like that. They're more like a girlfriend—GFE or “girlfriend experience” as it's called. Because it's not just about sex. These girls know how to take care of you and make you feel special. You wake up in the morning, and they're already making your breakfast or ironing your clothes. It's unbelievable! This place is like Disneyland for perverts! (field notes, July 7, 2007).

Because sex tourists do not have to enter into explicit agreements on the terms and conditions of the exchange and because Thai prostitutes make gestures and provide services that are interpreted as demonstrations of genuine affection, it is relatively easy for these men to forget that they are engaged in an economic transaction.

### 1. Local Consumption

When most people think of prostitution in Thailand, the image that immediately comes to mind is the aforementioned one involving a Western male sex tourist and a Thai woman. Utterly missing from this exchange are Thai men. They are ignored in the academic literature as well. While entire forests have been clear-cut to accommodate the studies about Thai female sex workers (Adkins, 1995; Davidson and Taylor, 1999; Mills, 1999; Phongpaichit 1982; Walker and Ehrlich, 1992) and their Western male customers (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Hughes, 2000; King, 2004; Pettman, 1997), I have not been able to find a single account dedicated to Thai men as patrons of the sex trade.

This is all the more surprising because the overwhelming majority of the customers are local. Behind the glitz and titillation of ping pong shows, smoking vaginas, transvestites and neon lights, as well as the dreary yet overstated reality of trafficked and underage workers, it is important to understand that the brunt of the prostitution in Thailand involves female sex workers catering to local men. It has been estimated that at least 450,000 Thai men visit prostitutes every day (Erlanger, 1991).

In fact, much of the impetus sustaining the incredible rate of prostitution in Thailand is cultural. Thai men believe that it is their right to have cheap sex, and there are enough poor Thai women to make it possible (Erlanger, 1991). Prostitution in many cases has become integrated with initiation rights: “For many Thai men, a trip to the neighborhood brothel is a rite of passage, a tradition passed from father to son” (Moreau, 1992). The fact that prostitutes play a large role in forming the sexual identity of young Thai males is supported by the available statistics. Studies have shown that the majority of Thai men have their first sexual experience with a prostitute—the act is often a part of high school and university hazing rituals—and that 95% of all men over 21 have slept with a prostitute (Handley, 1992). In addition to rites of passage, the activity of visiting a brothel has become a popular social activity: “‘Sex with prostitutes seems to be a way for men to enjoy each other's company,’ observed Barbara Franklin of Care International, ‘It is often part of a night out with friends who share food, drink and sometimes even sexual partners’” (Ladd and Hiebert, 1993).

There exists a deep imbalance in the attitudes that many Thai men have towards women, who are considered to be either sexual objects or obedient homemakers. Moreover, the rift between the sexes deepens when one examines the contrasting sexual roles prescribed to each:

And while it is perfectly acceptable for men to visit prostitutes, premarital sex between men and women who are dating is strictly forbidden. Many Thais believe that this double standard has helped create the thriving sex trade. “In Thailand, women are supposed to be chaste until marriage and monogamous afterward, says writer and social critic Sukanya Hantrakul. “*Men are supposed to be promiscuous*” (Moreau, 1992; emphasis mine).

Indeed, a survey of both sexes by the Deemar Corporation in 1990 found that “80% of males and 74% of females responded that it was ‘natural for men to pursue sex at every opportunity’” (VanLandingham, 1993).

In a newspaper article published in the Bangkok Post titled “Police Chief Links Brothel Ban with Rise in Sex Crime,” a “police director general” claimed that, deprived of massage parlors, “men in seaside provinces who make a living in the fishing industry and workers in provinces where industrial plants were located” would have “a lot of pent up sexual aggression” and would have to “relieve themselves every once in a while” (1992). He later predicted that “the rate of rapes and other sex-related crimes might skyrocket if these men find no place to satisfy their sexual desires” (Ibid.).

A variety of other important factors make prostitution in Thailand more socially acceptable than in most of the West. Foremost, it must be noted that prostitution in Thailand exists not as a disorganized underground profession as it does in most of the West but as a highly complex and ordered major industry. Due in part to the legal issues surrounding the trade, most sex workers in Thailand do not work independently but in established businesses. The structure and nature of the business is such that a large web of male businessmen with interests in the venues, as well as the politicians and police officers they must often bribe, profit (Manderson, 1992). Although the vast majority of sex workers in Thailand are female, a number of males—many of whom hold considerable financial, social, and political power—are intricately tied to the sex industry and have vested interests in promoting it.

Theravada Buddhism, the most common religion in Thailand, is also implicated in the literature as a basis for the prevalence of prostitution in the country. Because women are assigned to a lower status than men, the sex-based inequities that perpetuate prostitution fit into Thai religious culture (Truong, 1990). While sexuality in Buddhism is linked to the material world and seen as undesirable under certain circumstances, sex does not carry the sinful connotations that it does in much of Western society. Consequently, promiscuity, including the case of prostitution, is not viewed as being inherently evil (Ibid.). In fact, in that most female sex workers report that they remit portions of their earnings to their families (Phongpaichit, 1982), prostitution as a means of supporting the family can be an effective means of making merit (Wolffers et al, 2004).

## 2. The Third Wheel

Thai men are constantly being marginalized by both Thai female sex workers and Western male sex tourists. Their gender counterparts often describe them as unfaithful, lazy, unemployed, drunk, and abusive deadbeats. Thai women claim that they prefer Western men because of their strong aversion to the men in their own country. Their Western counterparts, meanwhile, hardly consider them to be a romantic rival for these women. In her book, *Patpong Sisters*, Cleo Odzer describes overhearing two (s)ex-pats sharing the following conversation:

“This farang dies and goes to heaven,” said the English neighbor with the sports section resting on his knee. “He arrives at the pearly gates and Saint Peter is there checking the book. ‘My, my, you’ve led an exemplary life’ says Saint Peter. ‘And because you’ve been so good, we’re going to grant you all the wishes you want. What do you fancy?’ ‘I have only one wish,’ the farang answers. ‘Send me back to Thailand. I want to live in Thailand forever.’ ‘Very well,’ Saint Peter says. And presto! The man gets his wish. He’s back in Thailand. But guess what! He is reincarnated as a Thai man!” “A THAI! Bloody hell!” The two farangs laughed and made agony faces. “Poor sod! Ho ho ho” (1997).

What is significant about this joke is that there is no punch line, ostensibly because one is unnecessary as just the mention of a Thai man alone is enough to provoke ridicule. Since Western male sex tourists often complain that their own women are demanding, overbearing, and materialistic, this mutual commiseration makes for an ideal match.

Further, the majority of the Thai males that Western male sex tourists encounter are employed in the service industry, usually as a taxi or tuk-tuk driver, waiter, or hotel bell hop.

### Insert Figure 1 Here

These emasculating roles socially castrate Thai men as being somehow less masculine. Such a perception is reinforced by the size discrepancy, both imagined and real, between Western and Thai men. Veteran sex tourists often advise novices to bring their own condoms because the local varieties are “too small.”

This perception of Thai men, in particular, conforms to the more general stereotype of the “asexual Asian male.” A recent issue of *Details* magazine featured a spread titled “Gay or Asian?”

### Insert Figure 2 Here

In it, an Asian man is surrounded by comments about his “bonsai ass” and “sashimi-smooth chest.” It uses phrases such as “choke up on your chopsticks” and uses more sexually explicit language that is both homophobic and racist. Yet this image remains the dominant perception, and the one most often portrayed in the mass media.

### 3. Previous Research

The ways in which images of Thai female sexuality have been generated in various forms (literature and film) by Western “orientalism”—the Western fascination with the exotic “other” of Asia—have received increasing attention by scholars (Hamilton, 1998; Manderson 1992). Significantly, however, much of this Western scholarship on prostitution in Thailand and other countries of southeast Asia has adopted its own version of the global media stereotypes, underlined by theoretical assumptions which posit the victimization and passiveness of “Asia” in the global economy of sexual pleasure (Askew, 2002). Asian sex workers remain consigned to victimhood status in Western feminist accounts of prostitution. The image of passivity and powerlessness extends to the portrayal of Bangkok’s landscape as well. Such a caricature disregards the reality that the multiple exploitative power of global consumption industries—such as sex tourism—may be subject to mediation, appropriation, and contestation at the local level by the Thai women and men engaged in the sex trade.

By and large, the academic literature has four foci in relation to prostitution in Thailand: HIV/AIDS, child prostitution, human trafficking, and exploitation—though these themes frequently overlap (ie Beyer, 1998; Buckingham and Meister, 2003; Kerwijk, 1995; Wolffers et al, 2004). Although the topic of sex workers in Thailand has been broached many times, the vast majority of these seem to be rooted in a victim mentality and adhere to a pathology model. In a significant portion of Western medical literature linking prostitution to the spread of HIV/AIDS (ie Wiwanitikit, 2004), for example, the tone and focus is overtly moralistic and judgmental. Sex workers are widely vilified, and their work is presented as if it exists in a vacuum outside of the context of the overwhelming influences of political economy. By connecting prostitution to the spread of HIV and by presenting it exclusively as a supply-driven activity, sex workers are scapegoated as the ones responsible for driving the pandemic (Wolffers et al, 2004). When the discussions are broadened to the societal level, the function is to associate blame and imply a sort of Babylonian morality (Beyrer, 1998). The reality is that the factors placing sex workers and their clients at a heightened risk for HIV/AIDS infection are not determined by moral or ethical standards but by their number of clients/partners and the conditions under which they work.

Thai prostitution is also frequently presented in the greater context of global human trafficking and modern systems of slavery and indentured servitude (King, 2004). While this issue is far from trivial on the global scale, the estimated proportion of sex workers in Thailand who have been trafficked is minimal (Phongpaichit, 1982) and the focus on trafficking serves to sensationalize rather than accurately present prostitution in Thailand (Lim, 1998). The same can be said for works exaggerating the role of exploitative recruitment in the industry and for the focus on child prostitution in the country. Though truly horrific instances of child prostitution and sex slavery undoubtedly exist in Thailand, they are overrepresented and overemphasized in the literature.

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Figure 1. Bell hop at Regency Park Hotel in Bangkok



Figure 2. "Gay or Asian?"