

Book Reviews

Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand. Edited by Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 1999. 289 pp.

This interesting and useful collection of papers brings together a variety of scholarly perspectives on a highly problematic set of questions. The book emerged from a conference held in 1995, although little is said about the organization, location, or details in this volume. As will be apparent from the title, the editors operate from the assumption that the Thai cultural system has space for several forms of gender, and several kinds of sexuality. The Thai “gender/sex” system cannot be comprehended on an analogy with Western (and other?) forms, because at least until recently the relation between attributed gender, preferred form of sexual expression, and individual identity were not structured by a rigid binary or dualistic system, while expectations of sexual behaviour do not neatly map onto Western concepts of normative practices. To pick two of the most striking examples: men who have sex with other men, provided they preserve a dominant masculinity, are not considered to be “homosexual”, while married women are not surprised when their husbands have sexual relations with prostitutes and generally tolerate this behaviour provided there is no element of personal affection or intimacy involved. The effort to tease out the many strands of individual choice, cultural expectation, social practice, and collective understandings involved in these complex situations is apparent in almost all of the papers published here, although some of the contributions do not sit as comfortably as others within the overall parameters of the project.

The editors provide a thoughtful and theoretically informed introduction, which sets out key elements of the sex/gender system in twen-

tieth century Thailand. The studies presented here wish to critique Western orientalist fantasies, as well as analysing local expressions and attitudes and practices. Although Western theory insists on distinguishing between the “sex” system and the “gender” system, linguistic usage in Thailand suggests that in discursive terms biological sex, gender, and sexual expression are all part of a single system, the key term of which is *phet*. The apparent acceptance of a wide variety of sexual practices in Thailand has long formed a fundamental aspect of the country’s allure to visitors; one particularly useful contribution in this work is the stress on the difference between the private and public domain, where a reasonably high level of toleration is extended to various forms of behaviour provided this is in private, even while the world of public discourse explicitly condemns it. The state at various times has attempted to control public discourses on sexuality, including today in the current methods of publicizing the HIV/AIDS problems through public media. It is clear that these efforts encounter culturally powerful sanctions against certain kinds of revelation in the sexual realm, one result of which has been the strong tendency to associate the “blame” of HIV/AIDS with prostitutes rather than explicitly targeting the everyday behaviours of upright male citizens as constituting the “problem”. The relationship between HIV/AIDS and the accepted patterns of sexual behaviour for Thai men and women is mentioned at a number of points as a particular problem, the common dimensions of which are highlighted in the two papers by Chanpen et al. (Chapters 4 and 5). Based on interviews and focus groups with married men and women in the early 1990s, these chapters present married women’s views on the extramarital sexual relationships of their husbands, and both men’s and women’s views on sexuality and the ideal spouse. They are particularly valuable for the extensive frank quotations from participants, who generally confirm what is common knowledge, namely, that Thai people generally have extraordinarily tolerant attitudes towards male use of commercial sex workers, an acceptance based on the notion that men have a strong natural sex urge, something which is not attributed to “good” women. The resemblance between this and the commonly accepted norms in Western societies in the Victorian era (and later) suggests a situation

where the influences of modernity (in the form of changed expectations of male and female behaviour, the extension of sexual desire as “normal” for women, the abandonment of ideals of chastity and virtue as proper to “good” women, and so on) have so far failed to take hold. The good old “double standard”, with which everyone was so familiar in the West until the 1960s, flourishes in contemporary Thailand, at least from these accounts. The fact that male patronage of prostitutes is understood as a logical outcome of this situation, though, is not as self-evident as it might seem. For instance, in most Western societies in the 1950s women were expected to be virgins at marriage and married women were not expected to be sexually adventurous, or even to enjoy sex very much, but this did not result in a situation where men were normatively expected to patronize prostitutes on a regular basis. And while it is clear that most Thai women do not consider their husbands’ extramarital sex to be in any sense desirable from their point of view, their concern is much more acute if the partner is a “girlfriend” or minor wife rather than a commercial sex worker, since the main anxiety is competition, rather than infidelity itself. Moreover, wives seemingly have little ability to influence their husbands’ behaviour: it is up to the men to determine what they will do, when, and with whom. Is this because women are reluctant to divorce their husbands? Or has it to do with quite different evaluations of what really matters in a marriage, and a different approach to the importance of interpersonal relations between spouses? Probably both, although the deeper implications of these patterns remain to be explored.

Gender relations are discussed in several papers. Thailand, like other Southeast Asian societies, is generally noted for more egalitarian gender relations arising from women’s role in trade, household finances, agriculture, land ownership, and kinship structures. Nevertheless, in many respects Thailand is a highly male-dominated society, not least ideologically, and the role of Buddhism in promoting an anti-woman position has also often been noted. One paper (Tannenbaum) presents a strong argument against the idea that Buddhist values structure the patterning of gender relations, pointing to the prevalent reliance on orthodox textual sources by anthropologists, rather than explorations of actual every-

day behaviour among people in specific life circumstances. A different source for the understanding of Thai gender relations can be found in Thai writings of various kinds. Barmé discusses writings of the early twentieth century, including examples of the earliest commercial women's magazines, as evidence for the development of an early proto-feminism in Thailand, at least among the élite. Fishel discusses transformations in gender and sexual norms during the reign of Rama VI (1910–25) based on the analysis of one piece of writing by the King himself, and another from a famous epic novel written by the late M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, showing how love and desire are refracted towards or through the nation. Harrison examines the characterization of the prostitute by Thai female authors, within the model of “madonna” and “whore” so familiar in Western usages.

Jackson's paper presents a fascinating analysis of the complicated issues surrounding homosexual “identity” in the Thai context. Just as Thailand is regarded as a “paradise” for the heterosexual male, so it is for homosexual males. The idyllic “gay paradise” concept, however, seems to be at odds with the strong anti-homosexual views expressed in both popular and official discourses. Jackson characterizes this as a “tolerant” but not “accepting” attitude. He develops the view that whereas “gay” in the West is seen as opposite to “straight”, that is, heterosexual, in Thailand “gay” is constituted in a complex three-way relation with *kathoey* (approximately, transgender male) and “man”. The positions and identities of *kathoey* and “gay” men are quite distinct. *Kathoey* are fascinating to both Thai men and women, and the *kathoey* model of homoeroticism has a very long history in the Thai sex/gender system, being known at least since the time of Ayutthaya. Masculine gay men, on the other hand, elicit severe condemnation. In recent times there has been a liberalization in attitudes towards “gay” men; even so, shame still attaches to male homoeroticism. In effect, the distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” remains undisturbed by the *kathoey*, since it is understood as a problem of a genuine woman being trapped in a man's body. The “gay” man, on the other hand, disturbs the sex/gender system if he openly asserts that his sexual partners are other “masculine” men. The longer-term effects of contact with Western-style

“identity politics” will be interesting to trace in the future.

Although this collection has opened up issues around subjectivity and identity, it must be said that much remains to be done. The various authors have provided areas of fruitful enquiry, but it is possible that either the task is too difficult, or the framing of the problem is somehow inappropriate. The position of the Western researcher, already implicated in a taken-for-granted mode of understanding of sexuality and gender, and positioned within Western discourses and systems of power, may indeed be part of the problem. As the editors comment, “There is still a tendency for studies of the intersection of sexuality and gender to be based on European frameworks and socio-historical processes” (pp. 22–23). Nevertheless it is difficult to imagine how Western scholars could step completely outside these, and the problem is even more entrenched once the extent of the transformation in the Thai sex/gender system by immediate influence from Western sources is taken into account. Perhaps what is needed is a different kind of theory underpinning sexuality and gender studies generally, for the West as well as everywhere else.

This collection is useful and timely, and makes an original contribution to the literature on sexuality and gender in Southeast Asia. The book is very well produced and will be helpful for teachers and students, as well as providing a sensible introduction to a topic of apparently ceaseless fascination for the “general reader”.

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