“Snakes Without Poison?”: (Re)Negotiating Hybrid Masculinities in Thailand[1]

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Abstract

A handful of Thai gender studies academics have noted that the field’s failure to develop a satisfactory episteme of contemporary masculinities is the result of a dominant theoretical approach which has favoured cultural exceptionalism whilst eschewing the frameworks developed in Western academia. This article maintains that this approach – which I argue had been a mainstay of the Thai anthropology of the fifties and sixties and, later, during the intensive research effort of the 1990s AIDS crisis – has resulted in a currently stagnant academic construction of the Thai male as a series of crude stereotypes whose behaviour is rooted in ‘traditional’ cultural values and beliefs.

Drawing on six months ethnographic fieldwork performed in the northern town of Nan during 2012, I argue that Thai gender studies must move beyond the explanatory models of ‘traditional’ Buddhist values and begin to see Thai masculinity as an intensely hybrid and internally contested

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discourse, [3] the meanings of which are constantly in flux. By analysing the discursive strategies of male members of the Nan municipal fitness centre, I note how *individuals* are able to reject, appropriate and (re)negotiate dominant idioms and discursive formations of masculinity in a bid to construct their own pragmatic interpretations of legitimate masculine subjectivities. In doing so, these men become implicated in a poly-vocal and power-laden discourse which constantly re-defines 'Thai masculinity', thereby interrupting its perceived fixity. Drawing from the works of Foucault and Bhabha, this article will introduce the term 'hybrid masculinities' and consider the potential benefits of its application to the established theoretical tools currently employed in the study of gender and identity in contemporary Thai culture.

Gangsters and Monks: Thai Masculinity in 'Classic Anthropology'

Thai masculinity has been under-theorised, to a large extent, by Thai gender studies' reluctance to move away from established debates. Van Esterik comments that the majority of the literature is "built on received categories and clichés that are easy to perpetuate."[4] These clichés include male promiscuity, the chastity expected of 'good Thai women', and social tolerance for sexual variety (numbers of partners, sexual orientation and erotic practices, etc.).

[3] By discourse, I mean a system of statements, practices, and institutional structures that share common values. A discourse includes both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects; it is the medium that provides the words and ideas for thought and speech, as well as the cultural practices involving related concepts and behaviours. See Best, *Postmodern Theory*. Parker has pointed out that discourses do not simply describe the social world, but that they also categorize it, and by doing so, bring certain phenomena into sight and obscure other phenomena. He continues that through restrictive sets of codes and conventions discourses sustain a certain world view and that the way in which most people in a society hold, talk about, and act on a common, shared viewpoint are part of and sustain the prevailing discourses. Parker, *Discourse Dynamics*, 24.

[4] Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 202.

The primary obstacle impeding the explanatory potential of these studies is a preoccupation and reliance upon Buddhist cultural explanations. This epistemological starting point is largely doomed to failure, as it is bedded in the presumption that lowland Thailand is culturally homogenous due to a common secular theology.[5] Once applied, this framework offers the writers of Thai culture the alluring possibility of generalising their arguments or findings to wider populations of the geobody based upon an implicit assumption that all Thais are Buddhist and that Thailand is fundamentally a Buddhist culture.[6] While there are relatively few writings explicitly concerned with Thai masculinity in the period of classic anthropology, those that begin to theorise gender and masculinity do so by implementing a 'Buddhist' interpretation of identity formation.

For example, Keyes argued that religious teachings are the principle informers of Thai gendered identities and theorised that Thai masculinity is perceived as conforming to the binary categories of either the monk or the *nak leng* [นักเลง].[7] Whilst the monk aims to control his sexual urges as stipulated by the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the undisciplined *nak leng* operates in the mundane world and is free to indulge in his 'natural maleness'.[8] Keyes portrays the *nak leng* as an unscrupulous character – daring and fearless, but also a liar and a ladykiller. The term can be translated as 'gangster' and at the time of Keyes's study was commonly used to denote violent thugs.[9] Keyes continues that 'potency' is fundamental to Thai heterosexual masculinity; that those who conduct the most feuds, drink the most whiskey and seduce the most women are able to gain and display their masculine potency, which, he suggests, is a major aspiration for the males in his research community.

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[5] Tannenbaum, "Buddhism, Prostitution, and Sex".

[6] This view also overlooks the broad variety of belief systems and religious practices that are based on widely differing interpretations of religious texts that characterises the 'complex polymorphism' of Thai Buddhism. Seeger, "The Changing Role of Buddhist Women", 806.

[7] Keyes, "Ambiguous Gender".

[8] Keyes, "Ambiguous Gender", 12.

[9] Sharp, *Bang Chan*; Trocki, "Big Men, Nakleng and Power".

Influenced by Keyes' theory, Fordham also notes a prominent local discourse that associates alcohol consumption with masculinity and imposes a Buddhist reading.[10] He hypothesises that the behavior of these men is explained by the fact that, within a peer group environment, they vie for merit by drinking and describing sexual conquests. However, Fordham's assertion is unconvincing as he does not provide supportive evidence for his claim and, crucially, does not specify the definition of the term 'merit' with which he is working. This is problematic as an orthodox reading of Thai Buddhism would be more likely to consider intoxication as a sin (บาป) rather than an avenue to merit accumulation. However, this contradiction remains unarticulated.

Religious interpretations have confined the study of masculinity to esoteric arguments that are disconnected with the reality of everyday life and have caused scholars to disregard theory developed in other parts of the world by relying on the assumption that Thailand is a "special case",[11] with 'traditional' gender practices. They cite Thailand's status as a never-colonised state as evidence for an uninterrupted continuation of Thai gender relations and look to 'traditional' gender practices – however vaguely conceived – to explain contemporary Thai gender identities.

Feigenblatt, for instance, argues that sexuality and gender in Thailand can only be known with a thorough knowledge of Ayutthayan models of gender relations, asserting that the notion that Thai gender can be explained "through the traditional arguments developed by queer theory and feminism" is "based upon a very shallow knowledge of Thai culture and history."[12] Feigenblatt's 'holistic' approach argues that Thailand must be accorded 'special' status and he champions the analysis of historical legislation, doctrinal Buddhist teachings and folk tales to explain contemporary gender constructions in the area that now incorporates the modern Thai state. He makes the valid point that we should be wary of applying what he refers to as 'traditional'– by this I think he means Western-derived – post-structural or queer theories to a local Thai context. Jackson has similarly addressed the problems of uncritically applying Western

[10] Fordham, "Whiskey, Women and Song".
[11] Tannenbaum, "Buddhism, Prostitution and Sex", 243.
[12] Feigenblatt, "Resisting Universalistic Feminist and Queer Hegemonic Discourses", 1.

theory to a Thai context, but has also emphasised the potential benefits that adapting these 'theoretical tools' can bring.[13] He suggests that by successfully adapting Western theory to other locations we may not only develop new lines of inquiry in Thai studies, but may further inform the original theories themselves, with the two engaged in an equal, dialogical relationship.[14]

Such an approach would, I believe, be better equipped to capture the fluid and contextual nature of Thai gender than a complete disengagement with theory originating outside of Thailand would, as Feigenblatt suggests. Furthermore, his argument that historical evidence alone is enough to unravel 'truths' about Thai gender is questionable. This argument suggests that gender, sexuality and culture have remained relatively unbroken and unchanged throughout history,[15] or that some identities are more authentic than others by virtue of being anterior.[16] Whilst historical analysis can only add to our understanding of Thai gender constructions, such analysis does not need to be central to their investigations. For example, a scholar concerned with an employee's perceptions of female executives in contemporary Britain may choose to include an account of how femininity is constructed in Chaucer's poems or Shakespeare's plays, or reference Edward I's punitive laws against female rights, but it is unlikely they would use these texts as the basis for explaining *why* some people hold certain views in *today*'s society.

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[13] Jackson, "Afterword", 200.

[14] In fact, many of the scholars who have been instrumental in developing the theories that have informed disciplines such as queer theory, themselves acknowledge their cultural specificity. For example, Foucault acknowledged that his theoretical works were based solely upon a reading of Western intellectual and philosophical genealogy and that, rather than slavishly applying his method to other cultural contexts, his concepts could be used like 'tools for research' and that his books could be treated as 'toolboxes'. Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*.

[15] This position is challenged by Barme, Harrison, Jackson, Pattana, and Thongchai, who have been amongst those to argue that the Thai elites cultural encounter with the West has catalysed significant social change and has transformed gendered identities in Thailand during the last 150 years. Barme, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*; Harrison, "The Allure of Ambiguity"; Jackson, *Lady Boys, Tom Boys and Rent Boys;* Pattana "An Ambiguous Intimacy"; Thongchai "Coming to Terms With the West".

[16] A notion rejected by postcolonial scholars such as Homni Bhaba. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture.*

Happily, few other voices are adding to Feigenblatt's call for a reversion to these older paradigms. However, the academic construction of the 'traditional' Thai male continued throughout the 1990s, when AIDS-based research positioned the Thai male as a central object of study.

Sex and Surveys: Thai Masculinity in the Time of AIDS

The increase in research – when the then prime minister Anand Panyarachun effected a 20-fold increase in the AIDS programme budget – after 1991 focused on identifying 'high risk' demographic groups and social practices that enabled transmission of the disease. Together with prostitutes, homosexual men, injecting drug users and tourists, the demographic cohort of Thai heterosexual men were designated as 'at risk' due to "the normative masculine behaviours of promiscuity and brothel patronage."[17] The designation led to a torrent of data in which Thai men were framed as an explicit group of study and in which their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the disease and sexual behaviours were recorded and analysed.

These studies – which focused on Thai men's AIDS awareness,[18] sexual behaviours,[19] brothel attendance,[20] alcohol consumption,[21] and, more recently, drug use[22] – provided the quantitative data that informed the large-scale campaigns launched through the media, government and NGOs. These campaigns contributed to an extraordinary reversal of the AIDS epidemic in Thailand and cleared a space for incorporating heterosexual masculinity as a legitimate field of enquiry in its own right, rather than as an addendum to the feminine/female-centric field of established Thai gender studies. Yet the appropriateness of these studies as models of emulation must be qualified. Overwhelmingly, they were

[17] Fordham, "Whiskey, Women and Song", 155.
[18] Sweat, "AIDS Awareness Among a Cohort of Young Thai Men".
[19] Nelson, "Changes in Sexual Behaviour"; Nelson, "Decreasing Incidence of HIV and Sexually Transmitted d Diseases".
[20] Fordham, "Whiskey, Women and Song"; Macqueen, "Alcohol Consumption, Brothel Attendance and Condom Use".
[21] Fordham, "Northern Thai male culture".
[22] Tovanabutra, "Methamphetamine Users in Northern Thailand"; Nelson, "HIV Infection Among a Cohort of Young Men in Northern Thailand".

performed by interdisciplinary academic groups drawn from epidemiology and public policy who favoured positivistic data collection methodologies. Their results are a wealth of qualitative data – largely generated by focus group discussions – which is then channeled into the findings of classical Thai anthropology texts of writers such as Potter, Keyes and Kirsch.[23]

The methodological approach and disengagement with the theory utilised in these studies not only squandered an opportunity to bring Thai masculinity into the international academy of gender studies, where it could interact and be informed by comparative works from other locations, but also reified and objectified the existence of a 'special' Thai masculinity whose excesses were posited as the obstacle to AIDS intervention. The focus on this 'special' masculinity served to obscure the very real political and economic causes of the outbreak in favour of a blanket 'culture-as-obstacle approach'. Moreover, their conclusions provide future scholars of Thai gender with statistical 'objective' data that encourages sweeping presumptions regarding how Thai men experience their social world at the expense of analyses that look at the multiplicity and variability of gendered subjectivities in space and context.

A handful of the studies carried out in this period attempted to incorporate ethnographic approaches, but due to time constraints and, no doubt, the demands for hard data from funding bodies, any ethnographic components are highly functional and do not add further insight and complexity to their findings. For example, Ford and Kittisuksatit use selected extracts from focus group discussions to form generalisable statements about gender relations:

> The easy going and egalitarian relation with a friend is substituted by the greater seriousness of a 'fan' relationship: the woman 'watches herself' attempting to behave in an appropriate way – almost as if the young people are starting to practise the traditional gender scripting of husband and wife, with the latter in a more submissive role and looking respectfully to the man as 'her leader'.[24]

[23] Potter, *Family Life in a Northern Thai Village*; Keyes, "Mother or Mistress But Never a Monk"; Keyes, *Ambiguous Gender*; Kirsch, "Buddhism, Sex roles and the Thai Economy"; Kirsch, "Economy, Polity and Religion"; Kirsch, "Text and Context".
[24] Ford, "Destinations Unknown", 524.

The authors then link these views as corresponding to a 'traditional' gender double standard, in which men are encouraged to have sex and women prohibited. By invoking an explanation of 'traditional values', they overlook the always unfinished and slippery nature of gender identity and morality and enter the territory of cultural determinism. Chayan, for example, unequivocally argues that the 'dominant cultural value' in the North of Thailand "emphasises drinking and having sex with women."[25] Similarly Fordham suggests that 'correcting' the 'problem behaviors' of Thai men poses large challenges as brothel visitation and drinking were 'fundamental values deeply embedded in Northern Thai male culture'.[26] But how solid are

[25] Chayan, "Changing Sexual Behaviours in Northern Thailand", 23.

[26] Following findings that Northern Thailand was the region with the consistently highest prevalence of HIV infections in 1990 (Brown, "The Recent Epidemiology of HIV and AIDS in Thailand"), there was a concerted effort to undertake studies that explored the 'problem' of masculinity within the region. Macqueen, "Alcohol Consumption, Brothel Attendance and Condom Use"; VandLandingham, "Dimensions of AIDS Knowledge"; Cash, "Experimental Educational Interventions"; Beyrer, "Same-Sex Behaviour"; Celentano, "Behavioural and Sociodemographic Risks"; Chayan, "Changing Sexual Behaviour in Northern Thailand"; Fordham, "The Social and Cultural Context of the AIDS Epidemic in Thailand"; Fordham, "Northern Thai Male Culture"; Sweat, "AIDS awareness among a cohort of young Thai men".

While Potter, Wijeyewardene and Tanabe have tentatively argued that certain spirit cults that have been studied in the north may affect gender relations, there is still little evidence of a particular "northern Thai male culture'. Potter, *Family Life in a Northern Thai Village*, 407; Wijeyewardene, *Place and Emotion in Northern Thai Ritual Behaviour*; Tananbe, "Spirits, Power and the Discourse of Female Gender". Moreover the large majority of the studies listed above gathered their data from within or close to the metropolis of Chiang Mai. VanLandingham notes that: "our own reliance on data from the north of Thailand limits the degree to which our observations can be generalised to other regions in the country" (VanLandingham, "Some Cultural Underpinnings", 3), yet his team does not see the problems of extrapolating data obtained within the ethnically, economically and culturally heterogeneous urban space of Chiang Mai to the other eight provinces that constitute the northern region of Thailand.. These extrapolations become problematic in Macqueen's study of the sexual norms of military conscripts in 'northern Thailand' (Phitsanulok) when he references Potter's observation that "in northern Thailand there is a long-standing custom for groups of young men who are friends to form courting groups and 'go around' together in the evening visiting at houses where attractive young women are known to live." Macqueen, "Alcohol Consumption, Brothel Attendance and Condom Use"; Potter, *Family Life in a Northern Thai Village*, 407. Potter's two decades old observations from Chiang Mai (located 250 km away from Phitsanulok) are cited as part of some vaguely defined, and often romanticised, 'northern' culture that is too restrictive a cultural category for the study of globalised Thailand.

the foundations of an argument that takes a whole-system approach to models of Thai gender and culture based on 'traditional values'?

Nidhi convincingly argues that the 'traditional Thai values' regarding sexuality these studies refer to are not as traditional as one may think and that they are deeply influenced by various Western – particularly Victorian – social mores which were appropriated by the Thai elite as part of their legitimizing strategy to rule.[27] He argues that young people, both male and female, in pre-modern Siam may have had more sexual freedom than is often supposed. Anthony Reid similarly questions the extent to which we can backdate a sexual double standard to pre-modern Southeast Asia. He writes that "the broad pattern of sexual relations – relative freedom, monogamy, and fidelity within marriage (which was easily dissolvable in divorce) and a strong female position in the sexual game – conflicted in many ways with the practices of all the world religions which were increasing their hold on Southeast Asia in the age of commerce." [28] Both Reid's and Nidhi's analysis serve to destabilise the illusion of continuity that the 'tradition' in '*traditional* Thai culture/gender relations' implies and reframes them as contingent and fragmented.

The data that inform these findings may also be of limited value due to their reliance on focus study methodologies. Schoepf warns that surveys of sexual behaviour – particularly those that favour focus group discussions and interviews – should be treated with great caution.[29] Take for instance two much cited findings that draw upon focus group research: that 58% of participants in VanLandingham's, et al.'s study had recently visited a prostitute,[30] and that 80% of Thai men questioned by Deemar responded that it was "natural for a man to pursue sex at every opportunity."[31] VanLandingham hypothesises that the cause of this behaviour is that male peer groups exert strong

[27] Nidhi, *On the "Politics" of History and Memory.*
[28] Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680*, 156.
[29] Schoepf, "International AIDS Research in Anthropology", 350.
[30] VanLandingham, et al., "Some Cultural Underpinnings of Male Sexual Behavior Patterns in Thailand".
[31] Deemar Corporation (1990) cited in VanLandingham, "Dimensions of AIDS Knowledge", 298.

coercive pressure on its members to engage in group brothel patronage and that Thai men are culturally ill equipped to resist this pressure. In his words: "the opinion of peers does make a difference."[32] Within a peer setting such as a focus group, it is thus logical that some men may exaggerate certain behaviours in order to meet with social acceptance. Conversely female respondents may be met with disapprobation and refrain from making similar claims. I am not claiming that these surveys are invalid, but rather that, in the absence of context it is problematic to assume that such 'objective' data enable us to understand the complex and constructed nature of masculinity in Thailand.

Scheopf concludes his argument by highlighting the detrimental legacy of AIDS research in African Studies. "Novices to African Studies", he writes: "produced rapid assessments and cobbled-together surveys…Sweeping statements were made about a special 'African' sexuality, based upon traditional marriage patterns different to those in Europe."[33]

I argue that similar sweeping statements have been made about a 'special' Thai masculinity that is similarly undifferentiated, highly sexualised and excessive. This is not surprising as, once placed within a 'risk' category, all individuals become separated from other sources of identity and degraded by definition, and the very nature of AIDS research necessarily takes sexual behaviours as a principle research focus. However, in the absence of research that genuinely engages with theory and incorporates more penetrating methodologies, we may only conclude that within certain contexts in Thailand there appears to exist a discourse that permits, even encourages, some men to be sexually promiscuous and engage in commercial sexual transactions. Yet the processes which inform how this discourse is sustained and interpreted are yet to be satisfactorily addressed. Loizos suggests:

> Consider as a thought experiment the kinds of discourse about the other sex you would expect to get in a refuge for battered women, a brothel after it had closed, a Jesuit seminary

[32] VanLandingham, et al. "In the company of friends", 2000.
[33] Scheopf, "International AIDS Research in Anthropology", 340.

> before the Second Vatican Council, an army barracks in contemporary Greece or Britain, or the all-male bars in many cities where middle-aged bachelor men hang out, men who have long since given up trying to get a wife since they lack the economic drawing power and sobriety to make them attractive. In this last context we might hear discourses of compensatory male independence and the overvaluation of male gender in the teeth of systematic rejections. In none of these cases should we assume that this was the *only* way of thinking or speaking about the other sex which would come to the speaker's lips: other contexts, other listeners – other discourses.[34]

There is no single sense of masculinity within the abstraction called Thai culture; from one local context, institution, domain or discourse to another we can easily find different ways of being masculine. Gazing at Thai masculinity as a hybrid discourse may help overcome the pitfalls of these studies and allow us to connect our findings with other areas around the world.

Thai Masculinity as a Hybrid Discourse

Taking as a starting point the current academic findings, I asked local residents in Nan town their thoughts regarding the notion that Thai masculinity revolves around the activities of drinking, smoking, gambling and prostitute visitation. Some informants, mainly older residents, broadly agreed that these attributes were integral to their own subjectivity of the masculine self and male body,[35] whereas other respondents used the question as "a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy."[36] More interestingly, however, was the process of *how* respondents discussed masculinity by selecting and collating related bits of information and discursively inscribing

[34] Loizos, "A Broken Mirror", 79.

[35] Subjectivity is the condition of being a subject: i.e., the quality of possessing perspectives, experiences, feelings, beliefs, desires and/or power. Solomon, "Subjectivity".

[36] Foucault, *A History of Sexuality*, 101.

various hybrid discourses upon the heterosexual male body in order to create a coherent symbolic construction of normative masculinity.

The following six transcribed extracts demonstrate the hybridity with which masculinity is discussed in the locale of Nan town.[37] I have selected these conversational extracts as they represent a relatively even gender and age range and demonstrate the dynamic way in which masculinity is discussed by residents in the town. Moreover, these extracts demonstrate how a wide range of semiotic systems, metaphors and power/knowledge discourses jostle together in a never unfinished bid to create a coherent 'normal' (ปกติ)' or 'natural' (เป็นธรรมชาติ)' discourse of masculinity that is both new and essentially hybrid in nature.

> [When I was young] Nan was very famous for brothels and I would go often. But when I went to study in Bangkok it was too expensive for a student who had little money, so I would come back once a month. I also told my university friends and we went on a brothel tour…the slang was 'going to buy vegetables'…The first time six of us caught a coach in the early evening and got off at the end of a road. We went in [to the brothel] and reserved some girls then went back out and went to drink whiskey together at the shop in the street....We did this nearly every month while we were studying until we graduated… Its normal (เรื่องธรรมดา) for men to do this because a man's unconscious brain (จิตใต้สำนึก) is different [from females]. It's like a processor in a computer. – *Niran, male, 53*

[37] It is important to note that this research does not intend to 'replace' prior academic conclusions of Thai masculinity by pursuing the positivistic methods they employed. Rather, this research attempts to destabilise their immutable findings through ethnography and my own, naturally subjective, analysis. This research makes no claims to be a comprehensive or representative picture of a 'national culture'. The town of Nan was not selected as a microcosm of Thailand, nor is the fitness centre representative of all men in Nan, as to claim so would be to undermine my intended approach. The research does not even make claims to 'know' the local masculine subjectivities in Nan. It is rather an 'ethnographic snapshot' of masculine discourses within a Thai town, that demonstrates the viability of an alternative interpretive model. Oliver-Smith, "Ethnographic Snapshot of the UN Permanent Forum".

There are lots of men who have morality (คุณธรรม) and observe the five precepts. As the precepts are normal (ปกติ) and excellent – those who go against them are not normal (คนไม่ปกติ). Those who drink alcohol and smoke violate the fifth precept... You could say that the fifth precept is an exceptional [precept] and that men should have wisdom and morality to preserve its purity. Actually, men's personalities change when they get older and they turn over a new leaf. Look at Angulimala…he murdered nearly a thousand people then he reformed and became a monk and even a saint. – *Aroon, male, 31*

Young men have lots of chemicals (มีเคมีเยอะ) in their bodies. If they don't have any urges it is strange (แปลก). You would have to wonder if they were gay or something. If they were 50 or 60 and couldn't control themselves then that is a different story. But if someone chooses to relieve themselves at places like [a brothel] then it should be acceptable…even though society is not willing to accept it, it is willing to close it eyes because it is men's nature (ธรรมชาติของผู้ชาย) and if it wasn't there wouldn't be any prostitutes. – *Somsri, female, 28*

My partner is a gentleman (สุภาพบุรุษ). Actually there are loads of people like this. The people who cannot find them should look at the company they keep...I once worked with someone who followed this formula exactly. He drank alcohol and went out at night and didn't give women any respect. He said that every woman was easy if a man had money. But, actually, the company he keeps means that he circulates around people like this. There are actually still lots of good men who do not do this sort of thing. – *Tasanee, female, 32*

I was 17 and my friends had already visited brothels so they came up to me and my best friend, who was also a virgin and arranged for us to go one night. The brothels in those days were single storied, had old corrugated zinc roofs and a little patio where the women could sit on a bench. They also had soft lighting. Green, yellow and red. There were about four or five girls there and I picked a plump one. It was ฿50 for a short time. She took me into her room ….Afterwards I wanted to give her a

> photograph so that she would remember me. So I said I would come back tomorrow… But [having sex] is not as easy as it is in the movies. If you can't do it what will you do when you get married if your wife has never done it? Nowadays teenagers *khuen khru* [ขึ้นครู][38] with their girlfriends or their *kiks* [กิ๊ก].[39] If they go to prostitutes it shows that they are not skilful with women…I think men now are more skilled (เก่ง) than we were. Society is very different to before because of human rights (สิทธิมนุษยชน), now if you go to the brothel it shows you are not skilful. – *Arthit, male, 60*

> All men are flirts (เจ้าชู้)[40] but to what extend depends on the person… Some people only a little bit. They will just look at women and say that they are beautiful. But others are more so, even after they are married they are still brave enough [to attempt to seduce women]…In any case it depends on the subconscious (จิตใต้สำนึก) and the mental condition (สภาพความคิด) of the person, which was planted when they were a child. But if a man isn't good at flirting and or isn't mischievous (อารมณ์ขัน), it's like he is a snake without poison. Not a 100% *man*. – *Lawan, female, 19*

One power/knowledge discourse that is repeatedly drawn upon to produce a legitimate and coherent account of masculinity in these narratives is a Western-derived discourse of modern psychology that has been invested with meanings of 'preponderantly local relevance'.[41] Niran employs a Freudian discourse of the subconscious (จิตใต้สำนึก), here equated with a computer processor to inscribe a biological determinism upon the male body to accommodate his own sexual ethics as normal (เรื่องธรรมดา). Drawing upon the Western-

[38] ขึ้นครู [*khuen khru*] literally translates as go up to/mount the teacher and refers to the practice whereby a young man will lose his virginity to an older women, often a prostitute. The practice was largely seen as a way of initiating young men into competent lovers in preparation for married life, hence the terms teacher (*khru*)

[39] กิ๊ก [*kik*] refers to a casual (sexual) partner.

[40] Although the word เจ้าชู้ [*chao chu*] can also be used to describe a man (or less commonly a woman) who is flirtatious and possibly unfaithful.

[41] Herzfeld, "Political Optics and the Occlusion of Intimate Knowledge".

derived power/knowledge discourses of psychoanalysis, computer technology and Darwinism, he constructs and legitimates the male body in a way that corresponds with his own experiences and ethical assessment of ‘‘normal” (ธรรมดา) articulations of local masculine behaviours. By deploying these discursive formations to trace the masculine subject, Niran creates something quite different from the ideas that inform it. He creates a subjectivity of the male body and identity that is neither wholly Thai, nor wholly Western – it is something new and hybrid.

Similarly, Lawan adapts Freud’s notion of the subconscious to explain why the male body is necessarily psychically linked to sexual promiscuity/flirtatiousness, whilst also accounting for varying levels of intensity between individual male bodies. She claims that all men are, by definition, flirtatious (เจ้าชู้) and mischievous (มีอารมณ์ขัน) and that although variation is possible (depending on one’s upbringing) those men that do not display this behaviour are not ‘100% *men*’ (English loan word). Her final position couples this explanation with the local idiom of an unskilled wooer as a poison-less snake, which in turn informs and is informed by her notion of the recent hybrid term ‘man’.[42]

In her account, Tasanee engages in ‘boundary work’[43] to draw a distinction between men who drink and patronise commercial sex and the ‘gentlemen’ (สุภาพบุรุษ) that do not. The use of the term ‘gentleman’ as a prestigious cultural marker has links to the Siamese elite quest for ‘*siwilai*’ (civilisation)[44] in the face of colonial cultural and ethical norms during the period of high colonial expansion in the region. The term also came to be strategically deployed by Thai writers such as Kulap Saipradit in order to expose the moral hypocrisy of Thai elites

[42] There seems to be little consensus among my participants as to when this term first began to be incorporated into local discursive formations of masculinity. One man claimed that the term had been used in the eighties. However many expressed that the popularity of the Thai language magazine version of Men’s Health (first published in the country in October 2006) has led to increased usage of the term.

[43] Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners*, 24.

[44] See Thongchai, “The Quest for Siwilai”; Thongchai, “Coming to Terms with the West”; Pattana, “An Ambiguous Intimacy”.

in the 1930s.[45] This term therefore is distinctly hybrid and informs both how Tasanee discursively categorises and experiences her boyfriend's ethics and creates an 'Other' discursive space in which she can position men who engage in activities that are not 'good' as less worthy.

The construction of binary dichotomies can similarly be seen in Somsri's extract in which she creates a symbolic boundary between young, male heterosexuality and homosexual/older heterosexuality. Basing her argument on the existence of chemicals (เคมี) present in the young male body, Somsri argues that young men should relieve themselves in places such as brothels, whereas older men are expected to reign in these urges (or not have them at all). Additionally, the absence of these urges may indicate homosexuality. Somsri, like Niyan, constructs the male body as an objective space that is itself productive of other spaces (brothels) and identities (prostitutes, the punter, the homosexual, the old man). Her statement, thus, constructs a cyclical discourse in which prostitution both inscribes and is inscribed by the male body; men's 'chemicals' need release therefore there are prostitutes, there are prostitutes therefore men's chemicals must need releasing. This 'objective' construction of male nature (ธรรมชาติผู้ชาย) informs and provides evidence for her subjectivity regarding wider social sexual ethics, such as brothel patronage.

In his narrative of losing his virginity in a brothel, Arthit indicates that the practice of '*khuen khru'* is becoming less common and relevant amongst young men, as it may be demonstrative of a decreased ability to seduce women. Even though his statement suggests that it is men who must woo women, he also implies that social change has created a context whereby both parties are sexually experienced and men have to be more skilful (เก่ง) than in the past. As a part of this social change – heralded, he suggests by 'human rights' – the institution of the brothel no longer ensures the harmony of the institution of marriage.

[45] See Trisilpa, "Sri Burapha and the Development of the Thai Novel"; Chusak, "Mystery Behind the Photograph of 'Khana Suphapburut' ".

In contrast to the other narratives, Aroon's transcript appears to be less hybridised than the other accounts, deploying concepts and words of Pali/Sanskrit descent (บริสุทธิ์, อรหันต์), rather than those of more obviously external heritage. Yet, as has already been mentioned, it would be wrong to interpret contemporary Thai Buddhism as a coherent institution that produces a single interpretation of masculinity or morality. Pattana argues that the modern formation of 'conventional' Thai Buddhism is not only a syncretic formation of various religious beliefs, practices and reformations that have considerably transformed the religion since its introduction to the country, but that it is also in "a moment of hybrid religious change where 'conventional' Theravada Buddhism, state and *sangha* authorities, multi-original religious beliefs and the drive for material success in the capitalist market all come to coexist."[46] This results in a multitude of religious interpretations that may emphasise certain doxa or physical practices over others. I know that Aroon, for example, follows the teaching of the popular Dhammakaya religious movement and regularly watches their televised sermons. It is important, therefore, to consider how his own subjectivity towards smoking, drinking alcohol and masculinity are therefore influenced by non-orthodox and hybrid teachings, rather than reading his subjectivity as evidence for a 'purer' indigenous morality.[47]

By analysing the local deployment of languages and ideas that emanate from outside Thailand as constituting 'hybrid' discourses, we move away from the concept that this phenomenon corresponds to an imitation of 'Western' gender values or the adoption of foreign ideologies within Thailand.[48] Instead, we are able to shift our focus to how individual agents subtly utilise discourses in heterogeneous – even contradictory – ways that can both defend, contest and (re)negotiate received wisdoms regarding masculinity and the male body. This can be seen in the way that a discourse of psychology can be mobilised through cultural metaphors which construct contradictory subjectivities regarding

[46] Pattana, "Lives of Hunting Dogs", 468.

[47] The Dhammakay movement emphasises that its lay community does not drink, smoke or take drugs and has mounted high-profile campaigns that encourage Thai citizens to completely abstain from any intoxicants.

[48] See Herzfield, "The Conceptual Allure of the West and Jackson, "Afterword".

the male body and masculine identity. Additionally, by adopting the notion of hybrid masculinity we also give the individual subject greater autonomous space than has been allowed in previous academic literature. The subject is still implicated in a complex web of intertwining knowledge/power discourses, but they may also carve out for themselves subjectivities of greater emancipatory potential.

(Re)negotiating Masculinity in the Fitness Room

It is not enough, however to note the hybrid nature of contemporary Thai masculinity through power/knowledge discourses alone. To do so would neglect the significance of space in the formation of identities.

Previously, I briefly referred to how the brothel can be discursively constructed as a real, imaginary and symbolic space productive of identities that interpolate with wider discussions of masculinity identity and gender relations, but there are many other spaces within the field that were also productive of various discursive formations of masculinity. The local disco, technical college, cowboy bar, internet games cafes, virtual spaces, and temples were just some of the spaces that inform and are implicated in the broad discourses of local masculinity.

Soja notes that "the power-knowledge link is acknowledged by every Foucauldian scholar, but for Foucault himself the relationship was embedded in a trialectic of power, knowledge *and space*. The third term should not be forgotten."[49] Indeed Foucault's later work explicitly theorises how space is integral to the exercise of power/knowledge formations. He wrote that "space is not just a backdrop, a fixed, undialectical immobile" but rather "a strategy, a tool important in compounding the effects of power."[50] Writing in a similar vein, Yeoh and Ramdas note how "space has the nature of a power resource drawn upon in concrete strategies by different groups."[51] My own research located the discourse of masculinity in the Nan Municipal Fitness Centre and looked at how the space is used as a power resource that allows the member the power to construct their own subjectivities of masculinity.

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[49] Soja, *Thirdscape*, 148.
[50] Foucault, *Power/knowledge*, 70
[51] Yeoh, "Remembering Darkness", 161.

The Technologies of the Self

Foucault identified the 'technologies of the self' as procedures that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[52]

He claimed that this self-induced transformation could be brought about through the individual engaging in a process of conscious self-reflection, the aim of which is to re-create oneself as a happier ethical subject within the apparatus of domination. He developed this theory based upon the concept of *gymnasia* ('to train oneself') and its centrality as a 'technology of the self' in the ancient Greek and Roman world. The concept of gymnasia – separate from *meditatio* which focussed on imaginary experiences – emphasised training in a real situation, even if it was artificially induced. This physical training was not reduced to exercise, but also to practices of sexual abstinence, physical privation and other rituals of purification that were labelled *ascetics.* It is through these processes that individuals are able to establish new *modes of subjection* that enables them to problematise and then refuse the way the self is constructed in other, dominant discourses. Therefore, instead of conforming to a fixed identity, we can critically resist the way our identities have been formed within the intersection of the governmental power apparatus and discursive knowledge production and to consequently live our lives more autonomously.[53] While Foucault analysed the technologies of the self through the sexual ethics of Greek and Roman times, his 'teleology of the subject' is relevant in explaining the processes by which members of the Nan fitness centre negotiated local discursive formations of masculinity and used them to produce resistant discourses.

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[52] Foucault, *Michael Foucault, Technologies of the Self,* 18.
[53] O'Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics.*

Foucault described the mode of being towards which one aims as the *telos*. For the members of the fitness centre, the *telos* is ostensibly the physical body, with the ascetics of discipline and bodily discomfort endured in order to achieve perfection of the body.

Yet this regime, I argue, equipped members with the discursive resources to create new resistant subjectivities of masculinity. For instance, one of these discourses is that 'real' Thai men drink, smoke and gamble. When asked about this subject some participants actively established a *mode of subjection* which positioned these behaviours as incompatible with the kind of person that they wanted to be or the kind of life they wanted to lead (their *telos*). After this reasoning, the members used the tools available to them (*ascetics*) as members of the fitness room to actively problematise this discourse.

This resistant discourse became more pronounced around three months after I arrived in Nan, in the wake of the news that a six-year-old child had been found unconscious from alcohol poisoning in the grounds of a nearby temple. The national media presented the story as demonstrative of a wider moral decline in the country – in particular its rural peripheries – and provided an emotive context by which several members embarked upon a strong campaign of 'boundary work' that explicitly categorised alcohol consumption and irresponsibility as un-masculine.[54]

The day the story was published Anan was discussing the incident with Yuu in the fitness room. He expressed a degree of empathy for some of the boys accused whom he said probably came from a "broken home" (บ้านแตก) and did not have responsible parents. Anan told me that it was the children's fathers, in particular, who were to blame:

[54] According to a *Daily News* article published on 19 April 2012, Nan town police began investigating a group of teenagers and one novice monk after discovering a six year old boy unconscious in a "pile of urine and faeces" in the middle of a group of monastic dwellings. The investigation found that the child had been left unconscious after some local youths had been drinking alcohol with a group of young boys aged 7-12 (one of whom was a novice). The article also references that Nan province has the fourth highest alcohol dependency rates in the country. Grapuk Dotdom, "Six Year Old Found Unconsciously Drunk at Monastic Dwelling, Nan Province".

> They make no effort (อุตส่าห์) to stop drinking. I don't have any children, but when I come here I help [younger members] to think about lots of different issues such as their careers, so that they don't fall into groups who go and find fights with the townspeople. When you do that you've got to go to prison and enter the system. When I take people to prison,[55] I just sigh and feel sad (เสียดาย) about their futures. On the other hand I feel good when I take my friends to go and train their muscles because it shows you the importance of manliness (ความเป็นแมน) and responsibility.

Anan contrasts himself with the fathers of these young people, who he claims lack the effort to stop drinking, by emphasising himself as a positive masculine role model for younger members. He links the process of training muscles with responsibility and the English loan word *man*. When I asked him what he meant by this term he said "every ผู้ชาย (man) is born a ผู้ชาย (man), but not every ผู้ชาย is a แมน [*man*]." The more rarefied category of *man*, he claims, is not synonymous with the male body, but is actively constructed by individuals in spaces such as the fitness room. By claiming that his own intervention stops young men from falling into violent gangs, however, Anan does subscribe to a view that young men are naturally inclined to anti-social behaviours and thereby implies that the male body must be disciplined and mentored if it is to become a *man*.

In contrast to Anan and Yuu, the younger members Daw and Drum were more critical of the young people accused and considered the incident as part of a wider local youth culture which links masculinity to behaviours they find problematic.

> Gan: Sometimes you can see them drinking in public places and I think it's really brazen (หน้าด้าน) and I'm just really confused why they do it...These people don't understand that drinking causes you to lose your mind (ขาดสติ) and cause trouble for the townspeople. They want to make society chaotic and think they are invincible. They think that it's better to force yourself (ฝืนใจ) to do things that you know are wrong so that people will

[55] Anan works as a guard at the Nan province prison.

> look at you and think you're cool (เท่). But I don't think it's cool at all, actually I think it's better to look after your health and try to make society stronger.'

Nak similarly considers these behaviours as arising from a failure to withstand peer pressure:

> The people who go out all the time are obsessed with their friends (ติดเพื่อน) and having fun (ติดสนุก). I think that it's stupid (โง่). They don't realise that they are putting bad things into their bodies and making their bodies weaker (อ่อนแอลง). I feel like I am much better than these ridiculous teenagers (วัยรุ่นไร้สาระ) who are like puppies and only group together to drink alcohol.

Gan is very critical of what he refers to as *bad boy* masculine performances (drinking, smoking and going out at night) asserting that they cause problems for the local community and contrive to make society 'chaotic'. He begins to form a sense of self by drawing on a 'reverse discourse' that positions the other masculine subjectivity as insecure. A reverse discourse often uses the same vocabulary as a dominating discourse, but produces an opposing strategy or social effect.[56] In this instance the meaning of the term cool (เท่) is contested. Gan portrays these 'cool' behaviours as a reluctant performance carried out against the individual's better judgement for an audience's validation. The fact that this insecure performance is injurious to the individual informs his reverse discourse that being a *bad boy* is, in fact, not cool. He thus semantically changes the concept of cool to be consistent with his own *telos*, suggesting that the care of the physical self and the 'strengthening' of society are worthier, and more logical, masculine standards.

Nak similarly presents 'people who go out all the time' as characterised by a lack of control over their own impulse. He draws attention to the bodies of these men, which he considers physically (อ่อนแอลง) and mentally weak (โง่) and indicative of a state of reduced masculinity and infantilism. Both Nak and Gan employ a discourse of

[56] Foucault, *A History of Sexuality*, 101.

health and civic responsibility to position themselves as more responsible and autonomous while simultaneously positioning the other masculinity as less worthy. This rudimentary use of a 'technology of the self', therefore, acts to transform their notions of self and 'achieve a certain state of happiness'.[57]

The Subjectivities of the Muscled Body

Within the space of the fitness room, the muscular male body generates both social status and self-esteem; a physical showcase of the individual's rationality and control. Outside the fitness room, however, there exists a wider discourse which links weights-based resistance exercise with a gay (sub)culture. This discourse, in which muscular bodies and the space of the fitness room are categorised as homosexual/erotic, is negatively perceived amongst many members as it threatens to undermine their efforts at creating legitimate heterosexual masculine subjectivities within the existing discursive network. In fact, it is never discussed within the fitness room, despite the member's awareness of its existence. In an interview, Den relayed an incident to me in which he encountered this discourse outside of the fitness room:

> Most people are unable to separate between those who go to the gym who are "real men" (ผู้ชายแท้) and who are gay. 99% of Thai people will see real men exercising and think they are all gay. I started to go and build up my muscles and a woman in my office said "have you (เธอ) changed your gender and become *gay*?" You know, I absolutely hate these gossipy people who like to say that people who go to fitness are gay. Why? Do real men have to let themselves go and get a pot-belly? Anyway I only come and exercise here because I have allergies (เป็นแพ้).

[57] Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 18. Yet in the process of differentiating themselves from this masculine subjectivity they still clearly draw on dominating understandings of masculinity (being in control, socially autonomous and physically strong) which illustrates the interdependence of these discursive formations in constituting masculine identities. Thus it is important to note that the technologies of the self undertaken in the gym and the hybrid masculinities that are developed are always operating within discourse and are never truly autonomous to it; subjectivities are always constituted in collusion with 'others' and wider discursive formations.

I heard a similar incident from Niew, who still socialises with members of the fitness room, but who no longer exercises at the gym:

> [When I used to] go to the fitness room my muscles weren't very big or anything but I have a big body already, so when I started lifting weights you could clearly see that I was bigger than other people. One day me and some friends went out drinking... When it got late my friend went over to a girl's table and started to talk to her. Then he came back and said "she thinks everyone at the table is gay!" Then she came over and was really confused that we weren't girly (ตุ้งติ้ง) in any way. But I felt confused about why people would joke that you and all your friends are gay. It wasn't a big deal or anything but it made me lose confidence with women. My personality isn't gay and this never happened before I stared lifting weights.

Both Den and Niew expressed frustration at a symbolic linkage between gym exercise/muscularity and homosexuality. Den questions the notion that the heterosexual male body should be untrained and pot-bellied, and strongly contests the suggestion that an exercise regime can indicate homosexuality. However, he then goes on to stress that his own motivations are health-based rather than aesthetic, and by doing so, distances himself from the discourse rather than directly challenging. Niew, similarly, did not negotiate the discourse and simply stopped going to the fitness room. Despite claiming that he did not find the incident serious, the fact that he stopped going to the fitness room suggests that this situation significantly contrasted with his construction of the self.

Foucault describes the body as an "inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)."[58] Similarly, Butler suggests that bodies matter – that when we gaze at bodies, we see not only flesh and bone, but values and ideals, as well as the differences that our culture has written on them.[59] How we come to perceive our bodies is dependent upon the cultural metaphors available to us. It

[58] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 83.
[59] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

seems that the cultural metaphors through which the muscular Thai body is inscribed are contested and ambiguous.

Phueng, a 32-year old copy shop business owner, explained her thoughts on male body aesthetics: “Women are scared of people with big muscles. But they don’t want someone who is too skinny. But I definitely know that *kathoey*[60] and *gays* like men with muscles.”

Amporn also suggests that her own ideals of the male body do not include muscularity: “I think most girls like handsome boys. Chinese looking (ตี๋) or Korean or Japanese style with single-lidded eyes (ตาชั้นเดียว). If they wear tight fitting clothes and have muscles they are probably gay anyway!”

Back in the fitness room, Yai conversely argued that his own muscular physique was a testament to heterosexual masculinity. He reconfigured the fitness room as a heterosexual space by emphasising its disparity with what he considered the homosexual spaces of urban gyms. “Gay people like exercising at expensive and fancy (หรูๆ) fitness centres. If they came here they wouldn’t like it. There is no air conditioning or handsome trainers like at big city gyms. Anyway, gay people like to play badminton more than lift weights.”

Whilst Yai acknowledges a discourse that links weight training to homosexuality, he tries to dismiss the idea of the fitness room as a homoerotic/feminised site. He continued to present weights exercise as a signifier of masculinity by contrasting it with what he sees as a modern feminised trend in Thai culture:

> …I think that the models in advertisements cause modern [male] teenagers to wear make-up and lipstick. In my opinion men should be strong (บึกบึน) and be gentlemanly (มีความเป็นสุภาพบุรุษ). This is what you call a ‘*man*’... If you are in a group with people who muscle-train, wherever you go you will be really eye-catching because it shows that you are a group of people who have diligence (ความวิริยะ) and perseverance (ความอุตสาหะ) and know how to find the good things in life.

[60] *Kathoey* is a Thai and Khmer term that refers to a transgender person or an effeminate gay male in Thailand. Jackson, *Lady Boys, Tom Boys and Rent Boys*, 203.

To Yai, the trained body is not only the aesthetic opposite to femininity or feminised masculinity, but a culturally inscribed surface demonstrative of certain mental attributes. Muscularity is evidence of diligence and perseverance, not narcissism. He interestingly contrasts his own project of aesthetic transformation with those of men who apply cosmetics. Whereas his body project makes him more masculine than the average man, theirs are emasculating and less worthy. In making this distinction he adheres to the logic of prevailing discursive formations that codes characteristics such as diligence (ความวิริยะ) and perseverance (ความอุตสาหะ) as masculine and superior. Yai shows, therefore, that even though his utterance is resisting a dominant discourse of masculinity that threatens to undermine his own *telos*, he does so by adhering to the 'truth games' that he is attempting to resist. Consequently, it would be a mistake to assume that technologies of the self strategies necessarily produce subjectivities that are necessarily free from homophobia or misogyny.

Nevertheless, Eak – a younger gym member – stated that his own reasons for going to the fitness room were largely aesthetic:

> Nowadays it's a popular trend to have a *firm* body, which probably comes from Korean cultural trends. Everything, such as the clothes, the hair, the faces or the style of male models…and the male *boyband* singers *show* their *six pack* so that the girls scream (words in italics are English loan words).

Eak fashions his body to look *firm* in the style of cultural identity markers that emanate from South Korea. His statement, which uses English-language loan words to describe Korean symbols, demonstrates the complexity of contemporary Thai hybridity. Not merely appropriating symbols and discourse from America or Europe (or some vaguely defined 'West'), Eak hints at a growing cultural hybridity that is looking as much to Asia as to the West for cultural consumption. Jackson hypothesises that, in the context of the political and economic rise of China and East Asia and the West's geo-political decline, we can "perhaps already detect signs of the Thai cultural gaze shifting

once again, to the more immediate north and east."[61] The influence of contemporary Korean body aesthetics and visual culture in the rest of Asia has already been documented,[62] along with the impact it has had on Thai cultural metaphors of feminine beauty.[63] It may be that men are similarly incorporating cultural references from Korea into their own gendered performance repertoire. While this does not necessarily herald a decline in the potency of the allure of the West in the Thai imagination, it does, perhaps, indicate its dilution in the hybridised composite of Thai gendered identities.

The extracts indicate the complexity, dynamism and hybridity of the discursive formations of masculinity that oscillate around a single space and body technique within the town of Nan and outlines how members of the fitness room use the space of the fitness room and the 'technologies of the self' as discursive resources in an always-unfinished process of identity formation in the face of dominant, but ambiguous, local discourses of masculinity. At stake in these discourses are the negotiated meanings of masculine bodies/behaviours/identity and the construction of meaningful gendered subjectivities. Truth games that link masculinity with certain behaviours or aesthetics are scrutinised by new modes of inquiry which vie to assert their legitimacy or 'objectivity' through the discourses of health, civic responsibility, physical strength, hermeneutics of 'gay culture', external cultural influences, etc. The result is a poly-vocal and fragmented discourse of masculinity that is neither hegemonic nor free-floating, Thai nor Western, local nor global, but a complex, hybrid discourse that instantly undermines any essentialist characteristics we wish to attribute to it. We, therefore, must embrace Thai masculinity as a syncretic entity comprised of hybrid components, the meanings of which are the site of dynamic, power-laden discursive struggles.

[61] Jackson, "Afterword", 205.
[62] Shim, "Hybridity and Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia".
[63] Boonsong, "A Lesson from South Korea".

Conclusion

Thai Gender Studies' failure to produce a satisfactory episteme of masculinity and the processes of male gendered identity formation comparable to the breadth of scholarship in countries such as India, Brazil or Greece is, I argue, the result of an epistemology that has eschewed the theoretical frameworks developed in other areas of the world on the basis that Thai culture is 'exceptional' or 'unique'. This belief has cemented an academic comprehension of Thai masculinity which is, I argue, based upon only one dominant discourse of many; the 'snakes without poison' discourse.

A brief examination of masculinity-in-context reveals that the pure, stable and 'traditional' phenomenon outlined in previous theories is, in fact, closer to Bhabha's restless, uneasy and interstitial hybridity. Thai participants draw upon a wide variety of discursive formations to bolster their own ideas of masculinity.

Thai masculinity, then, must be (re)configured as a synthetic entity whose hybrid components are shaped by a myriad of structural and discursive forces. It is only by looking at the hybrid nature of gender identity formations in Thailand that we can perceive the discursive formations of masculinity as permeated with power, without arguing in favour of a generalised hegemonic outcome.

However, this is not the extent of the theory's explanatory capacity. Tomlinson notes that "the idea of hybridization is one of those deceptively simple-seeming notions which turns out, on examination, to have lots of tricky connotations and theoretical implications."[64] One of these tricky implications is the extent to which we can assume that individuals enjoy agency (*not* cultural determinism) in constructing their own masculine subjectivities. A theory that accounts for human agency has a far greater capacity for nuance and flexibility (and indeed ethical legitimacy) than those that do not.

In addition, the theory of hybrid masculinities does not subscribe to the common anthropological tradition that treats the local as an autonomous site, where agency is only found in local individuals or communities studied in context. Instead, the local is enmeshed within

[64] Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed*, 24.

a constellation of supra-local networks. To suggest otherwise would be to add yet another binary to the study of Thai culture, in the form of a local/global dichotomy. Rather than consider the two as opposites, it may be more helpful to think of them as mutually constitutive. Therefore, the local is subject to exogenous discourses, but can also provide resources that inform wider discourses of masculinity – as exemplified in the case of the local/national debate that ensued in the wake of the incident in the temple. Thus, hybrid masculinities allows us to see that the local itself is the scene of power struggles between local actors over the meanings of masculinity, who are themselves embedded in larger external networks. The local, then, is at once a site of empowerment and marginalisation in which exogenous and endogenous power/knowledge discourses of masculinity pervade

Thus, more research must be undertaken to examine the complex and dynamic power processes that link hybrid masculinities with structures and agency that move beyond commonplace models of domination and resistance. By doing so we may further reveal the discursive processes by which masculinities are negotiated in contemporary Thailand.

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