

INTERVIEWS OF LADYBOYS IN THAILAND by Walter L. Williams

BEIBEI (means “goodness” in Mandarin) interview Nov. 8, 2006 in Hang Dong Thailand

I was born in a Chiang Mai hospital, twenty-eight years ago. My family lived and still lives in Ban Sanpatong, south of the city. I am Thai, and was the first born child of family of my mother and father. I am an only child. Both my father and my mother were teachers in a primary school. My father died when I was five years old, and I do not remember much about him. But my mother told me that he loved me very much as a child, and he planned everything for my future. My father's mother wanted a granddaughter, and she bought pink feminine clothes for me as a baby and she wanted me to grow long hair like a girl. But my mother did not like that, and wanted to raise me as a boy. My father wanted me to become well educated, and to become a medical doctor or a lawyer. But I did not like that, because I never liked mathematics or physics.

My mother was a good mother, but she was gone a lot as a teacher, and did not get home from work until late in the evening. So I was raised mostly by my mother's mother. She was a good grandmother, and very kind to me. I also visited my father's mother and father every week, and they were always very kind to me.

From my earliest memories, I wanted to be a girl. I had no interest in playing with boys in boys' games, and I always played with girls. The girls accepted me as one of them. When my mother was gone, I would dress up in her dresses. When she discovered this, she cried. But she did not talk too much about it. She tried to make me be like a boy, how to live my life in the correct way to be a boy. But I did not like that. I believed in my heart, in myself, that she was not right. I wanted to be a woman, I did not want to be a boy. I wanted to do everything as a girl. I wanted to become a beautiful woman, to be an artist, a designer of clothing. I was good in art at school, drawing and painting. I always got grade A in art classes. I loved sewing clothes and weaving cross-stitch. And cooking. I am a good cook. I liked singing and dancing from about age seven onwards.

When I started primary school, at age six I met other boys who wanted to be ladyboys. There were about twenty in my primary school class of 350 boys. Every weekend I would go to the school with my ladyboy friends and we would all dress up in feminine clothing and put on makeup. I would secretly buy women's clothes and makeup, from my allowance, and hide them at home so I could have something to wear at these weekend parties.

I had to have my hair cut short as a boy for the school, but I did not like that at all, so I saved up enough money to buy a woman's wig. When the school sent all the students to a camp for three nights of camping, I took this wig and my women's clothes. On the last night, we had a party and we dressed up in dresses, makeup and hair to perform. The boys all loved our performance. Every year we planned a spectacular show to this camp. We became very famous for this.

At age eleven I became sexually attracted to a masculine boy in my class. I was never attracted to females, or to another ladyboy. I had sex for the first time at age twelve, with him. We lived in the same dormitory for four months, and we slept together every night. Then I moved back home, and I started having sex with other boys. In the annual camp I would have sex with four or five boys each year. I did not have a regular boyfriend.

The boys liked us at the camp, but sometimes when I was in school a few of the boys would hit us and be cruel. They would say bad things to us, “e-kathoe” which is very low class and impolite. They made me feel bad because I was not the same as other boys. I thought, “What am I?” I think every ladyboy has these same memories, and feels the same way I do.

When I was ten years old, I first learned the word “kathoe.” That was an insult word, to make us unconfident in ourselves. As a result, I became very shy. The real boys and girls would talk about us, and so our little group of ladyboys did not like that. But we decided we did not care, and we were going to live our lives as we wanted. But inside, it was still very weakening. However, we learned to act to be stronger, and not to care about the insults and the derision.

At age fifteen I started high school, which had both girls and boys. The girls were more accepting of us kathoe. My feeling is that I was a woman, but I used the word kathoe even though I did not like it, because it was the only word I knew to describe this. High school was easier for me to be accepted. I was good in art and dance, and also English language and history. But I was not good math or science. So I chose the arts and language program.

I finished high school at age 17, eleven years ago. After graduation I immediately started growing my hair long, which I was prevented from doing by the school. I started wearing women’s clothing every day. By this time my mother had stopped complaining about my dressing femininely, and she had accepted me as a ladyboy. She taught me how to be a polite and refined woman. I am proud that I hold myself in an upright way.

I wanted to go to work in a cabaret or be a makeup artist in Bangkok, where I had previously visited a couple of times. I was dazzled by the big city. But my mother wanted me to go to the university. That was the second time I saw her cry, when I said I wanted to stop school. So I did what she wanted and began my studies in a university in Phitsanulok, where I majored in English and Political Science. I like language, and wanted to work as a tourist guide or in a hotel. I like the tourist industry, where I can meet a lot of people. I like to serve people, and I like to meet different types of people. I want to know about the world.

At the university I was dressing fulltime as a woman. The other students accepted me fully, and I never had any problems. I was much more happy than I had been previously. There were not so many rules as in the earlier school, and I was able to live my life as I wanted.

When I went to the university I had a boyfriend, we lived together for three years when I was 20 to 23 years old. He was two years older than me. When we graduated we moved to Chiang Mai together and we both got jobs. Then he got another job in Bangkok and we split up. I was very sad when he left. I stayed at my job in Chiang Mai, working in a hotel. Then I started working in the Simon cabaret show at age 24. I was bored with the hotel job, and I liked the excitement of cabaret. I enjoyed that work dancing and singing. After one year, one of my ladyboy friends moved to Guangzhou China to be with a Chinese boyfriend. They opened an entertainment cabaret show in Guangzhou and she asked me to come and work there. I worked there for one year. After that I moved to Hong Kong, because I could make much more money working in a cabaret there. I have continued working there since then. I enjoy that work very much. So I save my money from my work there, and after working for awhile I come back to Thailand. I support my mother and my mother's father, who is still alive. All my family accepts me now. I support my cousins too.

My mother wants me to get a job here, so I come back to stay here as long as I can before I run out of money. I still want to go back to Hong Kong in one or two years. I want to find work in Chiang Mai but I could only earn about 7,000 baht per month working here.

I want other people to be understanding of the life of ladyboys. To accept and stop gossiping about us. I want society to understand our mind. In this life I accept that I am a ladyboy. If I could choose to be different in a different life, I think ladyboys would not choose this. But I know I cannot change in this lifetime. This is the way I am. I have to accept the truth that I am a ladyboy, to be happy in life.

PHRAEMAI (means "Thai silk") interviewed Nov. 8, 2006 in Hang Dong

[Author's note: The interview took place at the small simple but spotlessly clean house that Phraemai shares with her mother and two of her sisters. At the beginning of the interview, Phraemai's mother was in the room, and I asked her when she first noticed that her son was feminine. She said that she could tell by age two, when Phraemai wanted to play with dolls and dress in feminine clothing. Phraemai never liked to wear boy's clothing or do boy's things. In all ways, she said, Phraemai was always very feminine. The mother accepted that, and never had any problem with this reality. The mother has remained very accepting of Phraemai during subsequent years, and the family remains close. After she left the room, I began the interview.]

I was born 21 years ago, in a family that has always lived in Hang Dong. I have four older sisters and one older brother. My father was a school principal and he was nice to me as a small child. But when I was age five my father had a motorcycle accident, and his personality changed. after that he was quite bad. Still today we are not close, and we do not talk much. He did not take care of his family, and give money to my mother. He did not care if I wanted to be a boy or a girl, he just did not care very much about me. He and my mother separated when I was seven years old. He remarried another wife and lived with her all these years. Then, just a few days ago, after his second wife recently died, he returned and wants to come back to my mother again. He moved to a little house close to my mother's house. My mother does not have feeling for him, but I am a little happy because he is back. But I do not have much feeling for him because he was gone for so long.

My mother was always a very good mother to me, and I love her very much. All my sisters were also very good to me, and very supportive of my feminine ways. My earliest memories were of wanting to put on makeup and be just like a girl. I only liked to play with girls, and did not like boys' games at all. I remember being excited to get a Barbie doll when I was five years old.

In contrast to the rest of my family, my brother hated me being a ladyboy. He wanted another brother, because he was surrounded by so many girls, and he wanted to have a brother to help the family. When I was seven years old, and he was seventeen, he tried to choke me. He would hit me, and was very hostile toward me. My mother got very angry at him and told him to stop, but he would not stop. He had a lot of hostility, became a bad person, and he did bad things. At age 29 he finally got caught by the police and was put into jail for stealing. No one in our family likes him.

Ironically, when he was in jail, there were some kathoeyes in the same jail. Male kathoeyes are put into the same jail as real men, while real women are kept at separate jails. And guess what, in jail he fell in love with a kathoey! He stayed with that kathoey until he got out of jail. Then later he married a real woman. My brother has changed, and he is no longer anti-kathoey, but he has never apologized to me for the bad way he treated me. So I want to have nothing to do with him. I have no feeling for him.

I went through school and never had any problem from any of my classmates or teachers about my feminine ways. But no one ever explained to me that there are other people

like me, so I was very excited when I was thirteen years old, when I met another kathoey. She told me all about kathoey, and we enjoyed talking about beauty and fashion and girl-type gossip. We also talked about men that we found attractive.

At age sixteen I had to stop school because my family did not have enough money for me to continue. Immediately after that I started to wear women's clothing fulltime and to grow my hair long, which I had always wanted to do but was forbidden by the school.

I was never sexually attracted to females, or to another kathoey. But when I was age sixteen I fell in love for the first time. He was a masculine man age twenty-eight. We never had sex, but dated for three months. Then his family pressured him to get married to a real woman. His mother knew that he was dating me, but she wanted her son to marry a real woman. This happens to every ladyboy in Thailand. In Thai culture it is difficult for ladyboys to have a permanent relationship because parents eventually want their sons to get married to biological females. It is very important in Thai culture for them to have grandchildren.

After that disappointment, I did not date other men. But at age eighteen I did enter the "Miss Kathoey Hang Dong" contest, and won the first prize. There were 38 contestants in the contest that year. I and my family were very proud that I won the crown. I have had sex periodically with some other men since then, but nothing ongoing. I spend my time working at my job, at a clothing factory, and in the evenings I sing Kareoke at a local pub to make a little extra money. On my free day, on Sunday, I spend most of the time relaxing at home. I dress as a woman full time, including at my job, and no one gives me any problems. The monks at the Buddhist temple are very kind to me. No one gives me any problems, and I am happy that I am so accepted by my family and friends and co-workers. Still, I wish people had a higher opinion of kathoey, and I hope I can help to improve the image of ladyboys in Thai society.

I am impressed continuously with the differences in masculinity in Thailand and the United States. American men are always trying to prove that they are “number one,” with an omnipresent competitiveness that permeates daily life. Thai people know they are not number one (people continually tell me “America is big; Thailand is small”), and they don’t care. Instead of trying to prove that they are number one, Thai people concentrate on enjoying life. This means a lack of competitiveness and a lack of the need to “prove their masculinity” in the Thai personality. This lacking is especially evident in the attitude of Thai men toward ladyboys (“kathoei” in Thai). I have often seen even the most masculine Thai man placidly taking direction from a ladyboy who is in charge of some event. Ladyboys are everywhere in Thailand, not only prominent in the entertainment business, but in every kind of mundane job, serving food in restaurants, working as government officials, in factories, and in practically every other occupation. Because they are part of everyday life, every Thai male grows up familiar with the presence of ladyboys. As a consequence, their appearance is unremarkable. They are just part of life. People may look at them because of their uniqueness, but without the snide glares, shocked looks, or snickers that often follow transgender people in America.

Last week I took a bus trip with a ladyboy. We got on the crowded bus full of Thai soldiers returning to their army base. The ladyboy I was with, while attractive, was clearly recognizable as a male. Wearing hot pink short shorts, with frilly lace on the pockets, and a skin tight tee-shirt with an obviously male chest, the ladyboy occasioned nothing more than a few mild looks from the soldiers. As I carefully watched for any kind of reaction by the soldiers, or the fact that the ladyboy rather ostentatiously pulled me into the bus by the hand and put an arm around me as we rode along, I was aware how differently a busload of American servicemen would have reacted to such a scene. Rather than being mystified by the lack of response, this scene reminded me of the intensity of homophobia and transphobia that permeates American culture. Its absence in Thailand seems less remarkable than its presence in America.

Thailand is in daily life what American transgender activists can only hope for, as a goal for the future. Ladyboys are just accepted as part of life. Now, this does not mean that things are perfect. There are some Thai people, especially Christian converts as well as those who have received formal education in the West, who do in fact hold discriminatory attitudes. But their influence is limited because they are a minority. Practically every Thai entertainment has ladyboys involved in some aspect, even if it might be for comic relief, but the comedy is more gentle than critical. It is impossible to live in Thailand and not come into contact with ladyboys.

The biggest problem for ladyboys is their love relationships. There is still strong pressure for Thai men to get married to a female and produce grandchildren for their parents. Since grandchildren may provide significant economic support for their elder relatives in their old age, this is a serious concern for the Thai family. As a result, a family might have nothing against their son dating a ladyboy while he was in his teens and twenties. But by the time he approaches age thirty, Thai young men receive considerable family pressure to cut off their relationship with ladyboys and instead to marry a female who can produce offspring.

I have heard many stories by ladyboys of their bitter disappointment that their relationships have been terminated by this family pressure. Their desire to have a permanent husband is cut short by these family factors. However, for a ladyboy who is not bothered by this reality, but is happy to have a series of relationships with young men in their teens and twenties, Thailand can be a very nice place for a transgender person to live. The absence of government persecution, and societal tolerance, make for a safer and more fulfilling life. If a transgender person from America or Europe can come to Thailand with financial security, Thailand can be a very pleasant place to live. The problem is that salary levels are so low in Thailand that most Westerners would not be able to live at Thai standards. Plus, government restrictions on work permits for foreigners make it difficult for a foreigner to earn much money in Thailand. It would be better to work for an American company doing business in Thailand, being paid American wages, or people who can afford to retire in Thailand and enjoy the less expensive cost of living. Transgender people who are searching for a place to live where they can be comfortable could do worse than to choose to live in Thailand.