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“Thailand” by Walter L. Williams

Thailand is one of the best countries in the world for gay, lesbian, bisexual and especially transgender people. This is due to Thailand’s distinctive history, and also a result of the lack of condemnation of homosexual behavior as sin in Thai Buddhist religion. Buddhism promotes an attitude of compassion and kindness for everyone.

Southeast Asia is the locale of one of the world’s most ancient civilizations. Archaeological findings at Ban Chiang and other sites suggest that agriculture may have originated in Thailand earlier than in any other area of the world. Beginning about 6,000 years ago, the world’s first Bronze Age civilization began in this area. The earliest peoples in the area were the Khmer and the Mon, and the Thai migrated from China sometime before the common era. As in other areas of the world, the earliest religion in Southeast Asia was animism. This religion, rather than focusing on the idea of an all-powerful god, emphasized the spirituality of all things that exist. According to this religious worldview, everything has a spirit, and the spirits are responsible for protecting humans and other beings when certain rites and ceremonies are conducted. A shaman, who could be either a man or a woman, was a person with spiritual inclinations who could assist other people in their spiritual needs. In animist religions, transgender people were often considered spiritually blessed, with both the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman united in one person. Such persons (called “kathoeys” in the Thai language, which translates as “ladyboy” in English) were considered twice as spiritual as the average

person, and they were highly respected by their family and by society in general. It is likely this ancient animist heritage that is responsible for the continued respect that transgender people have among traditionalist Southeast Asians up to the present.

## KHMER EMPIRE

The early history of Thailand was heavily affected by the Khmer culture of present-day Cambodia. In the year 802 a Khmer military leader named Jayavarman successfully united many local Khmer kingdoms, and established the Kambuja or Khmer Empire. King Jayavarman declared himself to be a god, and founded a form of Hinduism that emphasized penis worship. Khmer Hindu temples were constructed all over the empire with linga representations of erect penises as major motifs in the temples. Eventually the Khmer Empire covered all of present-day Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, the southern half of Vietnam, and parts of Myanmar. It was one of the world's largest empires of its time, and its capital at Angkor surpassed in grandeur anything built in Europe during that era. In the early 1200s Khmer King Jayavarman VII converted to Buddhism and built the magnificent capital at Angkor Thom. However, after his death a subsequent king tried to convert the empire back to Hinduism, and many Buddhists were angered.

## KINGDOM OF SIAM

The Thai people, who had adopted Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lankan missionaries after 700 C.E., were especially fervent Buddhists. They began a strong resistance movement, based initially in the Sukothai kingdom of north Thailand, about 1300 C.E. Eventually the Thai rebels wrested their independence from the Khmer Empire in 1351, and established the Kingdom of Siam with its capital at Ayutthaya. Within a few years a Thai army invaded the Khmer capital at Angkor and forced the

Khmer to cede several Khmer-speaking provinces that remain part of eastern Thailand today. Over the following centuries there were several wars between Siam and the Khmer Empire. In 1431, after a seven month siege of Angkor, Khmer King Ponhea Yat escaped and reestablished the Khmer capital in Phnom Penh where he hoped it would be less vulnerable to Thai attack. The King of Siam captured the entire Khmer royal court and ordered all of the court artists, musicians, dancers and intellectuals to be brought en masse to Ayutthaya. With heavy Khmer cultural influence, much of Thai classical culture was adopted directly from Khmer styles. In subsequent centuries Ayutthaya became the predominant city of Southeast Asia, and Angkor lapsed into decline. The Khmer Empire never regained its former glory, and Siam gradually took more and more territory from the Khmer.

#### THERAVADA BUDDHISM

At this point Siam exerted its cultural influence on the Khmer people, who eventually abandoned Hinduism and converted to the Thai form of Theravada Buddhism. Once Siam was independent, Buddhism flourished. However, as Thai people absorbed Buddhism, they retained many of their animist beliefs. Buddhist monks continued many of the same spiritual functions as the animist shamans, and even today they may perform healings and hold ceremonies that show a strong animist heritage. They also absorbed much of Khmer Hindu penis worship, and penises hold special religious significance in Thai Buddhism. Thai religion today is thus an amalgamation of animist, Hindu, and Buddhist ideas. Though *kathoe*y transgender people lost the special spiritual role that they had in the animist religion, nevertheless the continuation of animist traditions included continued respect for transgender people.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Siam developed a prosperous and extensive trade network with China, Japan, India, and Arabia. When early Portuguese and Dutch traders first arrived in Ayutthaya, they reported amazement at the well-planned, beautiful city. In many aspects, the Thai culture was more advanced than the European culture of the time. Though Ayutthaya was protected by a huge moat that surrounded the entire city, in 1767 the army of Burma invaded and destroyed the city. Its extensive ruins are still quite impressive, giving an indication of the kingdom's grandeur.

#### KING CHULALONGKORN AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SEXUAL FREEDOM

After the fall of Ayutthaya, new Thai leaders emerged in the south, which was less damaged by Burmese invasion. They reestablished the Kingdom of Siam with a new capital at Krung Thep (Bangkok), and in 1782 King Rama I began the progressive Chakri Dynasty, which has ruled ever since. King Chulalongkorn, who reigned from 1869 to 1910 as Rama V, was responsible for brilliant diplomacy that skillfully played the European powers against each other, and he managed to save Siam from being subjected to foreign colonial domination. Ironically, he established his credibility as a king by adopting European clothing and the trappings of royalty, and by instituting measures to show the Europeans that Siam was a kingdom like their own.

Thai people are proud of their long history of freedom, and Thailand is known as “the land of the free.” Even today Thai people venerate King Rama V above all other Thai kings, and Thai households often have a picture of him displayed in their living room. Chulalongkorn University, among Thailand's most prominent academic institutions, is named for him.

Siam's borders changed as King Chulalongkorn had to give up slices of territory to keep the French and the English at bay, but Siam managed to retain about half of the area of Lao-speaking people (referred to as "Isan" in Thai) even as Laos became part of French Indochina. Many Lao people escaped to independent Siam to get away from the French, and during recent decades of turmoil as a communist government was established in independent Laos, even more Laotian people came to Thailand. Today, the northeast section of Thailand is the Lao-speaking *Isan* culture area. There are also Khmer areas along the border of Cambodia, and Mon areas along the border of Burma (Myanmar), which have increased in size due to the actions of oppressive governments in those nations. Thailand today continues its history of welcoming people of other ethnicities who have suffered persecution in their home countries. Some have suggested that the long-suffering, impoverished peoples of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar would have been better off in recent decades if Thailand had incorporated those territories into its multiethnic nation.<sup>1</sup>

King Chulalongkorn had a very accepting attitude toward transgender people, and sponsored *kathoey* dancers in his court.<sup>2</sup> His son, King Rama VI, who reigned in the 1910s and 1920s, was reputed to have had male lovers. He brought in the pro-gay French attorney and writer Rene' Guyon (1876-1963), who is best known for his publications on sexual ethics. While living in Siam as a personal friend of the king, and as an affiliate of his court, Guyon drafted a modern legal code for Siam. The king eventually appointed him as the chief justice of Siam's Supreme Court, on which he served for three decades. Significantly, Guyon advocated the decriminalization of all sexual acts engaged in by willing participants without fraud. Because of this Frenchman's influence with the king,

homosexual behavior was not criminalized.<sup>3</sup> Ever since then, Thai law has not considered homosexuality or transgenderism to be any matter for persecution.

## EUROPEAN COLONIALISM AND THE RISE OF HOMOPHOBIA IN ASIA

Socially accepted transgender traditions existed in many other areas of Asia, and transgender people often had high status. But when the European colonialists came into power, they ruthlessly suppressed transgender people and criminalized homosexual behavior. Even countries with nominal independence, like Ming Dynasty China, were influenced by European prejudices and took a condemnatory attitude toward their bisexual past. Asia became homophobic. One of the great ironies of modern history is that many Asian people today do not realize that their cultures originally accepted same-sex attraction and transgenderism, and they incorrectly see gay liberation as a foreign import from the West. In reality, the most prominent foreign import from the West is sexual repression and homophobia.

In sharp contrast to colonized Asia, the Kingdom of Siam, which became a constitutional monarchy in 1932 and changed its name to Thailand, has proudly held onto its independence and its indigenous cultural traditions. Even today, Thais refuse to adopt the Roman alphabet and continue to use their own indigenous alphabet. They use the Buddhist calendar rather than the European calendar. Thus, Thai calendars for the year 2008 C.E. are labeled with the year 2551, dated from the enlightenment of the Buddha. Thai traditions of acceptance of LGBT people are part of this larger cultural pattern. Thailand, with its legal and social acceptance of transgenderism and same-sex attraction, is what most of Asia would have looked like if European imperialism had not been able to establish itself and export homophobia to this area of the world.

Since the time of Chulalongkorn, Thai kings have been sent to Europe and America to receive higher education, and they are thoroughly familiar with Western customs. Thailand's current King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) is, like his predecessors, strongly committed to the welfare of his people. He is venerated by Thai people for his programs to help the poor, and is admired globally for his progressive environmentalist stance. In his youth he was a Buddhist monk, and he exhibits a Buddhist ethic of compassion for everyone, including LGBT people. The king is committed to freedom and democracy, and during several crucial times during his reign he has exerted his influence to make the Thai government move in a more democratic direction. Even his tacit support of the 2006 military ouster of the corrupt Prime Minister Taksin could be seen as an effort to promote good governance. Now in his eighties, King Rama IX is the longest reigning king in the nation's history, and his picture is displayed prominently in almost every Thai household. I was lucky to see the King in person, and his sincere concern for his people was obvious. In fact, his presence seemed almost spiritual in the way he interacted with the elderly and the children. Many in Thailand believe that the current king is the best leader the country has had since Chulalongkorn.<sup>4</sup>

## THAILAND TODAY

Though Thailand holds onto its traditions, it also selectively adopts elements of Western influence as a means of improving the nation. This is especially true in higher education. Thailand has several first-rate universities, with an international faculty. Young people going into the medical field especially are encouraged to pursue their medical degree in a

Western university. As a direct result, Thailand today has an excellent medical system, with sophisticated hospitals that perform complex surgery.

Thailand requires all children to attend primary school, and every village has a public school. However, many students (especially in the rural areas) drop out before graduating from high school. High schools charge expenses for textbooks, school uniforms (with different outfits for different days of the week), and lunch, making it onerous for poor parents to send their children to high school. Plus, teenagers are often needed by the family to help out on the farm or to generate income.

Besides that limitation, Thailand's public education system is not as good as its universities. English instruction, for example, is not as effective as foreign language learning programs in other Southeast Asian countries. This may be partly because of Thai peoples' lack of familiarity with European languages that other areas of Asia received during the era of imperialism. Thai is a tonal language, extremely different in its spoken and written forms from English, and English has many sounds that Thai does not contain. Consequently, it is not easy for Thai people to pronounce English words. Because Thais fiercely retain their indigenous alphabet, their lack of familiarity with the internationally standard Roman alphabet makes it difficult for them to learn to write English. The low level of English proficiency is also due to outmoded methods of language instruction in government schools. English classes, which typically last no more than two or three hours per week, focus on training students to pass a grammar exam rather than teaching students correct pronunciation and comprehension of what they would read or hear in a real-world setting. In many private "international schools," in contrast, English language



programs are much more effective. Unfortunately, these effective private school programs are not available to students from poor families.<sup>5</sup>

Though Thailand has had its share of political instability in the constitutional era, due to several coups by ambitious military leaders, it has had much more overall stability than its neighbors. The other countries of Southeast Asia have gone through extreme turmoil as they wrested independence from their European colonial masters and fell under the rule of revolutionary leaders who had little experience in self-government. As a consequence of a relatively stable constitutional government, Thailand has been able to provide a more stable economic setting. Though many Thai rural farmers continue to live in poverty, Thailand has made good economic progress in recent decades. Many urban Thais live a comfortable, middle-class existence, and a wealthy upper class is also prominent. Thailand has a mixed economy, with multiple sources of trade and wealth. Bangkok is one of the major cities of the world, bustling with trade and other economic activities. With a relatively unencumbered business climate, Thailand is a center of capitalist activism. By the 1990s Thailand had become known as one of the emerging “Asian Economic Tigers.”<sup>6</sup>

While this freewheeling capitalist system has brought prosperity to Thailand, it has also brought chaos. Particularly in 1997, when a boom period suddenly crashed, the collapse of the Thai economy caused economic chaos throughout Southeast Asia. What is particularly unfortunate is the way that rural farmers in Thailand, who have little opportunity to profit from the booming urban economy, are caught in economic binds. To a visitor from a developed country Thailand is incredibly inexpensive. However, for a Thai farmer with a small income, the prices of everyday necessities can be burdensome.

I have found in my ethnographic research that many Thai villages are able to survive economically only because so many of their young adults leave home to take jobs in Bangkok or other cities around the world. Emigration is a huge factor in Thailand, as people send money back to support their families in the village. In traveling through Thai villages, when I see a large new house that is so much more expensive than the usual habitation in a village, my inquiry almost always reveals that one of the family members has a job in Los Angeles, Berlin, Taipei, Tokyo, London, or other prosperous locales.

Nowhere is this trend more widespread than in the impoverished northeast *Isan* area where I have conducted research since 2003. *Isan* people are among the most traditionalist of Thailand's people, with an image among urban Thais as uncouth "country bumpkins." But they are also more familiar with the world because so many of them have migrated to other countries out of economic necessity. Many of the workers in the sweatshops of clothing production companies in Los Angeles and New York are *Isan* people. Though they may have little education or knowledge of English when they first arrive, most Thai emigrants I have met have become successful in their adopted homes. The success of Thai restaurants throughout Europe and the Americas is only one example of Thai emigration abroad.

In addition to money coming from Thai workers in developed countries, the Thai economy is also buoyed by tourism. Money spent by tourists represents the largest transfer of wealth from developed countries to developing countries. Tourism is a major source of income for Thailand, which is one of the world's leading tourist destinations.<sup>7</sup>

Thailand has a strong extended family system. Family members feel a strong sense of duty to take care of their relatives because there are few socialized governmental

programs in the country. There is no social security program for the elderly, and those who are too old to work depend entirely on their children and other relatives for support in their old age.

## SEXUALITY IN THAILAND

I have found in my research that Thai Buddhism stresses personal happiness as a major purpose of life, and that Thai culture has a very strong ethic of “sanook” (enjoyment). Children are much loved, and they are encouraged to have fun and enjoy their childhood before they have to take up the serious work of adulthood. This includes sexual enjoyment, which is seen as something good and positive in life. Children see the evidence of sex all around them. Buddhist amulets shaped like penises are commonly displayed, and carved wooden penises are sometimes placed at the front of a house to provide spiritual protection for the family.

I have found in my ethnographic research in villages of northeastern Thailand that *Isan* culture especially is noted for its “bawdy” public flaunting of sex. I often hear *Isan* people making sexual innuendos, and have seen many pictures of nude bodies or sexual acts, or representations of genitalia, in Isan parades and folk music performances. Though many children observe these public displays, I have found that neither they nor their elders get the least bit upset over what a prudish American would consider a scandal for a child to observe. I found a comfortableness about sex that Thai children grow up with, to the point that most Thai adults (except for more sexually conservative ethnic Chinese, Muslims, and those who have been influenced by Western values) are far more accepting of sexuality than is typical in many countries.

I also found in my research that Thais have an open attitude toward the body that many people from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish cultures lack. Thai Buddhism does not emphasize scriptures telling people that the body is sinful, or that the matters of the spirit are in opposition to the matters of the flesh (as St. Paul stressed to early Christians). In contrast, Thai Buddhism even has a tradition of body massage as a spiritual act. Some of the most respected massage training centers are at Buddhist temples. These massages are not explicitly erotic, but they do impart a comfort with the body that is lacking in the Abrahamic religions. Traditional Thai massage is not sexual per se, but it is not a great leap for Thai people to extend the massage of other parts of the body to massage of the genitals. The purpose of Thai massage is to relax and enjoy the experience of being touched all over by another person.

The boundary between traditional Thai massage and explicitly erotic massage is fuzzy, just as is the boundary between Thai general enjoyment of life and sexual enjoyment. Thai people are so at ease with bodily contact and with touching other people, mainly of the same sex, that such arbitrary Western boundaries are rather meaningless. Several times I have experienced male Isan folk singers reaching out and touching my genitals while giving a musical performance, with not the slightest awareness that a foreigner might find such behavior offensive. At one local celebration I attended in 2006, an *Isan* man who had lived in America tried to stop such an expression of friendly association, thinking that I would be offended, but when I said “Mai ben lai” [don’t worry about it] he noticeably relaxed and let the singer continue to fondle me. At public events it is not unusual to see young men caressing each other casually, with their arms draped around each others’ shoulders and their hands on the others’ thigh. Touching is

part of showing friendship. The lack of homophobia in Thai culture means that it is normal for even completely heterosexually-inclined men to touch their friends. Because few have any fear of being labeled a homosexual, they do not think to censor their behavior with their same-sex friends.

This lack of homophobia in Thai popular culture means an acceptance of sexual freedom across the board. Because their history has conditioned them to emphasize their freedom, sexual freedom is considered a part of the Thai people's valued heritage. Freedom to do what one wants with one's own life, as well as freedom from Western imperialism, is part of people's conception of Thailand as "the land of the free." Thus, people are not expected to fit into one of two opposite categories labeled "heterosexual" and "homosexual." In Thailand, I have found, there are gradations in between these two orientations. One person may enjoy touching another's chest, rear, or genitals, but nothing more. Another person might enjoy playing with a dildo with a same-sex friend, but wants no direct genital-to-genital sexual contact. Still others might enjoy fellatio performed on them, but will not reciprocate. Still others find that they are comfortable in engaging in same-sex experiences, but only after they have had enough alcohol to give them the excuse of not remembering what they did while drunk. This is not so much a denial of one's sexuality, as it is a ruse to avoid forming serious permanent relationships, with their attendant financial obligations. Few of these people would define themselves as "bisexual," even though they have had extensive same-sex experiences as well as perhaps some other-sex experiences. They just see themselves as unique individuals who have the right to enjoy themselves and act in freedom just like all other Thai people. The married brother of my Thai boyfriend often parades himself in front of me wearing only a

small bikini, and always has a big smile if he notices me looking at his attractive physique. He does this even with his wife looking on, and seems disappointed if I am not noticing his good looks. Yet he has never made any effort to pursue anything explicitly sexual. He just gains enjoyment that someone finds him attractive. Happiness, enjoyment of life, and personal freedom are the great constants of Thai philosophies of life.

But this flexibility does not mean that no one identifies himself as homosexual or heterosexual. Some academic theorists, speaking with great authority but little actual ethnographic data, surmise that if homophobia were ended there would be no more gay people or straight people. Thailand is a very non-homophobic place, but there are plenty of people there who identify as gay. Contrary to the fears of many heterosexists, though, homophobia is not necessary to ensure that most people grow up to be straight. Thailand proves that even in a non-homophobic society, the majority of people turn out to be heterosexual. That is, both Thai heterosexuals and homosexuals are conscious of their sexual proclivities being entirely for a single sex, and they have absolutely no erotic interest in the other sex.

In addition, Thai gay men (who often distinguish themselves as “Gey King” as a top inserter and “Gey Queen” as a bottom insertee ), male-to- female transgender *kathoeys* (who might be either bottom or top in their private sexual behavior), and both masculine females and female-to-male transgender “Toms” (after the English word “Tomboy”) and their feminine female partners (who often call themselves “Dee” after the English word “lady”), have an identity of being different from the norm in their gender nonconformity and in their exclusive same-sex inclinations. And, just as with people in the middle who

have a mixture of erotic inclinations and experiences, those inclinations are considered entirely acceptable.

It can be argued that Thai attitudes go beyond tolerance of sexual minorities. Beyond simply tolerating homosexuals and transgender people, many Thai people seem to welcome and cherish such people. Though some families (especially ethnic Chinese, those who have more Western education, and those who are followers of Islam or Christianity) might reject their LGBT relatives, the vast majority of Thai families treat their queer relatives as full-fledged members of the family. This level of family acceptance is so high in *Isan* villages that gender and sexual nonconformity is completely unremarkable. Every *Isan* village seems to have at least a few transgender people, and it is impossible to attend any public event without seeing at least one or two. Whether one is going to a market, or a Buddhist temple, or to other daily events, a sharp eye will pick out the sexual and gender minorities.

Though most Thai people do not identify as gay, a considerable number may agree to engage in some level of same-sex activity if the offer of money is sufficient. The idea that sex and good looks are commodities that can be sold, just like anything else, seems rather ingrained in Thai culture. The older and more financially established partner is, one way or another, expected to provide some kind of financial payment or support for the younger partner. The older partner is perceived as having the advantage of a more stable financial position in society, and the younger partner has the advantage of good looks. It is a simple balancing of assets, conceived as part of the natural order of the way people interact. People exchange what they have for what they do not have. The instability of two young people, who are both often in a precarious financial situation,

leads to same-age relationships being quite unstable. A more common pattern in Thai sexual partnerships, as with non-sexual partnerships, often involves an older mentor/younger disciple relationship.

This relationship between financial considerations and sex is not something that applies only to same-sex activities. In heterosexual relations, money and sex are intimately tied together. I found in my research that when a man gains a steady girlfriend, and becomes sexually active with her, he typically is expected to turn part of his income over to her. Providing money regularly and dependably is part of the way he proves that he will be a good husband. When they do actually get married, he will be expected to provide a very substantial payment of money to his new wife's parents. The more beautiful and desirable the young woman, the larger the payment will be. This bride payment is not perceived as the husband "buying" the wife, as occurs in some patriarchal cultures, but as his expected payment for her granting her sexual assets to him. In fact, Thai wives have considerable power in marriage, especially because the new husband is expected to live with the wife's family and contribute to her family's continued financial well-being.

This connection between marriage and finances is one reason why Thai women, and Thai gay men, so often wish to seek out a wealthy "farang" (foreigner) as a partner. Good looks and age are considered less important characteristics in the partner than their agreeable personality and financial well-being. In contrast to the average Thai salary, even a middle class person from a developed country can seem wealthy in comparison. It is thus not uncommon to see a beautiful young woman or man paired with an older foreigner. If he is a good husband, who is typically expected to build a nice house for the



family and be something of a walking ATM machine for the parents, then he will fit right in and be treated royally by his spouse and in-laws.

Traditionally, if a man establishes an extramarital relationship with another woman, or (with his first wife's permission) if he takes a second wife, he is also expected to make payments to her as well. If he does not have enough money to do that, he may just visit a prostitute periodically to keep things simple. Thai men who want to have sex with multiple women, then, have a great incentive to make a lot of money so that they can afford these multiple sex partnerships. This sexual pattern may explain at least part of Thai economic entrepreneurship, which is so evident both in Thailand and in Thai communities abroad.

It is in this context that prostitution in Thailand must be understood. Receiving money for a single sexual act is just one extreme of the larger continuum tying together the financial and affectional relationships that exist among Thai people. Of course, this is not to deny that sexual exploitation occurs in Thailand. In 2007 a young woman in the village where I have been living was kidnapped by a man who intended to force her into prostitution. Fortunately, she was able to make a phone call and the police rescued her. In gratitude, her relieved parents held a celebration in honor of her return to the village. In other villages I have heard horror stories of slick sweet-talking men approaching gullible young women and their parents, promising to get them a good job in a big city for a small fee. Instead, when the young woman is taken to the city, the "good job" turns out to be work in a house of prostitution, and the "small fee" turns into a large payment to the man as his commission. The young woman is forced to continue the work until her fee is paid.

Though such exploitive situations exist, the Thai police have made efforts to prevent such horrors. Thailand has anti-prostitution laws, but they seem to be on the books mainly to prevent coerced holding of a person against their will. Thai police do not bother most Thai people who are freely engaging in the exchange of sex for money. My interviews with both male and female sex workers suggest that most Thai prostitutes are doing this kind of sex work not because they are forced against their will, but because they feel that they have no other alternative to meet their financial needs. Thai young people, both male and female, feel a very strong desire to help their parents financially. Unless they are a student, I have found that a person in their late teens or twenties who is not sending money regularly to their parents typically feels an intense sense of personal shame. Especially if the parent is in poor health and needs medical treatment, the child may practically be in panic. In my interviews I have observed that worry about their parents is a source of great stress for Thai young adults. Since most jobs for unskilled young people pay little more than basic survival needs, the way that many young people—both male and female—see as the only way to generate significant profits is to engage in sex for pay. Thai parents, especially among the poor, often look the other way and do not ask many questions about the source of their offspring's income.

Besides these family factors, there is also a historical factor that has contributed to Thailand's large sex industry. In the 1960s, the democratic capitalist government of Thailand was extremely worried about communist insurgency in nearby Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Therefore, Thailand became a staunch American ally during the Vietnam-American War. One of the ways that Thailand offered to assist the United States Armed Forces was to provide sites for "Rest and Relaxation" for the American soldiers. It was

much quicker and cheaper for the U.S. military to fly its troops to nearby Thailand than to send them back to America when they needed a break from the fighting. The Thai government founded an entire city, Pattaya, which before 1965 had been a tiny fishing village, as a major locale for American servicemen to enjoy themselves.

These “R & R” vacations quickly became wild sexual binges for many soldiers, especially as disillusionment with the war effort became common among young American draftees who were being affected by the antiwar movement at home. The idea of many of these troops was that they might die soon in a hopeless and pointless war, and they should at least be able to enjoy themselves to the fullest on their brief “R & R.” They could not have found a more willing culture than Thailand in which to indulge their every sexual fantasy. Thai entrepreneurs flocked to Pattaya and quickly opened many bars, restaurants, hotels, massage parlors, and every other conceivable enterprise to make money off of the American soldiers. Sex was a major part of the sell. Since then, prostitution has become a big business in Thailand.

Some scholars have suggested that Thai prostitution, and Thai sexual liberation in general, is a direct result of the American presence during the Vietnam War era. This interpretation reveals an ignorance of Thai history and culture. Rather than being a “cause” of Thai sexual openness, the Thai response to the American troops was completely consistent with traditional Thai cultural values. Thai prostitution grew even bigger than before, but the salient point is that the exchange of sex for money has long been ingrained in traditional Thai culture.<sup>8</sup>

After the Vietnam War ended and the troops left, Thai entrepreneurs responded by promoting sex for tourists. Planeloads of businessmen from Japan, Singapore,

Australia, and Europe soon replaced the departed American soldiers. Thai prostitutes were ready to provide them with every fantasy they requested, just as long as the payment was large enough. Thailand became the classic country devoted to “sex tourism,” providing sexual enjoyment for everyone from Russian mafia hoodlums to Saudi oil barons. Though Thai people definitely have mixed feelings about their country being a sexual playground for foreigners, tourism represents a huge part of the Thai economy. The Thai standard of living would be critically harmed if prostitution and sex tourism were to stop.

#### THE AIDS EPIDEMIC IN THAILAND

When the AIDS epidemic first became evident in Thailand, some viewed these sex tourists as the source of the problem. However, study after study showed that a much larger factor in the spread of HIV was that so many Thai men visited prostitutes regularly. The initial thrust of the government’s HIV prevention program was to try to persuade Thai men to stop associating with prostitutes. When that tactic failed, the government turned to a much more effective strategy of promoting condom use.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the nation, the Thai government operates a fine system of clinics and hospitals that provide basic care at low cost. But budgets are not big enough for these public health programs to offer more expensive treatments involving complex diseases, and the average Thai family is not able to pay the costs. As a consequence, people die earlier.

This is true of people with AIDS as well as other diseases. With sex being so prominent in Thailand, it was the first Asian country to be hit hard by the AIDS epidemic. The medical system was overwhelmed. Buddhist monasteries took in people

who were dying of AIDS, and some Buddhist monks have made heroic special outreaches to people suffering with AIDS. While dealing with the reality of limited budgets, the government public health department has responded more effectively than in many other countries. Rather than trying to deny the realities of sexual behaviors that lead to HIV infection, as many governments have done, or ignore the realities of female and male prostitution, Thai public health officials quickly accepted the advice of pioneering gay AIDS educators and have widely advocated for condom use.

Large billboards along major highways, announcements in the mass media, and health education programs in the schools (including Buddhist schools for novice monks) explicitly advise people on how to avoid HIV infection. Condoms are available free of charge from public health projects, and at low cost at many stores. By focusing on prevention rather than spending most of their funds on treatment of those who are already sick, the Thai government has helped to bring the AIDS crisis under control in Thailand. HIV infection remains a problem, and some Thai people with AIDS are rejected by their families, but the situation is much better than in many other developing nations.

Practically every village in Thailand has access to a nearby government health clinic staffed by professionally trained doctors and nurses. And every major city has at least one full-fledged hospital. Because of its excellent health care system and very accepting attitude toward transgender people, Thailand has become world famous as a global center for transsexual surgeries. The low cost of medical care in Thailand makes it even more popular as a destination for transgender people from around the world to undergo sex change operations.

## CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

For the historical reasons highlighted above, Thailand has no anti-gay laws. However, there have been periodic political controversies. In the 1990s a misguided Western-educated Minister of Education attempted to pass a regulation saying that no cross-dressing transgender person would be permitted to be trained as a public school teacher in Thailand's government-supported universities. The outcry against this transphobic proposal was so widespread that the idea was completely dropped. Today, transgender persons can be seen on every major university campus, and there is little or no resistance to their full participation on campuses. Transgender teenagers are even being allowed to cross-dress in many public high schools, with no apparent negative reactions from teachers, parents, or administrators.

Pioneering gay rights advocates like Dr. Seri Wongmontha, who was openly gay in the 1970s and 1980s while being a prominent scholar as well as a flamboyant celebrity, helped to set the stage for more public gay acceptance in Thailand. I interviewed him in 1987, and attended a play with a gay theme that he produced and in which he was the star performer. His play ran with sold-out performances for some time, packing crowds into a major theatre venue in Bangkok. Another big influence on public attitudes was due to General Prem, who was generally perceived to be homosexual. Nothing on this appeared in print in the Thai media, but people I interviewed in Bangkok told me it was common knowledge that this general was gay. He surrounded himself with handsome adjutants who went everywhere with him. After he retired from the army, Prem became Thailand's Prime Minister. He was lauded as being the most effective leader that the nation had had for some time. Although Prem never spoke out publicly about gay rights, he lived his life

openly and never felt the need to showcase a woman companion. He continued to have handsome personal assistants who went everywhere with him, and it was commonly assumed by people that these men were his boyfriends. There was no controversy about his sexuality, as would have been the case in the United States and many other countries. Prem was the most highly respected government official of his era, and even now in his eighties he remains a close advisor to the King.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, a prominent advice columnist in Thai tabloid newspapers known as “Uncle Go” regularly gave advice to homosexuals who wrote him about their personal problems. This column, which was quite popular among Thai readers, advised homosexuals in some detail about their sex lives and about how to structure their relationships. Instead of trying to persuade them to become heterosexual, Uncle Go typically gave advice on how to make their same-sex relationship more satisfying. Ladyboys, masculine females, men who had young boys as sexual partners, and homosexuals in general were all treated with respect and compassion.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, as AIDS became a problem in Thailand, public opinion initially turned against gay people. In contrast to the United States, however, where AIDS was first noticed as a problem within the gay male community, in Thailand HIV infections have been spread primarily by heterosexual activity and IV drug use.<sup>12</sup> American conservatives blamed the epidemic on homosexuals (ignoring the little-noticed fact that lesbians had the lowest rates of HIV infection of any group in society)<sup>13</sup> but in Thailand this type of scapegoating—though attempted by a few bigots—was not credible. Instead, gay men and transgender ladyboys, being well aware of the realities of HIV transmission from gay networks in Europe and North America, became prominent in HIV

prevention educational efforts. They have emerged rather as committed heroes in the effort to improve public health. Today, gay men, lesbians, and transgender people often go into the healthcare field, as a visit to many Thai hospitals will attest.

The image of transgender ladyboys and gay men has also been improved in Thailand due to sports. Volleyball competitions are quite popular, and a group of young gay males and ladyboys formed their own volleyball team. To the surprise of many, they kept winning matches. They entered the 1996 Thai national competition, and as they defeated one team of masculine young men after another, the Thai media made them celebrities. Huge crowds came to cheer them on, as the ladyboys pranced femininely around the ball court before handily defeating their opponents. Conservative sports officials in Bangkok, who were nervous about the image of volleyball as these flamboyant queens captured more media attention, attempted to keep the queer team from the national finals, but that effort only generated more public opinion in favor of the feminine boys. The officials were forced to back off, and allowed the ladyboy team to compete. In the final match of the Thailand National Volleyball Tournament, the ladyboys were victorious, and Thai sports fans went wild with excitement. A movie was produced and distributed internationally under the English title, “The Iron Ladies” (2000, director Youngooth Thongkonthun). This comedy movie was so successful that a sequel “The Iron Ladies II” was produced in 2003 by the same director.<sup>14</sup>

No sport epitomizes Thai masculinity more than Muay Thai kickboxing. Thai men are avid boxing fans, and they looked on in amazement as a young ladyboy named Nong Toom (born 1981) turned out to be an excellent boxer. This very feminine, cross-dressing male, whose parents and other relatives were typically quite accepting of their



ladyboy son, had a strong desire to bring in money to help her impoverished parents. To the surprise of many, Nong Toom kept winning boxing matches. She hated the violence of the sport, especially if the fight broke one of her fingernails, but she knocked out one opponent after another. In 1998 Nong Toom won the national championship boxing tournament, and once again the mass media gave much attention to a famous ladyboy. After this boxing champion made enough money to secure a comfortable life for her parents and herself, she retired from boxing and had a sex-change operation. Nong Toom is now a well known actress living in Bangkok. An award-winning movie has been made about this famous Thai sports figure, and it has been distributed internationally with the English title “Beautiful Boxer” (2004, writer/ director Ekachai Uekrongtham). Many Muay Thai kickboxers auditioned for the chance to play the role of Nong Toom, and well known professional boxer Asanee Suwan was chosen for the starring role. Sports, therefore, have been a factor in the social acceptance of transgender and gay males.<sup>15</sup>

While mass media attention to gay activism, AIDS initiatives, prominent public figures, and even sports have fostered a climate of acceptance in Thailand, the country is also subject to outside influences that are not so accepting of sexual freedom. The most recent political controversy in terms of same-sex attraction has to do with the suppression of youth sexuality. Pressured by the United States government, recent Thai administrations have passed “age of consent” laws to prevent Thai young people from engaging in sex. Partly this is a justified attempt to inhibit child prostitution, but it also runs the danger of countering traditional Thai casual attitudes toward sexual experimentation among children and adolescents. With more Thai social workers and law enforcement officials being trained in the United States, with its current hypersensitive

attitude toward any kind of sexual expression among youths, a number of Thai gay activists I have interviewed are afraid that Thailand might become afflicted with the same kind of sex scandals that often erupt in American politics.

## THAI BUDDHISM

Though under Thailand's democratic constitution every Thai person has the freedom to practice whatever religion they wish, over 90% of Thai people are Buddhist. Since one Buddhist country after another has succumbed in the last few centuries to conversion by the expansionist missionary religions of Christianity and Islam, Thai people I have interviewed are determined that Thailand should remain a Buddhist country. Everywhere I have gone in Thailand, at government offices and public schools there are statues of the Buddha on prominent display, and Buddhist monks give lectures in public schools. Buddhist monks were, traditionally, the teachers of youth before the rise of the public school system. Even today, Buddhist schools are quite prominent in providing an education for students whose parents are too poor for them to afford even the minor costs of attending government high schools. In 2006 I volunteered to teach English at one of these Buddhist schools at a monastery in a small town in north Thailand, and all of the students came from poor families.

Though Thai people can sometimes seem to deify statues of the Buddha as they pray in Buddhist temples, the Buddha stressed that he was not a god. Buddhists do not believe in an all-powerful deity. God-worshipping religions inevitably divide humanity into two opposing camps: those who believe in god, and those who do not believe in god and are hence enemies of god. With this view, those who follow a list of god's commandments as specified in a specific sacred text (which text is considered sacred

differs, of course, according to each god-worshipping group) are guaranteed salvation after death, while all others are not.

Although he did not challenge Hindu beliefs of reincarnation, the Buddha did not really pay much attention to what happens after death. Instead, the Buddha focused on what happens during the course of life. The Buddha's initial teaching, what Buddhists call the First Noble Truth, emphasized the inevitability of suffering. It is impossible for any person to go through life without experiencing suffering. His philosophical teachings were designed as a means of relieving suffering and achieving a life of serenity and enlightenment (Nirvana). By suppressing greed, anger, and stupidity, and instead emphasizing happiness, learning, creativity, and devotion to helping others, a person can aim toward an enlightened state of existence. By recognizing that one can make oneself miserable simply by desiring something that one does not have, the Buddha counseled his followers not to let their desires overtake them. But rather than practicing extreme denial or extreme indulgence, he said that a "Middle Way" approach is best. Rather than repressing one's desires, or conversely overindulging in them, Buddhists advocate moderation.

The Buddha stressed that nothing is permanent, that the state of the universe is constant change and impermanence, and so he advised his followers not to try to hold onto attachments since they would inevitably dissolve in impermanence. The Buddha taught people not to regret the past, since it is already over and done with, and nothing can be done to change it, nor to worry excessively about the future, which is totally unpredictable since so many factors can alter it in so many ways. Instead, he said, it is best to focus one's life and attention on the present, on having a fulfilled life by making

each and every moment the most happy and pleasant that one can achieve. Happiness is gained, though, not by indulging in selfish desires to others' detriment, but by spreading happiness to others.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than seeing sex, and especially homosexual sex, as sinful, Buddhist ethics focus on creating happiness. If a person rapes another person, or imposes himself sexually on another person against their will, then that causes unhappiness and is morally condemned. On the other hand, if a person gives happiness to another person, whether through sexual enjoyment or through other means, that is considered a moral good. Whether sexual happiness is provided to a person of the other sex or of the same sex is immaterial. Buddhism thus takes a neutral attitude on homosexuality or heterosexuality. As Thai Buddhist leaders I have interviewed have clearly articulated, it makes no sense for a religion to oppose a condition of being, or a basic sense of who a person is attracted to, for such large numbers of people as exist in reality. Buddhist thought is, therefore, realistic rather than dogmatic, and appeals to a person's reason rather than expecting blind faith. Some scholars have said that Buddhism is more accurately characterized as a philosophy of life rather than as a dogmatic religion. Above all, the Buddha stressed the need to show compassion and respect toward all people and toward all sentient beings of the earth and the wider universe.<sup>17</sup>

An accurate understanding of Thai attitudes toward sexuality necessitates an understanding of Buddhist ethics. Buddhism so thoroughly permeates Thai culture that it is a crucial element in Thai acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Due to the influence of Buddhism, Thai society has much lower levels of violence than in many other countries. One of the reasons Thailand has become such a popular tourist

destination is because tourists are much safer in Thailand than in most parts of the world. Tourists might suffer theft as their property is stolen by a Thai person, and Thai public opinion is quick to condemn such thievery, but such theft in Thailand is rarely done with violence. Religiously motivated violence does not exist. There is no such thing, for example, as a fundamentalist Buddhist kidnapping and murdering people in the name of god. Placard-waving Buddhists have never lined the shore of Thailand as a gay cruise ship approaches, shouting condemnations and throwing stones as has occurred to gay cruises docking in Christian countries. Any person claiming to do such things in the name of the Buddha would be considered insane.

Nevertheless, given its Buddhist heritage, one would expect that there would be no violence in Thai society. Sadly, that is not the case, and violent mistreatment of people does occur. Rape and sexual violence, both of women and of ladyboys, exist in Thai society. In my interviews with Thai people, I find that they often say that there are good Thais and bad Thais, the latter of which are not truly following the teachings of the Buddha. It is important to acknowledge that people are people, with all their flaws and shortcomings, and even a philosophy like Buddhism is not enough to prevent some people from mistreating others.

## THAI GAY PRIDE

Today Bangkok has the biggest annual gay pride parade in Asia; it has innumerable gay establishments ranging from upscale restaurants to raunchy nude all-male sex shows and it is internationally prominent as a gay-friendly tourist destination and retirement center. Pattaya is home to the annual Miss International Transgender Beauty Queen

contest. Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya, Phuket, and other Thai cities have huge Broadway-type musicals with beautiful transgender performers and openly gay dancers, and at every performance I have attended I have seen many Thai families in attendance with their children and elders. I have attended several “Miss Kathoey Beauty Pageants” that have been sponsored by local governments in even small towns, with the top prizes being handed out by high-ranking government officials. Politicians in Thailand seem pleased to have their photograph taken with the transgender contestants. Lesbian and gay troops serve openly in the Thai military without discrimination. Lesbian social networks and activist groups exist openly, in ways that would be impossible in many developing countries. In 2008 the third Asian regional conference of the International Lesbian and Gay Association was held in Chiang Mai, which also had a gay pride parade that was favorably received by residents of the city. The outlook for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Thailand seems not just favorable, but ideal.<sup>18</sup>

With such positive things going on in Thailand for LGBT people, it is easy to overlook the negatives. Though many queer people from more oppressive nations are envious, Thai transgender and gay people are not always in the best position that they could be. First, though they may be accepted by their family and community, job discrimination exists. Especially among Western educated Thais, transgender people may be considered base and low-class. Though it does not criminalize or persecute LGBT people, Thai law also does not offer many protections against discrimination. Second, the Thai government is very rigid in issuing national identification cards and Thai passports only in the sex of a person’s birth. Consequently, even transgender people who have been living as the other gender for many years still have to undergo the indignity of having

their birth sex listed on all their official documents. Transgender people I have interviewed say that the Thai government needs to make a policy change and allow transpeople to change the sex by which they are listed, or better yet to remove a reference to a person's sex from official documents.

Third, despite the fact that LGBT people can live with their same-sex partner without a problem, and may be accepted in their village or neighborhood as a couple just as a heterosexual married couple would be, there is no legalized marriage for same-sex couples in Thailand. Certain rights that exist in Thai law for married couples, including the right to travel or immigrate to another country as a couple, do not exist for LGBT couples. Marriage is not considered a religious ceremony (Buddhist monks do not officiate at, or even attend, wedding ceremonies), so this is an issue for the Thai government itself.

Beyond these specific legal issues, in my ethnographic research I have found that the main problems facing Thai LGBT people are the same problems that face other people in this freewheeling capitalistic nation with few governmental safety nets. Most notably, when I have asked Thai LGBT people about their wishes for the future, their most common response is to say that they want a stable relationship. This, though, is not easy because of family pressures for their young adults to marry heterosexually. In my interviews I have talked with many ladyboys who have felt dejected and abandoned when their boyfriend's parents forced him to marry a "real woman" so that the parents could have grandchildren. I have found that Thai ladyboys' despair in finding and keeping a permanent partner is the biggest cause for their unhappiness.

Second, LGBT people are concerned about who will care for them once they get old and cannot take care of themselves. Most people in Thailand depend upon their children for elder care. While Thai queer people are not hated or demonized, they may be pitied, mostly because they do not reproduce. When I have suggested to LGBT people that they should adopt homeless children, only one Thai person has told me that is what they want to do. There is not a Thai tradition of adoption outside of the extended family.

Third, like other Thai young people, Thai LGBT people I have interviewed often worry that they cannot make enough money to support their parents in their old age. Because heterosexual siblings marry and settle down with children of their own, it is the childless queer adult member of the family who often feels the most pressure to leave their village and travel to the big city or to another country to get cash for the parents' support. Thus, they may leave the gay-positive conditions in Thailand to move to another country, where they may be subjected to homophobic discrimination or violence. I have interviewed a number of these LGBT immigrants in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other cities in the United States. Ironically, it is because of their strong devotion to financially supporting their family that LGBT Thai people may neglect saving money and making investments for their own elder years. When I have asked these people what they think will happen to them in their old age, they either reply that they have not thought about that issue, or they are confident that their nieces and nephews will take care of them. However, all of the elderly LGBT people that I have met have been self-supporting. I have not been able to find out what happens to them after they can no longer work to provide for themselves, but I suspect that the strong Thai family system



operates to provide support for every elderly member of the family. Further study needs to be done to understand trends for elderly LGBT people in Thailand.

Attention to these problems, however, should not detract from the extremely favorable conditions for LGBT people in Thailand. A vision of what life can be like in a non-homophobic world can be gained by residence in a simple Thai village. Many queer people in other countries, who are in danger of being executed or imprisoned by fundamentalist governments, murdered by rampaging lynch mobs, thrown out of their home by homophobic relatives or landlords, or considered a shame to their family and religion, would give anything to experience this kind of freedom. Thailand, as “the land of the free,” is truly one of the world’s most favorable nations for sexual and gender minorities.

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#### Websites

[www.utopia-asia.com](http://www.utopia-asia.com)

[www.generalprem.com](http://www.generalprem.com)

For a perceptive recent history of gay activism in Asia, see Douglas Sanders article at

<http://fridae.com/newsfeatures/article.php?articleid=2132&viewarticle=1>)

## NOTES

5. Much of the research on which this essay is based is the result of the author's ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand, beginning in 1987. The most intensive period of fieldwork has been in 2003-2004 and from 2006 to 2008. Research sites have included study of urban gay communities in Bangkok, Pattaya, Kanchanaburi, and Chiang Mai, as well as teaching English to Buddhist monks and novices while living in a Buddhist monastery in a town in northern Thailand. The longest time, however, has been spent living in a small Isan rice-farming village in Maha Sarakham province in northeastern Thailand.

6. Baker and Phongpaichit, A History of Thailand and Wyatt, Thailand.

7. Ibid.

8. Lyttleton,

9. Ibid.

10. [www.generalprem.com](http://www.generalprem.com)

11. Peter Jackson, Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources (Elmhurst NY: Global Academic Publishers, 1989). See also Walter L. Williams review essay on this book, in the Journal of Homosexuality (1990).

12. Lyttleton

13. Walter L. Williams and Yolanda Retter, Gay and Lesbian Rights in the United States: A Documentary History (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2003).

14. See the films "The Iron Ladies" and "The Iron Ladies II" (2000 and 2003, director Youngooth Thongkonthun).

15. See the film “Beautiful Boxer”(2004) writer/ Director Ekachai Uekrongtham.
16. Peter Jackson, Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2003; Karen Armstrong, Buddha (London: Phoenix, 2002); Saneh Dhammavaro, Buddhism: Ethics and the Path to Peace (Chiangmai: Mahachulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya Buddhist University, 2001); M.L. Manich Jumsai, Understanding Thai Buddhism. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 2000); P.A. Payutto, A Constitution for Living: Buddhist Principles for a Fruitful and Harmonious Life. Bruce Evans, translator (Bangkok: National Buddhism Press, 1997).
17. Ibid.
18. For more resources on LGBT businesses and events in Thailand, see the website [www.utopia-asia.com](http://www.utopia-asia.com)

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