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TRANSFORMATIONS OF **SEXUALITY AND GENDER**

IN THE THAI PERSPECTIVE:
POLITICS, MEDIA, AND CITIZENSHIP

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Transformations of Sexuality and Gender in the Thai Perspective: Politics, Media, and Citizenship

Porranee Singpliam

To my family and partner

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Introduction

The realm of sexuality and gender is a complicated yet fascinating terrain in Thai society. It is the former because this realm has been and is currently regulated by instituted means through legislative measures and cultural norms. The diversity seen in Thai society is a source of fascination, whether it be in touristic areas, including Phuket or the Silom area in Bangkok; the entertainment industry, where Thailand is renowned for its Boys' Love and Girls' Love television series; or even medically, for Thailand is one of the top destinations to receive gender affirming surgeries in the world. Approaching these issues in Thai society can never be limited to a discussion of how gendered and sexual matters are governed, nor can it be encompassed within a celebratory milieu

regarding sexual and gender diversity alone. As something that is presided over by institutions and institutional actors, any attempts to manage sexuality and gender in Thai society can never be complete because of the intrinsic diversity that has characterized Thailand since historical times. The ultimate goals of this book are, first, to understand and explore how sex and gender issues are undergoing transformations within Thai society and, second, to question the extent to which these issues are a political matter.

Set against a neoliberal economic backdrop, sex and gender identities and activist issues in Thailand are never static. This book details the changes and transformations that have taken place, and continue to take place, within institutional domains such as religion, media, the economy, and politics, with a specific focus on cultural elements ranging from media representations and news to policies and regulations. Drawing on the legacy of Cultural Studies, the book examines sex and gender issues as central sites of struggle, emphasizing diverse cultural elements, particularly within the ordinariness of everyday life, and highlighting citizens as active agents rather than merely subjects regulated by the state. The book reflects current affairs in the 2020s, a transitional period marked by constant change rather than stasis. It reveals how underlying power relations, while pervasive, cannot entirely regulate sexual and gender matters, let alone the lives of citizens. Instead, the temporal scope of the 2020s exposes ongoing contestations in the dynamics of power, gender, sexuality, and politics.

To provide a general methodological overview for this book, I employ a qualitative research method where textual and content analysis are predominant. The cases that are mentioned engage with Cultural Studies and Gender Studies concepts. Where relevant, I refer to empirical data from my ethnographic fieldwork with distinct groups of Thais who are gay men, monks, and politicians. The analysis within the book heavily engages with contemporary cases in Thai society using a gender theory approach. The value of Western theory from pioneer thinkers is recognized, but at the same time, contextualization is needed to suit the locality that is Thailand. One of the most significant deviations from Western thinking concerns the amalgamation of sex, gender, and sexuality into the Thai term *phet*. I treat the performance of textual analysis as a critical task in this book for two predominant reasons. First, gender theory as an analytical approach under the discipline of Cultural Studies can unveil the most intrinsic barriers and struggles among various groups in a society, and because each society bears idiosyncratic characteristics, contextualization of many groundbreaking theories (such as those of Judith Butler, R. W. Connell, Heath Fogg Davis, and Michael Warner) is necessary. Second, by performing a close textual analysis of empirical social activities in Thai society (involving bodily politics, conscription, and Buddhist ordination, to name a few), this book engages with the overarching trajectory of *phet* in Thai society even as it is everchanging. For example, this book deviates from existing studies, which rely on mainstream reporting on the wage gap using a binaristic approach, to provide further critical analysis of this issue.

The main threads in this book are threefold. The first traces the genealogy of *phet* in Thai society through a diachronic study to assert that the binary *phet* that regulates Thai lives is a product of elitist construction. Moreover, historical traces show that such a construction was strategic where *only* the public was of key concern. This left space for *phet* diversity and eroticism to exist and flourish in society. While relying on Peter A. Jackson's diachronic study of Thai gender and eroticism, I recognize the immense value of a historical approach to researching gender cultures in the local Siam/Thai context. Yet my work develops this further by emphasizing how binaristic constructs shape the idiosyncratic relationship between citizens' bodies and the state, particularly how these constructs continue to shape forms of citizenship under neoliberal conditions, as the chapters will argue. The second theme continues with the discussion on the manufacturing of binaristic gender, which is the most powerful when it is instituted. *Phet*, therefore, should be conceptualized as a systematic structure resulting from the governance of gender through a Foucauldian account of bio-power, a kind of power that is exercised over one's corporeality. Such governing of sexes and genders can never be static, leading to the overarching third theme of this book, politicized *phet* and change. The remaining chapters discuss the ineluctable way *phet* is a political matter through the politics, media, and citizenship.

Overview of chapters

Chapter One, “On sex/gender in Thai society,” delineates how diversity regarding gender identities and sexualities has always existed in Siam (before the country’s name change in 1939). Such diversity, however, was a potential cause for Western intrusion into the sovereign state of the nation due to the lack of clear differentiation (in nineteenth-century Siam) between the binary sexes, which implied an uncivilized status to the Westerners. A historical trace, drawing upon Peter A. Jackson’s diachronic research on Siamese gender and eroticism, shows that the gender binary in Siam, and later, Thailand, was a product of cultural and political construction. This construction took form through the rulers’ and state’s exercising of bio-power unto the citizens’ bodies. Bodies are thus natural, cultural, and political. As I emphasize throughout Chapter One, the construction of sex/gender as binary goes on to impact lifestyles and the wellbeing of citizens in such a way that *phet* comes to have control over Thais’ lives. This construction, however, is not static. By drawing on the ideas of gender conceptualization, mainly from Judith Butler’s renowned theories on performativity, bodies, and gender identity, it appears that not only binary sex/gender is socially constructed. Despite its state of being socially constructed, the binary system of sex/gender also gives biological sex status as a truth. To maintain the constituted binary, many players must conserve and, at times, penalize those who transgress the “traditional” system of two sexes and two genders (normative heterosexuality). As I will discuss in detail, many contemporary incidents in Thai society show that actors are key in

preserving gendered performatives, but such acts and expressions can also undermine the force of the sex/gender construction as well. The chapter ends with providing a localized understanding of terminology related to sex/gender and diversity (that evades straightforward translation into Western terms). Ultimately, to grasp matters regarding sexes, genders, and sexualities, I assert that historical, constructed, and political elements must be taken into account.

Chapter Two, “Gendered relations and their effects,” discusses how *phet* can regulate citizens’ lives through the process of institutionalization. I explore how institutions act as the main foundation for *phet* ideology, most evidently through the examples of the Buddhist *sangha* and the Military Service Act. Instituted practices can also lead to stigmatization and unacceptance for those who are considered nonnormative. Furthermore, by drawing after Heath Fogg Davis’s seminal concept of sex-classification policy, I discuss sample cases where bodies are sexed and reinforced by both bureaucratic process (official documentations) and instituted norms. The results can be pernicious especially among those whose gendered selves do not align with their sexes assigned at birth. While binary sex is what norms and instituted practices are founded on, R. W. Connell’s groundbreaking theorization of gender relations proposes that sexual differences should *not* be the root cause for how individuals live their lives. Rather, when seen through various aspects of sex/gender relations (including the power, economic, emotional, and symbolic dimensions), the idea of “men as dominant sex class” (Connell 2021: 76) is changing, its power gradually undermined. I

then proceed to provide empirical data and statistics to show how *phet* relations in the four spheres are rapidly transforming, with several institutions maintaining a hold on patriarchal ties (where patriarchal dividends are still at stake). Changes that have taken place appear in legislation, medical institutions, education, and the media domain. I pinpoint, however, that while Connell's pioneering conception of gender relations is useful for unpacking influence, power, and resistance between *phet*, citizens, and society, I deviate from their concept by highlighting neoliberalism as contextualized in Thai society. Set under neoliberal establishments where resources and capital are key, I underscore how *every* individual is affected by neoliberalism, and their labor, agency, and precarity are thus impacted by the economic regime. This perilous situation is coupled with or exacerbated by their *phet*, to the extent that the simplistic binary sexual division of labor is no longer applicable.

Chapter Three explains how the business of the state is entwined with our lives. That the personal is political is thoroughly discussed in this chapter, "The politics of *phet*," starting with how a gendered state impacts the citizens' lives. What ripple effects are produced when statist authorities are male dominated? The first section details the gradual shift in the gendered pattern of the state. Politics as predominantly a masculine sphere is complicated by ideologies of reform, which also results in new masculine modalities that have transformed contemporary Thai politics. A measured shift has also manifested itself through the proportion of women in Thai parliament following the 2023 General Election. This section raises a question about the "homogeneity" of women as a category

(Mohanty 2006). In turn, this concern has sparked a debate on whether or not an increased proportion of women in politics has resulted in better wellbeing for the women of Thailand. This is drawn from the acumen of media pundits who question mediated “inclusivity” and “diversity,” in which “visibility results in invisibility” (Ott and Mack 2020). This section proposes that more diversity in terms of *phet* is needed for genuine representation of various groups, needs, and rights. As politics becomes more mediatized (Raicheva-Stover and Ibroscheva 2014), postfeminist sensibilities embodied by women politicians are rampant in Thai society, most vividly through the display of their wealth. This, too, is discussed in alignment with the politics of representation where it addresses heterogeneous citizens in Thai politics. The past decade has highlighted that wealth and (em)power(ment) can result in some policies being deprioritized. Currently, economic policy is emphasized. Neoliberalism indeed produces both empowering messages for various *phet* as well as acting as a barrier, given that resources are key.

Chapter Four, “Sex/gender in media,” explores how content related to sex/gender is mediated. Queer media is widespread in contemporary Thailand. Content about same-sex relationships has been endorsed by the Thai government in the past few years, and memorandums of understandings (MoU) have been signed to promote *phet* diversity internationally. Despite the prevalence of queer media, however, there are penalties when content becomes obscene. The criteria for distinguishing content is dependent upon the explicitness of the sexualities and sexual acts portrayed onscreen. As Jackson (2004)

observes, “Thai images are political artefacts” and, indeed, when they relate to *phet* elements, they are politicized and heavily screened by the state. The chapter proposes that despite general acceptance of queer media content, the statist authorities monitor content that might tarnish the good morals of the country. Legal intervention can be performed through, for instance, the Computer Crime Act (CCA). This makes statist scrutiny or policing more about explicit eroticism and sexual acts than about queer media itself. State-monitored media thus differs from neoliberal driven media, especially in the era following the onset of the era following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic where eroticism is rampant online. Elements of economic benefit are carried on into narrativization and the availability of resources. While Thailand is home to many queer celebrities and influencers, their fame can be apolitical and detraditionalized from queer pasts. This results in the need to consider the politics of visibility in light of the increased presence of queer media today, where affective labor is central and has become more immaterial (Sender 2012). Whether or not the content creators have the intention to make it so is not revealed, but what is certain is that the currency of queer media can reproduce conspicuous consumption, which can be delimiting for some. The chapter argues resources are necessary to transcend gendered stereotypes, especially for trans women. It ends with (a)political media and the conspicuous consumption that is commonly found in Thai new media today. Influencers opt to manage their selves akin to a business (Gershon 2011), which coheres with (and is even expected in) a neoliberal economic structure. What can we make of the pervasiveness of queer

autonomy as depicted in the marketized media? Does it proliferate class difference and beauty norms? As it seems, sex/gender in Thai media is substantively accepted by the state and the public, but the degree of acceptance, nevertheless, casts some expectations on sexual propriety, normative appearance, and economic class.

Chapter Five peruses cultural norms related to Thai sexual lives. In contemporary Thailand, it is common to hear about women's empowerment in the news and media, especially in how women's sexual prowess is portrayed in media. Despite its prevalence, however, sexuality is perceived differently when performed by men versus women. The normative perception, especially, takes an unequal stance when it comes to women and sexual matters. The chapter "Sexual lives and citizenship" explores the main reason why this is the case. By tracing the development of Thai citizens' sexual lives, including eroticism and sexual labor, we find that cultural norms can be sexually biased toward men, and those in power can mobilize for changes in norms, with one example being the legalization of same-sex marriage. This part theoretically engages with the Foucauldian notion of knowledge production by way of normalizing something—in this case, sexual matters and sexual lives—which can result in the power to control those who are nonnormative. Norms, as the chapter argues, are often scaffolded by institutions. The chapter continues with what has happened after same-sex marriage, focusing on sexual citizenship. What is the status of an individual whose profession or preference is associated with sexual matters? It is crucial to peruse how sexual lives are often pathologized by statist authorities. This is an issue

that is currently under debate, and academically, it does bear significance as sexual matters are as much public as they are private. The way in which the state constructs the sexual lives of Thais on the public scale (read: inclusive, diverse, and sanitized) differs from public knowledge about sexual matters, which speaks volume about the multifaceted levels of the publics in Thailand. The publicization of sexuality, what is otherwise a most natural act, always risks being policed and scrutinized by the authorities and the public. While same-sex marriage is now legalized, sex workers are still castigated and criminalized. What does this say about sexual citizenship? As the chapter will argue, judicially and normatively, sexual lives are pathologized unless they exist in, as I propose, a sanitized manner. This requires something to rid us of the notion of agency or economic reasoning regarding what has led an individual to choose to perform sex work. Ultimately, the chapter ends by examining the legality of the sexual lives of Thais, where in some areas, they are legitimate according to the system, and in others, they are vilified and unprotected. This results in a situation where one's membership in Thai society can be precarious as they may choose to live a life not aligned with traditional Thai morals and norms.

Key terms

Phet

A Thai term that encompasses a local understanding of the concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. When used in English, the

term is written as sex/gender where the “/” connotes local discursive knowledge surrounding *phet*.

Sex

The biological attributes that categorize individuals into female, male, or intersex.

Gender

The socio-culturally mediated understanding of the categories of femininity, masculinity, and transgenderism.

Sexuality

An individual’s affection and attraction toward others. It can be directed toward the opposite sex (heterosexual), members of the same sex (homosexual), or more than one sex (bisexual or pansexual), or involve no attraction at all (asexual).

Transgender

A term used to describe an individual whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth.

Gender nonconforming

A term used to refer to individuals whose gender expression is not aligned with the conventional notion of a feminine woman or a masculine man. It is used as a more overarching term to emphasize incoherence between sex and gender.

Queer

In Thai, *khwam lak lai thang phet* or *phet lak lai*, it refers to sex/gender identities, cultures, communities, and lifestyles that do not cohere with the conventional understanding of

heterosexuality. Individuals with genderqueer identities are referred to as *khon thee mi khwam lak lai thang phet*.

Kathoey

An individual whose sexual biology is male and expresses feminine gender characteristics. Today, the word contains almost no negative connotation. It is used by individuals to describe themselves (self-chosen identity) or as a form of address toward those whose characteristics are overtly feminine.

LGBTQIAN+

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, agender, aromantic, nonbinary, and beyond. These signify diversity in terms of gender identities, which may be fluid, diverse, and endless.

Sexual citizenship

A citizen's access to rights based on self-chosen sexuality. It emphasizes the political relations between citizens and society.

The state

Refers to a political entity of a society that includes government, statist authorities, and branches. It is accountable for regulating the citizens and populations within its unified territory.

On Sex/Gender in Thai Society

“In Thailand, we believe diversity is amazing.” (Go Thai Be Free)¹

Changes within

In August 2024, Janjaem (Bee) Suwannapheng won a bronze medal in the women’s boxing 66 kg (welterweight) category at the Olympic Games Paris 2024. *Khaosod English* (2024) writes that Janjaem assured the Thai boxing team an Olympic medal despite the results from the semifinals round. While this was a source of pride for the nation, Janjaem’s journey into the semifinals was a matter of international scrutiny, especially in the

¹ Tourism Authority of Thailand, <https://www.gothaibefree.com/>.

aspects of sex, gender, and dignity. Her competitor, an Algerian boxer, Imane Khelif, had been ousted by the International Boxing Association (IBA) and ridiculed online by public figures such as J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk, illustrating how society and institutions prejudicially categorize gender and bodily appearance. The *Daily Mail UK* writes that “The 25-year-old was disqualified from IBA competition in late 2023 on the heels of reportedly failing undisclosed ‘gender eligibility tests’ . . . forcing the fighter to defend herself from the allegations and prompting a strong statement in support of her selection” by the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) president, Thomas Bach (Prenn 2024). On social media platforms, both Janjaem and Khelif were subjects of cyberbullying where they were ridiculed with statements such as “This Thai boxer looks like a man also,” “Talking about Algerian Boxer [sic] being a man this one looks more manlier,” or “Seems that both are men.”²

The story of Janjaem and Khelif is not about the categorization of gender alone. When a public figure such as Donald Trump tweets that men should not compete in women’s sports or that there should be no tolerance toward “male violence”³ in sports (Khomami 2024), these tweets are aimed toward dehumanization rather than misidentifying sex-based categories in sports, as these influential figures would claim them

² Funny Thailand News’ YouTube Channel headlined the clip “Man VS Women?? Thailand’s boxer Janjaem Suwannapheng faces Imane Khelif in epic olympic showdown!” It was posted on August 4, 2024, accessible via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rb9Ayz6phE>. These comments were posted in English.

³ Referring to the match between Khelif and an Italian boxer, Angela Carini, where Khelif won the competition in under one minute (Ingle 2024).

to be. There are a number of issues that should be discussed based only on the boxing competition, namely:

- Who was tasked with investigating the players' chromosomes through what the IBA calls "gender eligibility tests"?⁴
- Why did the IBA and its accomplices brazenly unveil the results of their "undisclosed 'gender eligibility tests'" (Prenn 2024) at the Olympics after the IOC had already screened and accepted players based on their bureaucratic documents (in this case, passports)?
- Why does society (in particular, anonymous social media users) disdain players based on their appearance? What do these questions of power, moral integrity, and the gender binary say about the society that we are living in?

Gender issues again became the basis of a national controversy when, in the latter half of August 2024, Thailand had a new prime minister—a civilian and a woman—following the dissolution of the Move Forward Party (hereafter MFP). Paetongtarn (Oonging) Shinawatra's rise to become the leader of the Pheu Thai Party in August of 2023 and her ascendance to the prime ministership in August of 2024 speak volumes about the kind of gendered society we live in and how society "mold[s] us] into being either men or women" (Chalidaporn 2010: 387).

⁴ This test is incorrectly named as it examines the person's chromosomes, not their gender, i.e., their self-identified gender identity. These terms will be explained further below.

Paetongtarn became the second woman⁵ prime minister of Thailand (2024-2025); the first was her aunt, Yingluck Shinawatra (2011-2014). Having had two women prime ministers in Thailand says a lot about the current state of political ideology and gender in Thai society, both politically and socio-culturally. One obvious point is the visibility of women as heads of state. Thailand ranks seventh in the list of countries where women have assumed leadership positions as the heads of governments or nation-states, following countries like Iceland and Malta with three women prime ministers and leading Italy with only one woman prime minister as of August 2024 (Gupta 2024). On one hand, some may view Yingluck's ascension to the prime ministership as a product of coming from one of the "entrenched, well-heeled political families." As Nishizaki observes, "Yingluck, younger sister of the ousted prime minister Thaksin, exemplifies this pattern" where women's inroads into politics are mostly derived through "blood or marriage" (2018: 376). On the other hand, we ought to address the notion of sex and gender relations between women and men in Thai society. Conventional beliefs would presume that the political domain is men's (Bjarnegård 2009) and that its characteristics are masculine, but over the previous decade we have seen that the rapport between women and men in the Thai political domain is gradually changing, especially in provincial politics (Fishel 2001). This

⁵ I use the term "woman" to emphasize their self-identified personhood as a woman and to stray away from the biological essentialist terms of female and male traditionally used to describe a person or an individual. This means that any individual who identifies themselves as a woman ought to be identified as such regardless of their sex at birth.

has affected regulations and modes of governing society at the national level.

Apart from sports and national leadership, statistics related to people at the margins and periphery are also worth investigating in the Thai context. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Thailand writes that they are committed to an “equal and inclusive society” along the same lines as UNDP’s Gender Equality Strategy (2022-2025).⁶ Their multiple ongoing projects work to “shift power structures and the economic, social, and political systems that perpetuate discrimination, to ensure a more inclusive, safe, and sustainable society for all genders” (*UNDP Thailand* 2024). They report that as of 2021, women hold 15.8% of seats in the Thai parliament; 53% of LGBT respondents report that they faced verbal harassment in 2019; and there are more than 2,000 sex workers nationally who received support from UNDP Thailand “to improve their resilience” and receive “vocational training” in past years. What is of note from these statistics is that women, gender nonconforming individuals, and sex workers’ voices are now being heard in domains that are nonnormative such as the national parliamentary system and an international agency, namely, an International Development body under the United Nations. Statistical observations like these beg the question of what kind of gendered society the Thai people are living in and the changes they are facing with regards to gender within the context of Thai society.

⁶ UNDP Thailand’s official website, <https://www.undp.org/thailand/gender-equality>.

Additionally, the Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum ranks Thailand in 65th place out of 146 countries.⁷ The report's section on economic participation and opportunity places Thailand 21st, and puts it in 102nd place for political empowerment, showing that out of the four indicators, Thailand does well in the economic domain. A closer look at the statistics shows that such a high position in terms of economic participation is limited merely to a specific group. Only certain individuals or groups possess the resources and capital necessary to excel in this arena. This issue of statistical representation will be explored later in the book as it probes into the notion of visibility *vis-à-vis* representation.

Despite discernible statistics that are indicative of gender relations specific to Thai society, one of the reasons why the shift in gender relations is gradual is because of the cultural attitude that Thailand is a “‘tolerant but unaccepting’ country for LGBT people,” as Jackson characterizes it (Jackson cited in Ojanen *et al.* 2016: 43). Although the legalization of same-sex marriage in Thailand became effective in January 2025, socio-cultural stigmas and struggles are common among gender-diverse individuals, especially transgender individuals. These examples from a nongovernmental organization and nonprofit journalism organization emphasize a loophole in the specific kind of gendered society that Thais are living in. I would like to emphasize that though the nation is experiencing changes, because gender intersects with other

⁷ World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>.

socio-cultural categories, it is a vexing area to comprehend, yet worthy of exploring in the drive toward full inclusion and equality. The comments on diversity from the Human Rights Watch and the Pulitzer Center below reveal that despite being a country known for heterogeneity, yet strides are being made toward inclusivity in Thai society (UNDP 2019).⁸

Thailand has limited legal provisions that offer some security to transgender people, but they fall far short of comprehensive protections . . . In 2007, Thailand's legislature passed the Persons' Name Act, which allows transgender people to apply to change their name. The act, however, did not give people the option to apply to change their legal gender. Name change requests are approved at the discretion of individual administrators. Under the 2015 Gender Equality Act, which prohibits discrimination against people on the basis of gender expression, the legislature attempted to address some forms of discrimination experienced by transgender people. Yet the government has failed to adequately implement the law. The Committee on Determination of Unfair Gender Discrimination, which has the authority to enforce the law, heard 27 cases of alleged discrimination against transgender people between 2016 and 2019. Many of these cases took more than three months to adjudicate, and none of the eight parties found responsible received punishment.

(Holmes 2021)

⁸ UNDP Thailand's (2019) report "Tolerance but no inclusion: A national survey on experiences of discrimination and social attitudes towards LGBT people in Thailand," <https://www.undp.org/publications/tolerance-not-inclusion>.

Thailand, renowned as a welcoming travel destination for the queer community and for its embrace of gender diversity, presents a paradox for its transgender population. Despite a perception of acceptance, the reality for trans individuals in the country reveals a landscape marked by challenges in gender-affirming care, gender recognition, and healthcare access that impacts their overall health. . . . Nachale Boonyapisomparn, . . . co-founder of the Thai Transgender Alliance (ThaiTGA), sheds light on the pressure placed upon trans people to conform to societal norms, underscoring the limitations of acceptance within rigid societal structures and expectations, such as meeting certain behaviors and beauty standards.

(Sarat Tosakoon 2023)

As it appears, gender issues in Thai society are everchanging and developing. From examples of gender nonconforming folks from sports to politics, there can be no stagnant pattern for gender, rather it is historical and it is changing. What this means is that it is too simplistic to surmise that Thai society is male dominated in *all* areas of life. There are indeed advantages attached to certain sexes, and indisputably, male chauvinism, or societal values directed toward men and prejudices that may be cast upon women and other genders, still exists (Juree Vichit-Vadkan 2008: 129). Though socio-cultural norms that linger within Thai society have impacts upon minoritized individuals and groups, changes have taken place and are ongoing. As Falk writes, “In comparison to women in South and East Asian societies, women in Thailand are considered to have greater gender equality, at least in certain areas. . . . Thai society is described as heterogeneous, with regional and class

variations, and it has been characterized as having a system of gender complementarity” (2008: 96-97).

Under the frame of gender complementarity, there are certain areas where males still dominate. Prominent examples are the Thai military, the police cadet academy, and Buddhist religion, especially the Theravada sect that forbids women from becoming ordained monks, such that their ecclesiastic path to reaching nirvana is automatically impenetrable. Falk (2008) discusses at great length women’s involvement in Thai-style Buddhism by becoming nuns (*mae chii*) or female monks (*bhikkhuni*). It is also not unusual to see women working in the police force. However, they mostly occupy desk jobs where specialized communication skills are required (Asaree Thaitrakulpanich and Staff Reporter 2018). Once again, it is difficult to conclude that Thailand is utterly patriarchal. There are various levels of practices, classes, and borders where we see women, gender nonconforming individuals, and transgender individuals occupy spaces that, in fact, contribute to the emphasis on tolerance (versus inclusion) in the UNDP’s 2019 report.

The gender issues in the examples provided above as well as that unfold in the everyday lives of the Thai people, I suggest, can be experienced on two levels: the personal and the state.⁹ The former is a key characteristic of Thai lives—queer visibility in everyday interactions—

⁹ I opt to use the term “the state” to refer to a political entity of a society, which includes the government and statist authorities, for instance. The state, which I will be referring to throughout the book, is accountable for regulating its citizens and populations within a unified territory, that is, Thailand.

which attests to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)’s famous slogan “Go Thai Be Free.” The idea that “In Thailand, we believe diversity is amazing” is rather debatable, as the examples of male-dominated domains such as the military, the police force, and Thai-style Buddhism suggest, and women hold very little representation in those arenas, if any. Some may even say that the TAT’s slogan only serves to rake in “pink dollars” to benefit the Growth Domestic Product (GDP) of the country, since tourism tops the national GDP at almost 20% (Huang 2022). Alternatively, another way we can grasp the issue of gender in Thai society is at the level of the state. There are certain parts of society that allow us to do and be certain things and prohibit us from doing and being others. Why is it that women are not allowed to ordain as monks in Thai *sangha*? Why did the royal cadet academy cease to accept women to study in their academy? Why are some LGBTQIAN+ individuals still facing negative stigma and discrimination to the extent that they are prevented “from reaching their full potential as workers, students and community members?” (UNDP 2019) And the overarching question is “Who gets to decide?” Over time, will the state’s laws be enforced or, for that matter, changed?

It is in this manner that I wish to set the tone for this book: recognizing that Thai lives are political and that thinking of Thai daily lives as depoliticized is a form of self-deceit. As it stands, the statistics reported in the Gender Gap Report may or may not correlate with the lived experiences of Thai people, especially when topics such as dignity, gender identities, or even respectability are not part of the discussion. But, as seen through the four examples of women boxer Olympians, women

prime ministers, statistics on the global gender gap, and progress earned by LGBTQIAN+ groups in Thailand, the rhetoric of tolerance but not full acceptance shows that gender is entwined with our lives in a political way. Thai lives are politicized, and gender (and, as I will argue later, biological sex) is one key factor that has been forcibly used to regulate and determine whether people are viable as subjects or not. Janjaem and Khelif's story, Paetongtarn's rise to become the second woman prime minister, or even the TAT's slogan that going to Thailand allows one to be "free"—all of these ought to be considered through the lens of how Thai lives and choices are intertwined with the system and its structure. And in this sense the study of gender, sex, and sexuality is politicized as these aspects are gradually changing, which offers a novel way to understand and welcome changing *phet* relations.

Binary as constructed

Thai society has not always been structured as a binary. Moreover, its trajectory forward is most certainly not binaristic, as the Senate has passed a marriage equality bill in June of 2024 that became effective as of January 23, 2025 (*Aljazeera* 2024a). Specifically, existing research in Peter A. Jackson's (2003) diachronic study on Siam's¹⁰ bio-history of same-sex and transgender cultures finds that the process of distinguishing its citizens into an "either/or" category, i.e., woman or man, was influenced by the encroaching power of Western imperialism during the

¹⁰ The country's name was changed to Thailand in 1939.

nineteenth century. The gender binary was never deep-rooted in Siamese society. Below, I will delineate the ways in which the gender binary should be perceived as a social construction, a process that was constituted with power dynamics from the top-down at its inception.

The idea of a clear distinction between women and men was influenced by imperialist gender ideologies, which means that the differentiation of local people into “either/or” categories was not innate to local Siamese society. What exactly do I mean by the binary as constructed? Judith Butler (2002) writes in *Gender Trouble* about the “controversy over the meaning of *construction*,” specifically that the nebulosity of construction contains a philosophical dichotomy between “free will and determinism” (2002: 12). Following Butler, within this section I will demonstrate the historical enforcement of power on bodies, seeing the body “figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” (Butler 2002: 12-13), where the external relation in this case is Western imperialism. I wish to emphasize that the gender binary and its ideology can *only* be sustained so long as cultural expectations and sanctions are also imposed at the same time.

This offers another insight into the idea of construction: that construction may become something apart from an instrument or medium standing in for something else, e.g., national identity or even civilized status. It is therefore helpful to turn to Butler’s examination of another part of construction, where they write, “to what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive