

From the Iron to the Lady: The *Kathoey* Phenomenon in Thai Cinema

The Iron Ladies: El fenómeno *kathoey* en el cine tailandés

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Abstract

Even though they lack any legal rights, the *kathoey*, also known as *ladyboys*, have great social relevance in Thailand. We face a different way of looking at homosexuality, starting with a more tolerant consideration from the religious point of view thanks to the way it is conceived through karma. The successful release of *The Iron Ladies* (Thongkonthun, dir., 2000) initiated the production of an increasing number of gay films in Thailand. Choosing the standpoint of queer theory, this paper attempts to put across the reasons behind the success these films have found, studying the way Thai culture, particularly its cinema, depicts the various homosexual factions: the portrayal of the *kathoey* as a role model; an approach to the boom of male homosexuality in films; an investigation of the use of stereotypes; the evolution of the commercial gay comedy or the upsurge of dramas aimed at homosexual audiences.

Keywords

Thai cinema, gay cinema, *kathoey*, *ladyboys*.

Resumen

A pesar de que carecen de derechos legales, los *kathoey*, también conocidos como *ladyboys*, tienen una gran relevancia social en Tailandia. Nos encontramos ante una forma diferente de ver la homosexualidad, más tolerante en determinadas cuestiones, gracias a la visión que ofrece el budismo partiendo de una serie de preceptos fundamentados en el karma. El éxito alcanzado por la película *The Iron Ladies* (Thongkonthun, dir. 2000) dio paso a un creciente número de producciones cinematográficas de temática homosexual en Tailandia. Partiendo de la teoría *queer*, este trabajo intenta explicar las razones que existen en el incremento alcanzado por este tipo de películas, para ello es necesario hacer un estudio de la cultura tailandesa, en particular su cinematografía, y cómo se representan las diferentes formas de entender la homosexualidad: la imagen de los *kathoey* como un modelo a seguir, el auge de la homosexualidad masculina en las películas, el uso de estereotipos, la evolución de la comedia comercial homosexual o el aumento de dramas cinematográficos dirigidos a un público predominantemente homosexual.

Palabras clave

Cine tailandés, cine gay, *kathoey*, *ladyboys*.

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1. Introduction: The Kathoey

Anyone who wants to study the subject of homosexuality in Thailand should first learn at least a few things about the language of the country. The main problem we found was that in Thailand the separation between gender and sex is almost nonexistent. Historically, the categories of sex and gender would be included in the term *phet*. These categories are three: *phu-chai* to refer to male/man; *phu-ying* for female/woman; and an intermediate category that is known as *kathoey*.

The word *kathoey* denotes a person (man or woman) that expresses hermaphroditism or exhibits behaviours that are not considered appropriate to their sex. The *kathoey*s are called the third sex both in the academic speech and in a more popular context. This word is not only used to refer to biological males but also includes male women (tomboys) and their female partners (dee, from lady), bisexuals, queens, kings, ladyboys and any other words that refer to homosexuality (Jackson & Sullivan, 1999: 4).

The idea that the term *kathoey* means a specific type of homosexual is wrong, possibly influenced by the Western dichotomy between the two genders (Brummelhuis, 1999: 122-123). The words queer and *kathoey* are very similar: both terms were used pejoratively towards people who were hermaphrodites or whose sexual orientations were other than those established by heteronormative society. The term queer has traditionally meant strange or unusual and is associated with the gay community: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Over time, the two words, queer and *kathoey*, have underwent a series of semantic transformations that have made them move away from their originally negative connotations.

The entry of the western word *gay* in Thai society is fairly recent, but its use in Thailand has relegated the word *kathoey* to what we understand as transgender, transvestites and transgender, and specifically focused on men. *Kathoey would become what we know as Ladyboy*. Also, the word lesbian has failed to be accepted by Thai society because it is very difficult to translate into the Thai language (Jackson, 2001: 16-17).

In studies on sexuality in Thailand there is no difference between transgender and homoeroticism or between homosexual behaviour and identity according to the research conducted by Peter Jackson, a gay activist and a Thai history researcher from the Australian National University (Jackson & Sullivan 1999: 5-6).

However, in western research about Queer Theory there is a separation between gender and sexuality which is one of the highlights of these studies. As mentioned by Donald Morton, “the separation of sexuality from gender... mark the birth of queer theory” (1997: 14); and Eve Sedgwick argues that “the question of gender and the question of sexuality are not the same question” (1991: 30). But in the Thai case these distinctions are not viable, so we should do a review of western Queer Theory. Dennis Altman (1996) for example, presents the idea of «global queering» as there is a homogenization of homosexuality from the perspective of western archetypes. Models created in the West are later used to find similarities with the rest of the world in a way that generalizes the subject of a study proving to be an inappropriate method, as Altman said.

2. Religion

Another important aspect of Thailand is that it is a nation heavily influenced by Buddhism. Within the Buddhist scriptures in the *Tripitaka*, we find the Vinaya or monastic disciplinary code of Theravada Buddhism, the branch of Buddhism followed in this country. The Vinaya is understood as the rules governing the order and must be practiced by Buddhist monks who form the *sangha*, or community. Four types of sex/gender are described within these texts. First, there is the category of men and women; plus two additional categories called *ubhatobyanjanaka* and *pandaka*, which refer to hermaphroditism and homosexuality, respectively. According to Bunmi Methangkun (1986) both concepts have been translated into Thai as *kathoeys*.

Buddhism has a great power within this country where the three pillars of Thai identity are: the ideas of nation, religion and monarchy. Buddhism began as an order of celibate men who lived in a community, or *sangha*. Within the texts of Theravada Buddhism there are a number of references to homoerotic behaviour. The problem is that these texts are set in a period over two thousand years ago, so it is very difficult to contextualize them in the present time.

To Buddhist monks control over their desire, whether sexual or otherwise, is very important. Hence, that any monk who has sex is defeated on his road to Nirvana. The control and the extinction of desire is the basis for ending the suffering and attaining salvation, so gay men are seen as the antithesis of the spiritual process.

Buddhism explains that being a *kathoey* is akin to some kind of punishment, a karmic consequence of having done evil deeds in a previous life. These wrong deeds often are violations of a sexual nature, such as the lack of sexual control. Former monk Isaramuni (1989: 3-4) and Phra Ratchaworamuni believe that homosexuality comes from this lack of control which is beyond normality.

According to Bunmi anyone can become a *kathoey* or has been one in some previous live, so everyone should be tolerant to them. Bunmi raises the question: How many times may we be *kathoey*s in the future? (Bunmi Methangkun reported in Jackson, 1998). Thus, Buddhism tends to be tolerant to people who are attracted to others of the same sex, but also exerts a strong anti gay influence. When AIDS was expanding all over the world some Buddhist writers participated in the stigmatization of homosexuals. Their texts were based on certain Buddhist teachings that contributed to spread of fear and repudiation of homosexuals and that became the first cause of the propagation of this disease. At present time, some abbots allow transvestites or *kathoey*s to be ordained as monks because they believe that we should judge people on their mental state and not on their exterior appearance.

3. Thai Society

From the outside Thailand seems to be free of prejudices about homosexuality, to some extent because of their great sex tourism market in this country. But in reality this vision is partially incorrect. Usually it is quite difficult for Thai people to openly declare themselves homosexual because homosexuality still has a negative connotation. Maybe there are not direct sanctions against homosexuals, but in their social environment they can experience emotional damages as results of insults and gossips. This is one of the reasons why homosexuals are ostracized and they only act openly within a circle of extremely close people (Sinnott, 1999: 102).

Paradoxically, in Thai society some sectors of homosexuals are not hidden, but, quite the opposite, they are fairly visible, as in the case of transvestites, who have become the institutional images of *kathoey*. On the other hand, the case of the Tom or Lesbians is more problematical because they are still considered taboo and Thai society remains reluctant to accept female homosexuality (Sinnott, 1999: 102).

It is also worthy of remark the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, by both heterosexuals and homosexuals, as reflected in Thai mass media such as television and

the press, as well as cinema. In some cases homosexuals play as supporting characters to the heroes and heroines as assistants and also as comic relief. Thai cinema not only promote the stories if gay in this society as the main characters but also communicate the need to recognise the dignity of gay people as human being even when working with stereotypes (Sungsri, 2008: 233).

Stereotypes are constantly moving in all cultures. For example, in Western societies since the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, homosexuality and the homosexual condition have been –both academically and popularly– linked to some kind of illness or labelled as immoral or perverse behaviour. The problem is the myth that homosexuals are sick or evil people who are by nature insatiable sex predators still survives in some societies and keeps on leading to punishment and repression nowadays.

In his book *History of Sexuality* Foucault declares that possibly there have always been homosexuals but the «character» has been created by recent medical –more specifically, psychiatric– discourse since the second half of the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1976). In Thailand the attitude of the middle class plays a very influential role in the public opinion about *kathoeys*. Amongst the representatives of that professional middle class are psychologists or psychiatrists whose ideologies tend to be anti-gay or anti-homosexual. Thus, it is quite difficult for a *kathoeys* to enter the professional middle class, and they may even meet some trouble in certain sectors of education. For those reasons they hide their sexual condition in the public domain. The Thai tendency to avoid loss of face and painful communications nobody talks about it. Ten Brummelhuis has called this idea of “everybody knows but nobody talks” and called it the «Conspiracy of Silence» (Brummelhuis & Herdt, 1995).

The spread of AIDS in the early 1980s further strengthened homosexual repression. Thailand opted for denial and silence. Before the boom of the contagion of the virus, Thais believed Asian people were genetically immune to STDs and only the *farang*, a term used to refer to foreigners, should worry about them. But in the 80s homosexual men, prostitutes and Western tourists in Thailand were accused of spreading AIDS. They became the biggest threat to public health in the eyes of politicians, physicians, the mass media, and other public figures, including Buddhist monks, which caused a big cultural impact on Thailand. As Jackson says:

Gay men in contemporary Thailand are in the process of negotiating this ambiguous psycho-cultural space and, in general, are attempting to overcome the stigma that attaches to homosexuality by aligning themselves with the gender-normative status of «men» and distancing themselves from gender deviant kathoey. (Jackson, 1995: 186-187)

4. Thai Cinema: Gay Films

Next, I will explore the field of gay films: how this type of cinema has increased since 2000; what its main themes are; its types of characters and the stereotypes associated with them.

I will begin with a short introduction to Thai cinema. The film culture in this country starts with the beginnings of the cinema invention when a group of Parisians arrived in Thailand to exhibit their films. The invasion of Hollywood blockbusters during the 80's and the 90's compromised the previously strong national industry, which had to resort to creating films for a new audience, the teenagers. Student comedies and dramas, action films and horror films for teenagers became so common that they hardly left place to any other film genre (Sungsri, 2008: 157-158).

From an annual production of 200 titles in the 70's, the number of films produced decreased to just a nine titles in the course of the 90's (Sungsri, 2008: 131). However, a new phase in the history of the Thai film industry started in 1997 when a group of filmmakers migrated from the world of advertising and TV to the film industry: the debut of Penek Ratanaruang, Nonzee Nimibutr and the arrival of Hong Kongese Oxide Pang (Chaiworaporn, 2001: 159-160). They were also joined by advertisers Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Yongyoot Thongkonthun, whose debut was the gay comedy *The Iron Ladies* in 2000. This phenomenon coincided with socio-sexual progressiveness triggered by the empowerment of civil society that found ever more spaces in the growing private sector to express itself. In the course of these changes a new genre was established whose success few people had anticipated: *kathoey*-films.

Also, old directors that had been set aside by the predominance of films for teenagers returned when the industry was opened to the new Thai proposals. Under the label of New Thai Cinema there was a mixture of new filmmakers with news ideas, old filmmakers that had picked up their careers and filmmakers that had already been working during the 90s and continued doing comedies, horror and action for young people. This phenomenon led to an increase in the number of Thai productions since 2000.

If we make an assessment of the most popular film genres in Thailand the first place would be for horror, followed by comedy. In a third position would be the films that treat the gay theme, whose popularity started with the national and international success of *The Iron Ladies*, which is based on real events: in 1996 the male team that won the Thai national championship of volleyball was almost completely integrated by gays, transvestites and transsexuals. The film tells the story of two young male volleyball players, Mon and Jung, who are continually rejected by different coaches because they are homosexual. Finally, a new coach (in this case, a lesbian) who is to create a team that represents the province in the national championships decides to give them an opportunity, which causes the departure of the rest of the team (heterosexual), except one.

Mon and Jung are forced to bring into the team several friends of theirs, including a gay sergeant, a transsexual cabaret performer and a gay Chinese, along with other players the coach has found and who also happen to be gay. In real life this team of twelve players became a focus of attention because of the appearance of the six homosexual ones, with their pony-tail hairdos, heavy make-up and effeminate screams and gestures. Both the film and the real facts show the diversity of opinions about homosexuality that exist in this country. On one side there is a sector of society that believes this team is a disgrace to the nation and should be disqualified; then, an apparently more tolerant second sector sees them just as a simple entertainment, having fun with the way they play; and finally, there are those who identify themselves with the players and see this team as a way to break into society, a model to follow.

The Thai government decided to expel two of the homosexual players from the national team to prevent them from competing on an international level for fear of the perception of Thailand they could generate abroad.

There was a sequel to this film, *The Iron Ladies 2* (Thongkonthun, dir., 2003), but it was not as successful as the first one. This second film tells of how the two main characters first met and what they did after competing in the national league in 1996. In both films we find a lot of stereotypes which resort to humour.

If we analyze the characters, we find a transsexual, various crossdressing homosexuals and two gays. The first stereotype is that, as expected of a transsexual, this character works as a *kathoe*y in a *kathoe*y cabaret, and then also, throughout the story, the character prefers to be referred as a *Second Type of Woman* or *Transformed*

Goddess. Despite attracting men, *kathoeys* believe that they are not entirely female and will never be able to consider themselves true women. The film also reflects another problem facing transsexuals: Thai legislation officially bans the sex change, in the birth certificate and in the passport, for that reason a big number of *kathoeys* go abroad in order to acquire a passport in which their sex change is recorded.

The crossdressing characters are the centre of the mockery because their behaviours and aesthetics are so stereotyped that they quickly become the subject of jokes and ridicule. Maybe the most finely elaborated characters are the men who simply like other men. A very common gay problem in Thailand is that homosexual men, for fear of social criticism and rejection or due to family pressure, marry women with whom they maintain a normal life while hiding their homosexuality. That happens to the Chinese member of the team in the film.

If we look at the entire production of *kathoey* films since the release of *The Iron Ladies* in 2000 until 2008, we can find more than twenty different titles. In the Thai film industry this genre that makes use of transvestites and transsexuals has become a very fruitful business in which almost anything goes. Most of the more commercially successful and mainstream films are light comedies that make fun of homosexuality, but at the same time attempt to send a message of understanding and acceptance to the community. We can consider it as a strange mix of mockery and tolerance.

Amongst the most commercial comedies there are titles such as *Spicy Beauty Queen Of Bangkok* (Arnon, dir., 2004), the story of a transsexual who is denied a bank loan for a sex change operation, so he decides to rob a bank along with three ladyboys, the four of them dressed as girls. Things get complicated when the plan does not come together as expected because there is another group of young people trying to rob the bank at the same time. Other films worth mentioning are *The Odd Couple* (Puttarattamamane, dir., 2007), *Metrosexual* (Thongkonthun, dir., 2006), *Cheerleader Queen* (Arnon, dir., 2003) and *Kung Fu Tootsie* (Mokjok, dir., 2007), the story of the power struggle between three Cantonese mafias. When one of them is on the verge of beating the others, their leader is seriously injured and he is replaced by his homosexual twin brother. The latter has lived with his mother since he was a child and is fond of women's clothes and dressing up just like a girl; he even invents his own fighting style: *lady boxing*. The word «tootsie» in the title alludes to the film Sidney Pollack directed in 1982 about an unemployed actor who, in desperation, decides to pass as a woman in

order to get a female role in a soap opera. In the fiction of Pollack's film the protagonist becomes a huge television celebrity in his transvestite persona though, in exchange for success, he has to conceal the fact that he is actually a man from everyone. We should also mention that there are also gay horror comedies like *Haunting Me* (Arnon, dir., 2007) in which four *kathoey*s try to exorcise ghosts because this is the only way to help one of the ghosts to avenge their deaths.

Besides so many comedies there are some commercial titles which are closer to romantic drama, though they are very unusual in an industry that, as mentioned earlier, concentrates on horror, comedy and action (heterosexual). One of those rare films is *Me... Myself* (Wachirabunjong, dir., 2007) in which a boy suffers from a kind of amnesia after a girl knocked him down. Both of them have gone through emotional break-ups but over time love begins to emerge between them. The problem is when he starts recovering his memory he remembers he used to be a *kathoey* who acted in a cabaret, but he cannot help loving the girl, who will have to decide whether she wants to be a transvestite's girlfriend. Eventually, the message of the film is the stereotype that someone will become homosexual if he is surrounded by homosexuals and the same thing goes for transvestites. Other important dramas we should mention are *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, dir., 2007) and *Bangkok Love Story* (Arnon, dir., 2007). Both of them approach the feelings that arise when two boys or two men fall in love. In the couple there is always one that keeps denying his feelings until he finally accepts what he truly feels. Also there is usually a relative or a friend with an anti-homosexual attitude who opposes the same-sex relationship while there is also another character in the opposite extreme, more tolerant and permissive, that helps the protagonists to make up their minds. *Love of Siam* provoked great controversy because it was presented as a teenage romance without mentioning its homosexual content. Some sectors of society attacked it as a mere gay film while others praised the openness with which people talked about teenage sexuality and how love is not limited to physical attraction but evolves toward the emotional plane.

Beside the aforementioned commercial films there have also been some independent productions. Apitchapong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady* (2004) focuses on the homosexual relationship between two boys. Although it undertakes the theme of homosexuality, this film is important above all because its director belongs in what we might be considered an *avant garde* filmmaker. He also directed *The*

Adventures of Iron Pussy (Weerasethakul and Shaowanasi, dirs., 2003), an action musical comedy in which the hero is a transvestite secret agent. This film is a tribute to the films this director saw in the 70s. The fact that the heroes and the assistants of the heroes are transvestites or transsexuals is very frequent in Thai films, as we can see, for example, in other films such as *Ghost Delivery* (Moeithaisong, dir., 2003). Finally, titled after Bangkok's gay scene and based on a true story, the film *Silom Soi 2* (Rangsitienchi, dir., 2006) focuses on the problem of AIDS in a homosexual relationship. As for *Rainbow Boys... Rung*, (Siwanukrow, dir., 2005) it is an adaptation to Thai society of the novel by Alex Sanchez which shows the dilemma of coming out of the closet in this country, the difficulties and fears it involves.

But, possibly, the film that best reflects Thai society with regard to homosexuality while treating more aspects of this subject is *Beautiful Boxer* (Uekrongtham, dir., 2003). Based on real life events, it tells the story of a Muay Thai fighter called Nong Toom who has felt feminine since he was a little boy and is convinced that he was born in the wrong body. This film is a long walk through the life of the protagonist, from his childhood with the Buddhist monks, which shows how this institution treats homosexuals: transvestite behaviours will be punished in this and in other lives. Also, when the protagonist is still a child, his mother tells him that if he dresses or makes himself up as a woman other people will laugh at him, though, later, his mother becomes his greatest supporter. Thai people cannot accept the fact that a member of their family is homosexual and will prefer to hide the truth.

Nong Toom finds his place in the world of Muay Thai fight, first because he earns enough to support his family and also because it is the only way he can save some money to pay for his sex change operation. In Thailand this operation is so expensive that it is the last step in his process of sex change for almost any *kathoey*. They can have many health problems because of self-administration of hormones to look more feminine without knowing exactly what they are taking or the possible side effects they may have on their bodies. This problem is reflected in the film too.

We can see the different reactions people have when they discover the true sexuality of the fighter –some of them reject him whereas others support him– and the process the protagonist undergoes to accept himself until he goes to a fight wearing his feminine makeup.

This character brings together the strength and the brutality involved in Muay Thai with the beauty and feminine sensuality expressed through feminine make-up and clothing. The live of Nong Toom unfolds as the struggle for self-improvement of someone who has discovered of his true sexual identity.

A very common theme in Thai cinema is the opposition urban versus rural. Rural areas are presided by a series of connotations such as the traditional idea of the foundation of Thai society on basic principles of harmony between man and nature. Conversely, in the urban environment of the city, people forget their origins and set themselves free from tradition, embracing the influence of modernity and extravagant behaviours. In most of the films mentioned above, *kathoey* migrate from the countryside to cities where they come out of the closet and freely express their so-called sexual deviation.

In conclusion I can assert that a significant number of gay-themed films have been produced in Thailand recently. We may contend that they mark the beginning of an open homosexual discourse within Thai society, or alternately they may be just an economic phenomenon in the local film industry. What is clear is that some of these films help the audience think or understand the different issues related to gender or homoeroticism; and, at the same time, gay viewers can see some positive images of homosexuals in contrast with the negative images they have to suffer daily, due to the institutionalization of certain stereotypes in Thai society.

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