

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316227992>

Ladyboys

Chapter · April 2016

DOI: 10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss311

CITATIONS

0

READS

2,852

1 author:



Dredge Kang

University of California, San Diego

9 PUBLICATIONS 41 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Gender and Sexuality in Thailand [View project](#)



The White Asian: Queer Racialization in Thailand [View project](#)

Ladyboys

DREDGE BYUNG'CHU KÄNG
Emory University, USA

Ladyboy refers to transgender women (male to female), usually in Thailand, but the term is also used in the Philippines, and to a lesser extent in other parts of Southeast Asia such as Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The term is rarely employed outside Asia, though it is also used to refer to transgender Asian women in Western countries. It is a construction combining the English “lady” with “boy.” Such use of English to express terms referring to gender and sexuality is common in Thai uses of English (Enteen 2010). Ladyboy is used as shorthand to simply render a diverse range of local gender variations such as Thai *kathoe*y or Filipina *bakla*. The term evolved from the context of tourism and contact with foreigners.

Ladyboy is generally not a gender identity but a label applied in settings involving contact with foreigners. In Thailand, the term is thus used synonymously with *kathoe*y, the common term for a transgender woman. However, this encompasses a wide range of gender presentations and identities (Käng 2012). Other common terms that are more likely to constitute an identity include *sao-praphet-sorng* (second-category woman) and *phu-ying-kham-phet* (transsexual woman). Many ladyboys just as well refer to themselves as women. One difference in the categorization of “ladyboy” in the Philippines and in Thailand is that in the Philippines, a ladyboy can also be referred to as a “gay,” since “gay” can encompass transgender people, whereas this is not the case in Thailand.

The term ladyboy is mostly applied to cabaret shows, sex tourism, and pornography

(like “shemale” or “tranny”). While some transgender women, especially those in relationships with foreigners, will refer to themselves as a ladyboy, the term is considered stereotypical and offensive by some transgender women because of its associations with sex work (Käng 2012). Ladyboy is a neutral descriptor in workplaces such as cabarets and bars, where use of the term is commonplace. Ladyboy has its most positive appraisal in beauty pageants, the largest and most famous of which are tied to cabarets such as Tiffany. Their annual international beauty pageant is broadcast nationally in Thailand with wide viewership. Ladyboy beauty pageants are a common fixture of life in both urban and rural areas in Thailand and the Philippines. These pageants can also be integrated with local religious activities, such as Filipino Santacruzan festivals or Thai temple fairs.

Ladyboy cabarets such as Alcazar, Calypso, and Simon are among the most popular attractions for tourists in Thailand and promote the “amazing” character and distinctiveness of Thailand. All major tourist destinations in Thailand (e.g., Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Samui) will have at least one ladyboy cabaret show. Ladyboy cabarets are also popular in the Philippines. While highlighting their beauty, the hook that ladyboys were born male also presents them like a freak show. Their popularity in Thailand has spread on the mainland Southeast Asian tourist circuit to neighboring Cambodia, where Phnom Penh and Siem Reap now both have ladyboy cabarets. Thai ladyboy cabarets also travel to play at venues throughout Europe and Asia, while Filipino ladyboys perform as contract entertainers in Japan.

The representations of ladyboys in Thailand are complex. They are often stereotyped as criminals in news reports. Their primary

role in films is comic or tragic. At the same time, Thais often express great admiration and awe for ladyboys' "wer" (exceptional) beauty, claiming that cabaret performers, beauty contestants, and stars possess extreme physical characteristics unattainable for "real" women. In Thailand, cosmetic surgery and other processes of self-transformation are often valorized rather than stigmatized. Therefore, feminization for ladyboys can be positively viewed. The various transformations of the body including use of cosmetics and women's clothing, growing long hair, removal of facial and body hair, use of hormone pills or injections, breast implants, other injections and surgeries to modify the shape of various facial and body features (e.g., shaving the Adam's apple, lifting the eyebrows, enlarging the hips), and vaginoplasty all come at a high cost, which is associated with class status (Aizura 2009). Unfortunately, ladyboys often are unaware of or ignore the health risks and disfigurement associated with excessive use of hormones, home injection of silicone and oils, and surgeries provided without proper medical supervision or post-care instructions (e.g., use of antibiotics to prevent infection, bandaging, or dilation of the neo-vagina).

Southeast Asia is generally considered to be more tolerant of transgender people than other regions of the world (Peletz 2009). This is considered especially true in Thailand and the Philippines. Thus, there is a tautological explanation for the high numbers of ladyboys in these areas. There are many ladyboys because they are accepted. Ladyboys are accepted because there are many of them. However, high tolerance does not mean that ladyboys are free from discrimination, stigma, or violence. There are also different perceptions of acceptance from outsiders and insiders. While internationally circulating Thai films such as *Beautiful Boxer* and *Iron Ladies* suggest to foreigners that Thailand is very tolerant of transgender people, Western

viewers who have seen popular Thai films such as *Sassy Players* or *Haunting Me* that never get exported would be offended at the portrayals (Käng 2011).

Ladyboys are generally limited to a number of professions in beauty salons, food service, entertainment, and sex work. Contrary to some popular Western accounts, ladyboys do not become transgender in order to gain lucrative employment. In Thailand, ladyboys are often stereotyped as sex workers and stigmatized in tourist areas. A ladyboy can be arrested simply for being with a Caucasian man, on the presumption that she is a sex worker. Ladyboys are often not admitted to hotels and some dance clubs frequented by tourists. The rationale is that ladyboys are either sex workers or thieves, thus in the latter case, foreigners must be protected from them. By Thai law, a transgender person does not have the ability to change their sex, even after sex reassignment surgery. Thus ladyboy national identification cards state they are male and they can be denied entry because their gender does not match their sex.

Ladyboys generally consider sexual relationships with other ladyboys to be repulsive. As they typically identify with heterosexual femininity (even if they are not gender normative), they seek masculine male partners. For the most part, partners of ladyboys, both local and foreign, consider themselves to be heterosexual men. Though they should not be stereotyped as such nor devalued for their occupation, a large proportion of ladyboys are sex workers. Ladyboy sex workers, both in Thailand and the Philippines, often state a preference for foreigners as both clients and boyfriends. Ladyboys can earn more money from foreigners as clients. Additionally, there are different expectations among local and foreign boyfriends. A local boyfriend would expect to be supported financially by the ladyboy, while she can expect to be supported by a foreigner. This

can also lead to tiered relationships, in which a ladyboy has a foreign partner (typically older) who supports her, and she, in turn, supports her local lover (typically younger). Local partners of ladyboys are generally considered low class or lazy because of the support they receive.

Foreign partners tend to fetishize ladyboys. Many are explicitly looking for “a woman with a penis.” Thus, in Thai ladyboy bars, sex workers are required to be pre-operative. However, both pre-operative and post-operative ladyboys can work in girl bars with other women or as independent freelancers on the street. This creates a great deal of anxiety among male sex tourists who are repulsed by the idea of having sex with another “man.” Such men will often pass on tips to other foreigners for signs of someone being a ladyboy. This includes excessively beautiful and voluptuous women, being too feminine or too masculine, tall height, looking for Adam’s apples and low-pitched voices, big feet or large hands, comparing finger lengths, checking the shape of elbows, making sure she is wearing a bra, and, as a last resort, groping her genitals (assuming one only cares if a ladyboy is pre-operative). Their anxieties prove their masculinity. On the other hand, there are many foreign men who

think of the situation as local spice, something to try out in a situation where it is available.

SEE ALSO: Kathoey; Sex Tourism

REFERENCES

- Aizura, Aren Z. 2009. “Where Health and Beauty Meet: Femininity and Racialisation in Thai Cosmetic Surgery Clinics.” *Asian Studies Review*, 33: 303–317. DOI: 10.1080/10357820903153707.
- Enteen, Jillana B. 2010. *Virtual English: Queer Internets and Digital Creolization*. New York: Routledge.
- Käng, Dredge Byung’chu. 2011. “Queer Media Loci in Bangkok: Paradise Lost and Found in Translation.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17(1): 169–191. DOI 10.1215/10642684-2010-027.
- Käng, Dredge Byung’chu. 2012. “Kathoey ‘In Trend’: Emergent Genderscapes, National Anxieties and the Re-Signification of Male-Bodied Effeminacy in Thailand.” Theme issue, “Queer Asian Subjects,” *Asian Studies Review*, 36(4): 475–494. DOI: 10.1080/10357823.2012.741043.
- Peletz, Michael. 2009. *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times*. New York: Routledge.

FURTHER READING

- Jackson, Peter A., and Gerard Sullivan, eds. 1999. *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*. New York: Harrington Park Press.