

First Queer Voices from Thailand

Uncle Go's Advice Columns for Gays,
Lesbians and *Kathoeys*

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Transcription of Thai

There is no generally agreed system of transcribing Thai in roman script, and all current systems have some limitations because the 26 letters of the roman alphabet are not sufficient to represent all the consonants, vowels, diphthongs and tones of Thai. The transcription system used in this book generally follows a modified version of the Thai Royal Institute system. This system is only partially phonetic and does not indicate tones (of which Thai has five) or short or long vowel forms. I differ from the Royal Institute system as follows: *j* is used for the Thai consonant *zor jan* (not *ch*), and *eu, eua, euay* (not *ue, uea, ueay*) are used for this series of vowels and diphthongs. Hyphens are used to separate the units of Thai compounds that are translated as single words in English, such as *khvam-pen-Thai* for “Thainess”, or to separate the syllables of a Thai word to avoid ambiguity, as, for example, in *kradang-nga*, the name of a type of flower, and *sa-at*, “to be clean”. While Thai does not mark plurals, I add an “s” to Thai terms that have a plural sense in order to follow the rules of English grammar.

Some exceptions to this system are the transcription of the words *aa*, “a younger brother of one’s father”, *ee*, “a colloquial feminine title”, and *dee*, “the feminine female partner of a *tomboy* or *tom*”. The long vowels in these three words are represented with double letters to avoid possible confusion. (In the Royal Institute system these three words would be written as *a, i* and *di*, respectively.)

I follow the Thai system of referring to individuals by their given names, not surnames, and all references to Thai authors in the bibliography and elsewhere are in alphabetical order according to given name. I also follow Thai authors’ preferred spellings of their names in roman script when known, even where such spellings do not follow the system outlined above. Where an English word has been borrowed into Thai, the original English spelling is used and the word is *italicised* even if that word may be pronounced slightly differently in Thai; for example, *gay queen*, *gay king*, *tom*, *fan* (“partner”), *man*. However, because of their commonness in both English and Thai, the words “gay” and “lesbian” are not italicised. In all translations included here, the use of unitalicised “gay” or “lesbian” indicates that these borrowed English words were used in the original Thai.

Introduction to the Third Edition

It is now thirty years since I finished writing *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources* (Jackson 1989), and twenty years since the publication of the second edition, which was retitled *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand* (Jackson 1995a). My motivation for writing *Male Homosexuality in Thailand* was to critique stereotypes that were widespread in Western gay communities in the early 1980s that Thailand was a “gay paradise” of sexual liberality free from homophobia and transphobia. Living in Thailand in 1982 and 1983 to conduct fieldwork research for my PhD dissertation on Thai Buddhism, the worlds of Thai gay men and transgender women, or *kathoeys*, that I came to know first-hand were completely at odds with the Western orientalist and sex tourism stereotypes. Rather than a gay paradise, I found anxiety, fear of rejection, and confusion among Thai gay men themselves, and demeaning stereotypes and pervasive misunderstanding of gay and transgender *kathoeys* lives among the wider Thai population.

The sources I used to critique Western stereotypes and to reflect the reality of Thai gay men’s lives were letters to the gay advice column “Sad Gay Lives” (*chiwit sao chao gay*) published in the popular magazine *Plaek* (Strange), and in similar columns in the magazines *Mahatsajan* (Miraculous) and *G.L.*, all of which were edited by an “agony uncle” using the pen name of “Uncle Go Paknam”. These letters not only portrayed snapshots of gay and transgender Thailand in the early 1980s, more importantly, they provided access to the voices of Thai gay men and *kathoeys* themselves, albeit as mediated through the commercial frame of mass circulation magazines.

I did not know it at the time, but *Male Homosexuality in Thailand* was to become the first extended analysis of a modern Asian gay culture. And as a graduate student in Buddhist philosophy, I also did not know that Asian gay and lesbian studies, and later Asian queer studies, would ultimately become primary focuses of my academic research.

Three decades ago, I had no clear analytical models to follow in attempting to interpret the letters from Thai gay men to Uncle Go, or the often-unexpected advice offered by Go to his gay “nephews”. At the time I wrote the first edition

of this book, no ethnographic studies of Thai gay, lesbian or *kathoe*y cultures had been undertaken.

As I read and translated the letters, I felt that the Western-based frameworks of first-generation gay and lesbian studies, which emerged mostly from the United States, did not fully explain the cultural patterns that were reflected in the gay advice columns in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan* and *G.L.* However, at that time, this critical perspective on Western gay and lesbian studies remained largely imprecise and vaguely conceived. It would take some years of engagement with and reflection upon critical queer theories that only emerged in the decade after I wrote the first edition of this book before I could begin to articulate my misgivings about the culturally-based assumptions of Western theories of gender and sexual diversity.¹

In the early 1980s, my sense that then current Western theories of gay identity and gay liberation failed to provide bases for understanding gay and *kathoe*y Thailand led me to engage the anthropological literature on the country. At the time, I saw anthropology as the only academic field that provided extended studies of the distinctive patterns of Thai cultural frameworks and local cultural logics. In summary, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand* was an extended critique of stereotypical views of Thailand as a gay paradise based on translations of letters and replies to gay advice columns in the popular press and interpreted in the light of anthropological accounts of Thai culture. That is, the first editions of this book aimed to describe minority same-sex and transgender cultures in Thailand by analysing forms of popular discourse through the analytical lens of anthropological accounts of mainstream Thai cultures.

As a graduate student in the early 1980s struggling to complete a doctoral dissertation on modernising reforms in Thai Buddhist thought,² I did not have the time or resources to research the origins of Uncle Go's gay columns, or to translate the letters from Thai lesbians that were also published in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan* and *G.L.* It was only more than a decade later, in the late 1990s, that I had the opportunity to return to Bangkok and locate copies of the very first issues of *Plaek* from 1975 and 1976 in the collection of the National Library of Thailand. At that time, I was also able to locate and buy a small number of old copies of *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan* and *G.L.* from second-hand bookstalls at Bangkok's weekend market at Jatujak.

I kept all these items on file, and with the help of Scot Barmé I started reading and translating letters to Uncle Go from Thai lesbians and *kathoe*ys that were published in early issues of the magazines. My intention was to one day revise *Male*

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1. See the "Introduction" in *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in the Asia-Pacific* (2008), which I co-authored with Fran Martin, Mark McLelland and Audrey Yue for a critical summary of the limitations of Western gay, lesbian and queer studies.
 2. A revised version of my PhD dissertation was published in 2003 under the title *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*.

Homosexuality in Thailand to reflect the importance of Uncle Go's advice columns for the histories of all of Thailand's gay, lesbian and transgender communities. However, the pressures of academic life meant that project of revision languished for many years, gathering dust with the notes and papers for other proposed projects in Thai queer history that fill the filing cabinets in my office. When trying to restore a semblance of order to my office over the summer teaching break in January 2013, I was dismayed to find that many of the second-hand copies of the magazines that I had bought a decade and half earlier in Bangkok had started to turn brown and brittle. Printed on acid paper, these vital historical sources, the first published queer voices from Thailand, were in the process of turning to dust in my own office. Urgency therefore pushed this project to the top of my academic "to do" list. I have not been back to the National Library of Thailand to check on the state of the collection of *Plaek* held there, but I suspect at least some of the originals from the 1970s and early 1980s may be in a similar deteriorating condition. Even in the 1990s when I was researching gay, lesbian and *kathoeys* news stories in the Thai-language press, many newspapers from the 1960s held in the National Library of Thailand were already turning brown and brittle, and I was not allowed access to some issues because of their state of decay.

One aim of this third edition is to make available a text that has long been out of print, and was often hard to buy outside Thailand. More importantly, however, my aim here is to complete the story of Uncle Go's role in the public emergence of modern queer Thailand. This edition redresses two major gaps in the earlier versions of this book and shows the importance of the Uncle Go advice columns for public representations of all modern queer communities in Thailand, male-to-female transgender *kathoeys* and lesbian, as well as gay. This book includes a new chapter that traces the origins of the Uncle Go advice columns in a series of 1975 interviews with male-to-female transgender *kathoeyes*. I also include three further new chapters that document the first public voices of Thai lesbians published in the "It's Go Paknam!" (*Go Paknam sa-yang*) advice column, and which paralleled the separate advice columns for gay men in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan* and *G.L.* In the 1970s and early 1980s, Uncle Go's columns in these magazines were the only form of public discourse in Thailand that provided space for the voices of gay men, lesbians and *kathoeyes*. The Uncle Go columns were the first domains of public discourse in Thailand in which gay men, *kathoeyes*, *toms* and *dees* were given space to speak to the wider Thai population about their lives. My goal here is to reveal the foundational importance of Uncle Go's advice columns for subsequent public representations of all of Thailand's queer communities.

As discussed in detail in the following chapters, there is much that can be critiqued in Go's tolerant but nonetheless masculinist and heteronormative perspectives on queer genders and sexualities, especially his dismissive views on lesbian relationships and female same-sex eroticism. It is nonetheless the case that his advice columns opened new spaces at the national level in Thailand for forms of public discourse in which transgenders, gays, and lesbians could find

voice, and for the first time were permitted to speak of their lives and aspirations in their own terms. The Uncle Go advice columns were the foundation upon which the now thriving gay and lesbian press in Thailand has been built.

This revised and expanded third edition is divided into three sections. In Part 1, "Girls to the Power of 2", I trace the origins of Uncle Go Paknam's gay and lesbian advice columns in a series of interviews with male-to-female transgender *kathoeyes* that were published in the very first issues of *Plaek* in 1975. Part 2, "Uncle Go's Nephews: Male Homosexuality in Thailand", includes the central chapters of the first and second editions of this book, which translated and analysed letters from gay men that were published in *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan* in the early 1980s. Part 3, "Uncle Go's Nieces: The 'It's Go Paknam!' Columns for Tom, Dee and Les", includes translations and interpretations of selected letters from lesbians to Uncle Go from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s. The studies of letters from gay men that made up the contents of the first two editions of this book, here included as the chapters of Part 2, are "bookended" by a new opening chapter focusing on the very first accounts of *kathoeyes* in *Plaek* and a third section of three more new chapters devoted to analysing letters to Uncle Go from lesbians. There was some consideration of female homosexuality in the earlier editions. I have left those sections where they appeared in those previous editions, within the body of the studies of letters from gay men included here in Part 2. A new Afterword summarising Uncle Go's importance for the emergence of gay and lesbian publishing in Thailand in the 1980s has also been added.

My archival research in the National Library of Thailand in the 1990s turned up some unexpected finds. One of Uncle Go's gay correspondents, Rerng, whose 1982 letter I translated in the first edition of this book, some years later found a copy of this book and my translation of his letter on the shelves of a university library in Thailand. Rerng wrote to Uncle Go again in 1992, expressing amazement at finding his own letter translated into English, and Rerng's second letter to *Plaek* with Go's reply is translated and included here in Chapter 4 immediately after the original letter.

Also, when reading what turned out to be the very first published letter to Uncle Go from a lesbian, identified in *Plaek* only by the pseudonym "Itthi" (Pali for "woman"), I detected a tone of expression and feminist outlook that reminded me of a Thai friend, Anjana Suvarnanonda. In the 1980s, Anjana established Thailand's first lesbian rights organisation, Anjaree. In the letter from 1976, "Itthi" thanked Uncle Go for his support for gays and transgender *kathoeyes* and asked him to start an advice column in *Plaek* for lesbians. Uncle Go agreed, and in response to "Itthi's" request, a new column, "It's Go Paknam!" (*Go Paknam sa-yang*), specifically to respond to letters from lesbians, was started later in 1976. I asked Anjana if she had ever written a letter to Uncle Go, and she replied that yes, she had, when she was still an undergraduate student at a university in Bangkok, but she had not kept a copy. I was happy to be able to tell Anjana that I had found her letter to Go Paknam in the National Library of Thailand, and

she has very kindly permitted me to include her letter and to tell her story here. Anjana's letter, translated here in Chapter 8, marks a genuine turning point in the public representation of lesbian voices in Thailand, and in her letter one can already read clear signs of the activist outlook that would guide her life in the years and decades that followed.

Critical Revisions of the Earlier Editions

The early editions of this book were written within the somewhat essentialising frames of Thai area studies and first wave gay and lesbian studies. Area studies approaches tended to assume that Asian countries such as Thailand exhibit an overarching social structure and cultural patterns that can be described in terms of clearly defined "Thai attitudes". Some of the ideas from early ethnographic studies of Thailand that I drew on in interpreting the Uncle Go gay advice columns now seem dated and have been subject to revision by more recent anthropological research. In the earlier editions I often used essentialising, overly general expressions such as "traditional Thai society", counterposing an implicitly static "premodern" Siam to a presumed dynamic "modern" Thailand. We now know that Asian societies such as Thailand, which was called Siam until 1939, have always been dynamic, no less in previous eras than today, and "tradition" is often simply the label given to the cultural forms that happened to exist in a society when it was first visited and documented by Western scholars. In light of the critiques of area studies approaches that have been put forward since the 1990s, I, like many other scholars of my generation, have since developed hopefully more nuanced approaches to understanding both the historical and contemporary complexity of cultural patterns in Thailand (see Jackson 2003b, 2003c, 2010; see also Rachel Harrison 2010, 2014).

As already noted above, the first edition of this book was completed a decade before the emergence of queer theory in the Western academy, and some of my analyses from the 1980s included in Part 2 of this revised edition now appear dated and simplistic. My analyses of the letters to Uncle Go from gay men were written through the lens of identitarian gay and lesbian studies that provided the dominant frame of analysis of same-sex and transgender issues before the 1990s. This first wave of gay and lesbian studies was also marked by essentialist views of sexual identity. The comparatively uncritical use of terms like "homosexuality" and expressions such as "Thai attitudes to homosexuality and transgenderism" in the first edition of this book clearly marked it as a product of its period.

While theoretically simplistic, the analyses in the earlier editions of this book nonetheless documented issues and raised questions that have continued to inform my research in comparative Asian queer studies. What emerges in the analyses of the Uncle Go gay advice columns is how I struggled with both the Thai area studies and Western gay studies literatures of the early 1980s to interpret the cultural settings reflected in the letters. Responding to the inadequacy of

Western theories of gender and sexuality to map the contours of Thai genders and sexualities and, more broadly, reflecting on the extent to which we can draw on frameworks and categories emerging from Europe and America to understand Thailand remain dominant themes in all my work. I have significantly revised my theoretical models and approaches since first writing this book. However, my primary intellectual interest remains in questioning the relationship between Western theory and the patterns of Southeast Asian cultures, and so, apart from correcting some factual errors and editing for brevity, I have not made major changes to the translations or analyses of Uncle Go's gay advice columns that were included in the earlier editions. Part 2 of this book stands as a marker of both a key moment in the historical emergence of Thai gay voices and of my first tentative attempts to understand the distinctive cultural timbre and nuances of those voices. Rather than undertake wholesale revision, I have included notes that provide references to more recent publications on queer Thailand that develop or further analyse issues touched upon in the early editions. The new translations and analyses of the first letters from *kathoeyes* and lesbians to Uncle Go included here in Parts 1 and 3 are presented in a similar frame and style to the letters from gay men in Part 2. In these two new sections, my aim is also to provide an historical record and analysis of some of the most distinctive cultural patterns visible in these letters.

The focus of this third edition is on the letters to Uncle Go and Go's responses, from their first appearance in *Plaek* in 1975 to the forms they ultimately took in the 1980s. Some parts of the earlier editions have been left out. I have not included the chapter "The Emergence of Thai Gay Identity" from the second edition that was co-authored with Eric Allyn. That chapter did not discuss the letters to Uncle Go but rather described the commercial gay scene and gay rights and HIV/AIDS activism in Thailand in the early 1990s. The information in that chapter is now mostly out of date, and readers interested in more recent studies of gay, lesbian and transgender Thailand in the early twenty-first century will find the chapters in my edited collection *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media and Rights* (2011) a useful starting point. A range of other more recent studies is also detailed in the revised bibliography included here. Some letters in the earlier editions have also been omitted to make room for the new chapters on *kathoeyes* and lesbians in Uncle Go's columns. This has meant that the sequencing of some of the letters from gay men in Part 2 differs from the order in which they appeared in the first two editions.

I have made some minor changes to the text of the earlier editions. I have put some statements about gay life in Thailand that were originally written in the present tense into the past tense where I believe they no longer reflect the situation in the early twenty-first century. And, as noted above, I have also added footnotes to refer to more recent studies that qualify or expand upon some points made in the original text, and which provide corrected perspectives. The most substantial revision I have made of the earlier editions is in my account of the

Thai transgender category of *kathoey*. In the previous editions I described the *kathoey* as a “traditional form of transgender and male homosexual identity” in Thailand. I have considerably revised my view of the *kathoey* category in the light of subsequent research. This research has revealed that before the 1970s, the term *kathoey* included all forms of sexed and gendered being that fell outside notions of normative male and female heterosexuality. Effeminate men, masculine women as well as intersex persons were all labelled as *kathoey*. However, beginning in the 1960s, major changes took place in Thai cultural categories of gendered and sexual being and identity. Most notably, masculine-identified same-sex attracted men adopted the label “gay” and masculine women came to be called *tomboy*, and subsequently *tom* (see Jackson 1999a, 2000, 2003d). By the time Uncle Go’s columns first appeared in the mid-1970s, the term *kathoey*, which previously had denoted all forms of non-normative gendered and sexed being, had significantly narrowed in meaning to refer only to effeminate males and male-to-female transgenders and transsexuals. I have made changes to the original text to present a historically more accurate account of the *kathoey* category.

Pratchaya Phanthathorn: The Man Behind “Uncle (Aa) Go Paknam”



Image 1

Sketch of Uncle Go Paknam from the back cover of a 1978 paperback compilation of letters and replies to the “Sad Gay Lives” (*Chiwit Sao Chao Gay*) column in *Plaek* (Go Paknam 1978).

The man behind the pen name “Uncle Go Paknam” was Pratchaya Phanthathorn. As founding editor of *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan* and *G.L.* and writing under a range of

pen names including Uncle (*Aa*) Go Paknam and Phan Thathorn, Pratchaya opened the first discursive space in Thailand's mass circulation print media in which the voices of *kathoey*s, gay men and lesbians were heard in a non-judgmental setting. A potted biography on the back cover blurb of a 1978 compilation of letters from gay men to *Plaek's* Uncle Go column (Go Paknam 1978) described Pratchaya as then being in his 40s, hence having been born sometime in the 1930s, and as having started his career as a journalist and photographer for a Bangkok newspaper in 1955. Pratchaya then became deputy editor of a provincial newspaper before moving back to Bangkok in 1957 to first become deputy editor of the *Seri Prachathipatai* (Free Democracy) daily newspaper and subsequently head of the editorial team for the afternoon edition of *Issara* (Independent) newspaper and the *Issara-Seriphap* (Independent-Freedom) daily. However, he fell foul of the authoritarian military regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat,³ Thai Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, being arrested and gaoled on a charge of rebellion. The specific charge is not stated, but presumably Pratchaya had been critical of the military regime in his editorials in the pro-democratic newspapers, which were subsequently closed after a banning order. After being released from gaol upon Sarit's death in 1963, Pratchaya is said to have taken a six-year "break" from journalism for the remainder of the 1960s, a period when Thailand remained under military dictatorship. He returned to journalism in the early 1970s, but wrote only on non-political issues, concentrating on humour, documentaries, and fiction, before being appointed editor of *Plaek* in 1975.

Pratchaya's discursive activism in the 1970s, when in the guise of Uncle Go Paknam he would promote the right to polymorphous sexual pleasures, can be seen to emerge from his earlier personal history of being a journalist and editor for pro-democratic newspapers in Cold War-era Bangkok. *Plaek* began publication during Thailand's democratic window period of 1973–76. In October 1973, after decades of repressive military dictatorship, a student-led people power uprising resulted in the army strongman Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, his son Narong, and close associate Praphas Charusathien resigning and being forced into exile. Subsequent popular elections led to the re-institution of democratic government and opened the door for a dramatic, but sadly brief, flowering of liberal cultural and intellectual expression. Social issues that had been ignored or repressed under the years of military dictatorship were aired and debated, with widespread agitation for social reform in 1974 and 1975. However, communist

3. Sarit Thanarat was one of the leaders of a successful 1947 military coup against the government of then Prime Minister Pridi Phanomyong, an intervention that led to the return to power of Thailand's wartime fascist-aligned leader Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram. Sarit became an increasingly dominant political influence during the 1950s, overthrowing the government in another coup in 1957 and installing an interim prime minister. In 1958, Sarit staged a subsequent coup against the government that he had installed the year before, and assumed the prime ministership himself. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat remained in power until his death in 1963.

victories in Vietnam and Laos in 1975, and a return of conservative forces within Thailand that resisted change and reform, were the backdrop for a violent coup on 6 October 1976 that overthrew Thailand's brief, three-year period of democratic experimentation and saw the return of military rule.

While *Plaek* emerged as one example of the multidimensional cultural efflorescence of the 1973–76 democratic period, it appears to have been unaffected by the return of the army in 1976. There is no reflection of the dramatic political and social turmoil of the post-1976 period in the gay or lesbian letters to Uncle Go, or any other articles in *Plaek*. While Thai military governments have been, and continue to be, highly repressive of all forms of political opposition and political criticism, historically they have not shown much interest in monitoring or restricting the sexuality of Thai citizens. Homosexuality and transgenderism have not been criminalized in modern Thailand, and gay, lesbian, and transgender *kathoey* issues have been largely extraneous in the Thailand's long conflicted history over political openness. Indeed, Uncle Go's columns flourished under the repressive military government that ruled Thailand in the second half of the 1970s. While Pratchaya Phanthathorn might in some respects be considered a sex radical, the otherwise apolitical character of the Uncle Go columns in the 1970s and 1980s perhaps reflected his experience of having been gaoled by a previous dictatorial regime in the 1960s. Perhaps as an older man, Pratchaya sought to avoid being arrested yet again by keeping political content out of the pages of *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan*. In the 1970s, Pratchaya was a married man with a wife and family to look after (see "Interview with Uncle Go" in Chapter 1).

Pratchaya's most famous pen name "Uncle (*Aa*) Go Paknam" drew on a range of influences. The kin term *aa*, meaning a younger brother of one's father, has the emotional resonance of someone who is senior and respected, yet is also a close family member who is younger than one's father and so perhaps likely to be more understanding of the younger generation than older members of the family. Pratchaya adopted the pen surname Paknam because after his parents separated when he was a child during World War II he had gone to live with his maternal grandmother at Paknam, an area immediately south of Bangkok at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River. In an interview published in the gay magazine *Midway* in 1986,⁴ he stated that his pen name "Go" came from the fact that as a young man in the 1960s he had been regarded as being a *jik-go* or *go*, a rebellious teenager who liked dressing well and acting tough. Manit Manitcharoen (1983: 261) defines a *jik-go* as a "person who dresses ostentatiously, puts on airs and does not work". In *Bangkok After Dark*, a travel guide oriented to American GIs based in Thailand during the Vietnam War era, Andrew Harris (1968: 82) states that *jik-go* is the Thai pronunciation of "Chico", which in turn is an abbreviation of "Chicano". "Chico" was a term much used in Stephen Sondheim and

4. *Khui Phan Thep Go Paknam* [Chatting on tape with Go Paknam], *Midway* (1986) (BE 2529) 1(1): 60–64.

Leonard Bernstein's 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story* to refer to members of the Puerto Rican youth gang, the Sharks, whose street turf wars with rival Polish youth gang, the Jets, in 1950s New York City was a central dramatic element of the musical's recasting of the story of Romeo and Juliet. The 1961 film version of *West Side Story* (dir. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins) was very popular among young audiences in Thailand and had a major impact on urban youth culture in 1960s Bangkok. Harris observes,

Although there is a certain amount of casual homosexuality in much of Thai society, the Chicos [i.e., *jik-gos*] are not casual. They are tough, hard-bitten young hoods, one of the unfortunate results of the city [Bangkok] having grown so large so quickly, dislocating hundreds of thousands of people, and presenting them with new temptations. The Chicos materialised at the end of World War II, when they were known as Cowboys, a name they received because they imitated the gestures and tough talk of movie cowboys. They are more refined now; *West Side Story* is today's model. In addition to establishing the beginnings of a pimping system, the Chicos have been responsible for several waves of robberies, some quite brutal, and they have also found a source of money in the foreign homosexuals living in Bangkok.⁵ They are not full-time professionals like the *katoys* [i.e. *kathoey*s] are, or at least they do not present themselves that way. It is to them merely a means of living with a minimum of work. (Harris 1968: 82)

Some Thai informants suggest an alternative derivation for *jik-go*, saying that it may be an abbreviation of "gigolo", a term borrowed into Thai in the early to mid-twentieth century. Given the *jik-go*'s historical association with pimping and prostitution, this latter derivation is also plausible. In the 1970s, the *jik-gos* and their female hangers-on, called *jik-gees* (perhaps based on the term "Chickie", which also occurs in *West Side Story*), lost much of their earlier association with violence and homosexual prostitution. They came to be regarded more generally as nonconformist youth or "mods". Like the term "mod", *jik-go* is now an expression that dates its user to the period of the 1960s, when Pratchaya was a young man.

It is common for Thai writers and journalists to use pen names, often more than one. Pen names are not necessarily used to hide an author's identity, as the real names of many pseudonymous authors are often well known. Rather, Thai authors often choose pen names with resonances that reflect how they want their readers to perceive them or how they intend their work to be read, whether as serious, satirical, polemical, comical, or tragic. In calling himself "Go", Pratchaya chose a pseudonym for his gay and lesbian advice columns that had clear non-conformist connotations.

5. This appears to be a reference to the much-publicised murder of expatriate American newspaper editor Darrell Berrigan in Bangkok in 1965 by a *jik-go* male prostitute. For more detail on the murder of Darrell Berrigan see my 1999 article, "An American Death in Bangkok".

Thai Gay and Lesbian Language in the Uncle Go Columns⁶

Thai terminology for homosexuality and transgenderism used in the Uncle Go columns is discussed in detail throughout this book. This introductory note provides an overview of the language of Uncle Go and his *kathoey*, gay and lesbian correspondents in an historical context.

Western-modelled technical terms to describe homosexuality and homosexual activity were introduced into Thai in the middle decades of the twentieth century. For example, on the model of *rak-tang-phet* (literally “to love a different gender”) or “heterosexuality”, the term *rak-ruam-phet* (literally “to love the same gender”) was coined as the technical expression for “homosexuality”. *Rak-sorngh-phet* (literally “to love two genders”) was also coined to denote “bisexuality”. These expressions are all based on the word *phet*, which in different contexts can mean either “sex”, “gender” or “sexuality” and in the twentieth century became a master term central to all Thai understandings of gendered being and sexuality.⁷ As technical expressions, the above terms occur only rarely in the Uncle Go columns, in which more colloquial terms were usually used, as discussed below.

The Changing Meanings of *Kathoey*

The only premodern Thai terms referring to a person who was regarded as non-normative in their sexuality or gender expression were *kathoey*, and its Pali-derived synonym *bandor* (Pali: *paṇḍaka*). The original sense of *kathoey* was “hermaphrodite”. In his 1873 Thai dictionary, Dr. Bradley (1873: 21) defined a *kathoey* as a “person or animal that is neither male nor female but has just a urinary tract”. In the 1940s, the lexicographer McFarland (1982: 36) defined a *kathoey* as a “person or animal of which the sex is indeterminate”. *Kathoey* thus appears to have had an original biological denotation.

Before the 1960s, all people who deviated from dominant sexual and gender norms—including feminine men, masculine women, and intersex people—were called *kathoey*. However, from the 1960s, reports in the Thai press began to differentiate between female and male types of *kathoey*s. In that decade, masculine women and feminine men began to be differentiated by means of distinctive expressions such as *kathoey sao*, “a young woman who is a *kathoey*”, to describe a masculine woman, and *kathoey num*, “a young man who is a *kathoey*” and *kathoey phu-chai*, “a man who is a *kathoey*”, to describe feminine males (see Jackson 1999a, 2000). However, by the time Uncle Go’s column was first published in the mid-1970s, these short-lived, largely journalistic expressions had already become

6. For more detail on Thai gay, lesbian and *kathoey* language see my 2004 study, “Gay Adaptation, Tom-Dee Resistance, and *Kathoey* Indifference: Thailand’s Gender/Sex Minorities and the Episodic Allure of Queer English”.

7. For an extended account of the term *phet* see my 2012 study “*Phet*: Thailand’s Master Discourse of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality”.

obsolete, and had been replaced by borrowed English terms. “Gay” began to be used to describe male homosexual preference from the 1960s, and even the earliest letters to Uncle Go from gay men reflected a growing distinction between “gay” as a term to describe masculine male homosexuals and the effeminate and feminine *kathoey*. By the 1970s, the term *kathoey* was tending to be used only to describe effeminate males and male-to-female transgenders, not masculine women or female-to-male transgenders. Go himself never used the term *kathoey* to refer to either masculine women or women who love women. However, some of the older letters to Uncle Go translated here report that masculine women continued to be derogatively labelled as *kathoey* into the 1970s.

In popular usage in Thailand today, *kathoey* refers to male-to-female transgenders and transsexuals or to a man who exhibits cross-gender behaviour or speech. In colloquial conversation among heterosexuals, *kathoey* may sometimes be used with a similar force to derogatory English terms such as “poofter”, “faggot”, and “fairy”. In the letters to Uncle Go, the gender opposite of the *kathoey*, or feminine male, is the *phu-chai* (literally “male, man”), which, when used in a context describing identity or sexual behaviour, denotes a masculine-identified male. Related expressions emphasising a male’s masculinity are “one hundred percent male” (*phu-chai roi persen*) and “a complete man” (*phu-chai tem-tua*).

A now-rare term with a similar sense to *kathoey* that occurs in some of the letters to Uncle Go is *lakkaphet* (literally “to steal [someone else’s] gender”), which denotes disguising one’s true identity or station in life, and is generally used to denote a man who dresses and lives as a woman or a woman who dresses and lives as a man. This term can also occasionally be used to denote a layperson who impersonates a monk.

Gay Language in the Uncle Go Columns

Historically, terms for homosexual activity existed in Thai, but there were no ascriptions that separated male same-sex eroticism out as solely the activity of a specific type of “homosexual” individual. Until the post-World War II period, the Thai language lacked any term denoting a cisgendered or gender-normative homosexual man or woman as a person or personality type distinct from heterosexual men and women. The now-obsolete term *len sawat* (literally “playing love” or “to play at love”) originally meant simply “to make love”, but also acquired a homosexual connotation of anal sex between males of any age. *Len sawat* was the Thai title given to the 1982 American film *Making Love* (dir. Arthur Hiller). This film, starring Kate Jackson, Harry Hamlin, and Michael Ontkean, was about a married man coming to terms with his homosexuality and the love triangle that develops around him, his wife, and his male lover. *Len sawat* did not occur in any of the surveyed letters to Uncle Go. The use of the word for “playing”, *len*, in this expression did not mean that homosexuality was seen as an innocent or childlike pastime, for *len* also occurs in a number of Thai expressions for

adult occupations, e.g., *len kan-meuang* (literally “to play [at] politics”), which is a common Thai expression denoting being a politician or engaging in political activity.

The slang terms *len thua dam* (literally “to play [with] black beans”), *kin thua dam* (literally “to eat black beans”) and *at thua dam* (literally “to stuff black beans”), all denote anal sex between males and are commonly used in the sensationalist Thai press.⁸ An expression for anal sex between men that is much more common in the letters to Uncle Go is *phang pratu lang* (literally “to destroy or break down the back door”). While the term *phang* means “to demolish or be destroyed”, the above expression has no necessary connotation of violence and is used generally for consensual anal sex. In the letters translated here *phang pratu lang* is rendered as “to enter the back door” in order to avoid possibly mistaken associations with violence and also to reflect the sense of surreptitiousness that is often associated with this idiom. Thai uses technical terms borrowed from Sanskrit that denote the body’s orifices as “doors”. The anus is technically called *thawan nak* (literally “the heavy door”), while the urinary tract is termed *thawan bao* (literally “the light door”). In the letters to Uncle Go, the Thai term for “door”, *pratu*, is substituted for the Sanskrit term *thawan*, with the anus being called *pratu lang* (“the back door”). A variant of the above idiom denoting anal sex is *tham pratu lang* (“to do the back door”). More commonly, simply the word *tham* (“to do” or “to do it”) is used to denote the action of the insertive party in anal sex. While the crude Thai term for heterosexual intercourse, *yet*, is also often used to refer to homosexual anal sex and has a sense similar to the English “to fuck”, it does not occur in the Uncle Go columns, perhaps because it was regarded as being too obscene to be used in print.

The gay language in the Uncle Go columns included many terms borrowed from English, but often applied distinctive local nuances to these terms that are not found in gay terminology in the West. While Thai has long possessed verbs to describe anal sex between men (see above: *len sawat*, *len thua dam*, etc.), until the 1960s, the language lacked nouns to describe homosexual men who preferred either insertive or receptive anal sex. Since that decade, the English-derived terms *king* and *gay king* have denoted a preference for insertive anal sex, while *queen* and *gay queen* have denoted a preference for receptive anal sex. But unlike the case in English, the Thai term *queen* does not always carry a necessary connotation of effeminacy, and *king* does not necessarily imply strongly expressed masculinity.

The borrowed term *man* denotes having a masculine appearance, and the English-derived compound terms *man queen* and *man king*, which are not used by gay men in the West, emphasise the masculine appearance and demeanour of homosexual men who prefer receptive and insertive anal sex, respectively. Among Thai gay men, *phu-chai*, the local term for “man/male” is most commonly

8. See Jackson (2009a) for the origins of the expression *thua dam*.

used to refer to male biological sex and to heterosexual men. *Phu-chai*, meaning a heterosexual man, is then contrasted with “gay”, meaning a homosexual man. The English-derived *bai* (abbreviated from “bisexual”) and the Thai-English compound *seua-bai* (“bi-tiger”) denote a bisexual man, the latter term describing strongly expressed masculinity.⁹ In popular usage by the general public in Thailand, “gay” often connotes an effeminate man, sometimes even being used synonymously with *kathoey*.

The Language of Lesbian Love and Relationships in the Uncle Go Columns

The terms for female same-sex identities and sexual expression in the letters and replies published in Uncle Go’s lesbian advice columns reflect a highly dynamic and rapidly changing situation in the 1970s and early 1980s. Most descriptions of female same-sex love, romance, and eroticism in the columns draw on Thai terms, with the notable exception of the borrowed English term “oral” to denote cunnilingus. However, most words that refer to sexual identity and to women who love women as a group distinct from heterosexual women are based on English words and expressions. This reflects the fact that historically Thai had expressions for sex between women but not for female homosexuals as a distinct category of women. Until the post-World War II era, sexual preference as a defining feature of a woman’s identity or ascribed being was not labelled in Thai. Until the middle decades of the twentieth century, women who had sex with other women, perhaps even to the exclusion of sexual relations with men, were labelled simply as “women” (*phu-ying*). This pattern was common across Southeast Asia and Tom Boellstorff notes, “This does not mean that women in Southeast Asia never had sex with each other historically, but rather that socially recognised lesbian subject positions do not appear to have existed before the modern era” (Boellstorff 2007: 202).

Indeed, while female homosexual identities were not labelled in Thailand until the post-World War II period, female same-sex eroticism has long been recognised in a range of expressions. Premodern Thai sources describe sex between women using the expression *len pheuan*, “to play with a friend” (see Sinnott 1999, 2004; Loos 2005). While still widely known in Thailand today as a descriptor of female same-sex relations, *len pheuan* is now obsolete and does not occur in any of the letters or replies published in the “It’s Go Paknam!” lesbian advice columns. However, in his replies to his lesbian correspondents, Go occasionally used another old expression for female same-sex eroticism, *ti ching*, “to play finger cymbals”. *Ching* are small brass cymbals that performers playing female roles in Thai classical dance wear on their fingertips and beat, *ti*, in time to the music played by the orchestra. In the idiom *ti ching* when used to refer

9. For a discussion of the term *seua-bai* see Jackson (2009a).

to sex between women, *ching* (“finger cymbal”) denotes the female pubic area and genitals while *ti* (“to beat [in time to the music]”) refers to the sexual act. Significantly, however, none of Go’s female correspondents used this expression, suggesting that it was not popular among lesbians themselves and is more likely to have been a term used by heterosexuals to describe lesbian sex.

As noted above, in the premodern period, women who were viewed as not conforming to feminine gender norms were sometimes called *kathoey*, the same term that was, and still is, used to describe males who do not conform to masculine gender norms. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that masculine women came to be labelled with terms that differentiated them from feminine men and intersex people. While these latter groups continued to be called *kathoey*, masculine women came to be labelled with a series of English-derived terms.

In the earliest lesbian letters from the mid-1970s, Go used a range of terms to refer to lesbians. In 1975 and 1976, Go described masculine women and butch lesbians as *dai(d)*, where the final “d” was written in Thai but marked as silent with a *karan* superscript. This was apparently derived from “dyke”, but Go misspelt the final consonant as “d” instead of “k”. The English term “butch” seems not to have been used in Thai and does not occur in the Uncle Go columns. In the 1970s, Go also used the English term “lesbian” and the abbreviation *les*, both written phonetically in Thai script, as well as the capitalised letters “L.B.”, written in roman script, and being a short-hand for first letters of the two syllables of “lesbian”. In his 1976 reply to Itthi translated in Chapter 7, Go variously described lesbians who, he said, “want to be men” as *dai(d)*, “dyke”, *phuak dai(d)*, “the dyke group”, and *sao lesbian*, “lesbian girls”. Itthi herself only used “lesbian”, written in roman script inside inverted commas, to refer to herself and to other Thai women who love women. Go also used the English term *tomboy* in an interview with a correspondent called *Ai Keng* in the issue of *Plaek* following publication of the letter from Itthi. At that time, Go seems to have used *dai(d)*, “dyke”, to refer to sexually active butch lesbians, while he used *tomboy* to mean masculine demeanour and presentation.

By the early 1980s, Go had stopped using the term *dai(d)*, instead referring to masculine lesbians as *tomboy* and *tom*, terms that have remained popular in Thai and other Southeast Asian lesbian cultures since the 1970s. Citing Megan Sinnott, Tom Boellstorff notes, “‘Tomboy’ is a relatively novel subject position across Southeast Asia, having come into being in the 1970s in the context of socio-economic changes in the region (Sinnott 2004: 2, 63–64, 206–7)”. (Boellstorff 2007: 203) While the term *tomboy* was used from the 1970s, a distinct term for a *tomboy’s* feminine partner was not coined until the 1980s. For example, in a 1979 letter to Go (*Plaek* No. 172, 12 June 1979), the 18-year-old correspondent, Dat, described herself as a *tomboy*, while calling her girlfriend, Jorp, a “woman friend” (*pheuan ying*). Around 1980, the English term *lady* began to be used to refer to the feminine partners of *tomboys*. And by the early 1980s, the two terms *tomboy* and *lady* were usually abbreviated to their now common monosyllabic forms of *tom*

and *dee*, the latter being the second syllable of “*lady*”, to refer respectively to masculine lesbians and their feminine female partners.

Throughout the 1980s, Go and his female correspondents also continued to use the terms “lesbian”, *les* and *L.B.* The lesbian personal classified advertisements in the “Heart Friends” section of *Plaek* reflected a diverse mix of English and Thai terms used by advertisers to describe themselves and their desired partners. For example, in a personal advertisement in *Plaek* in 1983, 21-year-old Lan N. (“Niece N.”) described herself as a “girl lady” (*sao lady*) in search of an “L.B. friend” (*pheuan L.B.*) who is a *tomboy*. In the same issue, 21-year-old R. described herself as “young woman” (*sao*), who sought both *tom* and *lady* friends, and who would also respond to replies from “spinsters” (*sao kae*) and “widows” (*mae mai*).

Photos and Illustrations in Uncle Go’s Columns: The Sexual Exoticisation of Caucasian Bodies

The images and illustrations that accompanied Uncle Go’s gay and lesbian advice columns in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.* were always taken from Western sources and represented Caucasian men and women in either heterosexually or homosexually erotic poses. Uncle Go’s columns were never illustrated with photographs of Thai or other Asian men or women. Indeed, there was a range of dissonances between the discursive content of the Uncle Go columns, which dealt exclusively with local Thai contexts and settings, and the accompanying images and illustrations, which without exception were of non-Thai, indeed only Caucasian, men and women. These dissonances were even more pronounced in the case of the photographs that illustrated the “It’s Go Paknam!” lesbian advice columns. While the photographs that accompanied Uncle Go’s gay advice columns were copied from Western gay publications (see Images 13, 14, 20), the photographs for the lesbian advice columns were taken from Western erotic publications intended for heterosexual men (see Images 16, 17, 18). That is, the photos of female same-sex erotic play that illustrated the “It’s Go Paknam!” column were lesbian scenes presented for the titillation of heterosexual men and these images privileged the male sexual gaze, not the perspective of homosexual women. As Megan Sinnott (2004) has noted, the English word “lesbian” has been resisted by some Thai women-who-love-women because, as was the case with the “It’s Go Paknam!” column, in Thailand this term has sometimes been linked with porn for heterosexual men, not autonomous forms of female same-sex desire and identity that exist independently of the male gaze.

The absence of photographs and images of Thai men and women from the Uncle Go columns reflected sensitivities about what, in the 1970s and 1980s, could be represented visually in mainstream Thai publications compared to the topics that could be discussed in written discourse. The discursive accounts of sexuality and the visual imaging of erotic scenes in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.*

were respectively subject to quite distinct, and indeed markedly dissonant, legal and cultural regimes of representation. The content of some of the letters to Uncle Go from both gay men and lesbians was sexually direct, and *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan* did not suffer any legal consequences from publishing detailed accounts of Thai male-male and female-female sexual activities. However, erotic images were much more stringently controlled.

As I have discussed in my article “The Thai Regime of Images” (Jackson 2004b), there is a dramatic contrast between the often-prudish attitudes and forms of legal surveillance that control public representations of sexuality in Thailand, on the one hand, and private discourse and practice, on the other hand. This dissonance between the forms of power that control “public” versus “private” representations of sexuality extends to significant differences between what can be represented visually as opposed to discursively, and also to the ethnicity of the male and female bodies that are represented visually in revealing poses or erotic settings in Thai publications.

It is important to note that there is no dearth of erotic images of Thai men and women in underground pornographic publications and visual media produced in the country. While technically illegal, there is nonetheless a significant history of locally produced heterosexual and homosexual erotica and pornography in Thailand, both in print as well as video. These underground magazines, videos, and DVDs, both straight and gay, do represent Thai and other Asian women and men in sexually explicit poses and activities.

However, *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.* were mainstream publications sold publicly from newsstands across the country and for this reason they were subject to legal constraints that prohibited public imaging of the male and female genitals and exposed female breasts. While “beefcake” and “girlie magazine” type images of naked and semi-naked Caucasian men and women could be published alongside the letters and Go’s replies, full frontal nudity and explicit sexual relations could not be represented. However, an additional factor influencing the regime of visual representation in Uncle Go’s gay and lesbian columns was anxiety about imaging Thai male and female bodies in revealing or provocative poses, even when the genitals and female breasts may have been covered. This anxiety extended far beyond the pages of Uncle Go’s columns in *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan* and included even the modelling of male and female underwear in newspaper and magazine advertisements, for which Caucasian, not Thai, models were usually employed even when the underwear may have been a locally produced brand. For much of recent Thai cultural history, it has been much more acceptable for revealing photographs of Caucasian men and women, whether erotic or not, to be published in the mainstream press than for similarly revealing photographs of Thai men and women to appear.

In the twentieth century, the mainstream Thai print media often represented the “white” Caucasian body, both male and female, in highly sexualised ways while restricting photographic imaging of the Thai body to more demure and

less revealing poses. Indeed, stereotypes in Thailand often represent Caucasians in sexually sensationalised ways, with the *farang*—a term that refers both to the “West” as a culture and society and to “Caucasian” as an ethnicity—being viewed as more sexually direct and sexually obsessed (*ba-sek*, “sex mad”) than the Thais themselves. These stereotypes influenced the cultural regime of photographic representation of the body in twentieth-century Thailand, creating an ethnicised divide that meant it was acceptable to represent naked and semi-naked Caucasian men and women in Thai publications but not to represent Thai men and women in similar ways. The publishers of *Plaek* did challenge this regime of representation in the early years of the magazine’s publication in 1975 and 1976, before the military coup on 6 October 1976 that ended a three-year period of democratic government and social liberalisation following the ouster of a previous military dictatorship by a popular uprising in October 1973. Some of the photographs of *kathoeyes* interviewed in the “Girls to the Power of 2 Column” (see Chapter 1) in 1975 and 1976 were quite revealing (see Image 2). However, provocative and revealing photographs of Thai men, women, and *kathoeyes* disappeared from Uncle Go’s columns after the October 1976 coup, being replaced by photographs of Caucasian men and women.

It should be noted that the ethnicised regime of visual representation, which sexualised the Caucasian body while desexualising the Thai body, extended only to photographs. Locally penned drawings and sketches included in *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan* were often of Thai men and women in erotic and sexually explicit settings (see Images 9, 10, 11). It also needs to be noted that this ethnicised regime of photographic representation, which dominated mainstream Thai publishing when *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.* were at the height of their popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, has now largely disappeared. Since the late 1990s, Thai models have largely replaced Caucasian men and women in local publications, with the covers of glossy upmarket fashion magazines such as *Volume* and *Image* now often including full-colour photographs of semi-naked Thai men and women in ostensibly “artistic” but nonetheless provocative poses.

A further dimension of the Thai regime of images that remains powerful to this day relates to photographs of the female breast. While photographs of bare-breasted Caucasian women often illustrated the “It’s Go Paknam” column of lesbian letters, these women’s nipples were always blacked out with overprinted black dots or bars to conform to Thai censorship laws. Nonetheless, from the 1970s and into the 1980s, Thai publishers tested the limits of the anti-pornography legislation by progressively reducing the size of the black bars or dots painted over photographs of female breasts. As seen in Images 17 and 18, the painted black dots were sometimes not much larger than the actual size of the woman’s nipples.

Chapter 1

From *Kathoey* Exposés to Gay Advice Column

The Evolution of Uncle Go Paknam in Plaek

The Uncle Go Paknam advice columns for gay men and lesbians had an unusual, indeed odd, origin. This is perhaps only fitting given that these columns were published in a magazine titled *Plaek*, “strange”, that achieved national popularity in Thailand based on sensationalist accounts of all things weird, bizarre, and queer. The advice column format did not emerge fully formed, but rather evolved across *Plaek’s* first year of publication in 1975. The gay and lesbian advice columns did not even develop from any initial concern by the magazine’s avowedly heterosexual editor, Pratchaya Phanthathorn, also known as Uncle Go Paknam, to support the cause of promoting social acceptance of gays and lesbians. Rather, the advice columns emerged as a response to a flood of positive letters from readers across Thailand to a series of interviews of male-to-female transgender *kathoey*s published in the first issues of *Plaek* in a feature section called “Girls to the Power of 2” (*sao kamlang* 2). These interviews were the first accounts of *kathoey* lives based on the voices of transgenders and transsexuals themselves to be published in the mainstream national press in Thailand. The profiles published in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column produced a large volume of appreciative readers’ letters to *Plaek*, not only from *kathoey*s, but also from gay men and lesbians, as well as from a heterosexual public keen to know more about the new transgender and homosexual communities that were beginning to be reported, until then mostly negatively, in Thai newspapers (see Jackson 1999a). The heterosexual Pratchaya found himself in the apparently unexpected position of being asked for information and advice on gay, lesbian, and transgender issues, with the “agony uncle” advice column format emerging in late 1975 as a way of responding systematically to, and taking commercial advantage of, the letters received in response to the “Girls to the Power of 2” column. In this chapter I trace these unlikely origins of public discourses of gay, lesbian, and transgender/transsexual rights in Thailand from Pratchaya Phanthathorn’s often-fetishised accounts of *kathoey*s in the early issues of the magazine *Plaek*.

More Feminine than Women: *Kathoeys* as Hyper-feminine

In 1975, the pages of *Plaek* became the first queer-accepting discursive space in Thailand's mainstream print media. However, in this magazine, narratives of gay, lesbian, and transgender lives were framed by an authoritative editorial voice that, while championing polymorphous sexual expression, remained insistently heteronormative in its focus on the primacy of male desire. Pratchaya Phanthathorn promoted the cause of social tolerance for gays, lesbians, and *kathoeys* in 1970s Thailand, but from a masculinist and decidedly non-feminist perspective in which male heterosexual desire remained the dominant norm. As detailed here and in the following chapters, in the magazine columns penned by Pratchaya Phanthathorn transgender and transsexual *kathoeys* were fetishised as being better able to satisfy heterosexual male desire than born-women, *gay kings* were presumed to be bisexual and to enjoy "the best of both worlds" in being able to have sex with both men and women, while lesbians, despite deserving sympathy, were said to be unable to compete with men for women's affections because they lack a penis. Yet while valorising phallus-centred heterosexual male desire, Pratchaya's championing of all human beings' "right" (*sitthi*) to enjoy diverse forms of sexual expression did nonetheless provide a space from which Thai gay men and lesbians could begin to articulate their own autonomous discourses of the legitimacy of same-sex sexuality, relationships, and community.

From its second issue in May 1975, *Plaek* included a regular column titled "Girls to the Power of 2" (*sao kamlang 2*) written by Phan Thathorn, one of Pratchaya Phanthathorn's several pen names. Each "Girls to the Power of 2" column included a profile of a *kathoeey* based on an interview, or sometimes penned by the *kathoeey* herself, together with a photograph of the interviewee cross-dressed in a glamorous or provocative pose. The *kathoeys* profiled in the column in 1975 and 1976 worked in a range of occupations. Some kept down everyday jobs as men and only cross-dressed afterhours or on weekends. Others worked as catwalk models in *kathoeey* fashion shows, which were a popular form of entertainment at high society parties and events in 1970s Bangkok. Yet others lived as transsexual women and worked as beauticians or hairdressers. Some made their living from prostitution. In addition to providing a brief biography, Phan Thathorn often offered to help readers contact the *kathoeys* who were profiled, with the "Girls to the Power of 2" column effectively operating as an extended personal classifieds section to enable *kathoeys* to meet potential male partners.

Like many of the other feature articles in *Plaek*, the "Girls to the Power of 2" column was written in a risqué, sexually provocative, and typically tongue-in-cheek style. The very first profile, published in the second issue of *Plaek* in May 1975, was an interview with a cross-dressing *kathoeey* named only as Kusuma, who was described as being "lovely, tall, and slender, with fair skin like a Chinese girl. Real women feel put to shame (*ai*) when they see her figure." Kusuma



Image 2

Photo of a revealingly dressed transgender *kathoey* nicknamed Pao interviewed in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column of *Plaek* in 1975. The stylised text at the top is the masthead for the column and reads *Sao Kamlang 2*, “Girls to the Power of 2”.

had a daytime job for which she dressed as a man, but in her spare time she also worked part-time modelling women’s clothes in Bangkok fashion shows. Kusuma told Phan Thathorn that her parents had criticised and beaten her when she had first started wearing women’s clothes as a teenager, but finally they relented and let her dress as she pleased. However, Kusuma’s parents did insist that she wear male clothes when she went out to her regular daytime work because they would be ashamed of what the neighbours would say (*ai pheuan-ban*) if she cross-dressed at home. Kusuma related that she sometimes had to stop dressing as a woman for weeks at a time when the police harassed (*kuan*) her too much on the street. This apparently referred to the fact that in the 1970s Bangkok police periodically arrested men who cross-dressed in public on the presumption that they were engaging in street-based prostitution. On a fashion note, Kusuma reported that when she prepared for a fashion show she would have her hair and make-up done at *Phi Teung’s* beauty salon on Petchburi Road in Bangkok. In the 1960s and 1970s, Petchburi Road was the locale for a large number of entertainment venues catering for Bangkok’s middle-and upper-class men, including nightclubs, often called “coffee shops” in Thailand, as well

as massage parlours. Phan Thathorn ended the profile of Kusuma in this first “Girls to the Power of 2” column with the statement,

After you’ve read this story and seen Kusuma’s pictures, I think that all the sharks (*chalam*) out there will probably want to meet the real person. I have her (*thoe*)¹ phone number but I don’t dare print it here. I’m not keeping her all to myself, but I’m worried that sharks might bother her and phone her all day long. But if you really want to know her number, ask me directly, and I might be generous enough to tell you . . .

This interview and profile of Kusuma appears to be the first account in Thailand’s mainstream media of the sexual culture of cross-dressing and transsexual *kathoeys* and the men, here called “sharks” (*chalam*), who sought them out as preferred sexual partners. Thai newspapers had included news items about *kathoeys* from the early 1960s (see Jackson 1999a). However, these had almost always been negative reports of crimes involving *kathoeys* and critical sensationalism of the supposed spread of “sexual perversion” (*wiparit thangphet*) in Thailand. The “Girls to the Power of 2” column broke with this history of negative media representations, letting *kathoeys* speak for themselves and representing them in positive terms as successfully embodying feminine beauty and also as being sexually attractive to heterosexual men. Indeed, the “Girls to the Power of 2” column fetishised the femininity and sexual skill of *kathoeys* as even surpassing the attractiveness and allure of born-women.

This fetishisation of the feminine attractiveness of male-to-female transgender and transsexual *kathoeys* is reflected in the very title of Phan Thathorn’s column, *sao kamlang 2*. *Kamlang*, “power”, is the mathematical term denoting “raised to the power of”. *Kamlang 2* thus means “squared” or “raised to the power of 2”, and the expression “girls (*sao*) to the power of (*kamlang*) 2”, where “2” was written using the Arabic numeral, clearly implied an intensification of femininity. That is, *sao kamlang 2* implied that *kathoeys* express a multiplied or heightened power of femininity, exceeding that of born-women, literally “femininity to the power of 2”. The sensationalism of the expression “girls to the power of 2” was again made clear in the third issue of *Plaek* in June 1975, with the magazine cover including photos of Kalahari Bushmen hunting antelopes in Africa juxtaposed with a picture of a Thai *kathoeys* dressed in a bikini. The two sets of images had the same joint caption, “Miraculous Humans—Girls to the Power of 2” (*manut mahatsajan sao kamlang 2*). Here, African tribespeople and Thai transgenders were represented as equally strange, weird, and “miraculous”. Interestingly, a couple of years after *Plaek* was first published, Pratchaya Phanthathorn would become editor of a second magazine, titled *Mahatsajan* “Miraculous”, which also included Uncle Go’s gay and lesbian advice columns.

1. Throughout the interview Phan Thathorn consistently referred to Kusuma in feminine terms, such as using the third person pronoun *thoe*, which in this context carried the sense of “she/her”.

The fetishistic mythicisation of *kathoeyes* as being better women than born-women would become a distinctive feature of *Plaek*. The playful journalese idiom “girls to the power of 2”, apparently distinctive to *Plaek* and perhaps coined by Pratchaya Phanthathorn himself, was probably based on the pre-existing idiom “second type of girl/woman” (*sao/phu-ying praphet sorng*). These idioms are still widely used today in *kathoey* communities as well as in the mainstream Thai press and media to refer to male-to-female transgenders and transsexuals. Indeed, many Thai transgenders and transsexuals prefer to be called a “second type of girl” or “second type of woman”, as the term *kathoey* at times carries negative and derogatory connotations when used by heterosexuals to criticise gender non-conformity.

While fetishistic, heteronormative, and male-centred, it was Pratchaya’s unreservedly positive accounts of *kathoeyes*, and of the “right” of ostensibly heterosexual men, or “sharks” (*chalam*), to seek them out as legitimate or even preferred sexual partners, that initiated queer-accepting public discourse in Thailand. As seen in the following chapters, Thai gays and lesbians were able to draw upon the queer-accepting basis of Pratchaya Phanthathorn’s/Go Paknam’s philosophy that “*kathoeyes* are good (for men)” to transcend the original heterosexism and male-centredness of the “Girls to the Power of 2” column to become authors of their own autonomous gay and lesbian public discourses.

Phan Thathorn’s “Girls to the Power of 2” column in *Plaek* was a platform that promoted the expansion of heterosexual male desire beyond born-women to include *kathoeyes* as legitimate sexual and romantic partners for men. Phan Thathorn effectively argued for giving *kathoeyes* an acknowledged place in the structure of Thai heterosexual male desire, and in this he fetishised the embodiment of the feminine rather than the physiology of the female. Writing as Phan Thathorn and Go Paknam, Pratchaya appears to have been very well acquainted with Bangkok nightlife and sexual culture in the 1970s. Pratchaya never identified himself by any of the categories that he assigned to his interviewees and correspondents. However, it is clear from the authoritative voice that he assumes in the early issues of *Plaek* that Pratchaya himself was probably a “shark interested in girls to the power of 2” (*chalam sao kamlang 2*) (*Plaek* Issue No. 7, September 1975), that is, a man who sought out male-to-female transgender and transsexual *kathoeyes* as sexual partners. *Chalam* (“shark”) is also the name of a brand of Thai energy drink, similar to the now internationally well-known “Red Bull”, which began in Thailand as the *Krathing Daeng* brand. Like *Krathing Daeng* (Red Bull), *Chalam* is primarily marketed to men as a male energy booster and some early issues of *Plaek* included back-cover advertisements for this brand of energy drink, with a full-colour image of a great white shark baring its jaws (see Image 3).

In the 1980s, the type of male sexuality that Phan Thathorn calls a “shark”, would be renamed as “bi-tiger”, *seua-bai*, a term that combines the first syllable of the English word “bisexual” with the Thai term for “tiger”, *seua*. The images

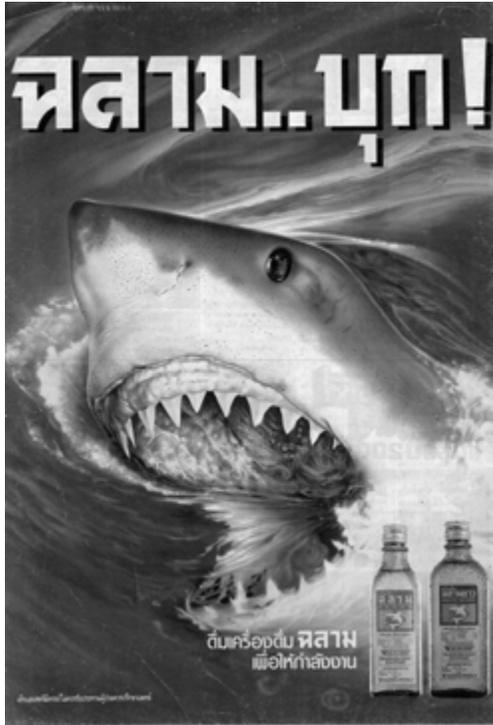


Image 3

An advertisement for *Chalam* (“shark”) energy drink from the back cover of a late 1970s issue of *Plaek*. In the “Girls to the Power of 2” column, Phan Thathorn described men with a sexual interest in male-to-female transgender *kathoeyes* as *chalam* or “sharks”, a term that implied a polymorphously diverse and sexually omnivorous form of male desire. The text of the advertisement reads, “Shark . . . attack! Drink *Chalam* beverage for energy at work.” Small text on the bottom left of the advertisement states, “Should not be consumed by children and pregnant women. Persons with illnesses should seek medical advice.”

of “sharks” and “bi(sexual)-tigers” invoked to describe a sexual culture of Thai men who fetishised femininity over female physiology have parallels to George Chauncey’s (1994) description of a category of men called “wolves” in turn-of-the-twentieth-century New York City. What the Thai terms for “shark” and “bi-tiger” and the New York slang term “wolf” share is a common invocation of the image of an all-devouring and perhaps predatory form of male desire that is relatively indiscriminate in its tastes, provided that its sexual “food” is presented, or at least imagined, within a feminine frame.²

2. It is interesting to note that “the Sharks” was the name of the Puerto Rican youth gang in *West Side Story*, and that the slang term for that gang’s Chicano members, “Chico”, was a likely origin of the Thai term *jik-go* that Pratchaya Phanthathorn drew on to name his gay agony uncle print persona, Go Paknam. However, it is not known if *West Side Story* was a source of the Thai term *chalam*, “shark”, meaning a man interested in transgender and transsexual partners.

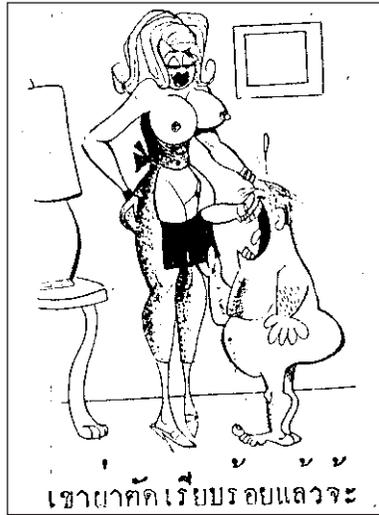


Image 4

“They’ve done the [sex change] operation nicely, dear!”—Cartoon in a 1975 issue of *Plaek* illustrating the “Girls to the Power of 2” column. The cartoon is clearly copied from a Western girlie magazine for heterosexual men, but has been given a new caption that relocates the image within a frame that highlights the sexual interest of *chalam* or “sharks”, Thai men who seek out male-to-female transsexual partners (see pages 7–8).



Image 5

Conversation in a Nudist Camp: “Look at *Mae Piak* there! Since she’s had her sex change operation she’s had to paint arrows to point the new way in.”—Caption for another cartoon illustrating the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in a 1975 issue of *Plaek*. Like Image 4, this cartoon has been taken from a Western girlie magazine for heterosexual men, but given a new caption that reflects Phan Thathorn’s fetishisation of male-to-female transsexual *kathoey*s as being better able to sexually satisfy men than born-women.

While Phan Thathorn championed the right of *kathoeys* to assume a place of respect in a Thai society that previously had seen them only as objects of scorn and derision, he also objectified and stereotyped transgenders and transsexuals. In the pages of *Plaek*, *kathoeys* achieved recognition to the extent that they could become sexually attractive objects of heterosexual male desire. The effect of this focus on expanding hetero-erotic male desire to include male-to-female transgenders and transsexuals was to disparage and devalue born-women as being less accommodating of male wishes, and physiologically less capable than *kathoeys* of satisfying penis-centred male desire.

Articles and humorous stories accompanying the interviews and profiles in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column often related the pleasures of insertive anal sex with a *kathoeey* as well as the capacity of the surgically constructed vaginas of male-to-female transsexuals to provide men with intense sexual satisfaction. The second issue of *Plaek* that published the interview with Kusuma summarised above also included an article titled “Where the Fuck Has it Disappeared To?” (*man hai pai nai wa?*) penned by Go Paknam. In this article, based on an interview with an unnamed pre-operative *kathoeey* performer at a nightclub on New Petchburi Road, Go Paknam writes that only a small minority of *kathoeey* performers have had gender reassignment surgery (*pha-tat plaeng phet*) and he describes how pre-operative transgenders hide their penis when wearing a female swimming costume for stage performances. Issue 17 of *Plaek* in August 1975 also included a short story by Go Paknam, titled “It Was an Arsehole [not a vagina]” (*nan man tut wa*), about a man who visits a bar in the Patpong red light district and asks for a “post-operative type of *kathoeey*” (*kathoeey chanit pha-tat*) prostitute. The next morning, the man boasts to a male friend about how good the sex with the *kathoeey* was, emphasising how tight (*fit-fit*)³ her surgically constructed vagina felt. His friend laughs at him and says that the *kathoeey* prostitute he had sex with had not had a sex change operation and he must have fucked her arsehole (*tut*) not her vagina (*hi*). The “Girls to the Power of 2” columns were also often illustrated with cartoons copied from unsourced Western girlie magazines, but given new captions in Thai that reflected the erotic sensibility of “sharks” and which relocated the cartoon within a transsexual rather than heterosexual frame (see Images 4 and 5).

In Issue 18 of *Plaek* published in August 1975, the “Girls to the Power of 2” column included an interview with a 33-year-old *kathoeey*, Bussara Phakasai, who was born in Bangkok’s Banglamphu area and at the time was the owner of a beauty salon in the Pratunam area of the city. Bussara stated that she had had a sex change operation in Japan, and previously had a husband (*sami*), Winai, but the two had since separated after having lived together for several years. Bussara added that she was interested in finding a new male partner. She also reported that she knew of 100 transsexual *kathoeys*, all of whom she maintained were now

3. In Thai, the borrowed English word “fit” is used to mean “a tight fit”.

the lovers or minor wives (*mia noi*) of well-to-do men, including storeowners, bank managers, and politicians. Phan Thathorn asked if Bussara could “take” (*rap*) a “super-sized” man. She replied that she could, but that her surgically constructed vagina could not take a “super deluxe sized” man, for whom she had to “use the old method of doing it behind (*tham khang-lang*)”, that is, receptive anal sex. Bussara stated,

I guarantee that our *kathoe* sex organs (*khreuang phet*) are much better than a woman’s, because we have been surgically “designed” (*top-taeng*) specifically to give pleasure to men, which is different from natural women, who can’t beat us in giving erotic pleasure . . . Once a man tries out us *kathoeyes* I guarantee he’ll completely forget the “old thing” (*khornng kao*, i.e. wife) at home.

Bussara added that *kathoeyes* are also better able to serve a man’s wishes (*pron-nibat ao-jai*) than a woman because, having once been male themselves, they “know men’s hearts well”. Furthermore, Bussara stated that when in bed with a woman a man usually has to take the lead in sex, but *kathoeyes* can “undertake” (*jat-kan*) everything, doing everything for the man, who need not do anything in order to achieve sexual satisfaction. However, Bussara ended her interview with the proviso that men should not think of slapping a *kathoe* the way they beat women, “because every *kathoe* knows how to kick hard and fight back”. This issue also included a short story titled “The Secrets of a Transsexual Girl to the Power of 2” (*khvam-lap sao kamlang 2 plaeng phet*).

The September 1975 issue of *Plaek* included an article titled “Gay King(s) Gay Queen”,⁴ which Phan Thathorn began by writing that since the “Girls to the Power of 2” column had been published *Plaek* had received many letters from readers asking about the differences among *kathoeyes*, *gay kings*, and *gay queens*. Phan Thathorn replied that *gay kings* dress as “normal men” but their personality tends a bit towards the feminine. In contrast, he wrote that *gay queens* liked to dress as women but are not “complete women” (*phu-ying tem tua*) like the “girls to the power of 2”, i.e. *kathoeyes*, who had been interviewed in *Plaek*. Phan Thathorn stated that *gay kings* are “smarter” (*chalat kwa*) than *gay queens* because they can have sex with both men and women, and can be either top or bottom (*kratham kor dai reu thuk kratham kor dai*),⁵ literally “either insertive or receptive”, while *gay queens* can only be bottom (*thuk kratham phiang fai diao*). He concluded this article stating,

But as for the styles [of sex] and getting satisfaction, absolutely don’t tell anyone that . . . from my interviews with those [men] who prefer gays (*nak*

4. The spelling “King(s)” here indicates that this English word was written phonetically in Thai but with the final letter “s” being marked as silent with a superscript *karan* symbol.

5. This definition of *gay kings* as sexually versatile, both top and bottom, is at odds with the usual understanding of this term in Thai gay communities as meaning a preference for insertive anal sex. In later years, Go Paknam would come to use *gay king* to mean an exclusive preference for insertive anal sex.

niyom gay) there tends to only ever be one answer . . . it's much better than
(*yiam kwa*) sex with a normal woman.

Phan Thathorn also provided background stories on the varieties of commercial sex available at different entertainment venues in Bangkok. In the December 1976 issue of *Plaek*, the "Girls to the Power of 2" column reported Phan Thathorn's exploratory visits to four types of bars in Bangkok's Patpong red light district: Go Go and "partner" bars for heterosexual men, gay bars, and "husband for rent" (*phua chao*) bars for heterosexual women. In Go Go bars female sex workers dressed only in bikinis and danced on a stage to entertain patrons and potential customers. In Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s, host bars were called "partner" bars and, as the name suggests, this type of venue provided dance and drinking partners to accompany male customers. Phan Thathorn then named a number of gay bars in Patpong—Tulip, Apollo, Tomboy, Siamese Cat, Twilight, Garden, and Harry's—and described the scene at one unnamed gay bar where the male sex workers had numbers attached to their clothes in the same way that female sex workers in heterosexual brothels wore numbers for ease of identification by clients. He reported that these male sex workers were more expensive than female sex workers in Patpong, with an "off" price of between 100 and 500 baht for Thai customers and a much higher price of 500 to 1000 baht needing to be paid to the establishment by Western customers for the privilege of taking a male sex worker off the premises to spend the night. The hybrid Thai-English expression *kha-off*, "off price", means the fee that a customer pays the manager of a bar to take a sex worker "off" the premises for sex. In English, this is sometimes called a "bar fine".

Cultural Attitudes and Historical Transitions in Bangkok's *Kathoey* Culture

The potted biographies of *kathoeyes* published in the "Girls to the Power of 2" column often reflected popular attitudes in the mid-1970s. Some of the interviews were also of the form of oral history reports that provided fascinating, but all too brief, insights into dramatic changes that took place in Thailand's male-to-female transgender cultures and communities across the twentieth century.

The "Girls to the Power of 2" column in the July 1975 issue of *Plaek* included an interview with 19-year-old Tum, who also used the female name Warunee and worked at a beauty parlour next to the Sheraton Hotel on Surawong Road in downtown Bangkok. Tum reported that her mother's younger brother was a *kathoey* who wanted to be a woman, while her mother's younger sister was also a *kathoey*, who wanted to be a man, that is, a butch lesbian. Here Tum used the term *kathoey* to refer to both effeminate men and masculine women. As noted in the Introduction, within a few years of the publication of this interview masculine women in Thailand would come to be called *tomboy* or *tom*, with the term *kathoey* being restricted to refer only to effeminate and transgender males.

In contrast to the glowing accounts of *kathoey*s' feminine beauty published in *Plaek*, in this interview Tum observed that *kathoey*s, a term which at that time referred to both feminine men and masculine women, were looked down upon by the wider society and were stigmatised with derogatory labels such as "odd, eccentric" (*phiren*), "unconventional" (*nork-khork*, *nork-baep*), and "stubborn" (*deua*), in the sense of refusing to listen to others' calls for them to conform to dominant gender norms.

The September 1975 issue of *Plaek* interviewed a 20-year-old transsexual named Jiap who at the age of 14 had been forced to leave her home in the northern province of Phrae because of persistent criticisms from her parents, family, and villagers that she was a *kathoey*. Jiap had dressed and lived as a woman since coming to Bangkok, first working as a fashion model and then meeting a male lover who had paid for her to study hairdressing at Pan Bunnag's Ket Siam beauty salon (see below). Jiap had since had a sex change operation and at the time of the interview was working in a beauty parlour in Bangkok's Khlong Toey area where she earned what was then a very respectable income of 3,000 baht a month. Phan Thathorn noted that, "She can look after a husband (*phua*) easily on that income", and he ended the column writing that anyone interested in contacting Jiap should send him a letter, but they should be fast!

The October 1975 issue of *Plaek* included an interview with Joi, a 19-year-old *kathoey* from Ayutthaya just north of Bangkok, who is described as being "polite and reserved like a woman" with "fair skin like a Chinese woman". Joi is said to have won the award of "goddess" (*thepphi*) in a *kathoey* beauty contest held as part of the Songkran or Thai New Year fair in the district of Takhli in April 1975. This brief report indicates that *kathoey* beauty contests were being staged as regular parts of festivals in provincial centres in the 1970s. The December 1975 issue included an interview with Aet, real name given as Sena Yubonsak, who is reported to have moved to Bangkok from Kalasin Province in Northeast Thailand at the age of 11, when, in her own words, she was already a "child to the power of 2" (*dek kamlang 2*) who liked to wear dresses. Now as a teenager, Aet helped her older siblings sell sticky rice and green papaya salad (*som tam*) outside the Ratchawat Cinema in Bangkok. Aet stated that she now cross-dressed all the time, and many male customers flirted with her. The interview with Aet included a photograph of her standing topless in a provocative pose, but with thin black strips printed over the nipples of her large feminine breasts in order to conform with Thai censorship laws that prohibited publication of images of fully exposed female breasts.

The Historical Recentness of Thailand's Public *Kathoey* Culture

Oral history style interviews with older *kathoey*s published in the "Girls to the Power of 2" column indicate that the public culture of male-to-female transgender *kathoey*s that was highly visible in 1970s Bangkok was then a very recent

phenomenon, and that in earlier decades of the twentieth century pressures to marry had been so strong that it had not been possible to live as a cross-dressed woman. *Plaek's* June 1976 issue included an interview with Sunthari, nickname Daeng Latphrao, whom Phan Thathorn reported as being very well known in Bangkok in the 1970s. Having been born in the 1930s, and being in her 40s at the time of the interview, Sunthari reported that she had started living cross-dressed as a *kathoeys* in Bangkok soon after the end of World War II. Sunthari stated that at that time *kathoeys* did not "roam the streets" the way they did in the 1970s, and in the early post-war years she had been part of a group of six or seven *kathoeys* friends who only dressed up on weekends to go out together to cruise for male partners in areas of Bangkok such as Thewet, Banglamphu, outside the Phattanakorn cinema, and around the now-demolished Chaloem Krung cinema on Ratchdamnoen Road.

Sunthari observed that in the 1940s *kathoeys* were not as beautiful as women of that time or as feminine as contemporary *kathoeys* were in the 1970s. In that earlier period, not all *kathoeys* had enlarged breasts and some were quite muscular in a very manly way. There were some *kathoeys* prostitutes, but not as many as in the 1970s, and in the early post-war years the only commercial aspect of an interaction would usually be when a male sexual partner treated a *kathoeys* to a taxi fare home. At the time of this interview, Sunthari had been a public servant working in the Highways Department for fourteen years, but it is unclear from the interview whether she was then living as a woman or perhaps only cross-dressing after hours.

In the December 1976 issue of *Plaek* the "Girls to the Power of 2" column was written by Pic, a regular contributor to the magazine in later years (see below), and was titled "A *Kathoeys* Family" (*trakun kathoeys*). This issue detailed how a *kathoeys* friend of Pic's introduced her to her 90-year-old father, who showed Pic a photograph of himself dressed as woman during the reign of King Rama VI (r. 1910–25), when the old man had been just 20 years old. Pic related that the old man had long ago given up cross-dressing, and had got married and had a family. He told Pic that in the early twentieth century, *kathoeys* were not as visible in public as they had become in the 1970s, and as a young man he had only cross-dressed occasionally. After he had stopped cross-dressing and married, he had had seven children. His first son had become a *kathoeys* and the old man stated, "How could I criticise him when I had been a *kathoeys* myself?" This son had died at the age of 30. His second son was a "genuine man" (*phu-chai thae*) and his third child, a daughter, was a "genuine woman" (*phu-ying thae*), but one of her sons had become a *kathoeys*. He described his fourth child as "a woman who wants to be a man" and who over the years had had more than ten different "wives" (*mia*), that is, female partners. The old man stated that at the time of the interview this daughter had both a "major wife" (*mia luang*) and a "minor wife" (*mia noi*), that is, a primary female partner as well as a female lover. His fifth child was a "genuine woman", while his sixth child was a son who had

also become a *kathoey* and now used the feminine name of Sunthari (male name Suthin). Sunthari had been featured separately in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in a previous issue of *Plaek* (see above). The youngest child was a son, a “genuine man” who had many minor wives, or lovers, and four children by his major wife. This son’s oldest child was a girl who “wants to be a man” and at the time had a “female partner” (*fan phu-ying*).⁶ Pic concluded the interview by suggesting that being a *kathoey* clearly runs in the family.

This interview, and Sunthari’s observations noted above that earlier generations of *kathoey*s had not been as beautiful or as feminine as the younger generation of transgenders in the 1970s, perhaps helps explain the Thai press’s fascination with male-to-female transgenderism in this period. The columns and articles in *Plaek*, as well as reports in the press at this time, often reflect a sense of surprise at how beautiful the younger generation of *kathoey*s were. It also seems to have been the case that in the 1970s *kathoey*s had become more visible in public, and definitely much more widely noticed, as increasing numbers of male-to-female transgenders began living as women full-time, not merely cross-dressing on weekend evenings as in earlier decades. Cross-dressed *kathoey* sex workers soliciting clients on the streets of Bangkok had also become a much more visible phenomenon the city. Press interest, and the success of the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in *Plaek*, thus partly reflected the increasing openness and visibility of *kathoey*s in Bangkok as well as the fact these *kathoey*s were more beautiful than previous generations of male-to-female transgenders. This would appear to indicate that by the 1970s Thai *kathoey*s had developed heightened skills in feminine style, dress, and presentation, and were increasingly successful in passing as women.

Thai Parents “Make Their Sons *Kathoey*s”

A theme that recurs in a number of the interviews in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column is the belief that Thai parents’ preference for “cute” behaviour and clothing for their children leads to some sons becoming *kathoey*s. In the very first instalment of “Girls to the Power of 2” based on the interview with Kusuma summarised above, Phan Thathorn argued that parents’ encouragement of young boys to act in sweet, feminine ways is one reason that a boy may become a *kathoey* later in life,

Some parents as well as older brothers and sisters want to have a beautiful, attractive child (*luk suay luk ngam*). When they see a cute one- or two-year-old child, even though he is a boy, they want him to be like a girl, putting him in a dress, putting on makeup and lipstick, and having him speak in a polite,

6. In Thai, the borrowed English word *fan* is used in a gender-neutral sense to variously mean “lover”, “partner”, “boyfriend”, “girlfriend”, “husband” or “wife”.

feminine way (*phut kha*).⁷ Then the personality of the young boy progressively changes to become like that of a young girl (*ai nu klai pen ee nu*).

In the September 1975 issue Phan Thathorn stated,

When the parents of some children discover that their son has feminine tendencies, while the boy is still small, they in fact like the fact that he uses sweet and polite female speech (*riak kha*) . . . but they change and dislike this behaviour when it persists as the boy grows up.

Also in September 1975 the “Girls to the Power of 2” column profiled a *kathoey* named Winat (i.e. from “Venus”) or Wi, the oldest of seven children, who stated that her parents had wanted a girl for their first child and had raised her as a girl, dressing her in girl’s clothes and talking with her as if she were a girl. In the October 1975 issue a *kathoey* named Suphatra, nickname Tiu, similarly reported that her mother had been disappointed that she did not have a daughter and had raised her like a girl, dressing her in dresses and making her talk like a girl.

It is difficult to interpret these brief but nonetheless recurring narratives, which also occur in some of the later letters from gay men to Uncle Go. Do these accounts reflect actual attempts by some Thai parents to raise a son as a girl, or are they post-facto rationalisations by *kathoeyes* that locate the “cause” of their transgenderism in forces outside their control? Whatever the case may be, behind the folk myth that some Thai parents cause their sons to become *kathoeyes*, we can nonetheless detect somewhat different expectations of norms of masculinity for young boys and adult men, respectively. It is also possible to detect a cultural anxiety about whether boys can successfully transition from childhood “cuteness” to adult norms of masculinity. These reports suggest that “sweet” behaviour and speech by young boys is indeed valued by many parents and is seen as “cute” and “polite” rather than feminine. However, as boys get older and approach puberty they are expected to transition out of “cute” behaviour and express normative adult forms of masculinity. After a certain age, excessive sweetness and politeness in a boy may become seen as effeminate or the mark of a *kathoey*.

Profiles and Interviews with Prominent *Kathoeyes* and Gay Men

The “Girls to the Power of 2” column also included profiles and interviews with some prominent figures in Bangkok’s gay and *kathoey* scenes in the 1970s. The column in *Plaek’s* third issue published in July 1975 was written by a *kathoey* named only as Pic, who would become a regular contributor to the magazine in the following years as the author of an eponymously named Bangkok gay scene

7. The feminine way of speaking that Phan Thathorn referred to is the use of the feminine polite particle, *kha*. See Chapter 7 for more details on gender-based speech forms in Thai.

gossip column called “Pic Jup-jip” (see below). Pic began her account of her own life with the words, “Pic’s boyfriend (*fan*) once said, ‘Why don’t my women lovers treat (*pronnibat*) me as well as Pic?’”, reflecting Phan Thathorn’s view that *kathoey*s are better at satisfying male desires than born-women. Pic related that she was a 26-year-old teacher at a private school in inner Bangkok, also working part-time with five *kathoey* friends as a transgender model at fashion shows presented as entertainment at Bangkok restaurants and private parties, for which the members of the group each received between 100 and 200 baht per performance.

Pic was born at Sattahip in Chonburi Province east of Bangkok and appears to have come from a well-off family, as she graduated from the well-regarded St Gabriel’s Catholic private school in Bangkok. Students at St Gabriel’s are not required to be Catholic, and indeed the majority of students were and still are from well-off Thai Buddhist families. Pic was a student at St Gabriel’s at the same time as Pan Bunnag, a well-known gay personality in 1970s Bangkok who would be profiled in a later issue of *Plaek* (see below). Pic stated that she had felt she had wanted to be a woman from the age of 3 or 4, and that in her class at St Gabriel’s she had known three other boys who also wanted to be girls. Pic wrote that she had been effeminate at school and had had a steady boyfriend for six years from the age of 14, but that man had subsequently married and had children. At the time of writing for *Plaek*, Pic had an 18-year-old student boyfriend whom she had met at a bar in Bangkok’s Patpong entertainment district and who stayed with her on weekends.

Pic wrote that she would like to have gender reassignment surgery, but needed to wear male clothes in order to continue to work as a teacher. She also wrote that she liked to go out to Patpong, but she did not dress as a woman there for fear of being arrested by the police and charged with prostitution. Pic complained that the Thai police completely misunderstood *kathoey*s because, rather than being prostitutes, *kathoey*s like herself in fact bought sex (*seu praweni*) from men working in Patpong’s bars and coffee shops. Pic reported that her monthly salary was 1,500 baht and she paid about 80 baht a time to take a male sex worker “off” the premises from a bar, with additional expenses being a tip for the sex worker, taxis fares, and the price of a short-term hotel room. Pic ended her essay by saying that *kathoey*s can be divided into different types depending on the type of sex they perform with male partners, whether oral, anal, or mutual masturbation.

This same issue of *Plaek* also included an interview by Phan Thathorn with a *kathoey* nicknamed Teung (real name Wasan Lekprasert) from a well-to-do family in Tha Tako district of Nakhonsawan Province in mid-Northern Thailand and who owned a beauty salon in Bangkok with a monthly income of 5000 baht. Teung stated that she was not interested in finding a regular male partner (*fan*) because she was afraid that he would just try to squeeze (*bip*) money out of her.

Pic Jup-jip “Juicy Gossip” Column

Pic began her own regular *kathoey*- and gay-scene gossip column in *Plaek* very soon after her essay summarised above was published. The gossip column was called “Pic Jup-jip”. *Jup-jip* is a playful idiom that here connotes juicy gossip, *jup* being the onomatopoeic sound of lips kissing and *jip* being the chirp of a bird. In her very first “juicy gossip” column in the July 1975 issue of *Plaek* Pic reported that “Big Lek”, the *kathoey* owner of the Starlight gay bar in Patpong, had now changed her name to “Lek Aunty (*pa*) Na Anusawari”. The term “Na” in this name, literally meaning “at”, “in” or “from”, is used as part of the surnames of descendants of noble families and rulers of old Thai principalities and has a similar sense to “von” and “van” in German and Dutch surnames. For example, the descendants of the former ruling family of Chiangmai in Northern Thailand now have the surname Na Chiangmai. The use of “Na” by *kathoey*s in their self-chosen campy “stage names” is a playfully ironic attempt to assume an air of class and prestige. The term *anusawari* in “Big Lek”’s new name means “monument” and referred to the Victory Monument area, colloquially called *anusawari chai* in Thai, which was a common hangout for *kathoey* and male sex workers from the 1960s through to the 1970s. Another camp name mentioned in Pic’s first “juicy gossip” column is Rungreudi Na Thaksin, for a *kathoey* who originally came from the south of the country, *thaksin* being a Sanskrit-derived formal term for “south”. Pic continued writing her fortnightly “juicy gossip” column for *Plaek* well into the 1990s.

In the June 1976 issue of *Plaek* Pic included an announcement that a newsletter for the *Chomrom Gay Club*, literally the “gay club association”, was now available by mail order from the magazine. Rather than an actual club journal, this publication seems to have been a gay personal classifieds magazine for which advertisers paid 10 baht to have their photo, personal details, and addresses published. The *Chomrom Gay Club* newsletter seems to have been published independently from *Plaek* by a man named Suwit living in the Yannawa district of Bangkok.

Perhaps the most prominent public gay figure to appear in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column was Pan Bunnag, who was interviewed in the December 1975 issue of *Plaek*. Pan was from a wealthy elite family with a long history of service to the Siamese royal court. Phan Thathorn wrote that Pan’s father had the noble title of *Phraya* Chaisuriphong, while his mother was *Khun-ying* Sali Bunnag, *khun-ying* being a conferred title similar to the British conferred title “Lady”. Pan completed secondary education at the prestigious St Gabriel’s school, also attended by Pic (see above), and undertook further studies in English at Bophitphimuk School. He then studied hairdressing in an unspecified foreign country, and is said to have liked travelling, at the time of the interview having already visited Japan, Germany, and France and intending to go to America the following month in January 1976. In the interview Pan is stated to have been the first person in Thailand to organise fashion shows with only *kathoey*s as

models. At the time of the interview, he was owner-manager of the Ket⁸ Siam School of Beauty (*rong-rian soem-suay Ket Siam*) in Soi Rong-nang Metro, which had previously been called the Rita School of Beauty and had first been established by Yupha Nopwichai. Pan's hairdressing salon commanded high prices for his special touch and throughout the 1970s and 1980s he was a household name as a flamboyant Liberace-esque media personality, often appearing on TV talk shows.

The interview in *Plaek* included a photo of Pan with long hair and dressed as a woman while cutting the hair of a male customer at his Ket Siam salon. Phan Thathorn stated that Pan had recently lived as a woman for two years but had since given that up in order to "become a different type of girl to the power of 2", namely, "gay". Pan is described as now dressing in a half-male, half-female style called "the gay style" (*baep gay*), because he had found that he was more widely accepted in the wider Thai society when he wore androgynous, unisex fashions than when he cross-dressed as a woman. Pan stated that most Thai people believed that 90 percent of cross-dressing *kathoeyes* were prostitutes, and he did not want to be thought to be a sex worker. While Phan Thathorn described Pan as "a gay type of *kathoey* who does not care about society's attitudes (*mai khae sangkhom*)", this would not appear to be completely accurate as Pan himself states in the interview that he had stopped dressing as a woman in order to avoid negative social reactions.

Starting in 1980, Pan began writing for *Plaek's* competitor sensationalist magazine *Cha-ngon* (dazed, stunned, dumbfounded), editing a gay advice column very similar to Uncle Go's original, and always more popular, column. Pan's gay advice column was called "How Come You Have to be Gay?" (*het-chanai theung torng pen gay*) and he wrote under the pen name Kradang-nga Lon Fai, literally "*kradang-nga* flower petals singed over a flame". *Kradang-nga* is a type of flower whose petals, even when dry or withered, still release a pleasant odour when singed over a flame. The idiom "*Kradang-nga* petals singed over a flame" refers to an older woman, compared to a "flower" that has withered with age, who nonetheless is sexually experienced and when aroused by the "flame" of desire is better able to satisfy a man than a younger woman, who may be beautiful but sexually inexperienced. Pan playfully used this camp idiom to refer to himself as an older gay man who is sexually experienced, and hence able to provide helpful advice to gay men as an authoritative agony "aunt", while also happening to still be good in bed. *Cha-ngon* also published a gay personal classifieds section called "The Mysteries of Finding Love" (*praitsana ha rak*) in association with the gay advice column by Pan/Kradang-nga. In the second half of the 1980s, Pan also wrote regularly for Thai gay magazines such as *Midway*. When Pan Bunnag died on 25 June 1991 after a long illness, his passing was front-page news in Thai-language dailies.

8. *Ket* is derived from the Sanskrit word *kesha*, meaning "the hair of the head".

Arguing for Gay and *Kathoey* Sexual Rights

While avowedly heterosexual, Pratchaya Phanthathorn was nonetheless an early advocate for gay and *kathoey* rights. In the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in the seventh issue of *Plaek* published in September 1975, Phan Thathorn argued that, just as we like to eat different types of food, so we should also have the right to have different types of sex. He maintained that “foreign countries” now accept this principle, and he portrayed the West as a modern (*than-samai*), progressive (*kao-na*), and developed (*jaroen*) sexual model for Thailand to follow. Phan Thathorn argued that in order to become truly modern, and to develop and progress like the West, Thailand needed to accept homosexuality and transgenderism. In the item titled “Gay King(s), Gay Queen” noted above which accompanied the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in the September 1975 issue of *Plaek*, Phan Thathorn wrote,

It should be everyone’s right to do this [i.e. have sex with the same sex] provided you don’t harm anyone else . . . People overseas accept this . . . In truth, being gay or a girl to the power of 2 is not wrong or something that should be looked down upon in any way, and in any event being gay isn’t illegal [in Thailand] either. Hence, trying to change their mind [i.e. make gays and *kathoey*s straight] when they don’t want to is completely wrong (*mai thuk-torng yang-ying*). Because being gay comes from sexual desire (*kamarom*), which is in the subconscious of every person, and all have the right to seek out happiness and enjoy sex (*sep kamarom*) in whatever way they wish. It shouldn’t be an object of disgust from the wider society at all.

Pratchaya sometimes used *Plaek* to provide background reports on homosexuality and transsexualism in Western countries based on English-language sources. For example, the October 1975 issue included an article by Go Paknam titled “Men Who Want to be Woman, Women Who Want to be Men” that reported on sex change procedures in the United States. These background articles were typically used as a basis for arguing that Thailand needed to become more accepting of gender and sexual diversity as Go Paknam, perhaps somewhat naively, maintained was then already the case in the United States and other Western countries.

Phan Thathorn and Go Paknam’s articles holding up Western countries as imagined models of sexual freedom for Thailand to emulate were often illustrated with images taken from Western, presumably American, gay publications. However, actual gay men and lesbians from Western countries, or for that matter from any other country other than Thailand, are all but absent from the “Girls to the Power of 2” column as well as the many letters to Uncle Go published over the following decades. Western gay and lesbian cultures and communities occasionally appear as remote presences in some of the letters and interviews. For example, as seen in Chapter 4, some of Uncle Go’s gay correspondents report travelling to the West and visiting Western gay scenes. Nonetheless, the “Girls

to the Power of 2” profiles of *kathoey*s and the Uncle Go gay and lesbian advice columns that ultimately developed from those profiles all reflect transgender, gay, and lesbian cultures in which the relationships described are almost exclusively between Thais.

Some observers have suggested that expatriate Western gay residents and tourists were key agents in the formation of Thailand’s modern gay culture. However, the “Girls to the Power of 2” profiles and the Uncle Go advice columns detailed in the following chapters tell a somewhat different story. In the pages of *Plaek* Thailand’s modern transgender and transsexual *kathoey* culture appears as a distinctly local development. And in *Plaek* we see that Thai gay men returning from sojourns in Western countries were focal influences for introducing new subcultural vocabularies and ideas of gay identity as “modern” and “progressive”. Rather than Thailand’s modern gay culture being an implant seeded by Western expatriates, it was educated and often economically better-off Thai gay men who had had the opportunity to travel to or live in the West who were among the founders of this Southeast Asian gay culture in the years after World War II. Educated Thai men and women who had not necessarily travelled to the West themselves but who, like Pratchaya Phanthathorn, had access to Western gay and other publications were also highly influential in breaking new ground that opened the way for the public gay, lesbian, and *kathoey* cultures so visible in Thailand today to take form. Thailand’s contemporary gay and lesbian worlds emerged in interaction with Western gay and lesbian communities, but Thais themselves mediated this interaction.

The fact that almost all the relationships reported in both Uncle Go’s gay and lesbian advice columns are Thai-Thai reflects the indigenous development of same-sex communities in Thailand after World War II. In this, the Uncle Go advice columns in the print medium of *Plaek* parallel Dredge Byung’chu Käng’s account of the “Thai queer online world” in the early twenty-first century as, “render[ing] tourists and expats relatively invisible. Thais generally express little interest in reading *farang* [Western] online forums, and Thai forums rarely discuss issues related to foreigners” (Käng 2010: 174). Käng adds that Thai gay and *kathoey* websites are, “usually inaccessible to foreigners as they require Thai literacy. This lack of Thai interest in *farang* decenters the Western gaze” (Käng 2010: 174).

“Love Problems of the Third Sex”: The First Gay Advice Columns in *Plaek*

When it appeared on newsstands across Thailand in 1975, *Plaek* was a publishing sensation. No previous mass circulation publication had reported the country’s diverse *kathoey* and same-sex cultures in such detail or in a way that gave priority and prominence to transgenders’ and gay men’s accounts of their own lives. As editor of *Plaek*, Pratchaya Phanthathorn was soon receiving large volumes

of appreciative mail from readers. In the August 1975 "Girls to the Power of 2" column Phan Thathorn reported that the interviews with *kathoeyes* published in the previous issues of *Plaek* had met with a loud positive response from readers. He claimed that after reading the interviews and profiles of *kathoeyes*, many male readers were writing in to tell him they were "giving up flirting (*jip*) with girls, and turning to flirting with *krathoeyes*";⁹ and many men were writing to ask how to contact the interviewed *kathoeyes*.

Not only heterosexual men appreciated the "Girls to the Power of 2" column. Pratchaya/Phan Thathorn also received many letters from gay men across the country. It appears that Pratchaya did not begin the "Girls to the Power of 2" column with any intention of becoming an "agony uncle" for an advice and lonely-hearts column for gay men. However, as a savvy journalist with some decades of experience in Thailand's publishing industry, he no doubt quickly realised that the volume of mail he was receiving from gay men showed that he had happened upon a previously untapped market sector of homosexual men who were hungry for information and support and keen to find ways of contacting new gay friends and lovers.

In the October 1975 issue of *Plaek*, just four months after the magazine had begun publication, a new column was added alongside the by then well-established "Girls to the Power of 2" series. Titled "Love Problems of the Third Sex" (*panha hua-jai phet thi-sam*), or in some following issues simply "Loves of the Third Sex" (*hua-jai phet thi-sam*), and penned by Uncle (*aa*) Go Paknam, this new column provided a venue for the letters that *Plaek* had been receiving from gay men asking for advice and information. The first letter published in the new "Love Problems of the Third Sex" column was from a 25-year-old man named Sutthiphorn, who described himself as having "transvestite feelings" (*arom lak-kaphet*) because he could only become sexually aroused with men. Sutthiphorn wrote that he had been both top and bottom in sex many times with men, whom he called *kathoeyes*, and while he had tried to have sex with a woman he had not been able to get an erection. Sutthiphorn asked if he could ever get married, have a satisfying sex life with a woman, and have children. Uncle Go's reply to Sutthiphorn is not particularly consistent, but nonetheless set the pattern for replies to many other letters in the years that followed. Uncle Go stated that while Sutthiphorn was feminine because he had received pleasure from being sexually penetrated in gay sex, he could still get married because he had shown he could "perform" in bed by also having been top in insertive anal sex.

A couple of months later in December 1975, *Plaek* published another letter in the "Loves of the Third Sex" (*hua-jai phet thi-sam*) column, this time from a young male student who reported that he had also had sex with both women and *kathoeyes*, and also masturbated every day. The young man used a range of colloquialisms, calling his penis "the fighter" (*ai su*) and describing sex with

9. In early issues of *Plaek* from 1975 the old spelling *krathoey* was sometimes used. However, from 1976, the contemporary spelling *kathoey* was almost always used.

women and *kathoey*s as “berthing his ship at the dock” (*ao reua khao uu*). He asked Go if his sex drive was excessive, and signed the letter as “Youth to the Power of 3” (*num kamlang 3*), because he enjoyed sex with women and *kathoey*s, as well as masturbating. As perhaps might be expected from a man who extolled the virtues of being a “shark” who can enjoy sex with both men and women, Go Paknam replied that the young man should stop worrying about his sex drive as his diverse experiences showed he had no problem at all!



Image 6
Photo of a self-identified *gay king* teenager nicknamed Piak interviewed by Phan Thathorn in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in late 1975, reflecting the gradual evolution of the column from an initial focus on transgender *kathoey*s to also include stories about gay men. The text above Piak’s photo reads “Girls to the Power of 2, By Phan Thathorn”. The text on the right has the header “Heart Friends” (*pheuan jai*) and is the gay and *kathoey* personal classifieds section that was also a staple of the Uncle Go columns. The first personal classified is from 20-year-old “Tui”, who seeks a *gay king* or *gay queen* partner aged between 15 and 30. The second personal classified is from “Toi”, who says he is a poor *gay queen* who wants to meet gay friends.

While Pratchaya Phanthathorn argued for sexual libertarianism from the earliest issues of *Plaek* and began the Uncle Go Paknam gay advice column within the first few months of publication, at that time he nonetheless made it clear that he saw same-sex sexuality as being merely a transitory release that was ultimately inferior to heterosexual relations. In the September 1975 “Gay King(s), Gay Queen” item already noted above, Phan Thathorn wrote,

Sexual desire is part of human nature, just as much for women as for men, and sex (*ruam kan*) between a man and a woman is regarded to be normal (*pokati*). But if a woman has sex (*ruam kap*) with a woman, or a man has sex

with a man, then it's just for sexual release (*plot pleuang khwam-khrai*), because there's no continuation of the family lineage, no children. After you've come, it's all over (*set laeo kor set kan*) . . .

In later years, writing as Uncle Go, Pratchaya would change his mind somewhat and come to regard gay relationships as potentially deep and lasting. However, as discussed in Chapter 8, despite starting a separate advice column for lesbians in 1976 after being urged to do so by a young lesbian university student, Pratchaya Phanthathorn/Uncle Go continued to see female same-sex relationships as transitory and inferior to heterosexuality. The extent to which male heterosexual desire remained the normative background for all of Go Paknam's columns in the following years is made clear in the typical advice that he gave to the different categories of gay men and lesbians that he identified. Because the men whom he identified as *gay kings* preferred insertive anal sex with a man, Go Paknam often argued that these men were also potentially bisexual and should try to have sex with women, and perhaps even get married. Go Paknam also argued that because *toms*, masculine lesbians, lacked a penis, they should accept that they would never be able to compete sexually with men for the hearts of feminine women or *dees*. And while he often wrote that *dees* have the sexual right (*sitthi*) to play around and have fun with *toms* when they are young, in the end they should give up their youthful sexual experimentation with women and settle down to marry a man and have a family.

Yet despite the many criticisms that could be made of the Uncle Go's columns from the vantage point of twenty-first century queer and trans studies, the importance of the columns at the time they were first published cannot be underestimated. Uncle Go provided the first public platform from which Thai gay men and lesbians could go on to launch their own publications and ultimately take charge of producing their own discourses and forms of public representation. While personally fascinated by male-to-female transsexual *kathoeys*, Pratchaya was nonetheless prepared to provide a tolerant space for all queer sexualities and identities—male, female and transgender—in the pages of *Plaek*, and also in the other publications he would edit in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Mahatsajan* and *G.L.* Pratchaya was sufficiently market-savvy to realise that while his own “shark-like” sexual interests may have provided a starting point for taking Thai mass publishing in a new direction, in order to continue to succeed as a commercial publishing venture *Plaek* needed to respond to what readers wanted. By the end of its second year, *Plaek* had reoriented its initial focus on the sexual interests of “sharks interested in *kathoeys*” to concentrate on the lives and loves of gay men and, very soon afterwards, of lesbians. It was in providing a venue for the voices and anxieties of gay men and lesbians that *Plaek* would most firmly establish its place on the Thai publishing scene for the next two and a half decades.

Pratchaya Phanthathorn's promotion of the sexual value of *kathoeys* for men and the causes of queer social acceptance all took place within a clearly

commercial publishing context. The fetishised focus on *kathoeyes* in the early issues of *Plaek*, and the subsequent evolution of the “Girls to the Power of 2” column into Uncle Go’s gay advice column, Pic Jup-jip’s “juicy gossip” gay scene column, and a “Heart Friends” gay personal classifieds section (see below) were all attempts to reach new markets and increase sales of the magazine. Indeed, the success of *Plaek* led Pratchaya Phanthathorn to start new publishing ventures to reach other niche markets. A couple of years after *Plaek* first hit the newsstands, it was accompanied by *Mahatsajan*, which while focusing on Buddhist rituals with a supernatural and magical element also included of Uncle Go’s gay and lesbian advice columns. And in the early 1980s, Pratchaya experimented with a magazine that focused specifically on reports of sexual experiences, with *G.L.*, a name based on the first letters of the English words “gay” and “lesbian”, mirroring his own polymorphous sexual interests in both women and men. Published for only a couple of years in the early 1980s, *G.L.* also included Uncle Go’s gay and lesbian columns. However, the commercial origins and context of the Uncle Go columns in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.*, should not blind us to the innovative nature of these columns in the 1970s and their genuine influence in breaking new ground for non-judgemental public discourses of homosexuality and transgenderism in Thailand.¹⁰

Masculinity and *Plaek*’s Gay Personal Classified Advertisements

As detailed above, in the first issues of *Plaek* a primary interest of Pratchaya Phanthathorn, in his journalistic guises of Phan Thathorn and Go Paknam, was to extol the feminine beauty of the new generation of *kathoeyes* in Thailand. In contrast, however, the gay men who wrote to Go Paknam and who bought *Plaek* made it clear from the very beginning that their main interest was in images and representations of masculinity. This is apparent in the gay personal classified advertisements that from early on were a regular feature of *Plaek* alongside Uncle Go’s advice column. In 1976, the gay personal classifieds section in *Plaek*, which sometimes also included advertisements from lesbians, was called the “Heart Friends” (*pheuan jai*) column. While consisting of only very brief statements of no more than 20 or 30 words, the personal classifieds from gay men

10. While *Plaek*, and Uncle Go Paknam, achieved fame, and notoriety, in Thailand for bringing *kathoeys*, gay, and lesbian lives into the public domain, most of the articles in the magazine nonetheless continued to have a heterosexual focus. For example, Pratchaya Phanthathorn also wrote heterosexual advice columns in *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan* under the pen name of “Kanlorng”, a word that has a wide range of meanings including “revolt, rebel; jump, stride over; excellent” (Tianchai 1989: 60). *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan* also included heterosexual personal classifieds columns called “Woman Man” (*phu-ying phu-chai*), and *Plaek* also included a heterosexual column of “horny jokes” (*khan-khan man-man*, “exciting [sexual] itch”).

who sought partners through the pages of *Plaek* in the 1970s provide a snapshot of forms of discourse that were current in the Thai gay culture of the period.

English-derived terms are very common in the advertisements, and the forms of gender presentation and the images of sexual attractiveness described overwhelmingly emphasise masculinity. The English term “man”, written phonetically in Thai script, was used to mean “straight acting” or appearing normatively masculine, and the capitalised English letters “K”, from “king”, and “Q”, from “queen”, were often added in parentheses to denote sexual preference as top or bottom, respectively. *Man (K)* thus meant “straight acting top” and *man (Q)* meant “straight acting bottom”. Significantly, the Thai term for “man”, *phu-chai*, was not used in the gay personal advertisements, as that word usually denotes a heterosexual preference. That is, the Thai term *phu-chai* denotes “a heterosexual man” and is used in contrast to the borrowed term “gay”, which means “a gay man”. The English term “man” was thus used solely to denote masculine presentation, not to refer to sexuality or sexual preference.

Masculine presentation, or being straight acting, was clearly very important for the men who sought partners through the “Heart Friends” column. Almost every gay personal classified advertisement from the 1970s and early 1980s included the self-descriptor “(I) look like a man” (*laksana pen man*), with normative masculinity sometimes being emphasised through expressions such as “looks like a real man” (*laksana pen man thae-thae*). In the August 1977 “Heart Friends” personal classifieds section of *Plaek*, “N.”, a 19-year-old *queen* (bottom) from Bangkok wrote that he “looks like a man” (*laksana pen man*), while 26-year-old Somchai, also from Bangkok, wrote that he was a *king* (top) who “looks like a complete man” (*laksana pen man tem-tua [K]*). A small minority of the gay personal classifieds described the advertiser as being a “soft man”. Also advertising in the August 1977 issue, “Eet-aet” described himself as “looking like a man but gentle and soft (bottom)” (*laksana pen man tae mi khwam-num-nuan [Q]*).

In the 1980s, the English-derived expressions *man queen* and *man king*, both written phonetically in Thai, remained common expressions in the gay personal classifieds to mean “straight acting bottom” and “straight acting top”, respectively. For example, in 1983, 21-year-old Boy described himself as a *man queen* searching for a *man king*. However, in this period a new, and still current, Thai expression, *mai sadaeng ork*, also began to be used to emphasise the sense of “straight acting”. Literally meaning “not expressing or showing”, *mai sadaeng ork* is an abbreviation of two slightly longer expressions: *mai sadaeng ork khwam-pen-gay* meaning “not expressing one’s gayness” or “not visibly gay”; and *mai sadaeng ork khwam-pen-sao* meaning “not expressing femininity” or “not visibly feminine”. For example, in one advertisement from 1983, 22-year-old Norng described himself as “a *man queen*, straight acting” (*laksana pen man queen mai sadaeng ork*), in other words, a straight acting, masculine-looking gay man who preferred receptive anal sex. While Pratchaya Phanthathorn’s own interests may have been in feminine *kathoeys*, from the late 1970s it was images and accounts

of gay masculinity that came to the fore in Uncle Go's gay advice columns, with only occasional letters from *kathoeyes* to the Thai agony uncle being published (see for example Chapter 7).

It would appear that a focus on gay men's interest in images of masculinity ultimately sold more copies of *Plaek* than accounts of the femininity of *kathoeyes*. The "Girls to the Power of 2" profiles of *kathoeyes* were dropped from the regular features in *Plaek* from the end of 1976, being replaced by the "Love Problems of the Third Sex" advice columns for gay men, and later for lesbians. These advice columns continued to appear, under a variety of names, in every issue of *Plaek* for the following two and a half decades, only stopping in the first years of the twenty-first century when Pratchaya Phanthathorn, and Uncle Go, finally retired from Thailand's publishing scene.

The Changing Names of Uncle Go's Gay and Lesbian Advice Columns

The "Girls to the Power of 2" (*sao kamlang 2*) column continued to be published until the end of 1976, running parallel to the new advice column for gays and lesbians, before being dropped towards the end of that year. The Uncle Go advice columns for gay men and lesbian went through a number of name changes over the years. When initiated in late 1975, the advice column for gay men was called "Love Problems of the Third Sex" (*panha hua-jai phet thi-sam*) and "Loves of the Third Sex" (*hua-jai phet thi-sam*).¹¹ In 1977, the advice column for both gays and lesbians was renamed "It's Go Paknam!" (*Go Paknam sa-yang*). Later that year, separate advice columns for gay men and lesbians were initiated, with the column for lesbians retaining the title "It's Go Paknam!" and the gay advice column taking being called "Sad Gay Lives Brightened by Go Paknam" (*chiwit sao chao gay khli-khlai doi Go Paknam*), the title under which the column achieved national prominence and by which Uncle Go is most often remembered (See Image 13). In *Mahatsajan* the advice column for both gays and lesbians was called "The Special Column of Go Paknam" (*column phiset khorng Go Paknam*). Go Paknam also wrote gay and lesbian advice columns in the short-lived magazine *G.L.*, which was published for only a couple of years in 1982 and 1983, also by the Jindasan Press that published *Plaek* and *Mahatsajan*. In *G.L.* the lesbian advice column was called "Go Paknam Resolves Les' Problems" (*Go Paknam khlai panha les*), and the lesbian personal classifieds were called "Les Friends" (*pheuan les*). In the late 1980s, the lesbian advice column in *Plaek* was often simply called "It's Go!" (*Go sa-yang*) and the title of the gay advice column was sometimes abbreviated to simply "Sad Lives" (*chiwit sao*), later in the 1990s being renamed

11. The literal translation of the Thai title *panha hua-jai phet thi-sam* is "problems of the heart of the third sex", with the literal translation of *hua-jai phet thi-sam* being "the heart of the third sex", where "heart" is a metaphor for love.

yet again as “Sad Lives Brightened by Go Paknam” (*chiwit sao khli-khlai doi Go Paknam*) (see Images 14 and 20). Go’s columns continued to be published into the 1990s, but ceased in the early 2000s. Towards the end of the first decade of the new century, a magazine with the name *Plaek* resumed publication after a several year hiatus, but now without the Uncle Go columns. The chapters in Part 2 translate and analyse letters and replies published in the Uncle Go gay advice columns in the first years of the 1980s, the period when *Plaek* was at the height of its influence in Thailand’s emerging gay community.

Pratchaya Phanthathorn’s Reflections on His Uncle Go Advice Column for Gay Men

In November 1989, Eric Allyn and Somboon Inpradith, editor of the gay magazine *Midway* and a former employee of Jindasan, the publishing company of *Plaek*, interviewed Pratchaya Phanthathorn about his life and work. Excerpts from this interview are included below. Allyn and Somboon described Pratchaya’s office as looking like a busy journalist’s office from a 1940s *film noir* detective movie, with books and magazines stacked on shelves that surrounded three walls and a small, battered manual typewriter sitting on his cluttered desk. Throughout the interview Pratchaya chain-smoked Marlboro cigarettes and continually changed between three pairs of eye glasses, depending on whether he was reading, searching for a book, or looking at the interviewers. Allyn gave him a copy of the first edition of this book, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources* (Jackson 1989), of which Pratchaya was extremely proud, and he showed the book to every employee at the Jindasan publishing company offices.

Interview with Uncle Go (Pratchaya Phanthathorn) by Eric Allyn and Somboon Inpradith, November 1989.

Allyn: What is your real name?

Pratchaya: Pratchaya Phanthathorn.

Allyn: What region of Thailand do you come from?

Pratchaya: Bangkok Province.

Allyn: Are both your parents Thai?

Pratchaya: Both are Thai.

Allyn: How old are you?

Pratchaya: Fifty-four. [Interviewed in 1989.]

Allyn: What is your educational background?

Pratchaya: I received a certificate from a secretarial college in Bangkok.

Allyn: Please tell me about your family.

Pratchaya: I've been married eighteen years. I have two children, a son aged fourteen and a daughter aged seventeen.

Allyn: You write three columns in *Plaek*, right?

Pratchaya: No, many more. I am the editor of *Plaek*. The main columns I write are Go Paknam and one as Kanlorng [another pseudonym], which is an advice column for straight men and women.

Allyn: Please tell us about your background as a writer.

Pratchaya: I've written many fiction and non-fiction books, including two compilations of Uncle Go's columns. I began my career as a journalist and photographer for a newspaper based outside Bangkok when I was seventeen years old, covering upcountry news for a Bangkok newspaper. I've been writing for over thirty years now.

I was an editor of a provincial newspaper and then came to Bangkok as a photographer. In Bangkok I became editor of *Issara Lae Santiphap* ("Independence and Peace") newspaper.¹² In the late 1950s, I attacked in print the then Prime Minister, Sarit Thanarat, who became so angry that he ordered the soldiers to destroy the printing shop and our offices and gaoled me. The Prime Minister forbade me to publish and I didn't publish anything for five or six years. Then I began writing humorous stories and fiction, and later I joined *Plaek*.

Allyn: Why did you start an advice column for gay men?

Pratchaya: Before *Plaek* went onto the market the editorial staff discussed what would go into it. We decided that we wanted stories about strange human events or stories that no other publication had dealt with before.

Allyn: What does "gay" mean to you? What is your idea of "gay"?

Pratchaya: I think it is only a different kind of sexual behaviour, not something that is unusual. The first time I wrote the story about gays I received

12. Another source (Go Paknam 1978) names this newspaper as *Issara-Seriphap* (Independence-Freedom).

many letters and telephone calls.¹³ Many said we were trying to encourage people to be gay and that it was an evil story. They criticised me.¹⁴ But many gay people were very interested in this article and wrote and said that they supported me and encouraged me to examine this lifestyle more.

Allyn: What was your first exposure to homosexuality?

Pratchaya: The first time I was involved with gays was when I interviewed *kathoeys*, which appeared in the second issue of *Plaek*. I then understood them much better. Because they were *kathoeys* they were open and they were willing to reveal everything about gay behaviour.

Allyn: Were they transvestites or transsexuals?

Pratchaya: They were transvestites. They had a technique to hide their male genitals, a strap that holds it up between their legs.

Allyn: What is the name of your advice column and why did you call it that?

Pratchaya: At first it had no name, just a title for the stories. Then I chose *Chiwit Sao Chao Gay* ("Sad Gay Lives"). I called it that because all the letters I received were from gays who complained that they didn't want to be gay at all, but couldn't help it, and they wanted to change their lives to be

13. In fact, as detailed in this chapter, Go's first stories were about *kathoeys*. When first used in Thai, the English term "gay" was commonly conflated with *kathoeys*.

14. In another interview published in the gay magazine *Mithuna Junior* in 1988, Pratchaya reported that there had been considerable opposition to his gay and lesbian advice columns when they first appeared:

When I first started the columns I think that being gay still wasn't accepted, because letters from older people who were anti-[gay] blamed me for promoting it [homosexuality]. Even people working in social welfare and the types who like to go on TV criticised me for increasing the number of gays and making people want to be gay. But no-one wants to be gay. Because of the truth of this fact, I knew those critics were wrong. They were off-target. No matter what you write, if someone isn't gay they won't become gay.

Pratchaya went on to describe his response to this criticism as follows:

I told them I wasn't promoting it [homosexuality]. I tried to oppose it. I tried to find ways to inform them [homosexuals] that if they were morally dissolute in certain ways or had been raised in a certain way then they'd become gay in some way or another. I tried to inform people about how to raise their children so they won't become gay.

(From: "*Pha-bai Rai-praeng—Go Paknam*" (Brushless canvas—Go Paknam), *Mithuna Junior*, 1985 2[27]: 104.)

thammada-thammada (“regular, ordinary”). They consulted me about what to do. The people who contacted me often thought they were the only one who loved their own sex. At that time, they wrote asking about how to cure it or how to change to be normal.

Allyn: What is the name of the column for lesbians?

Pratchaya: *Go Sa-yang* (“It’s Go!”). I started that column in *Plaek’s* first year, too, about six months after the gay column. My column for straights is called *Kanlorng*.

(He showed the interviewers two paperback books that were collections of his column “Sad Gay Lives”.)

Allyn: Many who have read Dr. Jackson’s (1989) book assume that Uncle Go is gay. How do you feel about that?

Pratchaya: I don’t feel anything about the idea that people think I’m gay. I’m often invited to talk at conferences about homosexuality, and every time I attend everyone asks whether I am gay or not. I tell them, “I’m gay—I’m *ke-re*”.¹⁵ Everyone laughs because they expect me to say I’m a *gay king* or a *gay queen*.

Allyn: Do you socialise with gay men?

Pratchaya: I now have many gay friends. When I started my column I wanted to study about gay life. I went to gay bars and talked to them.

Allyn: Have you ever had a gay sexual experience?

Pratchaya: Never. (Pratchaya responded emphatically in English.)

Allyn: Have you ever thought about it?

Pratchaya: *Kathoeyes* have often tried to persuade me. Even *kathoeyes* who were very beautiful and had large breasts. My name is very famous among *kathoeyes* and every time I interviewed them and asked them to take off their clothes for a photograph they would ask me to have sex with them. They wanted to have sex with Go Paknam. I refused, because I am a “playboy”.¹⁶

Allyn: How many letters do you get for the gay column each week?

15. *Ke-re*, pronounced like “gay-ray”, means “to be mischievous, roguish, high-spirited”. The word is Thai and is unrelated to the borrowed English term “gay”.

16. Go used the English word “playboy”, which in Thai denotes a man who has had sexual experiences with many women.

Pratchaya: For consultation, about twenty to thirty a week from both gay men and lesbians.¹⁷

Allyn: How do you choose which letters to publish?

Pratchaya: I choose letters in which it seems the writer has a big or serious problem.

Allyn: Are all the letters real? Have you or your staff ever written any?

Pratchaya: All are real.¹⁸

Allyn: Who reads the letters Uncle Go receives?

Pratchaya: I read all the letters.

Allyn: Where did you obtain your information about homosexuality?

Pratchaya: Most comes from life stories of gays. In the second or third year of the magazine, I studied gay life at gay bars and interviewed gay men. Then I consulted books.

Allyn: Thai or English?

Pratchaya: English, Thai, and translations of English books.

Allyn: Do you think that people who write letters to you exaggerate their problems?

Pratchaya: Their problems in the letters are real.

Allyn: Do you ever answer letters personally, or only through your column?

Pratchaya: I have no time to answer letters personally.

Allyn: How many staff people work for you?

Pratchaya: There's me in my capacity as editor, as well as one secretary, an assistant and a layout artist. For the gay column I work alone. I have total

17. In a subsequent interview conducted by Eric Allyn and Peter Jackson in October 1994, Pratchaya stated that he received ten times more letters from gay men than from lesbians.

18. Eric Allyn's translator for this interview with Pratchaya, Somboon Inpradith, himself a former Jindasan employee, noted at the time that "Nobody here [at Jindasan] is gay", meaning that no one on the staff could make up the kind of letters published in Go's column. All Thai men I have interviewed and asked whether they think the letters in Go's column are authentic have replied that the letters are genuine (Eric Allyn, personal correspondence 1994).

responsibility for the letters that come to Uncle Go, except for respondents to personal ads, which my secretary does.

Allyn: When you get a letter, I assume you edit it. What kind of changes might you make to a letter before you print it?

Pratchaya: If the letter is impolite or uses obscene words, I change that. Every letter I get is usually hand-written, but if I use it for the column, I will type it and make these changes before it goes to the typesetter.

Afterword

Thai Print Capitalism and Uncle Go in Transnational Queer History

As seen in the preceding chapters, there was often a dissonance between the aspirations for queer autonomy articulated in the letters to Go Paknam and the heteronormativity of Go's replies. The letters from gay, lesbian, and *kathoey* correspondents, on the one hand, and Uncle Go's responses, on the other, at times participated in an incongruous dialogue in which queer voices and Go's reappropriation of these voices to his heteronormative views spoke past each other.¹ From the perspective of twenty-first-century queer studies, there is much that can be critiqued in Go's replies, beginning with the fact that an avowedly heterosexual man was positioned as an authoritative public voice on queer lives and loves. And the publication of the gay and lesbian advice columns in magazines that specialised in representing the weird and sensational had the effect of reinforcing stereotypes by continuing to characterise homosexuality and transgenerism as being equally "strange", or *plaek*.

Yet, despite the limitations of the sensationalist genre of the magazines in which they were published, the Uncle Go columns did provide space for queer voices that were not contained by, and often went beyond, the libertarian but still heteronormative bounds of Go's advice. At the time they were first published, the Uncle Go columns transgressed the bounds of then dominant forms of public discourse in Thailand, even if this was in the context of a magazine genre that worked to confirm rather than challenge sensationalist stereotypes. No previous domain of public discourse in Thailand had permitted gays, *toms*, *dees*, and *kathoeyes* to speak their own lives, anxieties, hopes, and aspirations or to be heard as authors of their own discourses.

Uncle Go was not a voice for radical gay, lesbian, or transgender liberation. He did not challenge heteronormativity, or call for Thai queers to establish their own autonomous sexual and gender cultures outside the strictures of traditional family and cultural expectations. What Uncle Go did do was point out the cracks, gaps, and tensions within the heteronormative order of 1970s Thailand in which *kathoeyes*, gay men, and lesbians might find some—albeit limited, tenuous, and insecure—spaces in which to find love and to build relationships.

1. None of the letters surveyed for this study criticised Uncle Go's advice, although quite a few correspondents complained that Go had not replied to a previous letter.

The gap between the conservative advice of the heterosexual Uncle Go and the transgressive aspirations of his gay “nephews” and lesbian “nieces” reflected in discourse the fractures that were becoming evident within heteronormative culture in 1970s Thailand. In the 1980s, these fractures would grow even wider and provide spaces for increasingly independent expressions of gender and sexual difference in Thailand. The Uncle Go gay and lesbian advice columns are invaluable sources in Thai and indeed transnational queer studies. They are the oldest surviving public voices of gay men, lesbians, and *kathoeyes* in the Thai mass media, and document Thailand’s queer cultures at an historical moment when the members of all these communities were beginning to find the self-confidence to speak back to mainstream heterosexual society.

Uncle Go’s columns were seminal influences in the subsequent emergence of gay and lesbian publications and media in Thailand. Within a decade of Uncle Go’s columns appearing in print, a younger generation of more self-confident Thai gay men and lesbians had taken the opportunities provided by this new discursive space to establish their own independent print media magazines and newsletters. Both gay and lesbian pathfinders in Thai queer publishing found inspiration and first voice in the columns of Uncle Go, which provided launch pads for Thai queer media. In 1980, Pan Bunnag, who had been interviewed in the “Girls to the Power of 2” column in 1975 (see Chapter 1), went on to write his own gay lonely hearts column, “How Come You Have to be Gay?” (*het chanai theung torng pen gay?*), in *Cha-ngon*, a competitor magazine to *Plaek*. In the late 1980s, Anjana Suvarnananda, whose 1976 letter to Uncle Go led Pratchaya Phanthathorn to start the “It’s Go Paknam!” lesbian advice column (see Chapter 8), established the Anjaree lesbian NGO and began publishing the *Anjareesan* lesbian newsletter (see Sinnott 2004, Chapter 6). In the mid-1980s, the first wave of Thai gay magazines paid homage to Uncle Go’s importance for the country’s gay men by publishing interviews with him in some of their very first issues (see Chapter 5 for the interview with Uncle Go published in *Midway* magazine’s first issue in 1986).

Mithuna Junior, Thailand’s first commercially successful gay magazine which began publication in 1984, also owed much to Uncle Go.² In November 1996, I interviewed Anan Thornngthua, the founding publisher/editor of *Mithuna Junior*. Anan related that after graduating from a local university in 1983 at the age of 22, he had borrowed funds from his mother and, with a male school friend as co-investor, started publication of a monthly magazine called *Mithuna*, which imitated an existing successful publication *Num-Sao* (“young man–young woman”). In 1982, *Num-Sao* had been the first Thai magazine to publish both male and female nude full-colour centrefolds, previous erotic publications in

2. In the early 1980s, Pan Bunnag had published two gay magazines, *Boy* and *Choeng-chai* (“manly”), but they were not commercially successful and each ceased publication after only one or two issues.

the country having included only female centrefolds. Positive feedback from gay readers to *Mithuna's* male nude centrefolds led Anan to decide that there was likely to be a sufficient market to support a magazine oriented exclusively towards gay men. Anan launched this second, gay publication, called *Mithuna Junior*, in June 1984, beginning production with 3,000 issues per month, which were distributed to magazine outlets nationally. The mixed male- and female-oriented *Mithuna* ceased publication after several further issues and Anan then concentrated solely on producing the gay-oriented *Mithuna Junior*.

The influences that led Anan to establish *Mithuna Junior* reflect the strength of local factors in the expansion of gay culture and identity in early 1980s Thailand. When he established *Mithuna Junior* at the age of 22, Anan did have a small circle of Thai gay friends, but he had poor English, had never met a Western gay man, never seen a Western gay publication, and never travelled outside Thailand. He believed there was likely to be a market for gay magazine content in Thailand because a friend working at *Num-Sao* had told him about the flood of letters that that magazine's editor had received from gay readers expressing appreciation of its male nude centrefolds. At the time, no other nationally distributed Thai magazine included male centrefolds, and no Western gay publication had yet been marketed in the country.

In the interview, Anan stated that at that time he also knew and appreciated Uncle Go Paknam's then already well-established gay advice columns, and the commercial success of *Plaek* further convinced him that there was indeed a market for a regular gay publication in Thailand. Anan said that in deciding to publish *Mithuna Junior* he envisioned the magazine as combining the gay-positive support and gossip of Uncle Go's columns in *Plaek* with the male nudes of *Num-Sao's* centrefolds. In other words, Anan saw *Mithuna Junior* as combining gay-relevant features that had already demonstrated commercial success in the Thai publishing market.

The influence of Uncle Go was also reflected in the choice of name of Anan's gay magazine, *Mithuna Junior*. *Mithuna* is an abbreviated form of the Thai name for the month of June, *Mithunayon*, which in turn is derived from the Pali term for the astrological sign of Gemini, *Mithun*. In Thailand, *Mithun*/Gemini, the sign of the twins, is also regarded as the sign of lovers and of sexuality, with the related Thai-Pali word *methun* being a technical term for sexual intercourse. Anan chose this name for his magazine because of its associations with lovers and sexuality, and because the identical twins that are the symbol for the sign of Gemini are usually portrayed as both being male. Indeed, a 1978 paperback compilation of letters to Uncle Go (Go Paknam 1978) used a stylised version of the Gemini male twins as its cover design, with this image clearly having been chosen because of its homoerotic resonances (see Image 19). The choice of the name *Mithuna* for Thailand's first commercial gay magazine thus drew upon Uncle Go's previous use of this symbolism in his gay advice columns.



Image 19

The cover of a 1978 paperback compilation of letters and replies to the Uncle Go “Sad Gay Lives” (*Chiwit Sao Chao Gay*) column in *Plaek* (Go Paknam 1978). While clearly intended by the publisher to represent male same-sex desire, the unsourced image, most likely from a Western publication, is in fact an illustration of the twins who symbolise the astrological sign of Gemini, called *Mithuna* in Thai. This cover design of the Gemini/*Mithuna* twins had a lasting impact in Thai gay publishing history, with the publisher-editor of Thailand’s first commercially successful gay magazine calling his publication *Mithuna Junior*, a homage to the homoerotic connotations of the cover design of this Uncle Go paperback.

Anan’s market-savvy nous was borne out by the fact that within a few months *Mithuna Junior* had a copy-cat competitor called *Neon*, published by none other than the heterosexual owners of *Num-Sao*, whose male centrefolds Anan had imitated for his own publication. In the following decade-and-a-half, Thai gay publishing expanded rapidly, mirroring the extended economic boom in Thailand from 1987 until the Asian economic crisis of 1997. By the mid-1990s, more than 15 monthly and bimonthly Thai-language gay magazines

competed on the country's newsstands. Ownership of *Mithuna Junior* subsequently changed hands a number of times and the magazine ceased publication in the mid-1990s after almost 100 issues.³

Print Capitalism and Thailand's New Queer Cultures

The importance of Uncle Go's gay and lesbian advice columns in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.* for the emergence of public discourses of gay, lesbian, and *kathoey* identity in Thailand also reflects the role of commercial media in the development of new queer cultures. The emergence of public queer cultures in Thailand is closely related to the development of a national level market and the rise of domestic print capitalism, which Benedict Anderson (1983) identified as key sources of modern ideas of nationhood. From the early 1960s, nationally distributed newspapers were central to the rapid dissemination of evolving notions of gay and *kathoey* identity (See Jackson 1999, 2000). As seen in this book, from the 1970s, mass-circulation popular magazines such as *Plaek* contributed to the consolidation of the meanings of new transgender and homosexual identities. And in the 1980s, gay men and lesbians took control of discursive representations of homosexuality with the publication of their own nationally distributed commercial gay magazines. Modern Thai queer identities can be seen as forming nation-level "imagined sexual communities" whose emergence was facilitated by both mainstream and community-based forms of domestic print capitalism.

Since the early 1990s, a wide range of authors has identified the proliferation of new homosexual and transgender identities and cultures in both Western and non-Western societies as a major instance of cultural globalisation. Dennis Altman (1996) has labelled this phenomenon "global queering", and in a 1997 article "Global Gaze/Global Gays" he observed, "What strikes me is that *within* a given country, whether Indonesia or the United States, Thailand or Italy, the *range* of constructions of homosexuality is growing" (Altman 1997: 424, emphases in original). On the cusp of the twenty-first century, Peter Drucker (2000: 15) noted that despite different societies' distinctive gender and sexual cultures, their divergent relationships to the world economy, and their unique political contexts, the late twentieth century nonetheless still saw the emergence of, "identifiable common elements of lesbian/gay identity in one country after another". These observations have raised the question of what has produced similar gender/sex outcomes in diverse social, political, and cultural settings.

3. Digitally scanned versions of 1,000 Thai gay magazines from the 1980s to the early 2000s, including complete sets of *Mithuna Junior* and *Neon*, are available from the Thai Rainbow Archive Project websites supported by both the Australian National University (<http://thairainbowarchive.anu.edu.au/>) and the British Library (<http://eap.bl.uk/> Search project ID: EAP128). The digitisation of these magazines was funded by a grant from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme.

In the article in which he coined the expression “global queering”, Altman (1996) quoted an article from *The Economist* on the internationalisation of gay identity: “In effect, what McDonald’s has done for food and Disney has done for entertainment, the global emergence of ordinary gayness is doing for sexual cultures.”⁴ The idea that, like McDonald’s and Disney, global queering began in the United States and has transformed the planet’s queer cultures by cultural borrowing, or cultural imperialism, as a result of American global hegemony was a major influence in early accounts of the phenomenon. However, the view that new genders and sexualities beyond the West derive from US-inflected Western modes of sexuality has subsequently been critiqued for failing to capture the full scope of the processes at work in world sexual and gender cultures. Ara Wilson (2006) contends that this view of global queering assumes “an import-export calculus” that recapitulates Western hegemony by locating the reputed source and agency of modern queer life solely in the West.

However, while a growing body of research on Asian queer cultures has critiqued “Out of America” explanations of global queering (see, for example, Boellstorff 2007, Martin et al. 2008), this study confirms Altman’s view that market-based processes have played a central role in the rise of new gay, lesbian, and transgender cultures. Thailand’s first gay magazines, such as *Mithuna Junior*, were commercial undertakings. They did not emerge in direct imitation of Western gay publications but rather on the model of Thai precedents, notably the commercially successful examples of Uncle Go’s columns in *Plaek*, *Mahatsajan*, and *G.L.* and the genre of local erotica exemplified by *Num-Sao*. Only after he started his commercial enterprise did Anan Thorngthua come into contact with Western gay men and Western gay culture. Indeed, it was his publication of *Mithuna Junior* that provided an entrée to foreign gay worlds. Gay magazines and media are not merely products of a pre-existing gay identity, but are also affirmations and even incitements of identity. For Anan, the entrepreneurial activity of publishing *Mithuna Junior* at a young age contributed to his becoming a gay-identified man just as much as it was an expression of his emerging sense of sexual selfhood. In the interview, Anan stated that publishing *Mithuna Junior* had been central to his coming out, and that in fact he had known very little about Thailand’s gay world before starting the magazine. He insisted that he been too shy to participate in Bangkok’s gay scene before 1983, only knowing of it second-hand from newspaper reports and Uncle Go’s columns. Publishing *Mithuna Junior* gave him a “reason” to meet other Thai gay men when he had to approach them for copy for his magazine. Thai gay publications then emerged in the early 1980s when publishers responded to, and also incited demand from, an emerging local gay market. While this commodified gay cultural form has clear parallels in the West, it nonetheless emerged as a largely independent phenomenon in a context of domestic market capitalism.

4. *The Economist*, 6 January 1996, “Let Them Wed”, p. 84, cited by Altman (1996).

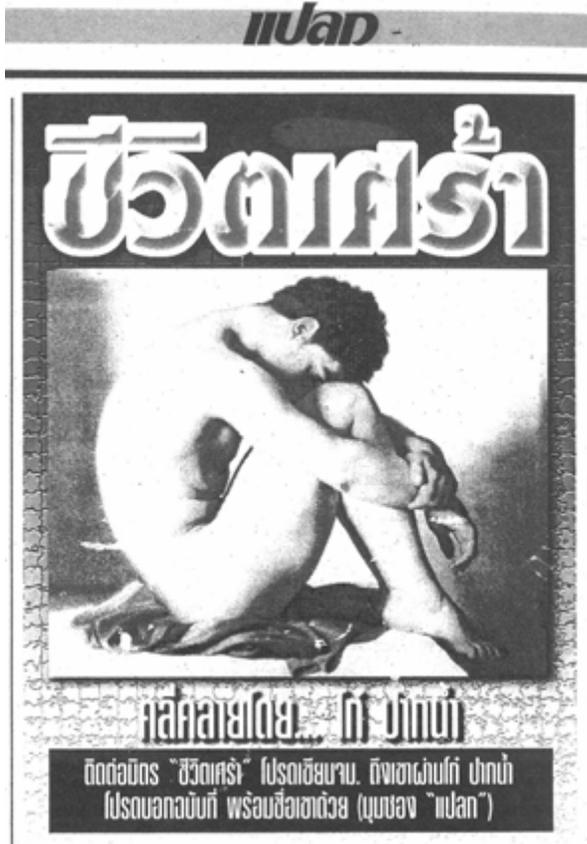


Image 20

Illustration for Uncle Go's column "Sad Lives Brightened by Go Paknam" from an issue of *Plaek* in the early 2000s. This period marked the twilight of *Plaek* just before the magazine ceased publication after almost three decades of gracing Thai newsstands. By the turn of the century, the relevance of Uncle Go's columns for Thai gays, lesbians, and *kathoeyes* had been superseded by the dynamic queer publishing industry that Uncle Go himself had helped initiate and nurture. The text below the image gives instructions for sending in letters to the gay personal classifieds section, "To contact friends from 'Sad Lives', please write via Go Paknam. Please cite the issue number and name [of the advertiser] (and write 'Plaek' on the corner of your envelope)."

The Passing and Surpassing of Go Paknam

The commercial success of Thai gay magazines from the mid-1980s indicates that from that time Uncle Go Paknam's original role had largely been superseded, and that the forefront of change in Thailand's gay cultures had moved decisively into the hands of the editors of gay and lesbian magazines and other trend-setting gay and lesbian entrepreneurs. With the growing availability of Thai gay

and lesbian magazines in the second half of the 1980s, Uncle Go became less important to Thai homosexual men and women, and his views were more likely to be considered quaint rather than genuinely helpful by the younger generation of urban gay men and lesbians. Rather than a young uncle whose advice one might seek to put into practice, in later years, Uncle Go became more like an aging relative whose old-fashioned views one may listen to politely but does not follow. While Go's views were already outdated by the end of the 1980s, his column continued to be published until the early years of the new century, in the 1990s mostly reaching an audience among poorer, working class men and women who could not afford the comparatively more expensive gay-owned and gay-produced new print media, which in the main came to reflect decidedly middle class and consumerist lifestyles. However, the story of Uncle Go Paknam, when a heterosexual man became the "founding father", or rather "originating uncle", of Thai queer publishing reminds us that the facts of queer history can at times be stranger (*plaek-kwa*) than the fictional plot of any gay or lesbian novel.

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