

**The very first series of Thai queer cinemas--what was happening in the  
1980s'?**<sup>\*</sup>

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It took more than half a century after motion pictures were introduced into Thailand for a Thai to produce a film that directly dealt with a queer character as a person, as in *The Last Song* (1985), followed by *Tortured Love* (1987) and *I Am a Man* (1987). Even though these three films allowed audiences to empathize with their characters, some characterization of queers in the films still replicated stereotypes of queer people as seen in other media; screaming, miserable, suicidal and so on.

In this paper, the dominant images representing queerness in the first series of queer melodramas, *The Last Song*—the very first *Kathoey*<sup>\*\*</sup> or male-to-female transgender thematic film in Thai film history—and its sequel *Tortured Love*, will be analysed and studied as to how these films reflected the Thais' attitudes toward queerness in the 1980s.

A year after *The Last Song* was screened there was a successful stage play *I am a Man*, the Thai version of Mart Cowley's film *The Boys in the Band* (1970). The success of *I Am a Man* resulted in it being made into a film by the same producer, script writer and actor, Dr. Seri Wongmonta, the dominant openly gay male in Thai society. *I Am a Man* provides significant case studies of queer lifestyles, with emphasis on masculine gay males.

In view of the fact that these represent the first wave of Thai queer cinemas, it is useful to explore the films with reference to Andrew Grossman's analysis of queer cinema. Given that Grossman divides queer cinema into two categories, the first being 'a propagandistic search for bourgeois acceptance' and the other 'a radical challenge to sexual hegemony', the first series of Thai queer films fall under the first category. (Grossman 2000: xxi-xxii) Not having the benefit of the Stonewall riot, gay liberation movement, or leftist wave at the time they were made, *The Last Song*, *Tortured Love* and *I Am a Man* assuredly have different political messages or aesthetic culture compared to their Western counterparts. Even though the films were made at the time HIV AIDs was very much in the news, and, like in many other places, homosexual males in Thailand were held responsible for the epidemic by the media and the public, these films still appear less associated with politics than with commercial values. Therefore, the messages of these films are far from human rights progressiveness. Since each producer has different gender preferences, their attitudes will be studied in terms of the heterosexual and homosexual norms in the 1980s. This paper will provide examples of how expressing viewpoints is represented in the chosen films.

For a more complete understanding of the texts and contexts of the first series of Thai queer cinemas, the following sections will discuss the unique perspective of these three films. It is hoped that exploring them will clarify the various means of queer cultural identity representation within a unique Thai context.

*The Last Song* (1987)

“Watch this ‘*The Last Song*’, *Kathoey* Film, if *Kathoey* don’t watch it, to whom it was made for.”

The statement by Daychawuth Chantakaro (2003: 149), a famous *Kathoey* cabaret performer and actress, in her autobiography may be true but it is not absolutely correct. Even though the film was popular among gay and transgendered people, and the theme song by the same title, *The Last Song*, was said to be a *kathoey*’s national anthem, the song eventually become a hit on radio charts all over the country. Remarkably, the film premier was a phenomenal hit with Thai general audiences, not just among gay and transgendered people.

*The Last Song* falls into every aspect of what Grossman describes as Queer film in Asian countries. It was made for commercial purposes by a heterosexual director-producer, Pisal Akkraseranee. The film targeted general audiences rather than any specific group, and it was intended to be popular for capitalistic purposes. (Grossman 2000: xv) Before moving on, may I note here that making films in Thailand is mostly self-funded; there is no fund from any kind of government organization. Moreover, the invisible discrimination against homosexuality contributed to the lack of a gay or lesbian movement, which indicates that there was no funding from gay and lesbian organizations, if indeed one existed at that time. The capitalism involved in commercial film distribution commands that the product must be saleable and presentable. Commercialism, then, removes the film a long way from a utopian significance. Fortunately, *The Last Song* achieved its financial goal, and went further to be screened at gay film festivals in New York and Montreal. (Hamburger 2002: 28)

For general Thai audiences the broad acceptance of *The Last Song* may be because of the film's dramatic plot: the opportunist man/women who approaches a woman/man for his/her riches. This kind of plot has been repeatedly successful in Thai media, both printed and electronic. The film's ending may simply be read as a typical suicidal queer plot. However, this kind of plot has frequently been applied to heterosexual characters as well.

Historically, these films were not the first time for the Thai media to cast transgendered characters, since cross-dressing theatres had been operative in the country for more than a century. The outstanding examples are *Lakhon Nai* (literally translated 'inside theatre') in the royal court, in which the performers were all females and *Lakhon Nok* (literally translated 'outside theatre') for the general public, in which the performers were all males. Therefore, in these theatres it was common for a man to play a woman's part, or for a woman to play a man's for the whole production without drawing attention to their anatomical genders. Apart from the entertainment realm, the signs of these cultural organizations are everywhere; transgender embodiments and cross dressing has dominated queer culture in Thailand. As Andrew Frobos and other scholars note, transgender in Thailand is not an act to be disclosed only at special events; many Thai kathoey do not attempt to conceal their gender identity. Moreover, in urban areas Thai kathoey have easy access to hormone treatments from a young age and can apply more masquerade techniques; sometimes they are hardly distinguishable as kathoey. (Frobs 2002) Furthermore, Thai kathoey's general use of camp gestures, and the widespread culture of camp in the country, allows the public to be familiar with that way of life.

As one might expect, the widespread scenario of kathoey and the traditional theatres provide opportunity for transgenders in the country to be viewed as performers or entertainers, in the past on stage and now on screen. However, at the time *The Last Song* was made, unlike the traditional theatres, the electronic media in Thailand, including films, often considered transgendered people, mostly male to female, as objects of laughter and parody. Nowadays, performing kathoey are accepted as accomplished actors and sexually liberated. They freely express themselves in ways that conventional Thais do not have courage to, such as outrageous flirting with men as illustrated in the beginning sequence of *The Last Song*.

In *The Last Song* the leading character is played by Somying Daorai, a real life male-to-female transgender cabaret performer in Pattaya city. This is the first time in Thai film history that a transgendered person was cast in the leading role, not as a man playing a woman or a kathoey playing a typically insignificant comedian role, but a kathoey as herself, expressing her desire, her love, her loss, and her death.

Additionally, the story line visibly portrays the other Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people, highlighting the diversity and the fluidity of gender identities in the cabaret venue.

Moreover, the casting, using Somying's real name for her character, emphasises the similarity between the film's representation and the actress's own sexual identity. In terms of social roles in the film, Somying (Literally meaning a proper woman) portrays a decent woman, until she finds out that her lover left her for a real woman during the final sequence of the film. Then she chooses to shoot herself on stage after performing '*The Last Song*'. The audience is expected to sympathise with and

understand her loss. Somying's death could give the impression of being another traditional melodramatic film moment. However, the film shows her true love, not her respective social standing, is the only thing that is important. At the very end of the film, with a scene of the breathless Somying laying on the stage, Pisal emphasizes the myth of queer desire for true love by showing a sentence in Thai prose, '*On the purple path of the third sex, it is difficult to find true love*'.

On the other hand, Somying's death could appear as a revelation of her weakness and manifestations of the homosexual inferiority complex. Based on that implication, the power of social structure finally brings Somying's lover into the heterosexual world. This connotation shows that the social construction of the heterosexual relationship is satisfied. The shifting of the characters' sexuality clearly reflects that gender is not fixed as a characteristic in a person, but rather shifts and changes in different contexts. The shifting of these characters will then continue to be represented in *The Last Song*'s sequel, *Tortured Love*.

### ***Tortured Love***

With the success of *The Last Song*, its sequel, *Tortured Love* was released with the same cast and crew. *Tortured Love* gives emphasis to Grossman's observation that Asian gay cinemas are mainly made for commercial purposes; it was publicly announced that this film was purposely made for profit. (Grossman 2000: xv) Unfortunately, the film did not flourish as planned. Even with the distorted irony of the plot, irrelevant subplots and distracting characters, the film still represents attitudes of Thai society and of homosexuals toward each other. These issues will

also be analyzed with respect to the deep river of Buddhist philosophy in the country illustrated by the film.

In this continuation, Somying coincidentally has a twin brother, Somnuk (also unconvincingly played by Somying Downrai). The twin brother was studying abroad when Somying was facing her tragedy in *The Last Song*. The plot resembles many of Pital's films by including heterosexual characters; 'the twin's sibling coming back from another country to take revenge on the bad guy.'

When all Somying's kathoey friends find out that Somnuk has returned, they forbid Somnuk from getting revenge. One of them says that 'we were born with bad karma from the last life, do not make more bad karma in this one.' These kinds of statements were also made by a character in *The Last Song*, and repeatedly used in almost every single Thai queer film made in the 2000s. This clearly corresponds to Jackson and Nerida (1999), Romjumpa (2003), and Totman (2003) studies of how Thais perceive the way a person becomes kathoey. They mention *Atakata*, a Thai interpretation of Tripitaka; a record of Therawada Buddhism. The interpretation clearly explains that whether they have good or bad karma is determined by what they did in former lives. Since being kathoey is 'karmically natural', then a kathoey should be treated with compassion in consequence of the suffering they have to tolerate. (Totman 2003: 69) "Being" kathoey then is not a wrong "doing" which will result in a bad karma, it is an unavoidable result of bad karma from the past. However, being oneself is not entirely determined by the past, but also keeps changing with regard to good or bad karma occurring at present and in the future. Accordingly, the deeply-rooted Buddhist beliefs expressed in the film serves

variously to clarify that freedom of self-expression is a feature of homosexuality, a tolerance among Thais toward a diversity of sexual preferences, and, how a number of Thai homosexuals perceive themselves.

In *Tortured Love*, the heterosexual relationship between Somying's lover, Boonterm, and his wife is frequently unsettled, partly because of Boonterm's longing for the late Somying. His desire for Somying then leads him to fall in love with Somying's identified twin brother, Somnuk. While the conflicting subplots continue, all of a sudden the viewers are then led to believe that Somnuk shoots Boonterm.

The final sequence shows Boonterm as a Buddhist monk, so after all he did not die. Like the rest of the plot, without any appropriate final solution between love, guilt and revenge, Boonterm finally crosses over the boundary between heterosexuality/homosexuality, celibacy/libidinous, priesthood/kathoe. His priesthood at the end of the film can be read as a leap into another world, outside the queer narratives and the regime of confusion. Thus the film is not viewed here as progressive.

Although the film is discharged of showing inappropriate sexual expressions in society, it was not well received by the Thai mainstream audiences. One may argue that the commercial failure of *Tortured Love* was caused by the failure to acknowledge the masculine gay male in Thailand in the 1980s. However, this argument is proved untrue by the success of the contemporary stage play and film *I am a Man*. The next section examines *I am a Man*.

### *I Am a Man*

As mentioned, *I Am a Man* is an adaptation of Mart Cowley's play *The Boys in the Band*. Later when *The Boys* was made into a film by William Friedkin in 1970, it was described by Vito Russo as 'the internalized guilt and self-hatred of eight gay men at a Manhattan birthday party [that] formed the best, most potent argument for liberation ever offered in a popular art form.' Russo further states that the film is 'a gay movie for gay people, and . . . both a period piece and reconfirmation of [a] stereotype.' (Russo 1987: 177)

*I Am a Man* was also initially made into a successful play. In spite of the declining popularity of stage plays in Thailand, *I Am a Man* was overbooked for weeks prior to the performance. The play producer then decided to produce it for the screen. The film version was incredibly well received by Thai audiences and the highest grossing movie by Poonsap's Film Production on record. (Humburger 2002: 29) In 2005 the film was selected by The National Film Archive of Thailand (NFAT) to be one of a hundred films that Thais must see. NFAT describes the film as a film that reveals real lives of queer people that exist in Thai society.

*I Am a Man* relies so extensively on Mart Cowley's original script that analysing the narrative of *I Am a Man* is tantamount to analysing *The Boys in the Band*. However, there is a certain distinction of views between the two versions as regard to religion, race and class. While *The Boys* portrays a Catholic, a Jew, a white and a black, since in Thailand racial and religious diversities are not as great or as critical as in the US, *I Am a Man* chose not to deal with these issues.

In terms of class, *The Boys* depicts lives of gay people in middle to working class society, while *I Am a Man* portrays the lives of Thai gays in middle to upper class society. The social class of *I Am a Man*'s characters emphasises the binary aspect of homosexuality and heterosexuality in Thailand. Like in many places, these divisions strongly affect the upper social level more than the lower.

Before looking at the film's leading character, the gender implications of the film title in Thai will be studied to comprehend gender diversities from a Thai perspective through its title "*Chan Poochay Naya*" (*I am a Man*).

#### **Gendered name; *Chan Poochay Naya***

The translation of the film's title into English, *Chan Poochay Naya*; (*Chan* – pronoun, I), (*Poochay* – noun, Man), (*Naya*, a final particle), may not leave much space to read between the lines. What is remarkable in this respect is how Dr. Seri wisely introduced gender into language by giving the name in Thai.

In as much as Voravudhi Chirasombutti and Anthony Diller studied eighteen Thai self-reference pronouns, they explain how the use of the Thai self-reference system is different from the English genderless "I". Self-reference in Thai varies in regard to many factors involving the speaker and the addressee, such as social status, gender, age, intimacy and so on. For example, "*Phom*" is 'used by adult urban males in a familiar, polite situation', and "*Dichan*" is used by 'adult female in a very formal polite situation'. Regarding the term *Chan* in the film title, Voravudhi and Anthony

describe it as a term used by ‘some females or gay male speakers’. (Chirasombutti and Diller 1999: 120-121) Nowadays, the word *Chan* is also used by a male speaker with his female friends.

The same complexity is also applied to the final particle *Naya*, the final word in the film title. In a formal situation Thai men use *Krap* and Thai women use *Kha* at the end of sentences to express their respect to the addressee. Unlike the English system, where the use of terms of address ‘*ma’m*’ and ‘*sir*’ depend on the addressee’s gender, the Thai final particle depends on the speakers’ gender-self. This, then, indicates that Thais see a person’s gender as personal, not constructed by others. The final particle *Naya* Dr. Seri uses to apply gender in his film title is usually used in a playful situation, and by women. The term is also comfortably used by queer males in the same circumstance. However, in everyday life, Thai queer males also use *Kha* (feminine) or *Krap* (masculine) in relation to how they choose to express their gender-self in a range of situations. Ironically, the most gender fixed term in the film title is *Phoochay-man*, since the film shows most of the male characters performing their self-genders differently in the changing situations. In the next section the leading character of *I Am a Man* will be analyzed in order to give an example of how the film uses him to construct queer identity.

### ***The Boys in Thai Contexts***

Generally, the plot of *I Am a Man* covers a birthday party one night for Toey, played by Dr. Seri, which is organized by his friend Mod. The party starts to become a disaster when Mod’s straight homophobic buddy from college shows up just as the

party reaches its climax and the characters celebrate with abandon. Since the film involves eight different queer male identities, due to the space limited, only one of the leading characters, Mod, will be explored.

Mod's character is different from any of the other characters analyzed in this paper since the film delivers his gender formation process. At the beginning, Mod as the party host, is introduced as a commercial aircraft pilot in a masculine uniform doing a feminine job, grocery shopping. Then the film shows Mod transforming himself to a fancy queen.

Later, the film displays flash backs of Mod's college life and a shadow of a kathoey angel following him around until one day when Mod and his friends take a trip to a waterfall. One of his friends confesses his love for Mod and the two become intimate. As Thai audiences would expect, the camera then pans to the scenery, the waterfall. This not only implies an erotic scene but also can be read as their inward bond to a new world given by water. According to the geomantic system Feng Shui, water is read as the embodiment of Yin, or female, in contrast with the nature of rocks, Yang – male. (Sheperds 2002) In line with this philosophy there is no more perfect place than a waterfall to symbolize the combination of these gender diversities. The scene is then celebrated with an image of the laughing kathoey angel. The film uses the angel image as a metaphoric medium to present the inner life of the character. At the end, when the party is over, the film shows Mod running screaming out of the house to join his friend. The angel again is seen closing the gate of the house. Seeing the angel as a messenger between god and humanity, her job of introducing a brave new world is completed.

## Conclusion

Although the object of representation in the first series of Thai queer cinemas analyzed in this paper remains unchanged in some characters, such myths as desiring true love, suicidal plots and screaming characters. The images of queer in Thailand in the 1980s are briefly summed up by these films and draw attention to the social construction of queer as understood by the filmmakers. The films are defined by the way they represent the discourse of ‘concept of queer’ in Thailand, both by heterosexual and homosexual male producers. Unlike Western political queer films, the characters in the first series of Thai queer films ask for sympathy and understanding rather than promoting queer rights and identities. These films, however, truthfully represents the direction of the queer movement in Thailand in the 1980s, asking for the same sympathy from Thai society. Therefore the self portrait of queer and its society is displayed by the film, not in celebration of queerness.

After the production of the first series of Thai queer cinemas in the 1980s, even though transgendered characters or persons continued to be publicized in Thai media, with the fall of Thai film industry Thai Queer films became nonexistent for a long time. Two decades later, in the year 2000, Yongyuth Tonkongtoon decided to make what turned out to be an incredibly successful movie from the real life of the national champion male homosexual volleyball team, *Iron Ladies* and later *Iron Ladies II*. Before concluding, I would suggest that an analysis of the text and context of *Iron Ladies I* and *II* in the future would be instructive.

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## Filmography

- *I am a man* (1987) (*Chan Poochay Naya*)

Director: Ml. Bandevanop Devakul

Cast: Likit Ekmongkol, Dr. Seri Wongmontha

Bangkok: Poonsap's Film

- *The Boys in the Band* (1970)

Director: William Friedkin

Cast: Kenneth Nelson, Peter White, Leonard Frey

USA: Twentieth Century Fox

- *The Last Song* (1985) (*Plengsuttai*)

Director: Pisal Akkrasenee

Cast: Bin Bunleulit, Somying Daorai

Bangkok: Akkrasenee's Film

- *Tortured Love* (1987) (*Raktorraman*)

Director: Pisal Akkrasenee

Cast: Bin Bunleulit, Somying Daorai

Bangkok: Akkrasenee's Film

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Kathoei is now an ambiguous Thai word for male-to-female transgender. Kathoei consider themselves as female and may or may not go for a full Sexual Reassignment Operation.