Notions, Identity, Gender Bias, Women, Gay, Sex Education and Lust

TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY in Thailand
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To Become Gay

Matichon, a daily newspaper, recently published a collection of contemporary gay jargon, which is quite interesting from several points of view. I have seen several such “dictionaries” in the past, one of which was compiled by an openly gay person and widely distributed to interested parties; another was submitted by one of my undergraduate students as part of an academic assignment.

But after reviewing the Matichon list, it became obvious to me that the volume of jargon used by and among gays has been growing quickly; several terms which are apparently in common use today are absent from the earlier references.

It’s been my long-standing observation that gay jargon can be broadly divided into three basic categories:

a. Those terms which, by describing certain behaviors or manners, distinguish the various sub-types of the gay culture
b. Verbs, mainly but not always, describing or relating to different forms of sexual intercourse
c. Those terms which carry charged meanings or highly subjective views

In fact, the Matichon dictionary is organized in just this way, lending credence to my observation.
The language which heterosexuals use is, by its nature, one which describes gays as a group apart, in both type and behavior. For example, non-gays commonly refer to all gays collectively as *tut*. Gays, on the other hand, use that term only when referring to those who are unattractive and use bright colored makeup; those who are considered attractive, or who have had sex-change surgery, are called *jaw*.

While this sort of differentiation is easy enough to grasp, non-gays tend to ignore the distinction, or pay it little attention. The attitude is similar to how we humans might describe all movements by ants as crawling, while ants themselves, if they could speak, might use a variety of terms for motion; for example, running, creeping, jumping, graceful walking, beautiful dancing, standing stunningly still, and so on.

In the case of gay jargon, though, most of it relates not to forward motion, but to sexual intercourse. For example, the term *playing bas*¹ means to perform oral sex, or *conch for the front and cockle for the back*, which means to take both the active and passive roles.

Much of this terminology was created out of necessity, since the Thai vocabulary doesn’t include many words which accurately describe and differentiate these behaviors. The language simply wasn’t made for gays; since gay activity was not widely acknowledged there was little pressure to develop a large number of new words to accommodate it.

But lack of descriptive terms was not the only reason for gays to create their own jargon. Equally as important is that while the number of openly announced gays in Thai society is growing, the gay culture as a whole remains largely underground. Although most

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¹ A direct derivative of Thai-English slang; that is, “playing bas(ketball)”
people are quite tolerant of gays, and none are likely to be attacked in the street simply because they dress and act in stereotypical ways, their lifestyle isn’t widely thought of as normal.

Furthermore, gay behavior is discouraged during socialization, and those gay characters that can be found in literature or the theatre are generally portrayed as troubled individuals, and often act as culprits. Furthermore, recognizable gay behavior is rarely shown, except when the character plays a minor comedy part, usually as a sidekick to an obviously heterosexual hero or heroine.

This incompatibility\(^2\) in Thai society between recognizing individual gays but ignoring gay behavior has been a major factor in the development of gay jargon. But the objective here has been for them to have a language which allows them to describe their own sexual behavior in terms they like.

But against the backdrop of a society which, while tolerant, is far from approving, the jargon gays have developed for themselves also shields them from much unpleasantness.

A quick review of the *Matichon* dictionary shows that the terms (such as *zig*, to use the backdoor, or *work*, to have sex) are very much technical descriptions of sexual performance. What is missing is any evocation of emotion. In fact, gay jargon contains very few words relating to intimate emotional relationships.

In contrast, the terms for having sex in non-gay language most often contain references to emotion, feelings and the romantic bond between lovers; for example, *making love, please be mine, caress, to give one’s heart, body and soul*, etc.

Because language is so often reflective of reality, the absence of emotional bonds in gay jargon, therefore, leads one to consider whether gay relationships are primarily sexual and lacking in intimacy.

\(^2\) Or, perhaps more accurately, incongruity
This is by no means meant to insult gays by assuming that their relationships cannot or will not develop intimacy and attachment. In point of fact, there should be little difference between gay and heterosexual relationships. Unfortunately, though, society’s disapproval of gay arrangements means that it is quite difficult for gay relationships to develop beyond the superficial and sexual. That reality is well-reflected in the mass of jargon which relates mainly to sexual intercourse, at the expense of emotional content.

Because Thai society offers gays few chances to develop long-term intimate relationships, the Thai gay culture reinforces this through the jargon developed by gays themselves, which is largely devoid of emotional terms or a sense of intimate attachment. In this way, they avoid the painful and unpleasant pitfalls of wishing and hoping for that which is unlikely to occur.

Realizing this, a gay would feel nothing more than thuk-thoon, or having “gotten buoy,” when rejected by a lover. It would simply be a waste of time to sit and moan, “Oh my impermanent love…the river of no return.” To do so would only be indulging kuk, or imagination, for them and a general waste of time. That recognition must certainly be one of the fundamental elements of collective Thai gay wisdom.

My final observation is that, in general, a single body of jargon is used by gays throughout Thailand, and the terminology has few if any regional influences. Thus, jargon used by gays in Chiang Mai is essentially identical to that used by gays in Buri Ram and Had Yai.

Since there are no geographic groupings, it seems likely that the distinctions amongst groups of gays are really just distinctions of social class; for example, middle-class gays must form a rather large community all of their own, which requires methods of communication

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3 Meaning having been dumped, in gay jargon

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and network building that allow individual gays to recognize a similar identity in others, even when they have not previously met.

Other than through use of a common jargon, though, and a few other observations, I don’t have any solid information on how this takes place. But it does seem to work. I have found, for example, that gay magazines are not commonly available in general bookstalls. To the contrary, they have their own outlets, the location of which seems common knowledge amongst gays. I would assume that similar situations exist in large cities other than Bangkok; that is, specific outlets for gay publications and specific locations for gay entertainment and parties.

Since the communication mode which gays have developed and adopted for themselves is so obviously effective in allowing one to recognize and interact with another, it would be rather interesting to see what other types of relationship networks gays are forming and maintaining.

I think it’s quite clear that gays have presently coalesced into a recognizable community within Thai society, and though media organizations like the “FM 100” radio station, are keeping up a highly public presence. In this sense, though, they are not unusual, but are following the trend of other groups whose shared interests have drawn them together in an ever-increasing number of such communities.

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To Become Gay
I’ve often wondered why a literary character as desirable in so many ways as Khun Phan⁴ had to resort to love charms to win the affections of Nang Pim, the object of his desire.

It had always been my theory that because the very personal, romantic kind of love he sought was so far from the norm of the time the stories were written that the poets who composed them had no tools at their disposal other than the symbolism of magic. Plus, of course, that kind of love, dazzling one as if by magic, is so difficult to rationally describe.

But then my student, Jintana Sroison, pointed out that another character, Khun Chang, was similarly in love with the very same Nang Pim. His love was so deep that he was willing to take her despite her several past intimacies. Unlike Khun Phan, though, he had no need for love potions or spells, although the reason why are not immediately clear.

But the fact that one character could seek and find a personal love while another could not made me reconsider my earlier hypothesis, but this time in the context of how sexuality relates to power in Thai culture, a complicated and often puzzling situation.

⁴ A ladies’ man with five wives, but who loves Nang Pim more than all the others is the main character from Khun Chang Khun Phan
Many people believe that the common Southeast Asian concepts of male sexuality actually have more to do with power than they do with sex. When the Thai dictator Pha Khama Daeng^5 died and the long-standing rumor of his having had tens of mistresses proved true, the news media were quick to term his behavior highly immoral. Yet while he was alive the general, while not exactly advertising his several affairs, also made no effort to conceal them and neither the media nor anybody else hurried to condemn him. To the contrary, his string of girlfriends was a well-known “secret,” and contributed greatly to the respect he was shown by others and the fear he often generated in them.

It was also true that most of the people who learned of the general’s many concubines only after his death were unsurprised by the news, as it was so very common for men in positions of power to have as many girls at their beck and call as they could manage.

Women have long been a feature of power and component of charisma in Thailand. Because they represent a man’s strength so directly, they are both symbol and source of his power. Important men gain power largely through their associations, and sexual associations are certainly one way to establish a kinship of sorts with just the right people.

The situation in Indonesia is quite similar. It was often said that the country’s founding president, Sukarno, a charming man, had several wives. He was quite open to the point of pride about his many affairs, and often sought sexual encounters with national beauties when he traveled abroad on state visits. Although opposition newspapers labeled his bedroom antics a national disgrace, several Indonesian intellectuals defended him as upholding Javanese honor.

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^5 Field Marshal Sarit Dhanariata, who had himself appointed Prime Minister of Thailand in 1959, after his predecessor, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachom, was forced to step down amidst civil unrest.
and tradition, by which its ancient warrior kings were presented gifts of beautiful women by their subordinates and the princes of their vassal states.

As should be obvious to all, sex and power are quite interconnected, and a complete picture of sex is formed only when we view it in its relation to power.

Seen through this lens, it turns out that Khun Phan was not quite as helpless as he appeared, and Khun Chang not quite as lucky as it might have seemed. This is because Khun Phan was man of power and, as such, sought to exercise his power through sex and coercion. His use of love spells, therefore, must be seen less as a desperate try for love and more as a way to force a woman to his bed, a place she might not have gone freely.

In contrast, Khun Chang had nothing at his disposal to win the heart of his beloved other than persistence, tolerance and patience, even enduring the humiliation of being kicked out of her bed. His behavior may seem endearing on the surface, but when seen through the prism of power, it is clear proof of his insignificance.

I’m sure most readers, looking at things this way, can easily grasp the clear difference in power between these two characters.

There’s also another important difference between these two men. Anyone reading the story can see that Khun Chang essentially lived in fear of Nang Pim during the time he was courting her. As soon as they became intimate, though, and she later became his wife, the fear so completely disappeared that he was able to arrange the murder of her son and remain cold and aloof despite her frantic anguish over her child’s welfare. Khun Phan, in comparison, never feared the objects of his desire.

It has long been a suspicion of mine that sex, seen through the lens of Thai concepts of masculinity, is as much an expression of power and position as it is the physical act of love. Bluntly put, a man
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gains power over a woman when he has sex with her, and he therefore learns to use sex as a means to gain and retain power.

And sex, in this context, need not even mean actual intercourse. It’s been my observation that sexual innuendo alone is sufficient for many men to establish their superiority over women. The technique is often employed to win arguments or settle disagreements, because when a man begins to use the sexually explicit language which women find repulsive, they often leave the debate and thus concede defeat.

In actuality, women might find it quite effective to remain engaged and argue their points with conviction instead of fleeing, but most simply find the man’s speech too crude for them to continue the conversation. Even when the woman’s position in a debate is clearly correct or the more reasonable one, a man who intensifies the conflict to the point of vulgarity will often win the battle.

That Thai women find crude male speech repugnant should in no way be taken to mean that they do not enjoy sex talk. They simply find the subject, particularly when combined with aggression, unacceptable in a conflict.

I have long suspected that a women’s reticence to insert sex into every situation reflects a reality that sex simply doesn’t bring them power as it does for a man. To the contrary, sex often robs women of the power they do possess.

Thai culture, at least ancient Thai culture, has never treated men and women equally in sexual relationships. When a man and a woman consummate their love it is viewed as a matter of gain and loss: the man gains while the woman loses, and much more than just her virginity. The phrase often used to describe the abandon which characterizes intense love, that is, “losing oneself,” is not what I mean here; if it were, both man and woman would stand to lose. But in the context of power, it is a zero-sum game; what the woman is actually losing is a measure of control over her life, control which is transferred
wholesale to the man. In a certain sense, it reflects the traditional Thai view that sex must lead to marriage, and within a marriage the wife is always subservient to her husband.

“Losing oneself” in this way, therefore, means that sex is a major life event for a woman, leading as it must to marriage, and one fraught with uncertainty as she also stands to lose control over her own vital spirit or soul. In contrast, though, the man stands only to gain, and the man who controls many such souls, through a string of girlfriends, mistresses or even wives, is seen in our culture as a most powerful person.

Once a man obtains such power, though, it is not restricted to exercise only over women, but is a more generalized sort which can and usually is directed toward other men. The sexual patterns of Thailand’s own Field Marshal Sarit and Indonesia’s president Sukarno prove this point quite convincingly.

For a dissenting view, we can turn to modern feminist thought, which leaves little room for anything other than equal standing between the sexes. It’s apparent to me that contemporary feminists would strongly condemn many of the means men employ to obtain sex, from purchase to force. They also have no interest in resurrecting antique concepts of chastity to give women a tool with which they could resist, as that would mean accepting the inequality inherent in the concept.

But the ideal of sexual equality between male and female shouldn’t be an excuse for women to become promiscuous. Rather, I would hope that men and women both would question just how they should carry on together to reflect true equality between them. Unfortunately, that is a question for which traditional Thai cultural attitudes and practices provides no guide and has no answer.
According to the TV news, contestants at this year’s Sukhothai Floating Festival beauty contest were forced to wear a skirt-cloth knotted above the chest and simulate bathing in an imitation Yom River painted onto the stage.

Furthermore, to ensure the contest had its sexually suggestive moment, the beauty queens were forced to walk back across this fake river while holding up their skirt so they would not get wet. One was left with the feeling that it was all somehow inappropriate, improper or indecent.

The committee responsible for organizing the contest claimed this odd talent display was done only to ensure the preservation of Thai culture and the Thai way of life. That made no sense to me at all; my first impression was it was a strange explanation and more probably just an excuse for behavior which would otherwise be offensive. But exactly how strange I could not say at the time, and so I resolved to give the matter some thought. There were certainly important things to consider, such as the fact no one has ever claimed that beauty contestants in western swimsuits preserve Thai culture, and that wearing those swimsuits in public is not generally thought of as inappropriate.

So I’ve reached the conclusion that, if indecency is defined only by the parts of the body which are exposed, then the Thai skirt-
cloth is no more indecent a garment than a western swimsuit. But when traditional attitudes are taken into account, the skirt-cloth in a beauty contest becomes something quite indecent, as our culture has always considered it a private garment, to be shielded from public view. In contrast, a western swimsuit, no matter how brief, has always been thought of as outerwear which can be seen by anyone looking in the direction of its wearer. But in almost every culture, including Thai, a public glimpse of something private is all the more exciting than looking at something already in the public domain.

In Thailand, particularly in the north-central and northeastern parts of the country, nearly every woman wears a skirt-cloth when bathing or in her own private place, but never in public. Southern Thai women, especially those living in Phuket and other western regions, commonly wear a skirt-cloth around the house. Since the open architecture of the Thai house makes it less-than-private space, and since many activities take place outdoors in those areas, there’s a fair chance that others might catch a glimpse of a skirt-cloth worn at home.

But despite the risk of being seen, Thai culture still considers the home to be an entirely private realm. Women who would never wear a skirt-cloth in a public place, to a temple or even in front of a visitor to the house, don’t hesitate putting one on when they are home alone. But they would just as surely put a shirt on to cover it in front of a guest, as welcoming a visitor is tantamount to entering the public sphere in which the skirt-cloth is quite inappropriate. And although Southern Thai women are not quite as strict as their north-central or northeastern sisters in defining exactly where and when a skirt-cloth can be worn, they, too, wear it only in what they consider to be private areas.

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6 A large cloth, wrapped around the body from above the breasts to the knees; often worn for modesty’s sake while bathing.
These customs and practices are in stark contrast to those involving the western swimsuit. Invented to serve the rapid growth of middle-class tourism in 19th and early-20th centuries, it was made expressly for use in public and worn at the beach and at public pools by Thais and westerners alike. (Unlike the more modest Thais, though, westerners rarely wore anything while bathing!)

As leisure swimming grew in popularity as a pastime, homeowners began to construct private pools. But just because they were on private property didn’t mean they were part of an individual’s private zone. In fact, private pools in the west have long been used for more than the owner’s relaxation; they often function as a reception area for guests or a venue for outdoor meals and parties. Swimsuits are accepted poolside attire, regardless of who might be present, and have never been thought of as strictly private or intimate wear.

Although our Thai cultural attitudes are often different from those of westerners, their perceptions about swimsuits and the customs governing their wear are essentially the same as ours: it is a public garment quite appropriately worn in certain specific public areas.

Then there is the question of fashion. Swimsuit styles popular today reveal the thighs, mound of the breasts and other parts of the body which most Thais consider private. Because of this higher degree of personal modesty in the common culture, Thai men are much more likely than their western counterparts to become aroused or excited at the sight of a woman in a skimpy swimsuit, although they certainly realize, regardless of how much skin is on display, that the suit is not a private garment being shown off in public but has been designed and made specifically for that domain.

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7 Ajarn Nithi contends these semi-private areas are, in fact, well within the public sphere, deriving their status from the public uses to which they are put.
(To reduce their chances of getting too excited, Thai men might consider a public campaign to loosen the restrictions on what can be worn where. They might advocate, for example, the wearing of a breast-cloth\textsuperscript{8} or whatever else is thought of as fantasy attire at beauty contests. But not many such campaigns have yet gotten off the ground!)

Regardless of the status of the swimsuit itself, swimming can be either a public or private activity depending on the circumstances. Bathing, on the other hand, carries with it no such ambiguity; it is considered a private activity in every culture I know of. Perhaps it’s because of all the washing and scrubbing of private areas, or because it can be so relaxing; I really don’t know for sure. But I do know that nobody ever holds a bath judging event during a beauty contest.

By common consent the world over, things having to do with private areas remain private, and are never meant to be shown in public. Even a westerner would feel peculiar watching a beauty pageant in which the contestants dressed in swimsuits but then competed on events such as demonstrations of shaving hair from their armpits.

Despite all these points, it seems that the skirt-cloth – swimsuit comparison we’ve put our attention on is really a false one which doesn’t yield much pertinent or practical information. The fact is that it’s impossible to say which garment is better, since they serve different needs in different places. To attempt a useful comparison of these clothes, garments both to be sure but dissimilar in several culturally significant ways, would be like comparing a handkerchief to a sanitary napkin. Both may be made from cloth, but they are hardly interchangeable; the handkerchief is made for public use, while the sanitary napkin is a thoroughly private article.

\textsuperscript{8} A component of Thai traditional dress, made from a shawl used as a woman’s wrap-around upper garment
Proving once again that things made for the public domain, even those which have private functions as well, are acceptable in public regardless of what they might expose, is the example of the loincloth. It is quite acceptable for male beauty contestants to wear such a revealing garment because it is seen as appropriate for public domain purposes, as well as being worn privately while bathing.

The concepts of private and public domains appear to be present in all cultures, but they are subjective and thus vary considerably from place to place. But there is a common thread: whatever is perceived to be a private act usually causes intense discomfort if performed in public. A most extreme example would be someone coerced into having a bowel movement on a public street. Suddenly an unremarkable and universal private function would become filled with embarrassment, humiliation, degradation and the sense that one’s essential dignity had been very personally violated.

There are many people in Thailand who are forced, metaphorically, to shit in the street; those who, for example, with a number on their breast, sell themselves publicly for sex, those who beg on the streets in humiliating circumstances, young children and elderly women up all night breathing fumes and risking injury or death to sell garlands at busy intersections for a pittance, etc., etc.

It is culture that carves out the boundaries between the public and the private. But where they are drawn can be an instrument of power. The larger the private sphere the more it must intrude upon the public domain, restricting it to fewer and fewer people, and reducing opportunities for public discourse amongst us, the educated elite, who cannot function intellectually in a solitary, private world. Where the line between private and public is placed, therefore, has profound implications for many aspects of society and the grip on power held by those who draw the line, their colleagues, friends and associates, and others in the population who hold the same beliefs.
But even when one thing or another remains firmly in the public sphere, complex, contradictory, vague or obstructionist regulations, established deliberately or inadvertently, can so restrict access or make it so difficult that it might as well have been put into the private domain.

A fine example is Thailand’s official language for public acts, laws and documents, a linguistic variant native to the central plains region. Most Thais have little understanding of its proper structure or use which considerably blunts its effectiveness as a medium of communication. Yet when people talk in the public arena, they are compelled by both culture and regulation to use this formal speech. Their poor grasp of the tongue, and that of their audiences, leads to misunderstanding, conflict and goal failure, which in turn may disqualify them from further consideration as public speakers, and that, by itself, is a considerable loss of personal power.

Patterns and forms of dress are yet another topic to consider. Most Thai males, for instance, have had neither training nor practice in tying a western necktie, and rarely wear them unless compelled by the demands of a job. But amongst well-bred and well-educated Thais dressing without a necktie is acceptable only in one’s private sphere. It’s easy enough to see, therefore, how without something as simple as knowing how to select, tie and wear a necktie, a substantial number of Thai men are denied access to much of public social life of the upper classes; for them, at least, the public sphere can be very, very small indeed.

Using this backdrop, we can see how much turmoil was caused by leaders of the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers, who, dressed in simple cottons like the villagers they were, set out to discuss their grievances with a cabinet minister on the assumption they were and should be treated as equals.
Definitions of private and public are related to concepts of space and power, and both overlap to some degree. Sexual relationships, to use a specific example, reflect the unequal distribution of power between a man and a woman and draw heavily on cultural notions of public and private.

Returning for a moment to the matter of private skirt-clothes in a public beauty contest, it’s my guess that those contestants who wore them felt more uncomfortable and ill at ease than those who wore western swimsuits. Although they were not physically harmed, their discomfort was real, particularly when having to “bathe” before an audience or walk across a river replica in a garment normally worn only in private.

They were uncomfortable, of course, for the obvious reason they were being forced to put on a private display for a public audience. Worse yet, it was done solely to arouse any male in attendance, with little tricks for the girls like lifting their skirts when crossing the on-stage river with its make-believe, painted water, tricks clearly designed to titillate.

Obviously, there exists in the world much discrimination against women which is far more destructive (and often violent) than being encouraged to show a little skin at a beauty contest. But just because something else is worse doesn’t excuse that which is wrong. As it was directed, the pageant was not so much a celebration of feminine beauty as it was a demonstration of the participants’ powerlessness. And in that sense it reflects certain inequities in the society at large.

Sadly, the more women seek to make their mark outside of hearth and home, the more barriers are erected to separate them from or control their actions in the public domain where male power and control lies. Like forcing a beauty contestant to wear a skirt not normally worn in public, and then to raise it to show a bit more flesh, the successful and powerful men of the public arena retain the ability...
to humiliate (and thus control) any woman who threatens the cozy arrangements which have so enriched and enhanced the public stature of those very same men.

It’s my belief that had this particular pageant received high praise, next year’s event would need even more of these little skits. Perhaps the organizers could demand that, for the sake of realism, the women urinate on stage after getting “wet” in the imitation river. After all, it’s just a natural thing, and rather expected in Thai culture after getting doused!

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It had been so long since I heard of the activities of the Association of Housewives that I began to miss them.

Relying solely on my memory, which often fails in people of my age, I guessed that it was about 20 or 30 years ago that the Association began to appear frequently in the news.

Before I go on, I should point out that in Thailand the associations that have always played the most important roles in government and society are those related to the four armed services and the Ministry of Interior. Although in reality these associations did little of importance, they managed to make others believe they were of great importance.

The common thread for their members was a link to a specific branch of the services or a government ministry. In short, they were professional groupings, as were most other associations. Nothing like an association of housewives had ever existed, even those grouping together wives of men in like professions; for example, wives of lawyers, teachers, professors, taxi drivers, customs officers, etc.

The Association of Housewives was thus unique. It wasn’t a collection of the spouses of people in a specific occupation. And its members were not the wives of government officials or bureaucrats; in fact, only a few government agencies even recognized the existence of such an organization. Yet even that small recognition was more
attention that the Association of Housewives garnered from the private sector, which never made mention of it at all.

But what exactly was this association? I thought first of their uniform, since all the well-known associations had them, and uniforms have always been a popular feature of Thai organizational life. My recollection was that when the members lined up they appeared in bright green, glowing yellow or other colors similar to the uniforms their husbands wore. Yet it is not quite right to say that the Association of Housewives was affiliated with any particular government organization. Quite the contrary, since neither the Customs Department, Airports Authority, State Railway nor other such agency, each of which have their own recognizable uniforms, had an Association of Housewives.

So what exactly can we learn from this Association of Housewives about the role of women in Thai society? First of all, we must understand that an association, be it from the army, police or interior ministry, is a symbol of power in Thai society, and they were, at one time, very powerful indeed.

But the power of these groups was gradually reduced over time, formally by regulatory restriction and informally by changes in societal attitudes. At the same time, the Association of Housewives was defining its role within the realm of charitable activities and public welfare. The members devoted themselves to pursuits such as giving food and medicine to soldiers on patrol, preparing feasts for poor children in slum communities, etc. So it was at the same time that the power of the associations to which its members’ husbands belonged was being restricted, that the Association of Housewives sought to replace their role in society through beneficence.

But regardless of the nature of their activities, both the Association of Housewives and the career-related associations to
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which the husbands belonged were essentially about obtaining, maintaining and exercising power.

And it turns out that the Association of Housewives and the husbands’ organizations were closely intertwined, almost functioning as one unit. The rise of the Association of Housewives would not have been possible without the support of the husbands’ associations, and their contributions of essential services and facilities like office space, etc.

In their administrative structures the associations are all quite similar and closely tied together. For instance, the chairwoman of the Royal Thai Army branch of the Association of Housewives must be the wife of the Army commander-in-chief, and her term in office coincides with her husband’s tour of duty in his post. Learning about the women themselves or trying to understand what talent or experience they bring to their particular posts in the Association isn’t a very useful exercise. To understand who’s who in the Association of Housewives all one needs to do is find out what job each woman’s husband holds.

Looking at all these associations, it’s not surprising to find that the ones with the highest profiles are those whose members are mostly male. Women are found scattered here and there in them, but their presence has little effect. Women hold no prominent positions in these associations, nor do they have interesting or significant roles to play.

(As an aside, I believe it’s high time that women were given or sought out positions of power and importance; I’d personally be delighted if Thailand were to have a female prime minister. But hard as that may be to comprehend, it would be much more difficult still to imagine a female commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army.)

It’s possible that being in a world directed and controlled by men more or less influences a woman’s way of thinking. It may
even prevent them from viewing events and situations with their natural female perspective. This state of affairs, though, is quite conducive to women who wish to support their husbands by joining together in a group like the Association of Housewives. Those who are free from their spouse’s control, in contrast, pay little attention to and show little interest in such organizations. Although they may be wives of soldiers, policemen or civil servants, they are not the type, if truly out from under their husbands’ thumbs, to belong to these kinds of associations.

In pondering the whole matter, I’ve wondered whether the Association of Housewives is actually a backdoor to the power structure, but have concluded that it is not (other than the informal communication pathway resulting from the marital relationship between members and their husbands in powerful positions). My reasons have much to do with timing and the availability of other avenues. First of all, the Association of Housewives had not even been established during the rather long period of military dictatorships when the backdoor approach was widely used by special interests as an effective way to access those in positions of power. Second, the Association grew in prominence and prosperity much later during a period when the backdoor was no longer necessary; access to decision makers for those in the arms trade, infrastructure, transport, etc., was relatively straightforward through a front door available to all.

But there is also another reason why the Association of Housewives never functioned as a backdoor to power, and that is because it’s a closed organization in which members must be tied to one another. It isn’t the kind of group in which individuals mingle freely and that limits its ability to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. For a backdoor to function effectively it must be open to a wide cross-section of people who can access any member they wish; the Association of Housewives, being a structurally closed
organization, is quite difficult to penetrate. Finally, as any backdoor is, by definition, circumventing normal procedures those who use it have an interest in keeping their activities as quiet as possible, something not so easy in a formal association whose affairs must be reported publicly.

To better understand the organization and its implications, I’ve tried to compare the women in the Association of Housewives with those in the women’s groups now popping up like mushrooms all over Thailand. It turns out that the two see their roles quite differently.

The most prominent of these new groups have carved out roles in domestic activities such as weaving, food preservation, cooking and the manufacture of handicrafts, for the specific purpose of generating household income. Some are so successful that they are earning more for their members than they make from any other activity; in some cases the group is the main source of income for the women who belong.

These new women’s groups are quite well aware of their own individual identities. They make no effort to recruit men into their ranks, and some of the members are quite bitter over the lack of support they’ve received from the men in their lives. Others, though, are quite content as their husbands and children provide additional labor to produce handicraft products for sale. When I asked if one group had considered changing its name to reflect its work rather than the gender of its members (for example, the Natural Dyeing or Traditional Weaving Group), the answer was a firm “no,” for the reason that they wished to preserve it for women in the future.

The members of these new groups clearly recognize the significance of maintaining and promoting their identity as women, something of even greater value than the group’s primary income producing activities. As a result, they are quite ready to stand up independently and fight for their rights. An example of this behavior
is the group which, prior to the issuance of the Tambon Administrative Organization (TAO) regulations, campaigned effectively in rural area for a quota of TAO seats to be set aside specifically for women.

These are confident women. But their confidence may have its roots in the fact that women living in remote areas, free from the influence of western perspectives, are more secure in their identities than their urban sisters, whose outlook, particularly regarding formal education, has been partly molded by western concepts and ideas.

It’s my belief that looking at women’s rights through western eyes is not a practical way to understand the movement for those rights in Thailand. There are many Thai cultural and historical factors which might be more important than the commonly accepted western perspectives.

Female MPs who care about women’s rights issues, therefore, should, in my opinion, concentrate their efforts where they can have the greatest effect, which is right here in the metropolis of Bangkok where women’s identities seem less secure than they do in the countryside.

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An inspirational educator who leads us on a journey of intellectual discovery is often called a “guru.”

But all gurus need not be teachers; we bestow the title on others as well, particularly those individuals who are pioneers in their chosen fields. Those who write a textbook for a popular Thai orchestra which becomes an accepted standard, for instance, would deserve the moniker but fit into this second category. On the other hand, those who only teach orchestra technique which has been developed by others, but who have many devoted students, would be gurus of the first category.

The naming of gurus according to the second category raises the question of the appropriate Thai form of address. “Professor” does not quite seem sufficient, since many professors have not created a novel approach to their subject.

But for every one who does break new ground, like the popular guru Srisak Wallipodom, most other professors seem content to rehash that which others have thought up.

Before we leave this subject, I’d like to turn to the topic I intended to explore. That is, why no Thai woman throughout history

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9 Mae Ploy is the lead character in a classic Thai drama; she is the personification of the Good Thai Woman in days of old
10 Sai Deaw is a thin T-shirt with spaghetti straps, a risqué but popular garment for modern Thai teenagers
ever seems to have been popularly thought of as a guru for inventing a new approach to a pressing problem.

Female poets in the Rattanakosin period received much praise from intellectuals of the time, but that was apparently not enough for them to be thought of as gurus like Sunthornphu. The beauty queen Noppamas\textsuperscript{11} invented her own forms and practices for royal ceremonies and would clearly qualify as a guru if she had been real instead of only a fictional character in an historical drama.

Why is it, therefore, that women are simply not thought of as inventive? Personally, I can’t think of a single rational reason.

But if women were not thought of as gurus, it doesn’t mean they were culturally unimportant. In fact it is just the opposite, as most Thais seem to view women as the ones most responsible for the preservation and passing down of culture to the next generation.

The roles of women in socializing young people were much more clearly defined than those of men. Teaching of girls, for instance, a task frequently described in Thai literature, was virtually monopolized by women. One can speculate that this was so because much of what was taught was about becoming a wife and mother, but this might not be the real reason since women frequently taught other things as well. Plaikaew’s mother, for example, taught several important subjects, including the powers of the supernatural and magical mantra, to both girls and boys, including her own grandson, Plai-ngam\textsuperscript{12}.

In short, it has always been women who laid the foundations of the education of the young, although most children were later sent to study with a wise, old monk. In this sense, the role of women fits well with their image as the preservers of culture.

\textsuperscript{11} The fictional court lady who created the Loy Kratong floating festival ceremonies
\textsuperscript{12} The son of Khun Phan or Plai Kaew in Thai traditional folktales
A friend of mine has done some research on proverbs, folktales, old sayings, etc., with an eye toward identifying the different images of the father and the mother in Thai culture. He found that fathers were routinely drawn as emotionally distant from their children, possessing absolute power within the family, maintaining conformity with rules and regulations, but acting largely indifferent and without much attention to detail.

Unlike fathers, though, mothers were described as paying attention to details, interacting with their children as a source of happiness and security, and eager to direct or interfere in the daily lives of their offspring. Where to study or whom to marry: these are the issues for which mothers have always waited for their chance to direct, coerce, manipulate or supervise their children. In this way, they maintain control over the next generation, as supervision cannot work without control, either overt or implicit.

(Interestingly, we can conclude from this that Thai men have been so accustomed to being directed about by women, that they have become dependent and could not function without female supervision. Of course, this is a bit off the topic at hand!)

It is far from surprising, therefore, that Thai men of my generation, when asked which person taught them to greet, prostrate, chant, read and write poetry, virtually always mention their mothers. And since the role of the mother was so all-encompassing, the idea of him acting against her teachings or in alternative ways in his profession are so radical that he could easily become a guru in a field like dance.

In this context it’s quite easy to see how women became the streams and rivers of Thai culture, keeping it flowing from the past to the present and from generation to generation.
My foreign teacher once discussed with me his view that See Paen Din\textsuperscript{13} required a female character in the lead role, despite being written by a man, in order to elicit the feelings of the elite classes during the historic transitional period of the four reigns. Although it would have been possible to make the lead character male, my teacher opined that the writer “possibly viewed the world from a female perspective, and therefore preferred to tell the tale with a female voice.”

When he said this, I merely thought it was debatable observation, but nothing of real importance. Later, I began to think that the real reason for choosing a female lead was the fact that women in Thai culture are thought of as preservers of culture. Using a man to describe the atmosphere and mentality of the palace, in such a cultural pattern, would be strange indeed. And it would be even more absurd for Mae Ploy, the very embodiment of the traditional values of Thai womanhood, to be expressed through a male character; men are expected by this society to be either dynamic or absurd, but not rather boring cultural preservationists. (Unless, of course, they are politicians who employ only their mouth’s wind without any real commitment!)

With this as background, it seems reasonable to take another look at the role of women as the main preservers of Thai culture. While there is nothing wrong with calling men gurus for inventing new approaches, we must not forget the contribution of women. Without them, the guru’s creations would have long-ago disappeared, with Thai culture all the poorer for it.

But women’s roles have changed and grown more complex in the modern day. Many, if not most, must work as hard as men, often outside of the home. Even rural women, both farming and non-
agricultural, are virtually compelled to work by their families’ need for a second income. As work consumes more and more of their time, women’s role in socializing the younger generation is likely to gradually decline.

Under this very real scenario, it is reasonable to ask how many women will eventually be telling folktales to their children before bed, or encouraging their evening chanting, or preaching to their daughters about recipes and how to cook.

As I look today at young girls wearing sai deaw, I can’t help wondering how these women of tomorrow will be preserving Thai culture for the next generation.

But just when I began to despair, and much to my surprise, I came across some research done by Ajarn Teerayut Boonmee suggesting that the most popular Thai dramatic character among young people is Mae Ploy!

Yes, the very Mae Ploy, sitting modestly and politely as she heeds the words of her elders, stringing flowers to the preaching of her royal sovereign, the very embodiment of a fine wife to her husband and an attentive mother to her children in every aspect of their lives. In short, she is the energy of the stream which carries culture from one generation to the next.

Is it only now that she turns to wear sai deaw, as if it were a breast cloth?

Pondering all this, I wonder if Mae Ploy is simply an idol that must be preserved as a piece of history, or a model for today’s youth whom they admire and wish to emulate. I don’t have all the answers,

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14 Whose boss, unfortunately, did not appreciate the complaint about his own direct budget allocations, forgetting that public funds are not his alone but are used in trust for the people to provide benefit to all; lamentably without mention as to the benefit, or lack thereof, of Ajarn Teerayu’s research!

15 A traditional Thai garment
but I do find people’s impressions of *Mae Ploy* and her relevance to their lives a most interesting subject for thought.
The debut performance of Sudarat Keyuraphan, the minister of public health, in a television advertising spot was, to put it mildly, one of the least exciting things I had ever seen.

Bangkokians tend to view, sometimes wishfully, their political leaders as take-charge, get-the-job-done types. Many feel the city’s governor should be out there digging trenches for water pipes, moving push-carts along the street and pressing the metropolitan police to cite drivers of smoking cars (all tasks which candidates for the post weave into a public persona of an elected official taking the job seriously).

Mrs Sudarat, whose carefully cultivated reputation as a no-nonsense lady, brought to her portfolio experience in several posts which Thai culture usually defined as man’s work: deputy minister of interior, political party secretary and the like. I expected she would show what she was made of.

But her advertisement contained none of that tough-guy masculine imagery. In fact, it was just the opposite: she extolled the feminine virtues of a warm family, a good steady income, being a good neighbor and the BTS Skytrain. Yes, the Skytrain. Even that was painted as a feminine issue.

The horrible traffic in Bangkok has long been co-opted to draw votes and probably will continue to be so for many years to come.
But proposed solutions to the gridlock in the past have always drawn heavily on the perception in Thai culture that the masculine virtues necessary to solve intractable problems are tightly intertwined with power. Technological prowess, a masculine concept, must be harnessed (through, for example, computerized traffic signals, helicopter traffic control, construction of multi-level highways, etc.), and coupled with the equally masculine strict enforcement of regulations (staggered-day entry into the city center, high-occupancy vehicle preferences, taxis prohibited from stopping except at designated areas, etc.) if the problem is ever to be solved.

As she presented it, though, Mrs Sudarat’s Skytrain lacked any sense of power at all. It was just a little electric train, another commuter’s option.

But I understood the approach. In Thai culture ideas tied to women have to appear somewhat fuzzy and cute\textsuperscript{16} if they are to be accepted. And, after all, I had been given to understand that the campaign committee of Mrs Sudarat’s Thai Rak Thai party chose the image of women specifically to draw votes for her.

I discussed this with a friend who was privy to many of the internal machinations of the party. According to him, it was rumored that Thai Rak Thai’s campaign committee had nothing to do with it. Rather, they had hired the team which ran George H W Bush’s unsuccessful 1992 presidential campaign, and simply followed its advice.

That was news to me, and I wondered why a political party with as much financial strength as Thai Rak Thai would go with a team that had lost the White House. Why not hire Bill Clinton’s advisors instead? After all, they won.

\textsuperscript{16} That is, girlish or childish
But anyway, I know that in Thailand nobody, even a team of foreign losers, can find all the solutions, which is one reason our economy collapsed in 1997 and we’ve had to hang our heads in shame ever since.

But if the rumor about outside advisers were true, it might explain Mrs Sudarat’s soft-sell advertisement, with its emphasis on a slick commercial version of femininity. It would simply be the old story of foreign ideas being transplanted across cultures and political systems.

Despite the boundless confidence of foreign advisors, though, it’s not quite that easy a thing to do. Womanhood can be commercialized in America because within their culture women clearly have a sense of solidarity with other women. One woman, any woman, can be presented as representative of every other, and indeed of all other, women.

But when womanhood has such a prominent identity, men are often denied access. I have a friend who once registered for a class on feminism in which most of the other students were female. They made short work of him by insisting that since he was not a girl, he neither could nor would ever understand the issues they raised for discussion in class. Asking him if he could be a feminist, they gave him no chance to reply but answered for him in the negative. Unsurprisingly, he dropped the course.

With such attitudes, it doesn’t take a genius to play on the concept of womanhood to promote a sense of belonging in women and thus win votes.

But it’s my contention that Thai women in our society really don’t have a strong sense of being one with their gender sisters. Of course, Thai feminists have a different opinion and theirs is certainly valid for them, but their numbers are few in this country and my impression is that they have very little real power.
In fact, if there is any sense of a greater “womanhood” in Thailand, our culture imbues it with negative connotations. “Women” are seen as complaining, overly melodramatic, fussy, indecisive, and possessed of a host of other character flaws. Definitely not the sort of people who should be in positions of authority and responsibility. And since these attitudes are held both by Thai men and Thai women, it’s not much of a mystery why “womanhood” holds so little attraction and generates no sense of belonging among females here.

I once overheard a woman who was running for election for a university administrative post say about herself that she was not a typical woman. The implication was that she was tough, intelligent and had a core of steel, just the opposite of the image of a woman as neither strong nor smart nor resolute.

This sense that one does not belong to a larger group is not limited to women. A Thai laborer, for example, has no feeling he is one with other laborers; there’s no group identity hidden in his consciousness.

Of course, not everyone feels they are one alone. There’s more of a sense of belonging with the Luk Pra Kiew,\textsuperscript{17} Luk Mae Dome,\textsuperscript{18} the “Fifth,”\textsuperscript{19} or even of “the poor” or “the farmers” than there is among women or laborers.

In short, women as a group cannot be commercialized in Thai society.

But that doesn’t mean that one woman, Mrs Sudarat, cannot be commercialized. Commercialized as what, however, I cannot predict. Even the campaigners failed to hit the target, likely because Mrs Sudarat possesses several identities, a woman being only one of them.

\textsuperscript{17} Chulalongkorn University alumni  
\textsuperscript{18} Thammasat University alumni  
\textsuperscript{19} Class 5 of the Chulachomklao Military Academy
Some people might accept her group identity as this or that, but not as a woman, since that sort of thing really doesn’t exist in Thai society.

This lack of a sense of belonging amongst Thai women would probably explain their unexciting roles in the political arena as well.

Nevertheless we can’t deny the fact that women’s rights in Thailand are quite a bit better accepted than in any other society in Asia. Despite this, women have remarkably little influence in politics, from the Tambon Administrative Organizations all the way up to the cabinet.

Women’s lack of political influence seems disconnected with the fact that women’s rights are well accepted on a broad scale in our society. It seems to me this may be the result of the fact that individual women have no sense of belonging to a larger notion of womanhood.

But although there are no women in the cabinet, women as a whole don’t seem to feel affected. Women in general have no feelings whatsoever about the lack of females in politics.

Put another way, it’s my belief that most women have no sense of commonality with someone like Khunying Supatra Masdit, even if they share the same gender. Like or dislike has nothing to do with the gender of a Khunying.

Females seeking a career in politics should understand the fact that the concept of womanhood will yield very few political benefits in Thai culture, and in fact will provide little if anything at all.

As a result of this, the role of female politicians in pressing for women’s rights appears to be equally minimal. I can’t think of any female politicians who are even serious advocates for women’s rights. Even highly publicized acts such as Khun Paweena’s police raid on a brothel should not be seen as a women’s rights issue. Rather it should
be viewed as a human rights matter. This is why her actions gained just as much support from men as from women.

So, all that being the case, as I listen to female politicians say how much they would like to see a female prime minister, I can’t help but wonder how that would be relevant to the issue of women’s rights.
Now is the time for us to decide whether sex education should be part of the Thai public school curriculum.

Thais have long understood that sex education imparts information, but many believe it is the kind of information that does more harm than good. Therefore, they conclude, best not have it at all.

That kind of attitude towards knowledge shows a complete lack of respect for the human intellect. But, fortunately, it seems another view has presently won the day because we are right now in the process of discussing plans to bring sex education into the public schools.

A respected authority on this subject chose his words very carefully when he said during an interview that, “the aim of sex education is to strengthen reproductive health and well-being … sex education being crucial to reproductive health. Providing sex education is the first step towards other areas of reproductive health such as reduction in abortion rates, promotion of teenage health, and cutting the incidence of HIV infection.”

It seems to me that this expert was doing his best to support sex education in a society largely ignorant of the subject, and a rather pretentious society at that. He was trying to package sex education in a way he felt would be acceptable to the society at large, so he hit
on reproductive health as its primary justification. To him, the simple fact of having sex education in any form was far more important than the content.

From my perspective, though, I think we should be worrying more about what sort of sex education we have than whether or not we have any at all. Sex education that fails to recognize attitudinal changes in gender relations will not equip students to cope with the sexual situations they are likely to encounter in real life.

It’s a simple fact that so many people have sex without giving a thought to reproduction (other than wishing to avoid it). So why is it that we feel the need to justify sex education only in terms of reproductive health?

It would be better, and far more honest, to admit that sex education should address the full range and the many dimensions of sexual relations in today’s society: medical, public health, social, moral and emotional. Let the opponents of knowledge say whatever they wish.

But even if our society rejects the honest approach, debate on the matter will still provide a good opportunity for public education. And one day there will be sufficient public support to make well-rounded sex education a reality.

I have no idea whether in ancient times people only had sex for reproduction; certainly many religions seem to find the act so repugnant that they can accept it only if its goal is children. Sex without reproduction is, for them, sternly frowned upon.

But I do know that in one ancient culture, Thai, that is, this attitude towards sex does not exist. If we look at Thai literature over the years we see many representations of sex that have everything to do with pleasure, and very little to do with reproduction.

Sex was also democratic, in that it was considered pleasurable for both parties, even if the man got the better of the deal; he could
have his pleasure with several women, while a woman with any respectable moral standing was restricted to just one man.

It all reflects a very realistic attitude toward sex, in the sense that enjoyment is a very natural part of the experience and, in fact, there would be very little sex without pleasure.

But Thai people, particularly the noble class, began to change their attitudes toward sex under the influence of western prudery. Women in Victorian times were expected to endure, not enjoy, sex, and only as some sort of marital duty. A wife was expected to relieve her husband of his sexual tension and bear his children, in exchange for which the husband was expected to control his lusts and have sex only with his wife.

Yet as we know, there were a multitude of prostitutes plying their trade in Victorian England. It seems that then, as now, the sexual behavior of real people did not exactly match that of the public ideal. Nobody complained much, though, since pretension was an important characteristic of the genteel classes, and reality and appearance were often at odds.

This practice of pretense has unfortunately been adopted by Thais in our present-day morality. So much so that the “better” classes of modern Thai society would likely be uncomfortable socializing with the old Thais of the Rattanakosin or Ayutthaya periods with their rather more honest approach to these matters.

I don’t mean to imply that all our modern ideas are hypocritical or that we should take up the attitudes of ancient Thais as a basis for sex education. Many of the attitudes of bygone days toward other subjects such as gender, hierarchy, etc., would cause substantial turmoil if transplanted to the present.

Rather, my question is, are we going to institute a sex education that ignores the enjoyment and pleasure of sex? My fear is if we have sex education which honestly addresses this point, there will
surely be a backlash and loud complaints that educating youngsters about sex is just one more step down the path to decadence.

In my personal view, there’s no fixed link between the enjoyment of sex and promiscuity, simply because joy is a state of mind, more profound that any physical state.

Interestingly, that dimension of joy was rather neglected in the ancient literature. Yet sex that is bought is different than sex given freely when bound to love, and the two forms are sure to have vastly different effects on the participants.

In point of fact, the real joy in sex comes in the intimacy of sharing and caring, not in one person taking advantage of another. An ideal sexual relationship, therefore, is simply incompatible with promiscuity.

If we provide the right kind of information to our young people, that deep bond of tenderness could well include “safe sex.” But if we teach only about sexually transmitted diseases, we will be touching only on the technical aspects of sex, which puts it, once again, in the category of a superficial encounter. And if we leave it there, we will never be able to address the continuing expansion of the commercial sex industry in Thailand, even if we do make some progress toward controlling HIV infection.

You may wonder why I’ve mentioned the sex trade. It’s because I firmly believe we can’t properly teach about sex without doing so. We have hundreds of thousands of prostitutes in this country, both male and female, and despite popularly held misconceptions, the vast majority of them cater to Thais, not foreigners. Another matter central to the issue of sex education is the fact that social attitudes in Thailand regarding sex have evolved quite a bit in the past few decades. It is simply no longer possible to dictate to our youth using rigid, overly simplistic ethical rules.
It’s absolutely essential that we understand that what’s right or wrong in sex depends entirely upon the context, and each situation is different from every other. In addition, social and economic factors come into play, and these can vary greatly from person to person.

For parents who sell their daughters into prostitution, for example, we need to consider all the factors which contributed to their action. We may see their behavior as clearly wrong, but it behooves us to consider what drove them to it. Only in this way can we understand and prevent future problems, instead of wasting our time assigning blame.

Looking at things this way, I believe you can see why it’s been my long-standing hope that if and when real sex education makes its way into the Thai school curriculum, it will be well-rounded program touching on all the aspects of this very, very human subject.

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Talk About Sexuality in Thailand
The Daily Matichon reported recently that German researchers had used a computer to construct a maze, putting male and female volunteers to work trying to find the way out. The results suggested that males got to the exit first because they set out immediately toward that goal, while the females were preoccupied trying to figure out their position in the maze.

The researchers concluded from this little experiment that “men possess a greater ability than women to follow directions on roads because the male brain is different than the female brain.”

I tried to find a report of this experiment in one of Bangkok’s English-language newspapers so I could compare the research findings. Unfortunately I could not, so having only one source from which to draw on, I apologize for any errors that creep into this discussion.

I have written about such an experiment before, but one which came to a very different conclusion. Then, researchers in the United States had constructed a real maze out of plywood for the volunteers to navigate and watched their progress on closed-circuit television. In that experiment it seemed that males and females demonstrated an equal ability to find their way out, but that the methods employed by each sex were quite different.
The men, after bumping into one dead end or another, built a mental map of the entire maze; the women, in contrast, would observe things on the dead-end paths like the pattern of the plywood or a nail trace and use those clues to identify which lanes they should steer clear of.

Yes, men’s and women’s brains are different, but that doesn’t mean one gender’s mental ability is more efficient or otherwise superior to that of the other. If there is any measurable difference in practical effectiveness it has yet to be found.

With that understanding, I read the German research findings with considerable skepticism. The men’s better performance, I suspected, might have something to do with the fact that working on a computer screen is somehow favorable to them, while the more true-to-life plywood maze presents no such advantage.

The German experiment, therefore, did not prove to my satisfaction that men are better at navigation or following directions than women; rather, at least to me, it proved that men are better at using a computer. The relative performance of the sexes in real-life situations was still unclear.

Not only did I doubt the findings of the German experiment, I had the nagging suspicion that the researchers might have been men, and that there was more than little gender bias at work there.

Almost everything we have been taught today is fraught with gender bias. It’s not difficult to understand why when we realize that most of the material we study has been crafted by men. It’s only natural, therefore, that the literature reflects the idea that men are more important, more given to direct action, and essentially more intelligent than females in either the general or the specific.

A friend of mine who teaches physics at Midnight University, Chatchawan Boonpan, once told me about an article he had read in

The Science of Those Who Wear Pants
Resurgence magazine about widespread gender bias in the natural sciences.

It seems that most scientists, when explaining the reproductive process, turn most of their attention to the millions of male sperm rushing to fertilize the female egg. Only the strongest and fittest will succeed.

Birth, from this viewpoint, is all about male sperm; the female egg plays an almost passive role. Moreover, the reproductive fight begins even before fertilization, but all the competitors are male; the woman waits, quiescent, for the reward which will be brought to her by the strongest male cell.

The Resurgence article noted that this concept of a passive female is, in reality, only a half-truth, since the human egg has protruding hooks which it uses to capture sperm.

Many other metaphors are in common circulation when it comes to talk about conception. One has it that the egg is the active cell, choosing the sperm it wants, instead of the other way around. In this picture life begins with a female act; that is; the egg’s decision. No competition is involved nor is the choice dependent solely on the strength of the male sperm.

We in the academic world like to talk about intellectual neutrality; that is, following the facts wherever they lead, objectively and without bias. But it always seems to be a fight, as most minds are tainted with a bit of bias to one side or another.

Bias is a thick contaminant. When it derives from greed or hatred it can sometimes be controlled by conscious effort, but when it derives from illusion it is extremely difficult to eliminate. The problem is that the illusion which spawns the bias is so convincing that one has no way of separating it from reality.
The perception that men are superior, creatures of action, the force of the world and the dominant sex, is part of socialization from a young age in most cultures worldwide. It’s a view which has profound implications for both men and women.

Yet it may be just an illusion, although admittedly a very persuasive one. But because we almost never perceive it as such, the gender bias which it causes arises largely outside of our awareness.

Any set of assumptions, concepts, values or practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for those who share them is called a paradigm, and paradigms play a central role in how we reach academic conclusions.

It’s generally difficult to see issues clearly without understanding the paradigm. To find a way around bias, I suggest putting academic conclusions, whether research results or a doctor’s self-proclaimed opinion, aside; they generally rely heavily on the individual professors’ points of view, which are no more valid than anyone else’s point of view.

Consider these issues, for example: should the lignite power plant at Bo Nok, Baan Krut be built? How should the environmental impact assessment be evaluated? Should the current interest rate for bank deposits be raised?

These are questions that concern everyone in our society, and each person has an equal right to comment on them. Although they involve technical matters, nothing is so technical that a person should be prohibited from offering his opinion. The simple fact is that, no matter what the conclusions, all are dependent on one paradigm or another. And many of the opinions which issue from supposed experts are actually presupposed and the proponents seek out those scholars likely to support their assumptions.

In writing this essay, I tried to think of an example of bias in academia which clearly affects people’s lives; I settled on sexuality.
Have you ever noticed that most pornography (both above and below the shelf) is made for men, despite the fact that a significant proportion of its consumers are women? On opening any one of these publications we see women with no self-identity other than to respond willingly and absolutely to male lust. They have no desires, preferences or tastes themselves.

This view of sexuality has been so thoroughly spread through pornography, novels, television, drama and sexual studies that it has come to be accepted by most people, both men and women. In reality, though, it is only a male perspective.

The study of women’s sexuality is a relatively new pursuit, having only started about 50 years ago. There simply isn’t the body of serious research on women’s issues that there is on men’s, and what there is hasn’t been as widely disseminated.

The implications are widespread. In the event that I should decide to produce pornography for women, I would be shooting in the dark, since I wouldn’t have enough information to figure out what their sexual fantasies might be.

Thus, women who seek out pornography must make do with material produced from a man’s perspective which, as noted above, is generally characterized by the complete absence of female sexual identity. And so it is that the sexual culture which women are given to believe is theirs is in reality, despite the illusion that it is not, the sexual culture of men.

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I’m not really knowledgeable enough about Buddhism and its disciplines to talk much about bhikkhuni\(^{20}\) from an academic viewpoint. But I can talk about the social perspectives, although on those, too, I feel I lack essential knowledge.

Regardless, though, I want to discuss the subject. But I feel it’s fair to warn you that, given my limited knowledge, you should be somewhat skeptical of anything I have to say!

Now that that’s out of the way, we can start our discussion. I’m beginning with the matter of the shi,\(^{21}\) as many suggest it’s the only possible choice for a Thai woman who wants to join the Buddhist order in a recognized role.

According to our custom, law and religious practice, a shi is not strictly a member of the Buddhist clergy, in contrast to an ordained monk, but is in fact a lay person who has devoted herself to the order. The legal limitation, of course, could be removed in a moment should we wish it; but one’s status, their standing in the community and how they are seen by others cannot be dictated by law. As we so often see, the law is frequently unable to orderly mold the world as it is written; transsexuals, for example, are not the only ones the law seems unable to fit by force.

\(^{20}\) An ordained female member of the Buddhist clergy, similar to the monkhood for males

\(^{21}\) A Buddhist nun, who renounces bodily pleasures, lives according to a set of precepts, and devotes herself to the service of a temple and the Buddhist order
The ordained clergy in any religion necessarily occupy a space somewhere in between the profane and the holy. Although Theravada Buddhism suggests that one should use one’s own effort to reach the goal of enlightenment, and that neither being a bhikkhu or a bhikkhuni will help one along the way, it cannot be denied that in Buddhist communities the ordained clergy, that is, the bhikkhu, or monks, are almost universally considered as bunyakhet, and merit flows to all who perform acts of charity for them. Consequently, it is the ordained monks who are called upon to perform religious rites, in ways which vary from community to community and culture to culture.

In my opinion, rites are an important symbol of shared belief, and an equally important tool to indicate just who has been formally ordained and who has not. Ordained clergy have certain ritual duties which are exclusive to them, and certain rights and authority which flow both from their status and from the general perception, common among all organized religions, that they are a bridge from the mundane to the spiritual.

Among the world’s great religions, Islam, Judaism and the protestant sects of Christianity have rejected the priesthood. Strictly speaking, they have no priests to maintain conformity and act as intermediaries for their flocks. But whether or not their imams, rabbis and ministers are seen in a social context as if they are priests, having special rights and duties and bridging the gap between earth and heaven, is something which I, with my limited knowledge, cannot determine.

As regards shis in Thailand, though, it’s my opinion that they have never been seen by the Thai people as true members of the clergy, with that special ability to live between the profane and the

\[22\] Literally, within a “sphere of merit”

Shi and Bhikkhuni, The Buddhist Nuns
sacred. Without that common perception, therefore, *shis* have never really functioned as monks, the “priests” of Buddhism.

Nevertheless, in olden times the term *shi* did mean a member of the clergy, someone with ecclesial rights and duties and who had gone through a formal ordination; in other words, a “priest.” In fact, it was King Rama III who gave the title of *shiton,* or “king’s priest,” to the future King Rama IV when he had entered the monkhood, taking the clerical name Prabhikkhuwachivan. In addition, foreigners here during the Ayutthaya period have noted in their histories that women who shaved their heads and observed the *attha sila* were known throughout the kingdom as *nangshis.*

Despite the royal perception, though, most Thais have never considered *nangshis* to be clergy or “priests,” nor do I know of any period in our history when *nangshis* were allowed to conduct the rites reserved for monks, whose higher status was always derived partly from their perceived position as an intermediary between the mundane and the spiritual.

So why was it, then, that women in ancient times were ordained as *shis*?

Those willing to dress and act in a manner different from most have always been seen as following their principles and beliefs without compromise, in other words, showing their true identity. And announcing that identity determines the forms which their social relationships must take.

Perhaps women choosing ordination as a *nangshi* simply did so in order to establish a new social relationship with those around her. But as this hypothesis is not an entirely satisfactory explanation,

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23 Literally meaning, “first shi”
24 The name taken by the future King Rama IV during the period in which he entered the monkhood
25 The eight precepts followed at all times by Buddhist nuns, and also by lay Buddhists in periods of meditation or during certain holidays
26 Nang meaning “woman”
we must dig deeper and investigate more closely those who were ordained as *shis*.

A few of the documents I’ve studied suggest that some women of the high social classes became *nangshis* in their later years, when they no longer had the burden of caring for husband (who by that time may have died) or children, particularly daughters which they often accompanied to the royal court as they offered themselves as wives.

According to some documents, these women were commonly also called *shis*. But instead of residing in a temple, they lived either at the royal court or at their daughters’ homes where they would be cared for by their children and grandchildren. They often went through a formal ordination ceremony of sorts as an expression of their strong faith in Buddhism and to mark their passage from the world outside to the world within. Over time, the title *shi* was gradually supplanted by *ubasikka*, which was taken to mean a woman who not only observed the *attha sila* precepts, but also shaved her head and wore a simple white robe.

If an *ubasikka* wanted to stay at a temple, though, she could only do so on *Wanphra* or *Wankone*, two of the lunar holy days. Yet, earlier, *nangshis* had been staying in temples since the Ayutthaya period. A fellow named Gampfer, who arrived in Siam during the Prapetraja period, recorded much about the temple life of *nangshis*, including one story about Wat Nangshi, a large temple with many in residence, which was engulfed by scandal involving the local monks.

I suppose that most *nangshis* were old women. Most were probably neither rich nor had children to care for them. But either due to their deep Buddhist faith, or because they had no other place of refuge, they decided their futures would be best served as *shis*.

The roots of attitudes toward *nangshis* remain obscure. We know they are not likely to be revered. In the event one or another is

*Shi and Bhikkhuni, The Buddhist Nuns*
highly respected, it is because of their acts, deeds and achievements before they came to the temple, not because of their ordination. In short, the social status of a nangshi in the temple is not likely to be high. At best, they are seen as poor, elder, lonely women who deserve only pity, not praise or reverence.

It is immediately obvious to any observer that a temple has limitations on the degree of help it can provide to lay women. Many are drawn there for a variety of reasons, and interact often with the monks. But there are lines not to be crossed. A laywoman might ask to share a monk’s food, and that might be acceptable now and then, but too often risks gossip directed at the monk and behind-the-back talk of inappropriate affairs. Similarly, while the temple might welcome laywomen during the day, asking permission to take refuge might be met with consternation and refusal, as it simply would be inappropriate for females to remain overnight.

So it turns out that the only reliable way a woman can be accepted in the temple and be helped by it is by becoming a shi, by whom the monks will not feel threatened or uncomfortable. In fact, the entire image which a nangshi projects, complete with white robe and shaved head, is that of harmlessness and devotion, and of a person no longer defined by gender difference or sexual desire.

In this way, a nangshi staying with monks at a temple will not disgrace them by her presence, and will, in fact, probably improve her own situation. After all, a small, poor and powerless woman could easily be mistreated by men, but with a white robe and shaved head, she prevents harm from coming to her.

There is an old story about a granddaughter of King Rama I, who had been taken prisoner by Burmese soldiers. While in Burma, she decided she would become ordained as a shi. When the Siamese army counterattacked and took the Burmese town of Tawai, rescuing her, she left the temple, no longer a shi, although she continued to
call herself by her clerical name, Phrachaoongshi. This is, in my view, an excellent example of a woman using the white robe specifically for protection from harassment and harm in a difficult situation.

The concept that a shi is a woman devoid of sexual identity or desire may be the ideal, but it is not widely believed. Thai folktales about an elderly couple, Tathen and Yaishi, are found everywhere throughout the country. Ordained together, Tathen soon begins acting like an alashi, a monk who conspicuously fails to behave in accordance with religious discipline. I personally feel the characterization is a bit unfair; Tathen’s antics seem to me more like those of a nenkhong, or perhaps someone who has left the ordained monkhood but not yet vacated the temple.

I once met a guest at my home in Chiang Mai who told me, with some amusement, that he was going to a temple with the intention of liberating a shi from her vows and making her his wife. So much for the concept of the genderless, sexless shi. For that one man at least, the white robe presented no obstacle at all to his desire.

On the flip side of that coin, I also recall a famous Thai country song (the name of which I unfortunately cannot also recall) about a man who refused to see a nangshi he had known, but who had had much bad fortune in Bangkok, as he was afraid his visit would be an impediment to her Dharma study. So he left her alone and suffered the loss of her company in silence. So we see that, when it comes to shis, even a tale of sexual denial is obtuse, with the role of a shi being neither well defined nor well understood by Thai society.

When asked if Thai women can choose a life of devotion to the sacred, my answer is almost always “no.” There is simply no opportunity at the present time for them to become full-fledged

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27 An older man who, while never actually becoming an ordained monk, has been a novice within the temple for many years
bhikkhuni, ordained members of Buddhist order, or Sangha, the ecclesiastical equal of monks, differing only in their physical gender.

In practice, of course, many women devote themselves wholeheartedly to spirituality, but they seemingly only succeed at the fringes in pursuits like becoming a medium, a profession that is overwhelmingly female. Yet even in this role, she cannot be herself, but appears only as the bodily vessel for a ghostly spirit which may be either female or male. The superstitious people who respect her as a medium to the worlds beyond rarely realize that the woman they see in front of them is actually not there at all, but is the body and spirit of the ghost of another.

So even in a spiritually-related vocation with few barriers to a woman’s entry, her status is poorly defined. Mediums are not held in the high regard and unambiguous sanctity of monks, but neither are they on an equal footing with other women in the general population. We must not forget that, despite being an available career path for women whose interest lies beyond the mundane, anyone advertising themselves as a medium is quite far outside the mainstream of religion in Thailand, and is viewed with disapproval by the upper and more educated classes in society.

Why is it, therefore, that women in Thai society find it impossible to obtain a sacred status? The answer to that question is, sadly, beyond my clear understanding. But I cannot help taking a guess at a plausible explanation.

In my opinion, the root of the problem lies in the status of women within the culture at large. Thai women have several advantages over Thai men. It is they whom inheritances go. When they marry, their husbands generally leave their own house and move into the wife’s house. This puts the woman in a position of security, and perhaps makes her willing to accept a man with a less-than-perfect past.
It has often been said that a man with only one possession, a knife, can find a woman who will have him. But the reverse, of course, cannot be true. Because family status and the daily march of domestic life depend mostly on a wife and mother, her background and that of her family matter much more to a man than his matters to her.

This fact relates directly to the ordination of women. A bhikkhuni, by the sole virtue of her position within the Buddhist clergy, would immediately be the recipient of much respect and admiration, regardless of whether or not her own character deserved it. In the event that a woman from a bad background were to be ordained and then later leave the temple and return to lay life, the incongruity between her formerly high-status position and her possibly poor behavior after taking off her robe would, in my opinion, cause much social chaos.

It’s entirely possible that something like this is at work beneath the surface, but it’s just my hypothesis; the subject is so complex and my knowledge of it so thin that I really can’t be certain.

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Amusing Women

Women have been prime ministers in several countries, so the phenomenon is no longer new. In fact, women have managed to find their way into most occupations in one place or another. But comedy seems an almost exclusively male preserve; women comediennees are hard to find and those that one does find don’t appear to have much talent for the trade.

It seems to me, without much solid data to go on, that there are far too few comediennees the world over, including Thailand. In some areas like circuses it’s my impression that female clowns just don’t exist at all. And as for stand-up comediennees, there are none that I can name off the top of my head.

I must say, though, that I do remember several European and American comediennees in television situation comedies, often so popular that they were the stars of the shows. But their numbers pale in comparison to their male counterparts; there’s simply no gender balance in the vocation of delivering laughs.

I’d have to say that the most famous comedienne in Thailand is Noi Pho-Ngam. Unlike her colleagues who use material written by others, she creates her own jokes and gags, and that alone makes her quite a standout. But, with apologies to any feminist who might be reading this, I simply don’t think she can perform as well as a man.
So why is it women aren’t very amusing? I can’t answer that question as it relates to Europeans, Americans, Muslims, Vietnamese or even Eskimos, but I think I do have a good answer within the Thai and southeast Asian cultural context.

The first thing that we must recognize is that there are virtually no comedy scripts written in Thai, even though most Thai literature consists of performance scripts and Thai performances are normally full of comedy.

But Thai comedy is almost always performed spontaneously, and that makes it very, very difficult to write. Thai comedians are always looking for the best moment in every performance to play the gag, and the situations of each show are never the same.

It’s not my aim to make you believe that women cannot play comedy roles or cannot play them well because they are somehow dull or lack the comedic instinct. In fact, many do have wit but have difficulty playing a comedy role because it is not their natural cast.

The sweet sound of a woman’s voice just destroys Thai comedy, much like our former prime minister, Chuan Leekpai, felt saying “sorry” for a social faux pas would destroy him. In order to understand this state of affairs, it’s necessary to thoroughly understand Thai comedy.

In our culture, the duty of a comedian is more than just amusing an audience. That is both because and the result of their having no fixed roles like the other characters around them; they are the only ones on stage with the freedom to be whomever they wish, freedom normally reserved, I think, for God.

The actor playing a hero controls only that character in the story, while the comedian controls the character of the story. If the tale is a sad one, the comedian can make it less so, if it is stressful, he can relieve the stress with laughter. And a comedian has the flexibility
to use philosophy or metaphysics as tools to understand sorrowful moments in the story.

Comedians are, therefore, those who manipulate situations to position the audience just where they want them, just as the gods pull the strings of human beings according to their pleasure.

In Indonesian traditional folk theater there is a joker of a character named Semar, a colorfully dressed fat man believed to be an incarnation of Siva, whose primary behavioral characteristic is loud and frequent farting. (Farting, in that culture, is a symbol of being above God’s rules which, since this joker makes the rules, is his natural place).

Comedians are the ones who make audiences happy, angry, sympathetic, sad and even pensive. The wit of the Thai comedian is not only used for laughter, but sets the rhythm and tone of the performance as well. A good comedian is as big a star as any other performer, and many of today’s stars got their start in Thai comedy.

It is this multi-dimensional nature of the Thai comedian that makes it so difficult for women. It isn’t that a woman can’t play God; there are Chaomae everywhere, and more than a few Susithaihaos, as well.

But there are differences in the way Thai society views male and female power. Female power is generally seen to be one of two types. The first, which is a type shared with males, is omnipotent, wild, violent and inflexible. The second is soft and merciful, curing illness, helping the poor in the manner of the mythological goddess Mekhala, and generally providing mankind with boundless abundance.

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28 One of the main trinity of Hindu deities, Siva (or Shiva) is also one of the most complex. Viewed alternatively as creator and destroyer he is both ascetic and sensual, the benevolent herdsman of souls and wrathful avenger. He is worshiped as the paramount lord by the Saivite sects of India.

29 Influential women

30 A ruthless woman from Chinese history, who seized power during the late Ching dynasty; the term is used satirically to describe a woman with a similar character.
Male and female power is not really all that different, but if broadly analyzed, is more a matter of differences in expression. Male power is not always described in detail, but it is always large, static, and directive. If it is opposed, destruction results, but the power that causes that destruction is not always obvious. Male power is not directed toward punishing individuals for infractions of the rules, like Nang Takien\textsuperscript{31} breaking necks; rather, it causes natural disaster.

Male power has an intellectual bent, unlike the emotional character of female power. But both powers can work together, even as different aspects of the same force, as can be seen in the Indian Sakti sect. There, the male god Sakda represents an immoveable force which maintains universal order and embodies both evil and virtue, right and wrong. But it falls to his wife, Sakti, to have the power of reward and punishment. Her power is tactile and accessible. If a devotee wishes to reach the male god, it is necessary to do so through his wife.

A similar situation prevails with regard to the modern Susithathaos. Before one can reach the high and mighty in any organization it is first necessary to pass by the many “Susis” who are often, in addition to being secretaries, the minor wives, or mistresses, of the big shot.

Returning to the matter of comedians, their power is neither wild nor merciful, but an intellectual power and thus essentially male. While their public persona is that of a joker, in fact their actions are - manipulated by the male power behind the scenes.

So once again we must ask why it is that women in Thai culture aren’t seen as very amusing. The view that they are not may be due to some latent sex discrimination; I simply don’t know. But I would very much like to pound on our politicians and political parties to

\textsuperscript{31} A powerful female spirit which lives in a Takien tree.
make them realize that equal rights for women is a more complex issue than whether or not we should have female ministers (or prime minister) and, if so, how many.

The oppression of women throughout Thai society is both scandalous and shameful. The instances are many: disenfranchisement of prostitutes, unsafe working conditions and abusive treatment of females in factories and government housing estates, discriminatory wage structures, and an emphasis on attracting foreign capital to the private sector while ignoring the welfare of individual workers, etc., etc.

No matter how many female ministers we have in government, the oppression of women will continue until we look carefully at our policies and their effects. Without that, putting women into positions of political power will not improve the welfare of women in Thailand, who will continue to suffer discrimination and oppression, much like the females so admired by Niwat Kongpien.32

32 A famous Thai nude critic
If I were a journalist, I’d be in a quandary as to whether or not to send my editor a report on commercial sex on campus because I couldn’t be sure if it was news.

That’s because stories about university students selling sex have been a staple of our local news for over a decade. We’ve become so accustomed to the subject that café comics weave it into stage and television skits, making jokes about the crush of applicants to the commercial colleges which have become notorious for the extracurricular employment of their female students.

The majority of the population even accepts that the reasons for students putting themselves on sale fall somewhere between earning money for their families or their schooling and wanting an extravagant, glittery lifestyle. And very few people are talking about it, first, because it is so overly familiar as to be unworthy of comment and, second, because there are very many girls who aren’t students who make their living selling sex. In our society it just doesn’t seem so strange for a student to sell sex, especially if the reason she does so is to drag herself out of poverty.

Poverty, of course, isn’t the only condition that leads one to prostitution; there are other more complex factors at work as well. But when 90 percent of Thai prostitutes are poor it’s impossible to say that poverty isn’t a causal factor.
But if poverty has remained a constant in encouraging a student to turn to prostitution, what she does with the money she earns has undergone quite a change in the past few years. Girls who once sold sex just to pay their tuition, keep body and soul together, and help out with the family expenses are now spending their earnings on themselves, buying the latest designer trends and fashions. As this has become accepted behavior, students who are not poor find themselves putting their bodies on sale for the sake of a new Louis Vuitton handbag.

So back to whether I’d send a report on all this to my editor, if I did I would probably say something like this, “nowadays, students aren’t given scholarships, but Louis Vuitton accessories instead.” I couldn’t make it a story only about students selling sex; if I did the editor would surely laugh and say, “that’s not news; everybody’s known about it for ages!”

All this, of course, is the state of affairs in Thailand. But a piece of news from abroad has a similar content: it seems Japanese high-school students are quite keen on keeping company with the same Mr Vuitton. They are such eager consumers that their parents have been left wondering where their daughters could find the money for items so expensive that their mothers can only look wistfully on them in the shop windows.

Now don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying, as others have done, that the cause of this kind of behavior in both Thailand and Japan is globalization. Rather, I believe it has more to do with widespread changes in attitudes toward virginity; in both Thai and Japanese societies the very concept of virginity has become devalued.

I realize by saying this that it implies female virginity was highly valued in ancient Thai societies; I really don’t believe that was the case. In point of fact, I’ve always thought the idea that the worth of an unmarried female depended on her virginity was a western import.
It is a very old view in the west, as any review of law and religion reveals.

From time immemorial, rape has been a serious crime in all western cultures. If a man rapes an unmarried woman he is seen as having stolen her most precious possession, her virginity; if he rapes a married woman he has stolen her husband’s monopoly of sexual access.

Western thought made its way to Thailand relatively recently, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, in the mid-19th century. Its popularity was greatest at first among those high-status Thais who had been educated abroad. As universal education was established in the country, though, the concepts spread throughout society, and were adopted most completely by those with the most education. Eventually, the fact that these ideas were once imports was lost and it became common belief that the worship of virginity was and always had been an important element of Thai culture.

But just because the value of virginity took a large tick up during the Rama V period doesn’t mean that, before then, women craved men the way their “liberated” sisters in the west did after the sexual revolution of the 1960s. To be reserved and demure had long been seen as a virtue, even if virginity was not; after all, the classic instructional poem *Suphasit Soan Ying* ³³ counseled just that sort of demeanor to convince a husband that a woman was thoughtful, a very desirable character trait. During those times, “having a husband,” meant to have sexual relations with a man; the phrase was unrelated to losing one’s virginity. If a widow, for instance, who was clearly no virgin, had sex with a man, she was also seen as “having a husband” again.

³³ Probably composed by Sunthornphu, a well-known Thai poet of the early Rattanakosin period, although that has yet to be proven to everyone’s satisfaction.
The poem also warns that a woman who is not thoughtful in “having a husband” may eventually be abandoned by him. Or she may be stuck with a drunkard, causing her so much unhappiness that she is driven to “have husbands” one after another to the point of condemnation.

Nowhere, though, does it teach that a woman should be careful to avoid being molested by a man. The reason for that, I believe, is that virginity was not seen as particularly valuable, so losing it wasn’t considered much of a loss. Much more important for a woman was to have a good husband, even if coincidentally he would be depriving her of her virginity.

Since women in ancient times thought they would become wives of the men they slept with, the character of their husbands had much more effect on their lives than did their virginity. But in modern times this thin pane of tissue has become unreasonably valued, and a “good girl” is expected to save it for her husband to be.

As for the husband, one wonders why, if he thinks his future wife’s virginity is so important, he would go on having sex with her after she’s lost it!

Returning to the daydream about my editor’s nonchalance, his disinterest in student call girls plying their trade to enhance their shopping experience may indicate that the value placed on a young woman’s virginity is slowly evaporating from Thai society. Among the rural poor with their limited education, mothers spend little time instructing their daughters in techniques to preserve their virginity, but quite a bit of time cautioning them on having the right kind of husband. As for the urban, educated classes most influenced by western thought, their children have rather conspicuously abandoned their parents’ ideas on virginity.

But despite this devaluation of virginity, Thai society most definitely views prostitution as a fairly illegitimate form of labor. If a
student has a job delivering pizzas so she can earn enough for a fancy French handbag, her choice of occupation won’t condemn her, although others may express their disappointment at the frivolous way she spends her wages. But if she sells her body for the same purse, our society will definitely think she hasn’t got a proper job.

So we come to the central question of this discussion: how and what do we teach our children? Telling them that they shouldn’t do this or that, but being unable to explain why isn’t a very effective technique. Neither is it useful to instruct them to be thoughtful before “having a husband.” They are quite likely to reply that they aren’t looking for a husband, just a handbag. They may even remove the commercial aspect entirely, claiming they sleep with several men simply because they like it, a position pretty much guaranteed to cause grief in their parents.

It’s my contention that the cultural patterns that guide sexual behavior in Thai society have been seriously warped by the western notion of a high value on the maintenance of virginity. But although that value is strong, it is not strong enough to overcome other, older mores, and the result is a blank, where behavior has no guide and becomes unmoored from any moral foundation.

Obviously, it’s impossible to revive old thoughts and ideas; society has already changed far beyond them. But because there is a certain lack of continuity between the old and the new, developing a modern replacement is proving difficult.

Unfortunately, sexual mores are not the only facet of our culture that has become confused. Other ideas we imported from the west have proven equally as destructive, as they supplanted the values which were rooted and flourished in our societies but, being foreign, had no ties to our history or our culture.
Above the Neck, or Something Like It

A group of Thai senators observed, during the debate over our present constitution, that article 5 of the draft document, which guaranteed equal rights for all Thais, prohibited discrimination on several grounds, one of which was “sexeses.” This was more than these legislators could swallow, giving, it was clear to them, far too much protection to the third sex.

Astonishingly, some members of the Constitutional Drafting Assembly agreed with this interpretation, and insisted on deleting the word “sex” from the proposed clause.

Their thought process goes something like this: since everybody knows there are only two sexes in the world, anybody who isn’t one or the other is abnormal, and besides that, it’s highly suspicious that a third sex is of such high concern.

It’s been my longstanding observation that attitudes toward the third sex generally fall into one of two opposing categories.

On the one hand, elderly, educated people see the third sex as both abnormal and immoral. The idea that it is abnormal causes teasing, and the more those who consider themselves to be of the third sex act or behave in ways contrary to the usual patterns for

34 Thai culture holds that the head, as the top of the body, the seat of intelligence, and the farthest point from the humble feet, should be accorded respect; the title of this essay implies this may not always be warranted.
their physical gender (men, for example, who prance and swish in an exaggerated caricature of femininity), the more they attract teasing.

But teasing is not the same as condemnation, insult or hatred. These reactions come into play because the third sex seems quite conspicuously to bring sexual conduct into the open; many people feel that’s inappropriate and thus grounds for condemnation. I should point out here that the cause of such condemnation is sexual flaunting, and its target can just as easily be a member of the first or second sex as it can be the third.

The opposing view is held mostly by younger people with a western or western-style education; their attitudes mirror those of liberal, educated people in the west. They consider being of the third sex an individual’s personal matter, and just as valid as being of the first or second sex. As long as no one is harmed they feel that it shouldn’t be anybody else’s business. Importantly, this viewpoint sees nothing about the third sex as morally wrong in any sense of the term.

The first attitude, seeing the third sex as abnormal, and its corollary, which sees it as deserving of condemnation, is the one most widely recognized in our society. Although it may not be spelled out as such, it can be found without much effort between the lines in the school curriculum.

For instance, I know of no public school textbook which contains any mention at all of the third sex, despite the fact that schoolchildren cannot help but see the phenomenon everywhere. The omission is similar to those involving unusual sexual practices, prostitution, or gangsters and the politician’s son. We pretend that none of these controversial subjects exist, perhaps in the hope that if we ignore

55 Male or female, or vice-versa
56 A widely publicized and long-running saga of a prominent political leader’s son with a reputation for bullying and brawling, who was alleged to have shot to death a lower-rank policeman in a dispute in a pub
them they will disappear. The thinking seems to go like this: these things are not good, so the little dears had better not learn about them.

Those who hold most tenaciously to the first attitude are frequently also of the opinion that the whole idea of the third sex and its tolerant acceptance is a foreign concept, a western import, a view that coincidentally implies immorality and decadence in western traditions. If one substitutes “capitalist societies” for “western societies” the conservative attitudes of these people would not be much different than those of the elderly communists in the former Soviet Union.

This attitude has perpetuated discriminatory behavior, including hatred of the third gender, by using the term “abnormal,” and painting it with the colors of western decadence. I hasten to point out here that it was during the Victorian age, in the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, when the Thai educational system and the noble classes opened to western ideas which were certainly not seen as decadent.

But it is true that hatred of and discrimination against the third sex seems not to have arisen from Thai culture but is a western import. Most western cultures contain the notion that God created man in his image, and woman from the rib of man (which may be why men feel such a thumping in their chests when they see a beautiful woman). As for the third sex, no mention is made, leaving people to conclude that the whole thing might be a creation of the devil, Satan, the opponent of God (and, by extension, everything good and decent).

With this cultural context, it’s not surprising that many view the third sex as abnormal, convinced that its members must have been men or women who were somehow changed into something awful. Their behavior after the change is equally awful; all in all, they are bad, evil and to be condemned.
Although the influence of religious dogma has declined in most western societies, its legacy is deeply rooted and many westerners feel an instinctive hatred of the third sex, even if outright discrimination is prohibited by law or social convention.

In the third world, though, sexual freedom and rights did not come just from changes in knowledge and attitudes, but from battles won on many fronts – political, economic, social and cultural – until finally most people came to accept what we have today.

But that doesn’t mean they’ve forgotten old prejudices. And even if they are no longer overt, those hatreds and prejudices have a way of affecting much of our behavior. Even Bill Clinton, don’t forget, advocated several policies which were not particularly favorable to gays despite being seen overall as sympathetic to their needs.

Those who hold the second attitude toward the third sex find their views much more in line with those prevalent in ancient Thai societies. While these people also tend to view the third sex as something slightly abnormal, they approach it not with hatred but with comic gentleness, as it had been portrayed in the mural paintings and literature of the past.

However, it is the first, negative, set of attitudes which has had the most influence in our educational systems, and which thus has the potential to spread. But it is just as possible to see the attitudes of the second group grow in acceptance. One reason this might be so is that, through globalization, more and more people are becoming influenced by western thought. And it’s a common perception these days in the west that the third sex, rather than being a lifestyle choice, is as much determined by biology as the shape of a nose or the color of a complexion.

As more and more Thais come to believe this idea, it will be all the more difficult for closed-minded experts from the first group to
do things like open clinics to cure those of the third sex, or teach parents on how to socialize their children so that they don’t become gay, etc.

I began this essay by mentioning the third sex in the context of a constitutional draft to show how even a principle so well established as to normally be beyond debate, that is, equality under the law for all Thai citizens, can still cause turmoil when applied in certain ways.

As has always been the case, the most divisive and often violent conflicts result not from the principle of equality, but from the different points of view which people have concerning human beings and their behavior.

Those who are worried that unwarranted protections are being given to the third sex, I suspect, also have gut-level feelings that they are somehow less than human or at least less so than other Thais. It’s not surprising that some people have these ideas; the cultural changes now taking place in Thai society suggest that we Thais hold a wide spectrum of views, perhaps the widest and certainly more than we find in the west, on what constitutes a human being.

And if we have no consensus on that, how can we possibly come to agreement on what constitutes a Thai human?

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At the Heart of Sex Education

I recently read in a newspaper report about sex education in France that over 60 percent of the public schools there with pupils over 15 years old have installed condom dispensers.

I don’t know if the report was meant to imply that because the students had been educated about sex they needed condoms available nearby, or if it was part of a program to promote safe-sex by having the means to achieve it close at hand.

Whatever the case, though, I’m sure the news will be seized on by both sides in the sex education debate, supporters and opponents.

I’ve found that Thai children generally get information about sex from three sources. The first is other children, as it was in the time when Plai Kaew, Khun Chang and Nang Pim37 played at being husband and wife, and no different than children anywhere. While prolific, this is also the source of many misinformed beliefs, particularly regarding the opposite sex. Nevertheless, friends and the lessons of games one plays with them are often more important in learning than any classroom or teacher.

37 The three characters in a love triangle, the subjects of the classical Thai poem Khun Chang Khun Phan
The second information source for Thai children is watching the behavior of family members, neighbors and others in their immediate community. Since family and community are quite close physically and socially in our culture, private space is rare and otherwise private matters such as sex are often seen, overheard and talked about. Writing this reminds me of so many of my generation who grew up in rural areas, and while still young had heard and seen much of this “private stuff!”

The third source of information is the arts, a point stressed by academics throughout the years. Love passages in literature, erotic murals, and the suggestive lyrics in folk music were all part of the sex education of Thai children in days gone by.

Of course, none of these sources of information are very straightforward; few describe sex in all its dimensions and all are frequently obtuse. Knowledge from one’s peers, particularly without the ability to separate fact from fiction, has many faults, and children often copy superficial aspects of sex in their play without any real understanding of the subject.

Peeping in on the private sexual behavior of adults is also not a very good source of data; being only visual it provides few tools with which to understand the full range of feelings and emotions that accompany a sexual encounter.

Getting information from the arts presents some of the same difficulties. Although Thai artistic expression makes little effort to conceal sex, recognizing it as a natural aspect of life, it also doesn’t provide a complete picture. The beauty of sexual passages in literature, for example, is not the true beauty of sex but that which lives in the poet’s imagination. Put another way, poets are interested in poetry and often take considerable artistic liberties with the facts.

Similarly, depictions of sex in paintings aren’t quite accurate either. In actuality, they exist mostly as vehicles for wit, and sex
scenes hidden in murals were often put there to tickle the viewer’s funny bone. In the same way, sexual references in traditional folk music serve less the cause of knowledge and much more the wit of the artist in employing innuendo and double entendre to tease and titillate.

If we take these various things to be the sum total of sex education in years past, what was given to children then was, in my opinion, attitudes rather than facts. They would grow up with the impression that sex wasn’t really a serious matter, but a feature of life that could be played with. It might be inappropriate for public display and discourse, but a person with a witty mind could always find a way to turn it into a joke without incurring disapproval.

Looking at our modern society, though, I can’t help but be struck with how different sexuality in traditional Thai culture was different than what we see today. In ancient Thai culture, there was no place for sex or sexuality in public. Addressed only through witty puns, clever innuendo and jokes, sex could never be seen clearly and honestly.

There may have been many reasons for this, but I’ve been given to understand that the primary reason was that, in the old days, sex was tightly bound to a person’s role within the kinship system. A woman, for instance, was expected to feel that she would become a wife to a man with whom she had sex; similarly, the man was expected to feel he could claim her as his wife (although not necessarily his first wife).

Today, though, sexuality has been separated from kinship roles, and belongs entirely to the individual. Sex can be given freely, preferably, but not always, accompanied by love, in much the same way as any other piece of private property.
Modern sexuality has become, therefore, a complicated emotional experience, profound in many ways, and about much more than just physical contact. The advent of eroticism in novels, films and plays, which is relatively new to Thai society, marks this change of attitude.

I’ve always felt that this sort of personal, highly emotional sexuality was rather alien to the ancient Thais. Although sex is a natural and central feature of being human, much the same as hunger, how we see it depends on the cultural framework of the time.

With changes in perceptions about sex, we must also consider changes in the way sexual knowledge is presented. Sex education must be more than just a description of bodily functions and processes (menstruation, organ changes at puberty, how women become pregnant, body temperature and blood pressure during intercourse, etc.).

Sexuality has undergone profound changes in cultural perceptions and is now seen as a highly complex matter, involving emotions, feelings, attitudes, values and so on, all of which combine to create the sensual experience of sex. Yet these issues are hardly discussed at all in the current plans to introduce a sex education curriculum in the public schools.

It should be obvious, I think, that in this age of potentially fatal sexually transmitted diseases, it is simply not enough just to teach our young people how to use condoms. Safe sex, like any sex, involves many psychological aspects including emotional bonding and ethical values.

Similarly, while it’s important to encourage students to avoid promiscuity, that message only makes sense when they are also taught about the value of a complete relationship, full of love and caring.

I’m certain that sex education shouldn’t conjure up the image of an all-knowledgeable teacher imparting emotionless information
to students. Sex education, like any other form of education is a process by which teachers and students interact, learning and growing together.

With that sort of sex education, the instructor would find, when the semester had ended, that he or she had become a better person in regard to their own sexuality. I don’t mean better in terms of sexual activity, but better in understanding the depth and value of sex.

In continuing the debate over sex education, it’s essential that we speak the same language. And that means focusing on the kind of curriculum that can respond to changes in sexual climate, many of which are so very evident in our own time.

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A well-known singer gave an interview on television recently, saying that she’d stopped being a man and became a woman again, relieving her mother’s worries and making her happy once more.

Readers may be forgiven for wondering if gender is as fluid as that. Can one become a man or woman anytime they wish? Is gender a characteristic one is born with, or a role one plays? For my part, I’m supporting the singer’s notion (more so now that she’s become a woman again), because I believe that gender is a matter of both culture and biology.

In the cultural context, gender is simply a role which one plays. Every society has gender roles and the characteristics of them define the gender. People wear, for example, pants or skirts, are aggressive or passive, direct or roundabout, and talk in one pattern or another according to the gender role in which they see themselves.

Many people feel that gender roles were an offshoot of the division of labor between men and women. Others, though, see them as culturally constructed by one gender (usually male) in order to control or oppress the other (usually female).

But whatever their origins, gender roles have become hallmarks of what it means to be male or female. When the singer I mentioned earlier had assumed a masculine role, she thought of herself as a man and related to others in a man’s way.
Looked at this way, it’s easy to understand that a very important part of a person’s gender identity is culturally constructed. In fact, the paths and choices open to a person are often socially predetermined according to gender, and behavior outside of expectation is frowned upon. If, for example, a daughter shows her admiration for her father by imitating his mannerisms, she would not be thought of as a loving daughter, but seen by others as butch.

In real life, of course, there will always be a certain percentage of daughters who adopt the wrong gender role out of closeness to their fathers. Instead of being demure and soft, they speak bluntly and aggressively, traits which in Thai society are most definitely male.

The practice of schools like the Rajabhat Institutes, which refuse to admit gays or transsexuals to some of their programs, is unnecessary when it comes to female students whose fathers are no longer living, because even they learn quickly from society to adapt their behavior. It doesn’t take much prodding for them to develop the practice of putting *kha* in their speech to show their femininity.

As we can clearly see, the learning process in human experience is a complex one, and people learn from more than one source. Even kindergarten students gain knowledge and understanding in many more places than their classrooms; they learn from all of their life experiences, not just from one person or in one place.

And the learning process is also much more than just imitation. When educators confuse the two, and try to force students to learn through recitation, problems inevitably arise.

Sometimes, though, cultural influences work in different directions than those of early child-rearing. Some people, for example, take a gender role which is the opposite of their biological sex, and are rewarded for their choice. They may become popular, gain attention or transcend the limitations of their natural gender.
In point of fact, all of us change our roles as circumstances change. At one time we may assume strong roles as care-givers; at other times we may be weak and need care ourselves. Gender roles, too, can change in response to changing situations in our lives and the fact that they do should not be cause for great concern.

My own personal opinion is that those who worry too much about role shifting, convinced that it means the end of civilization as we know it, are relying for their belief on the most unlikely or patently ridiculous scenarios. In order for their concerns to make sense, we would have to take gender roles entirely out of context. It would require disregarding both the material and spiritual rewards of having children and ignoring the human instinct to procreate. Humankind will not become extinct simply because some people fail to conform to their culturally assigned gender roles.

While our discussion so far has focused on the cultural aspects of gender roles, there’s no denying that biology is an equal if not more important contributor to gender identity. But it is a far more complicated matter than simply the configuration of one’s sexual organs.

The dictionary defines a woman as a person having the capacity to bear children. Although this may sound sparse, it’s actually quite a good description of womanhood, although it makes no allowance for the many women who are infertile.

But if we put the dictionary aside and enter life, we discover that it is hard to put a finger on just what defines womanhood or manhood. It gets especially difficult in cases of physical ambiguity, such as an hermaphroditic baby born with both male and female genitals, or one whose sex organs are so malformed as to make gender typing problematic. In those cases, it’s often left to the obstetrician to determine what sex the child will be. If he decides that female is the best choice, then female that child will be.
Of course, physical characteristics aside, the dictionary definitions of man and woman rarely include matters of emotion and feeling. It’s not uncommon for a person to have been born one physical sex, but live with the firm belief that he or she is of the opposite one, trapped in the wrong body. In those cases the configuration of the genitals means relatively little.

What is it, we might ask, which causes conflict in a person between their physical body and their perceived gender identity? Research suggests that the problem lies at the chromosomal level. Some people, it seems, are simply born between sexes. Of course, those people, who we commonly think of as the third sex, are far fewer in number than standard-issue men and women.

For my part, I really don’t know if biology or culture is more important in determining homosexuality, but I have been told that gays can usually recognize their own kind with as little as a glance. But no matter what the cause, homosexuals are people no better and no worse than anyone else. There are many of us who, unsatisfied with our physical appearance, seek out a plastic surgeon to make us into something we were not naturally. If society finds that sort of thing acceptable, why should homosexuality be condemned?

Discrimination against homosexuals in education or employment is no different than discrimination against people with a certain skin color or shape of their eyes or nose. And colleges that deny gay applicants a place in the classroom are also denying their other students the chance to learn about tolerance and diversity. Those very same colleges often extol the value of diversity, and eagerly seek, for example, American students who are quite different than Thai pupils. But when it comes to homosexuals, diversity is jettisoned on the strength of prejudice.

Some of these schools have even gone as far as supporting discriminatory legislation which is patently unconstitutional. Worse
yet is that they have done so largely out of ignorance; it’s a poor reflection on the quality of these schools. Nevertheless, perhaps their shameful behavior will illustrate just how important it is that we take control of our children’s educational future out of the hands of politicians and administrators, and heed the rational, informed opinions of the intellectuals and scholars who make up the faculties of our colleges and universities.

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The Culture and Biology of Sex
Many years ago, before the sub-district administration organizations (TAOs) existed, rural residents pressed to have legally-recognized municipal authorities for their villages or sub-districts (known in Thai as tambon). They felt their need would be better served if they had the collective legal power to deal with matters of land ownership, rental rights, etc.

Interestingly, it was a conspicuous feature of the many meetings and conferences called to discuss the matter that most of those participating were female in groups like a women’s or housewives association. And in all the meetings which I attended, one idea was proposed over and over again. That was that in whatever organization was eventually created, official posts must not only be reserved for village and district headmen, but for local women as well.

I must admit that I disagreed with the idea at the time but did not do so publicly since I felt that the main goal, that is, providing more opportunities for citizen involvement in the public affairs that affect their lives, was much more important. My reason for disagreement was a rather simple one: as a matter of principle I felt there should be no special privileges for any particular person or group (except in the case where certain qualifications of position or

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38 Literally, country-like, but used here to mean alternative
gender are required for the post). But I was unaware of the historical basis for such privileges which are found throughout many cultures and traditions.

Those cultures and traditions have proven to be an effective way in which a society prescribes the rights and privileges of its members, more effective even than laws, although laws have become the modern world’s tool of choice in granting or limiting those rights and privileges.

In our Thai culture it cannot be denied that women have been relegated to the periphery of administrative power since ancient times. If a woman wanted to be an insider in government at any level, she had to do it informally.

Suddenly the logic of reserving positions in local administrative entities for women became clear. That was the only way that women would ever have a chance to participate in public administration. Of course, giving them that opportunity meant reducing opportunities for men in what had always been an exclusively male preserve, but that seems a small price to pay.

But, as I mentioned earlier, I hadn’t thought all this through at the time, believing only that there should be no special privileges.

The local administrative organizations that these people contemplated and which were eventually established are modest affairs. They cannot address issues which are within the purview of larger organizations, such as forestry, irrigation and education. But they are a starting point in empowering rural residents with a measure of control over some of the things which affect their daily lives.

And according to the NGOs working in those villages, the villagers themselves, and many academic researchers, those TAOs which have much female participation also have high levels of creativity. They are the ones most active in community-based efforts.
such as the student lunch project, nursery project, AIDS patient care project, campaign against drugs project, etc.

By contrast, those TAOs with only men are almost passive, pleased to have their work directed by the Ministry of Interior and spending their time getting support from any government official that comes their way. Unfortunately, it is well known that the Ministry of Interior is a highly centralized organization with little understanding of or interest in problems at the rural sub-district level. As a consequence, those TAOs tied most closely to the Ministry are also the ones with the least connection to the villages they are meant to represent; so little, in fact, that many have faded into irrelevance in the minds of local villagers.

So how do we explain the differences in activity, creativity and relevance between those TAOs with women and those without? Almost all I have heard revolve around the notion that women are more likely than men to concern themselves with things close to them. Their issues are not power, administrative control, or the like. Rather they are interested in whether their children are using drugs, the welfare of a relative with AIDS, earning money to support their families and other similar issues. In short, a woman’s world revolves around her home and her community, and it is there that her interest lies.

This explanation certainly has merit, but there may be another factor at work here which is almost never mentioned: perhaps Thai men have difficulty thinking for themselves, preferring the easy path of following whatever a government official says or does. It’s a culturally influenced behavior pattern, since public administration monopolized by males in our culture has also been strongly dominated by officials from the central government.
I don’t mean to suggest that ancient Thais had no administrative structures apart from that of the central authorities. In fact, there were several locales where servants who had fled their master or criminals on the lam would gather, and in these places administrative associations inevitably sprang up. But the level of control exercised by these ad-hoc organizations was necessarily limited and involved little hierarchical rank or structure. Real rank issued only from national-level administrative organizations and those have always been dominated by government officials. And since the administrative revolution which took place during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, those officials have had considerably more tools at their disposal to force compliance with their wishes and reward those who cooperate.

So it seems that men, with their culturally prescribed duty to bring status and property to their families, are more likely than women to be submissive to government officials. Even those men who are part of the local administrative organizations seem unable to imagine how they accomplish anything except in terms of favor from the official government structure far above them. It never seems to occur to them to just look around at their friend, neighbors and the other people living and working in their community.

Consequently, Thai men are always waiting for advice, orders, regulations, official letters or explanations from the government; their feet aren’t planted firmly on the ground but are waving around somewhere in the air. In short, they lack vision. For them, the solution to every problem is application of the same tired, old answers provided by government officials. The answers remain the same, even when the questions are new.

In contrast, Thai women, with their history of being on the periphery of administrative power, are free from the domination of doing things the way they have always been done. They recognize
new problems when they arise, and seek out new solutions relevant to the problems, without orders, regulations or old ways of thinking as obstacles. They think and do in a true *Luk Thung* way.

Yes, it seems obvious that Thai women are far more *Luk Thung* than Thai men, especially in matters related to administration of their local affairs and their relationship to the official government system. This is the central reason why our government officials are always cautioning against giving women too much official power. They rightly fear that if women get it, the cozy arrangements they’ve created for their own benefit just might crumble and collapse overnight!