Red Light District:
Sex Tourism in Southeast Asia

Victoria Betts

Abstract
Sex tours from Western European and North American patrons have become increasingly common in recent years, with tour operators advertising Southeast Asian destinations such as Bangkok, Thailand as centres of sexual freedom. Thailand’s increasing economic dependence on tourism, and the representation by sex tour agencies of Thai women as sexually ‘liberated’ provide moral justification for Western tourists seeking Bangkok’s Red Light District. The Thai sex industry has become a lucrative employment opportunity for young women, despite deeply ingrained cultural values which contrast sharply with their representation in the West as the sexually voracious, ethnic Other.

An Introduction to the Thai Sex Industry
Thailand has been represented in tourist advertisements and miscellaneous Western-oriented media as “the land of smiles” and, more controversially, as “the brothel of the East.” The focus of this paper is the representation of Bangkok as a “sex capital” destination for Western tourists seeking exotic sexual experiences and how this representation is distinctly “orientalist”. First, I investigate the relationship between the rise of tourism, and the representation of Thai culture in the West. Next, I address the question of how Thai peoples reconcile the commodification of female bodies for the purposes of sex with ‘traditional’ cultural values.

For the purposes of this paper, prostitution will be defined as “the provision of sexual services for reimbursement or material gain.” While this definition is broad and may encompass a variety of activities it is necessary to emphasize the underlying complexity and elasticity of the term. Leslie Ann Jeffrey uses the example of a 1988 case of a dominatrix being charged with keeping a bawdy house and the ensuing debate on whether or not spanking constitutes sex to demonstrate the uncertain boundaries of sex and, by extension, prostitution. Similar ambiguities can be found in the study of Thai sex workers, as will be discussed in the following pages.

Background

Data from 1993-1994 place the number of male, female, transvestite and child prostitutes in Thailand at approximately 150,000 to 200,000 at a given time, or 200,000 to 300,000 over a one-year period. The total population of Thailand is approximately 58 million people. This seemingly broad statistical estimation is due, in part, to the ambiguous (hidden) nature of prostitution in Thailand. Prostitution is practiced in a number of settings including tea houses, massage parlours, bars and nightclubs, restaurants, golf clubs, and in public places (as in the case of streetwalkers). The line between what is prostitution and what is not is blurred. For example, "bar girls" or more long-term relationships between Thai girls and foreign men where there is some staged emotional involvement on the part of the 'prostitute' and gifts or money may be exchanged as 'payment'.

In Bangkok, however, the form of prostitution traditionally understood as such in the West (that of a paid short-term sexual encounter, perhaps for one night or only a few hours), the "most public face of the sex industry" is largely confined to Patpong, Bangkok's most famous red-light district.

Patpong is widely known as the centre of the sex-trade in Bangkok. The name refers to two narrow streets (Patpong 1 and Patpong 2), their side alleys and any businesses lining them, including souvenir stalls, nightclubs, go-go bars, lounges and disco shows. Not all establishments engage in the sale of sex or sex shows; some are engaged second hand as in the sale of alcohol. Ironically, the first sex-industry related business established in Patpong was opened in 1969 by a retired United States Air Force officer who converted a tea-house into a nightclub.

Contrary to what one might imagine from the relative openness of the sex industry in Bangkok, prostitution has been illegal in Thailand since the introduction of the Prostitution Prohibition Act in 1960. Oddly enough, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that the sex industry began to truly boom in Thailand. During the Vietnam War, American military personnel were often sent to Thailand on R & R (Rest and

---

4 Lim, "The economic and social bases", 7.
8 Manderson, "Public Sex Performances in Patpong," 456.
10 Manderson, "Public Sex Performances in Patpong", 457.
Recreation) leave; it was then that Pattaya, the second most famous centre for prostitution in Thailand, first developed a visible sex industry. The selection of Pattaya as an R & R location for US officers led to rapid development, with restaurants, shops, nightclubs and other businesses expanding from North to South. After the withdrawal of American soldiers from Vietnam, Pattaya continued to expand on the basis of tourism.

**Representation**

Due to the representation of Thailand in the media and sensationalist news stories about sex tours, there exists an image of Bangkok in the eyes of the West as a sort of ‘sexual paradise’ for foreign men. These advertisements are an essentialist portrayal of Thai people (women in particular) as submissive or servile. These images serve to normalize prostitution by suggesting that the Thai people are simply more sexual than Europeans or North Americans. A key moment in this representation of Thai culture in the West was the publication of an image of a Bangkok bar girl sitting on the lap of a Western male customer on the cover of a 1993 issue of *Time* magazine. The article referenced joined to the picture had little to do with Bangkok or Thailand, but the image clearly indicated the universality of this sexualized perception of Thai culture, and Bangkok specifically.

Stereotypical views of Thailand are prominent in the Western gay community as well. For example, Bangkok is shown as a “gay heaven” where the meanings of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are much more fluid, and where ‘Western’ sexual boundaries are not applicable. Homosexuality is neither illegal in Thailand nor considered immoral under Buddhist law, and homophobic violence toward masculine-identifying men is rarely seen. Yet, it becomes apparent upon further study that homosexuality is tolerated in some regards but not entirely accepted. This ambiguity is most readily understood in the case of gender-ambiguous, cross-dressing *kathoey* who are often the subject of sexual harassment or even assault by heterosexual men. Similarly, the Western interpretation of Thai people as overly sexual and constantly in pursuit of new pleasures is another stereotype that has little basis in reality.

---

13 Boonchalaksi & Guest, “Prostitution in Thailand”, 133.
14 Ibid., 134.
16 Askew, “Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation,” 251; Boonchalaksi & Guest, “Prostitution in Thailand.” 137
Male and female sexuality is considered to be innately different in Thai society.\(^\text{18}\) Indeed, the Thai interpretation of sexuality is not entirely different from that of Western society; the perceived differences are simply more widely emphasized and accepted. Thai women are considered to have fewer, less intense sexual urges and are expected to be in control of them at all times. Men are said to have a basic physiological need for sex which requires frequent outlet similar to how the need for nourishment requires eating.\(^\text{19}\) This need could previously have been satisfied by the common practice of polygamy in Thai society but, since the institution of anti-polygamy laws in 1935,\(^\text{20}\) this is no longer an option as an way for men to express their sexual desires. Since these laws were enacted, it has become more socially acceptable for married men to visit prostitutes.\(^\text{21}\)

Researchers suggest that image of women as subservient may stem from the traditional orientation of Thai gender roles, which are understood by Thai people as complimentary. These gender roles place the male in charge of religious and public affairs while women manage the household, land resources and care for children.\(^\text{22}\) Feminists and women’s rights activists in the West have railed against the social and ideological relegation of women to the role of housewives, claiming it is evidence of patriarchy and the socially reinforced dominance of men over women. It may be this idea applied to Thai culture which suggests women are subordinate to men. In fact, many Thai societies are matrilineal and often matrilocal, with land being passed through the female line and only movable resources, such as cattle, being inherited by the male line.\(^\text{23}\)

That is not to say that women were, or are, necessarily considered equal to men in Thai society. There has been an ongoing struggle for equal legal rights for women in Thailand for twenty years.\(^\text{24}\) However, the very fact that they continue to fight for equal rights contradicts the representation of them as submissive.

It is evident from these examples that the Western representation of Thai culture is a product of orientalist views and simplified essentialist ideals. The depiction of Thai sexuality as being more open or free than Western sexuality is a projection of Western fantasy and not at all indicative of the reality of Thai culture.


\(^{19}\) Knodel, et. al., “Sexuality, Sexual Experience, and the Good Spouse,” 96.

\(^{20}\) Jeffrey, “Sex and borders,” 56.


\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Jeffrey, “Sex and borders,” 94.
This representation, of course, is crafted and reinforced by advertising agencies and tourism companies which seek to promote (and justify) the sphere of sex tourism.

**Sex Tourism**

The first instances of foreign individuals traveling to Thailand for the more or less sole purpose of sexual experience can be found in the American military personnel who were sent to Pattaya on short-term R & R leave during the Vietnam War. As previously mentioned, this began a boom in the tourism economy in Thailand which continued through the 1970s and 1980s. The number of foreign tourists in Thailand rose from 80,000 in 1960 to almost three million by 1986; the income obtained from tourism comprised nearly 5 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 1991.26

However, foreigners make up only a small proportion of the customers of the sex trade — most clients of prostitutes are Thai men. The importance of tourism to the sex trade lies not in the number of tourists who visit Thailand for this purpose, but in the view of politicians and policy makers that the sex trade is the major attraction for tourists. It follows that, since tourism has become a vital part of Thai economy, the sex industry should be ignored, tolerated or even supported in some cases, but certainly not banned.27 Sex tour operators provide moral justification for their business by presenting it as a new kind of development aid to the Third World and suggesting that, by hiring a prostitute, you are ultimately helping her and allowing her to send money back to her family.28

Patpong, as previously indicated, is the major tourist destination and home of the most obvious and visible form of prostitution in Bangkok. However, the commercial sex market in Thailand is segmented into a variety of categories depending on location, type of practice, and length of engagement. It is these varying aspects of the tourist-oriented sex industry in Thailand that blur the boundaries of prostitution in much the same way the Canadian dominatrix case of 1988 did.

Open-ended prostitution presents the clearest example of the ambiguity of prostitution in Thailand: the idea of long-term paid relationships between foreign men and Thai girls, that can potentially culminate in marriage, falls into an indefinable grey area in the commercial sex market29. This concept deviates from the traditionally accepted idea of prostitution in the West by introducing the possibility of emotional investment, an aspect which is not purely physical or economic. These women, known as “bar girls”, essentially act as girlfriends for their foreign clients during the course of their visit to Thailand; the men pay them either with cash or with

---

26 Boonchalaksi & Guest, “Prostitution in Thailand” 136.
27 Ibid.
28 Sittirak, “The daughters of development,” 86.
gifts. These relationships may even persist beyond the point of the client’s departure from Thailand, with the man continuing to send gifts and money to support his Thai “girlfriend”. These cases, however, are rare and hide the negative social stigma experienced by women prostitutes and the real violence that, in many cases, is something women are forced to endure.  

The encounters between bar girls and tourists do not take the outward appearance of an economic exchange: it often involved a more drawn-out process of establishing a rapport with the client before offering to come back to the hotel with him. In fact, most bar girls do not see themselves as prostitutes as it is commonly defined, and would be offended at the suggestion. Instead they present themselves as hostesses or companions to the guests. Bar girls or paid “Thai girlfriends” are similar to “rented wives” which were popular with American soldiers during the Vietnam War. These women would perform all the “duties” of a wife — cooking, cleaning, providing a consistent sexual outlet and taking care of their temporary husband’s personal business — for as long as the foreign soldier remained in the country. 

The impact of tourism on the Thai economy cannot be debated; it is a common argument that tourism can assist in the economic development of Third World nations. However, the impact of sex tourism in Thailand specifically is more a matter of perception and representation than truth.

Conclusion & Discussion

I will now return to the original question of how Thai people reconcile the booming commercial sex industry with traditional cultural values. The research presented here suggests that it is largely an issue of globalization. Traditional Thai culture suggests that women have a much lower sex drive than men. As such, the increased number of women entering the sex trade has been perceived as a sign of cultural and economic decline in the face of increasing modernization and Westernization. The work demands a drastic change women’s perspectives on gender relations and their role in the family as they are forced to go against deeply engrained cultural norms; women enter the business of selling their bodies with hesitation, anger, fear and resignation but never calmly or willingly. In the case of rural communities, residents are reluctant to even acknowledge that local women have become prostitutes. This certainly conflicts with the Western perception of

---

Thailand as a sexual paradise where the locals are happy to oblige foreign tourists seeking any kind of sexual experience for a price.

Prostitution is simultaneously seen as problematic evidence of cultural decline, and a solution to economic crises as it seems to attract tourists which make up a large portion of the GDP. In fact, the sex industry comprises only a small part of the monies spent by tourists in Thailand each year and is actually indulged in much more frequently by local men. It seems, then, that there is a problem of representation within Thailand as well as on an international scale: in both cases, the sex industry is given characteristics which are assumed to be reflections of reality but which are in fact blown out of proportion by those individuals and business promoting a false ideal to justify their desire to profit from the sex trade.
Works Cited


