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TALKING SEX: THAI *PHET* AND ITS CONNECTION TO THAI DRAG PERFORMANCE AS REFLECTED BY THE LANGUAGE OF *KATHOEY* PERFORMERS IN CHIANG MAI

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ABSTRACT

Drag performance has enjoyed increasing popularity around the globe, largely thanks to the success of US reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. This specific brand of drag from the West has recently gained popularity in Thailand. Mainstream conceptualizations of drag performance often rely on a binary gender imaginary that differs from Thailand's *phet* system. This qualitative study aimed to investigate contemporary discourse regarding Thai *phet* through interviews with Thai performers of drag and cabaret in Chiang Mai and to highlight how Thai drag negotiates the Thai *phet* imaginary. Eight performers based in Chiang Mai, representing a variety of performance backgrounds and *phet* presentations, were interviewed. Interviews were transcribed and underwent narrative and discourse analysis. The participants used *phet* vocabulary fluidly and contextually. The terms *LGBT(Q), gay, sao song, hua pok*, and *kathoey* were at times used to indicate distinct categories. At other times, however, any one of these words could be a part of a larger category of *kathoey*. The participants used the term *kathoey* to refer at different times to a particular feminine aesthetic presentation, an internal sense of self, or an over-the-top demeanor. Participants sometimes used language influenced by a binary understanding of mainstream drag performance but also acknowledged that Thai drag doesn't fit that binary. The space of this newer brand of drag performance aligns well with an expansive category of *kathoey*. In this way, Thai drag actually challenges both Western concepts of sex/gender/sexuality and dominant conceptualizations of Thai *phet,* celebrating other ways of being for Thai *kathoey*.

Keywords: Drag queens; cabaret; kathoey; phet; gender; LGBT(Q); Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

Western conceptualizations of gender/sex/sexuality start with a binary of woman and man. People exist both within and beyond this binary; some exist at or near one of the poles, some exist in between, and some reject the binary altogether. Still, conversation about gender, sex, and sexuality in the West and in the English language has some relationship to this binary. Many scholars (Morris, 1994; Jackson, 2000; Käng, 2012, Nithiwana, 2021) have written about the difficulty of interpreting the gender–sex–sexuality system of Thailand (or *phet*) through this Western binarism and through the English language in particular. Briefly, Thai *phet* is a

classification framework related to what the English language calls sex, gender, and sexuality. However, *phet* cannot be reduced to any one of these terms. While Thailand's current *phet* system includes numerous different categories and is ever evolving (Jackson, 2000), *phet* is generally based on a system of three: *phuying* (woman), *phuchai* (man), and *kathoey* (a category including people who would be categorized in the English language as trans women and effeminate gay men). Because Western thought and the English language are so structured by the man-woman gender binary, it can be particularly difficult to truly imagine possibilities that do not begin with that system. Even thinking "beyond the binary" implicitly invokes a binary to go beyond in the first place.

One style of performance that explores gender is drag performance. Drag is currently enjoying mainstream popularity due largely to the international success of the American reality show competition, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. A common understanding of drag performance is "men dressing and performing as women" (and sometimes also "women dressing and performing as men"). While this definition of drag leaves out many successful drag performers who complicate this neat binary, it remains the most common definition of drag in the mainstream. As *RuPaul's Drag Race* has enjoyed huge success and massive audiences from around the world, the reality show has spread across the globe with chapters of the show in many different countries, including Canada, the UK, and Thailand (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). The popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and two seasons of *Drag Race Thailand* have contributed to the increasing presence of drag performance in Thailand. However, if mainstream conceptualizations of drag are tied up in Western gender binarism (even as drag seeks to challenge that very binary), then Thai drag performance negotiates not only the Western gender binary but also the local *phet* system.

This project asks two main questions. First, how is Thailand's *phet* system represented through the discourse of Thai cabaret showgirls, diva performers, and drag queens? And second, how does drag performance in Chiang Mai allow Thai *kathoey* to challenge dominant *phet* discourse and open up new possibilities for ways of being? Understanding better how Thai performers use language to talk about drag performance will provide insight into how Thai people navigate local and global discourses regarding sex, gender, sexuality, and *phet*. As drag is still a relatively new concept in Thailand with a growing fan base, this project can also shed light on the role that drag performance plays in a Thai context.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 *Phet* (and gender)

Many authors have written in English on the subject of Thailand's framework for understanding sex, gender, and sexuality, or, in Thai, *phet*. Morris (1994) explains the modern framework as the intersection of a Thai three-sex system (male, female, *kathoey*) and a Western system of four sexualities (heterosexual men and women and homosexual men and women), resulting in what she calls "sexualized genders." Jackson (2000) traces an "explosion" of sub-categories for *kathoey* that appeared in the early 1960s before the introduction of English language gender/sexuality vocabulary. This sudden increase in *kathoey* categories eventually stabilized into a handful of relatively distinct *phet* categories, or what Jackson calls "eroticized genders." Many of these additional positions incorporated English-language vocabulary and included *gay*, *tom* (from "tom boy", similar perhaps to a butch lesbian or sometimes a trans man), and *di* (from "lady", similar to a femme lesbian, generally in a relationship with a *tom*). The term eroticized genders accounts for the way that sexual attraction is factored into the divisions between these categories. This is not the case for the concept of gender in English, for which labels are chosen based on what someone knows or feels about their own self, regardless of their attraction to other people. In English, sexuality or sexual attraction labels (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, etc.) are adjectives that can be claimed by people of any gender because, according to the Western framework, gender and sexuality are distinct. Note that due to the lack of distinction between sex, gender, and sexuality within the *phet* framework, a *gay* is generally not seen as a *phuchai* (man), but instead occupies a totally different *phet* category. Käng (2012) offers a succinct and fairly fluid analysis, stating simply that "the lines between the categories *tom*:woman:*kathoey*:*gay*:man are neither clear nor fixed but coalesce around these key formations," (p. 476). This description is useful because it acknowledges that the categories used to describe Thai *phet* are not nearly as clear cut as those used to describe gender in Thailand. Similarly, in her study on the diversity of *kathoey*, Nithiwana (2021) found that *kathoey* embody and experience *phet* in different ways in different contexts, even claiming multiple different categories at a single time.

While English language discourse regarding gender and sexuality has influenced Thai *phet* discourse, Jackson (2009) emphasizes that the development around the world of categories beyond conventional categories of sex, gender, and sexuality happened largely due to local (not global) capitalist market forces. This means that while a rapid increase in sex/gender/sexuality categories can be observed in societies around the world, each system developed in unique local ways. While the vocabulary of queer may help conceptualize the development of Thailand's *phet* system, Thailand's "queerness" is going to operate differently than queerness

in the West. In the same article, however, Jackson warns against equating other culture's expressions of gender/sexuality possibilities with unchanged traditional categories. Just as discourse and expressions of sex, gender, and sexuality have changed over time in the West, so too has discourse and expressions of *phet* in Thailand changed from the past. What *kathoey* means in contemporary Thai discourse is not the same as what *kathoey* meant hundreds of years ago (or even 20 years ago when Jackson described the explosion of *kathoey* categories). When invoking *phet* in their interviews, the participants of this research negotiate their own current needs, past iterations of *phet* terminology, and multiple global discourses. As such, their deployment of *phet* discourse can illustrate developing understanding of *phet* and changing needs and desires of Thai *kathoey*.

All this scholarship illustrates the difficulty of effectively using English—a language so deeply entrenched in not only gender and sexual binaries but also the separation between gender, sex, and sexuality—to present an accurate picture of the Thai *phet*-scape. Nithiwana's (2021) conclusions also illustrate why defining distinct categories at all can be so difficult. Still, some provisional categories for AMAB (assigned male at birth) individuals are necessary in approaching this article. Firstly, the word *phuchai* is often translated as "man," but such a translation is incomplete. "Man" in English gender discourse refers specifically to a gender, independent of sexuality. However, as Jackson (2000) explains, *phuchai* in Thai specifically refers to a man who is attracted to *phuying* (women), or what English would call a straight or heterosexual man. Jackson goes on to say that the first English word borrowed to describe phet was "gay." As noted above, *gay* in Thai actually functions as a noun to describe a category of masculine-presenting men who like other masculine-presenting men. This is different from "gay" in English, which is a sexuality that is added to describe a gendered position (i.e., "gay man" or "gay woman"). Then there is the category of *kathoey*. Jackson (2000) explains that before the introduction of English gender discourse in the 1960s, *kathoey* may have referred to any male or female who exhibited elements of the opposite sex. By the 1980s, however, *kathoey* had come to mean only people born male who live as women, or what English language would call transgender women. As Käng's (2012) and Nithiwana's (2021) works suggest, however, such a specific definition doesn't capture the fluidity and diversity of the category. Käng (2012) does, however, suggests that people who identify themselves as *gay* would likely be offended by the term *kathoey* except when in-group joking and in rural areas outside of Bangkok. Another term is *sao praphet song* or the abbreviated *sao song* (literally "second type of lady"). Käng suggests this label is considered a more polite way to refer to *kathoey*. Because the purpose of this research is to reflect on the discursive function of *phet* terminology, all *phet* terms presented in this article have not been translated and are reproduced exactly as they are used by the participants themselves.

2.2 Cabaret and drag

This paper investigates discourse regarding drag performance in Chiang Mai, so a clear understanding of drag and related performance traditions that make up the local performance landscape is needed. Before the term "drag" (*draek*) gained popularity in the Thai lexicon, Thailand was home to a number of cabaret shows. Benjanavee (2017) traces the origin of Thailand's *kathoey* cabaret shows to Pattaya in the 1970s. Early cabaret shows drew inspiration from drag performance in the US and featured men lip-syncing as women onstage, a hallmark of drag performance. As cabaret established itself as a popular tourist attraction, it moved to larger stages in Pattaya and became popular as an employment opportunity for feminine-presenting *kathoey*. This move to larger stages caused Thai cabaret to move away from a performance standard that more closely resembled US drag performance and to develop into something more uniquely Thai. In an interview, Wichai Sawatchin even claims that this move to larger theatres actually caused drag queens (or men performing as women) to disappear from Thailand altogether (Benjanavee, 2017, p. 67). Generally speaking, Thai *kathoey* cabaret features a single main performer or a small team of feminine-presenting showgirls (*nangshow*). These performers often dress in revealing costumes with large, colorful headpieces and other signature costume pieces, resemblant of French cabaret outfits, where the Thai performance tradition gets its name. These main performers are backed by a team of background dancers, which may be other showgirls or boy dancers (*dancer chai*). While the performance tradition originated in Pattaya, cabarets have since been established in other major tourist destinations around Thailand, including Chiang Mai (Sawatchin, 2017). Cabaret-style performances are usually found at larger theatre venues that resemble the massive cabaret stages of Pattaya.

While cabaret drew early influence from the US drag scene, a style of performance that Thai people call "drag" (*draek*) has gained popularity in the last decade or so and is distinct from cabaret. The influx of this specific brand of drag performance in Thailand is due partly to the growing international popularity of the US drag reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which has numerous additional chapters in countries around the world, including Thailand (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). Two Thai performers, Jai Sira and Pangina Heals, have also played important roles in popularizing drag from the West, independently bringing elements of this culture back to Thailand from Australia and the USA, respectively ("Nueng diaw Jai Sira draek khwin phan na," 2018; Pattanalertpun, 2018). Because this brand of drag and the English term for the performance style is relatively

new in Thailand, little academic work has been published specifically about what Thai people are calling "drag" today. The most helpful definition of Thai drag comes from Sopitarchasak (2023), who concludes based on interviews with Bangkok drag queens that drag in Thailand is defined by its individuality, its over-the-top nature, its element of transformation, and its performed quality. This definition aligns with performances that might be seen at Chiang Mai venues that specifically advertise drag shows (6ixcret Show, Ram Bar, and Blow). Performances that fall into the category of "drag" are more likely to feature a solo performer, rather than a team as in cabaret. As with much of the art showcased on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the wigs, makeup, and outfits of the drag performers in Thailand don't try to imitate conventional feminine beauty. Rather the performers, who may be masculine or feminine presenting in their daily life, still transform into something larger-than-life through drag performance. That over-the-top quality extends further into the performances themselves, which feature somersaults, death drops, and leaps into the splits. In this way, drag in Thailand is defined by its *power*. This also differentiates it from traditional *kathoey* cabaret, whose performers much more closely embody standards of feminine beauty: the cabaret showgirls' onstage looks will more closely resemble their everyday presentations, and the dancing is much simpler and more contained (perhaps more ladylike).

An additional style of performance that came up in interviews with the participants of this research was diva performance. This style of performance seems to straddle the lines of drag and cabaret in Thailand. (Some participants suggested that diva performance is a subset of cabaret; others suggested it is a subset of drag.) Diva performances generally feature a solo performer who presents their best imitation of a famous American diva (think Whitney Houston or Tina Turner). While the solo aspect is more similar to drag performance, diva performance is not over-the-top in the same way. Performers use outfits, makeup, wigs, and mannerisms to recreate a very specific standard (in this case, one well-known person), which is similar to cabaret. While the element of transformation is there, the freedom of drag performance is not. And while the show is generally a solo show, the individual celebrated in a diva performance is not the performer herself, but a well-known cultural figure.

One interesting aspect of much of the academic discussion surrounding drag performance in Thailand is the conspicuous absence of *kathoey*. Sopitarchasak (2023) remains within a more Western binary framework of gender and sexuality. While the term *kathoey* is found in 4 different quotes that are used in the research, *kathoey* are otherwise absent from the results. The author chooses to use English terms (that also circulate in the Thai language) like "gay" and "trans". What is missing, then, is an analysis of the lines separating various categories and how those categories connect to drag performance. In an earlier analysis of the two seasons of *Drag Race Thailand*, Rattanadilok Na Phuket and Kasa (2020) erase *kathoey* entirely, referring to all contestants as men who transform into women onstage, regardless of their gender/*phet* presentation or identity. Even Thailand's most recognized drag queen, Pangina Heals, suggests in an early interview on the subject of drag that *kathoey* can't be drag queens (Pattanalertpun, 2018). While this statement doesn't reflect the reality of Pangina's own beliefs (he is the host of *Drag Race Thailand*, which has featured many *kathoey* contestants), it does exemplify the difficulty of using the Thai language and Thai *phet* landscape to talk about drag, a performance tradition that comes from the West and is connected to Western gender binarism (even as it offers a challenge to that very binary). What is missing, then, and what this paper aims to shed light on, is *kathoey*'s relationship to Thai drag. Illuminating this relationship will ultimately offer valuable insight on contemporary Thai discourse regarding *phet*.

2.3 *Wer*

The over-the-top nature Sopitarchasak notes of drag performance resonates with the "wer" quality that Nguyen (2018) identifies in Thai queer art. The term *wer* is a Thai articulation of the word "over" and translates to "over-the-top." According to Nguyen, "*wer* indicates an exaggerated degree, an extravagant departure from the norm: it is at once excellent and too much," (2018, p. 140). Participants in this research deployed this term often to discuss drag performance, and it was likely the term that Sopitarchasak translated to "over-the-top" in his own interviews. According to Nguyen, the *wer* element of Thai queer art represents a challenge to Thai social and culture conventions. Rather than shying away from sex and sexuality in an effort to save face, queer artists actually lean into their position outside of socio-cultural norms of respectability to challenge the Thai state's censorship and restriction of queerness. *Wer* often involves an ironic "tactical borrowing of Western cultural objects" (Nguyen, 2018, p. 153). This borrowing is tongue-in-cheek and highlights the incongruity between the wealth and culture of the "developed" West and Thailand. The author illustrates that *wer* resonates with American camp aesthetic, which similarly leans into ironic excess to challenge local social norms, especially related to queerness. However, Nguyen also explains that *wer* is not *anti*-normative because it is still heteronormative, even as it opposes heteronormativity. The art he describes has a complex inside-outside relationship with Thai social norms. Perhaps a more comprehensive (and sympathetic) take might be that *wer*'s challenge to the social expectations that limit queer (*kathoey*) expression is not a total rejection of Thai-ness as a whole. These artists don't necessarily want to divorce themselves from

Thailand and Thai culture, but rather use excessive expression to question the necessity of certain restrictions of state-supported Thai-ness while maintaining elements that are meaningful to them. This resonates with Nithiwana (2021), who found that *kathoey* claim and express *phet* categories in varying (even contradictory) ways to challenge *phet* discourse without rejecting *phet* as a whole.

According to Nguyen's analysis and the words of Thai performers, Thai drag performance is perhaps defined first and foremost by its *wer*-ness. Following Nguyen's suggestion, this quality allows Thai drag to act as a form of social protest (an important characteristic of drag in the West) in a way that cabaret does not. While cabaret has been an important source of economic opportunity and community for *kathoey* in Thailand (Pramoj na Ayutthaya, 2003; Benjanavee, 2017), it is ultimately a tool the state uses to promote tourism to Thailand. As such, cabaret showgirls are restricted by expectations to be apolitical and demands to be constantly beautiful (Villar, 2017). Käng (2012) even goes as far to say that the Thai state reduces Thai *kathoey* to just another "natural wonder" of Thailand through cabaret. The over-the-top or *wer* element of drag, then, has the potential to reimbue queer Thai performers with an individual sense of political agency. *Wer* embodiments of *phet* and deployment of *phet* discourse can allow Thai subjects to reclaim and redefine *phet* on their own terms.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study was conducted using in-depth semi-structured interviews with performers in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The interviews were conducted from July to September, 2021. The subject of the interview was drag performance in Thailand. Participants were asked about their experiences with drag performance, the definition of drag, the difference between drag and cabaret, and the relationship between drag and *phet*.

3.1 Recruitment and sampling

Participants included were self-described drag queens, cabaret showgirls, and diva performers who worked mainly in Chiang Mai at the time of the interviews. They were selected via purposeful and snowball sampling in a way that included performers of a variety of ages, a variety of *phet* expressions, and a variety of performance traditions, including drag performance and similar styles of performance popular in Chiang Mai. While the topic of the interview focused on drag performance, this variety of performance backgrounds aimed to capture the way that participants may understand drag performance and its relationship to *phet* differently based on their age, connection to and familiarity with drag performance, and personal *phet* identity and presentation. Since the vocabulary of drag is still relatively new in Thailand, the drag performance scene is intimately related to more longstanding performance traditions like cabaret and diva performance. Recruiting participants from a variety of performance traditions thus allowed everyone whose work may affect or be affected by drag performance in Thailand to weigh in on the connection between Thai drag and *phet*.

The researcher had personal connections to all but one of the participants. Participant 1 was recommended by one of the other participants. The researcher reached out to performers in person or via social media, explaining the study and its aims, and to schedule interviews. A study information sheet was presented to each participant, and verbal and written consent was received prior to each interview.

3.2 Data collection

Each interview was conducted in person at a location of the participant's choice. Before the interview, the researcher again explained the objectives of the study and the general content of the interview. Verbal consent was again obtained before beginning the interview. Each interview was conducted entirely in Thai and lasted about one hour, concluding when the interview came to a natural conclusion with no further questions on either side.

There were 8 participants in the study. All interviews were audio recorded with consent from the participants. All recordings were transcribed in Thai verbatim. Participant names were replaced by code (Participant 1–8) to protect anonymity. Per ethical approval, all transcripts and recordings remain unpublished and accessible only to the researcher. Original language for translations included in this work are available upon request.

3.3 Data analysis

The transcripts were analyzed in MAXQDA2022 using both narrative and discourse analysis, focusing on connections between the participants' experiences and their use of language to discuss drag. Transcripts were coded for *phet* related language as well as information related to definitions for, experience with, and inspiration for various performance styles. Because language was a focus of this research project, all analysis was done with the original Thai transcripts and the original language was only translated for the final writeup.

3.4 Participants

Table 1 presents basic information about the participants, including their ages, self-determined performance style, and self-determined *Phet* identity.

The small sample size of the current study makes larger trends harder to identify. A larger study that included more people of different ages could draw farther-reaching conclusions regarding how Thai performers of different generations and *phet* presentations conceptualize drag performance and talk about *phet*. Also, because this study only includes performers, the use of *phet* language may not be generalizable to the general Thai populace. Future studies might investigate language used by *kathoey* who are not performers or by *phet* minorities who are AFAB (assigned female at birth) like *tom*, *dii*, and *lesbian*.

This research was reviewed and approved by the Chiang Mai University Research Ethic Committee (Protocol Number 044/64).

Table 1: Participant Descriptions

Participant	Age	Self-Determined Performance Style	Self-Determined *Phet* Identity
Participant 1	40+	Cabaret showgirl/Diva	*Sao praphet song*
Participant 2	40+	Diva/Drag queen	*Gay*
Participant 3	30–40	Diva	*Gay*
Participant 4	30–40	Cabaret showgirl	*Sao praphet song*
Participant 5	20–30	Drag queen	*Gay*
Participant 6	20–30	Drag queen	*Gay*
Participant 7	20–30	Drag queen/Cabaret showgirl	*Kathoey*
Participant 8	20–30	Drag queen	*Gay/Hua pok*

4. RESULTS

This section gives a detailed review of the language that participants used to discuss *phet* during their interviews, aiming to tease out what *phet* means and how it functions discursively for the participants. Perhaps the crux of this section is the final subsection on use of the word *kathoey*, which reveals how *kathoey* is expansive, resisting concrete definition, indexing at different times an internal feeling of self, a feminine aesthetic, and an over-the-top (*wer*) demeanor.

4.1 A note on language

Because the focus of this research is on Thai language discourse, most terms for performance and *phet* are transliterated into English. “Drag,” “drag queen,” “cabaret,” and “diva,” for example, are terms that have been borrowed directly into Thai (*draek*, *draek khwin*, *khabare*, *diwa*). The term “showgirl” used at times in this paper is a translation of the word *nangsho*, which translates directly to “show lady” and refers to a feminine-presenting cabaret performer, often the star of a given performance number.

Another important consideration for this research write-up is the use of pronouns. In English, third-person pronouns are specific and largely unchanging, which is not the case for a highly contextual language like Thai. Attaviriyanupap (2015) provides a helpful review of personal pronoun usage in Thai, noting that a single pronoun can take on multiple shifting meanings, even changing between first-, second-, and third-person. She notes that there are more gendered first-person pronoun choices than third-person gendered options. According to Attaviriyanupap, this fluidity actually allows *kathoey* “the freedom to choose female forms which suit their identities better, at least in informal conversations,” (p. 395). The participants in this research either used their name or chose the pronouns *chan* and *nuu* when referring to themselves. The choices of these pronouns typically indicative of a woman speaker corresponds with Attaviriyanupap’s findings regarding *kathoey* pronoun choice. However, to equate that with the feminine third-person pronoun “she” in English would not be an accurate representation, as the choice of a specific gendered pronoun is a much larger (and more politically loaded) decision in English. Instead, pronouns are chosen to most accurately reflect the participants’ everyday presentations, which clearly gravitated toward two poles of masculinity and femininity. The pronoun “he” is used for masculine-presenting participants (2, 3, 5, 6, 8) and the pronoun “she” is used for feminine-presenting participants (1, 4, 7). It is important to note, though, that these pronouns are not an accurate representation of the language the participants used in Thai. However, no English pronoun choice (even gender-neutral “they”) would accurately represent the participants’ discourse. As such, pronouns are chosen to indicate everyday aesthetic gender presentation to help readers generate a clearer picture of the speakers. Even so, pronouns should be taken with a grain of salt given the fluidity of Thai *phet* categories.

4.2 Boundary of *phet*

Talking about *phet* in English, as already mentioned, is difficult. Consider, for example, that performers had a harder time choosing a single *phet* category than might be expected, demonstrating yet again that *phet* categories are fluid and overlapping. Performers' daily *phet* presentations leaned pretty clearly toward more traditionally masculine or feminine presentation; more masculine-presenting participants (in all cases with short hair and in traditionally "boy clothes") would likely be identified in the West as gay men, and more feminine participants (marked, for example, by long hair, breast implants, facial feminization procedures, and traditionally feminine clothing) would likely be identified as trans women[1]. Despite generally gravitating toward one end of a masculine-feminine binary, all of these participants at times use the term *kathoey* to refer to themselves and communities they are a part of. When asked explicitly about which *phet* category participants gravitated toward, the answer was not as clear cut as might be expected in English. Participant 7, for example, first claimed the *phet* category *chai* ("man"), likely because it's the official *phet* listed on all of the participant's legal documents. When informed that the participant could choose whatever *phet* category she felt most connected to, she chose *kathoey* explicitly because it was the broadest of the terms available. Other performers, in choosing a *phet* identity term, seemed similarly hesitant to lay claim to a single term, participant 3 even saying it was difficult to choose. Participant 2 thought it was strange to be asked at all and didn't put too much stock in his answer. He ultimately concluded that the reason this question was included at all was probably because the researcher was from the USA where the participant believed choosing a gender is important. This corresponds with Nithiwana's (2021) subjects who often claimed different labels at different times.

The most frequently spoken term related to *phet* categories beyond *phuchai* (man) and *phuying* (woman) was *kathoey*, followed by *hua pok*, *sao song*, *gay*, *LGBT(Q)*, and *trans*, respectively[2]. Notably, the word "queer" never came up. The Thai transliteration of "queer" (*khwia*) appears in academic and activist settings; it's listed, for example, as an acceptable term in the Thai Transgender Alliance's media language handbook (Samakkeekarom, 2020). However, no participant in this research used the word *khwia* to describe their experience with or their understanding of drag performance (a performance tradition that most Westerners today would label as decidedly queer). The term has not become as ubiquitous within and beyond the Thai LGBT(Q) community as it has as an inclusive umbrella term in the West[3]. While Thai people use *khwia* in activist and academic settings, the term has not become everyday lexicon as *gay*, *LGBT(Q)*, and even *trans* have.

Thai-language *phet* terminology (*kathoey*, *hua pok*, and *sao song*) came up more often in interviews than English loan words (*gay*, *LGBT(Q)*, and *Trans*). The word *trans* was used only once by Participant 8 (the youngest) talking about people who would more likely perform as cabaret showgirls. Participant 8 explained that most showgirls "don't want to be *phuchai*; they want to be *phuying*; they want to be *trans*," adding that some *trans* perform as drag queens. Participant 8 was explicitly talking about who could perform as a drag queen. In prior instances, however, participant 8 used the term *kathoey* numerous times to discuss cabaret showgirls, even using the term to refer to himself. When it became necessary to convey a more specific meaning (someone who doesn't want to be a *phuchai* [any longer], and wants instead to be a *phuying*), Participant 8 drew on an English loan word, *trans*, in order to make the point clear. In other words, the word *trans* here was used to illustrate a specific phenomenon of wanting to present as a *phuying*. The choice to use an English loan word suggest that this phenomenon is not expressed so simply with Thai *phet* terms[4].

4.3 *LGBT(Q)*

In English, the acronyms LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA+, and other iterations of varying lengths are used to group everyone who is not a heterosexual cisgender person (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and/or asexual, etc.). While the boundaries of this umbrella term are sometimes contested and not

[1] It's important to note that this categorization comes from the researcher himself. While this distinction is somewhat reflected in language use that will be explored in the findings and discussion, none of the participants explicitly claimed to be either "masculine" or "feminine." Rather, these categories are invoked to create the most accurate picture of the participants in the minds of readers.

[2] The Thai articulations of English loan words—gay, LGBT(Q), and trans—are represented in italics to differentiate them from the English words. All of these words operate in Thai as nouns and are reproduced here as such.

[3] For those unfamiliar with the identity term "queer" in English, the simplest definition is a catchall adjective that describes someone who identifies as anything other than a heterosexual cisgender person. The boundaries of "queer" are contentious, and due to the term's history as an insult lobbed primarily at gay men, some people remain uncomfortable with the term. Still, the term is largely accepted today as an inclusive identity category for anyone who considers themselves a part of the LGBT community.

[4] The term "trans" (short for "transgender") in English is an adjective that suggests that someone identifies as a gender other than their gender assigned at birth. The term can thus be used to modify gender nouns (e.g., trans man, trans woman) and can also be used to describe a person who does not identify as their birth gender (e.g., "they are trans").

universally agreed upon, it is generally understood to be an adjective that refers to an inclusive community (e.g., the LGBT community, an LGBTQ space, an LGBTQIA ally). The term has also been borrowed in Thai (*aeo ji bi thi khiu*). *LGBT* or *LGBTQ* is used by Participants 2, 4, 5, and 7. The word is sometimes used in tandem with *kathoey*. Participant 2, for example, explains that *kathoey* has many meanings and that "*LGBTQ* will always have certain femininity about them." Participant 2 seamlessly transitions from the term *kathoey* to the term *LGBTQ*, essentially equating the terms. Similarly, Participant 4 explains that she cannot change her official government title to "Miss" because "being *LGBT* is not allowed in Thailand." *LGBT* here represents someone like Participant 4 who wants to change her title from "Mister" to "Miss" (*nai* to *nang*). Participant 7 also explains that she had a hard time at her first job "because I was a *kathoey*—I was *LGBTQ*—and I had to compete with real *phuying*." She rhetorically aligns the categories *kathoey* and *LGBTQ*, a move she makes again when discussing the lack of the government support given to the performers during the pandemic: "the members of the *kathoey* community—the *LGBTQ* community—were responsible for supporting each other."

LGBT(Q) was also used in international and activist contexts. Participant 7, for example, expressed that she wanted to travel to San Francisco because "the state supports them; *LGBTQ* people get to be *LGBTQ* people." Participant 4 praises other countries for giving people the freedom: "if I'm *gay*, then I'm *gay*; if I'm *LGBT*, then I'm *LGBT*; *tomboy* or anything." Participant 5 uses the term *LGBT* to refer to events hosted by Mplus, a Thai LGBT health and activism organization. The term *LGBTQ* is deployed in international and activist contexts to gesture toward the larger community implied by the English term, but in Thai contexts *LGBT* seems to slip back into the category of *kathoey*.

4.4 *Gay*

The term *gay* is spoken by Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. The English loanword often stands in for the Thai term *hua pok* (a term that refers to a *kathoey* with short hair, covered further in the following subsection). Participants 2 and 7 explicitly align these two terms. When Participant 2 was asked how he identifies *phet*-wise, he expressed "I'm a *gay*, a normal *gay*… I only dress up for work. Usually I dress as a *gay*, a *hua pok*." Participant 2 contrasts his own presentation with someone that would dress like a woman normally. Participant 7 explained that she used to believe that drag performers had to present masculinely, citing that the first drag queen she knew in Chiang Mai "was a *hua pok*, he was a *gay*." The alignment of *gay* and *hua pok* suggests that they are interchangeable in this context. Participant 5 also aligns *gay* with masculine presentation, noting that his interview outfit is "calm, a normal *gay* look," as compared to their drag presentation as a "fierce woman" (*saopriaw*, literally "sour lady"). *Gay* here refers to masculine dress.

In all of the above instances, the term *gay* refers to someone who is not a feminine-presenting *kathoey*. Participants 3, 5, and 7 are even more explicit about the distinction. Participant 3 explains, "for the most part, the people I've seen perform drag are *gay*; I still haven't seen a *sao praphet song* [perform][5]." At another point when referring to a cabaret showgirl they know, Participant 3 noted "They aren't a *sao song*; they're a *gay*. They dress beautifully." Participant 5, explaining who could perform as a showgirl, emphasized that not all showgirls are *sao song*; "I guess you could say some are *gay*." Participant 5 seems reluctant to assign a *phet* term to the performers at all. In this case, the word *gay* refers to a person that is explicitly not a *sao song*. Participant 7 also uses the term *gay* in contrast with the term *kathoey* when she discusses her work at a host bar[6]. She saw "*phuying* go [to the bar], *kathoey* go, *gay* go. But for the most part, you wouldn't see a lot of *phuchai*." In this instance, *gay* is a category distinct from *phuying* (women), *kathoey*, and *phuchai* (straight men). In another instance, though, Participant 7 mentions that she has a family friend who "is also like this, but he is a *gay*[7]." The family friend is identified as being in a larger *phet* category with Participant 7 (likely *kathoey*), but the term *gay* further explains that the two are not exactly the same. In all of the above instances the term *gay* is deployed in a way that marks it as not feminine, while not necessarily divorcing it from the category of *kathoey*. This marks a distinct departure from the English language usage of "gay," which only refers to sexuality or sexual attraction, and its connection to trans identity. To suggest that a gay man is a trans woman because he is feminine is inaccurate and likely offensive to the individual described.

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[5] *Sao praphet song* translates literally to "second type of lady" and generally refers to feminine presenting *kathoey*. For more on this term, see the following section.

[6] A host bar in this case is a bar where male "hosts" can be "called" by patrons for intervals of an hour. Patrons are usually women, *gay*, or *kathoey*, and they will invite the host boys to come sit and drink, talk, cuddle, and experience other elements of intimacy to different extents. In this case Participant 7 was not a host herself, but was at a host bar that also featured drag performances.

[7] "*Khao pen mueankan*" or literally "he *is* as well." The word *pen* (to be) here is a euphemism suggesting that the person *is* a *gay* or *kathoey*.

4.5 *Sao praphet song/Sao song*

All participants who used the word *sao song* used it when talking about cabaret showgirls. Participant 1 uses the term referring to her earliest years performing in Chiang Mai, saying "I had a team of my own. There were many people, including boy dancers and *sao song* dancers." *Sao song* here is used to define one of the two categories of cabaret performers, the other being boy dancer (*dancer chai*). Participant 6 draws a connection between cabaret, *sao song*, and Chinese audiences, saying "Chinese people love *sao song*, ladies with white skin who show their cleavage, their bodies." Participant 6's use of *sao song* is not as a performing subject but as an object of the audiences' gaze. Participant 5 hypothesizes about cabaret performance in Thailand, saying "Thailand brought [cabaret] in. *Phuying* couldn't do it because it was too revealing. But then there were *sao praphet song*, and they wanted to perform." This performer suggests that Thai culture and social norms separate *sao song* from the category of *phuying* (women) and further implies that *phuying* are not meant to be looked at, but *sao song* can be. Participant 5 connects *sao song* to pageantry, saying "in the past, I didn't know about cabaret. I only knew about *sao praphet song* competing in beauty pageants." "Pageantry" here is a translation of the Thai term *kanprakuat* or *kanprakuat nangngam*. This phenomenon refers to beauty contests, which are common and very popular in Thailand. These pageants do not involve any dance or lip-sync performances as in cabaret or drag shows. Rather contestants demonstrate poise, charm, and beauty through runway walks, self-introductions, and responses to questions. While these pageants most commonly feature women contestants, there are pageants for men and *kathoey* as well, and *kathoey* are very often involved behind the scenes in all cases. In this instance, participant 5 is referring to a beauty pageant specifically for *sao song*. This participant, who comes from a rural area, suggests that the beauty pageant is a substitute for cabaret for *sao song* who don't live in the city. Participant 7 echoes this, saying that while her hometown didn't have a cabaret show, "it had a district beauty pageant, and they would hire the Chiang Mai showgirls to perform…. Once, the Chiang Mai Cabaret team performed in [her hometown] because they were hosting a *sao praphet song* beauty pageant." Pageantry does have a longstanding connection with cabaret. In her article on *kathoey* beauty contests, Wuen (2007) explores a popular pageant hosted by Alcazar Cabaret Show in Pattaya. Other large cabaret theaters in Pattaya and elsewhere in Thailand have similar beauty contests. Wuen argues that while these contests offer *kathoey* a sense of agency and an ability to be proud of themselves and their abilities, that sense of agency is always qualified by the objectifying gaze of the audience and judges that determine the standards against which the contestants' bodies are evaluated. Aligning *sao song* with these beauty contests positions the *sao song* as again the object of an audience's gaze.

While *sao song* is connected to cabaret performance and pageantry, Participant 7 deploys the term in a way that separates it from drag. She says of her first time performing in Chiang Mai "I had never seen a *sao song* performing drag; I had only *hua pok* dressed as a woman, so I understood that only *hua pok* were drag queens." Despite ultimately changing her mind about drag, this participant expresses that she thought *sao song* couldn't be drag queens (could only be cabaret showgirls). This resonates with Participant 3, who uses the term *sao praphet song* in relation to cabaret and to repeatedly express that they haven't seen a *sao praphet song* drag queen. For this participant, *sao praphet song* is connected to cabaret and a distinctly feminine beauty: "if we're talking about *sao praphet song*, they don't look drag. They get up and sing songs and look beautiful. That wouldn't be drag." Again, *sao praphet song* are connected with specific standards of beauty and being looked at. Drag, on the other hand, is decidedly *not* beautiful, and therefore not a space for *sao praphet song*. Referring to the cabaret show bar where they perform, Participant 3 further explains that most performers are "beautiful *sao praphet song*. They've had breast implants, and some of them have had bottom surgery." Not only are *sao praphet song* explicitly beautiful, but that beauty is tied to their bodies and certain standards that their bodies have been modified to fit. As with Participant 6's comment that Chinese audiences like *sao praphet song* with beautiful skin and cleavage, *sao praphet song*'s beauty in this example is also not entirely her own. *Sao praphet song* consistently refers to a person that, while beautiful, is always the object of someone's gaze.

4.6 *Hua pok*

Another Thai term used frequently by participants was *hua pok*. This term is considered derogatory by many (perhaps depending on who is speaking and who the target of the word is) and is generally understood to refer to a *kathoey* with short hair (including someone who would like to grow their hair out and cannot because of school uniform hair style rules). *Hua pok* was used by Participants 2, 4, 6, and 7. As described above, Participants 2 and 7 use the term in conjunction with *gay*, essentially equating the two terms and differentiating them from feminine presentation. Participant 6, however, rather than connecting *hua pok* with gay, aligns *hua pok* and *kathoey*, explaining that before they started drag "I was a *hua pok*, a *kathoey* who liked doing makeup, but I hadn't yet dressed up." Participants 2 and 7 align *hua pok* with *gay*, but Participant 6 suggests that *hua pok* is also a *kathoey*.

Participants 4 and 7 use *hua pok* to refer to a certain presentation. Participant 4 explains that before moving to Chiang Mai "I didn't know what I was. I was like this [gestures at the researcher, a gay cisgender

man], like you, a *hua pok*, because I was from rural Thailand." Here, *hua pok* refers to having short hair and wearing boy clothes. Working at a gay bar, however, Participant 4 started dressing more femininely and concluded that "between *hua pok* and *kathoey*, I got more attention as a *hua pok* than as a *kathoey*." Participant 4 assigns herself two terms to mark different chapters of her life, differentiated not by her identity, but her presentation. *Hua pok* refers to a period of the participant's life when she wore a more masculine hairstyle and clothes, which resonates with Participant 2's statement above. Talking about performers in Chiang Mai, Participant 4 explains that "now there are some *hua pok* who dress as women, but in their daily lives they are still *hua pok*…. They wear wigs, but in their real lives they have short hair." Then, talking about drag queens, Participant 4 says "most are *hua pok*, *phuchai* who get dressed up." In this latter instance, *hua pok* are aligned not with *gay* or *kathoey* but with *phuchai*, likely due to the *hua pok*'s more masculine presentation. Participant 7 makes a similar move talking about her initial understanding of drag: "I didn't have any experience, so I understood that drag queens were only *phuchai*, *hua pok* who were still *phuchai*." Above, Participant 7 connected *hua pok* with *gay*, but here *hua pok* is aligned with *phuchai* (men), likely referring to a more masculine presentation, contrasting the speaker's own feminine presentation. Participant 7 ultimately decides that drag is not just for *hua pok* but is for anybody. She opens drag performance to herself, despite no longer having a masculine *hua pok* presentation. In all the above uses of *hua pok*, the term references a more masculine presentation with short hair and boy clothes. Like *gay*, the term *hua pok* is sometimes used in a way that marks it as distinct from a specific instance of the term *kathoey*, and at other times the terms are aligned, suggesting the categories are not entirely distinct.

4.7 *Kathoey*

All participants other than Participant 3 used the term *kathoey*. The term is used to indicate a person or group of people, but who was included in the category *kathoey* was not always the same (as already seen above). *Kathoey* at times specifically referred to a person with a feminine presentation and at other times referred to a much larger category of people. Still at other times, the word *kathoey* described a certain demeanor. *Kathoey* as presentation referred primarily to long hair, surgical modifications, and feminine clothing. This is demonstrated by instances when *kathoey* was a category distinct from *hua pok* or *gay*, as when Participant 4 discussed her work experience above. In this example, the participant suggests that she embodied *hua pok* and *kathoey* presentations at different stages of her life: *hua pok* with short hair and boy clothes, *kathoey* with long hair and feminine clothing. Participant 7 also uses *kathoey* at one point to create a category that is aesthetically different from *hua pok*, saying that performing drag "isn't limited to just *hua pok*. *Phuying* can also do drag. So can *phuchai*. So can *kathoey*." Listing *hua pok* and *kathoey* as distinct categories highlights a difference in daily presentation (masculine/short hair versus feminine/long hair), a point of interest she returned to multiple times when recounting her changing understanding of drag performance.

Kathoey could also refer specifically to feminine clothing choices. Participant 4 explains that when she would go to festivals in her hometown as a child, "I would wear a wig, wear other stuff, dress as a *kathoey*." The phrase "dress as a *kathoey*" ("*taeng pen kathoey*") suggests that *kathoey* can indicate a certain feminine aesthetic. This resonates with Participant 2 discussing his personal *phet* identification, mentioned above: "I'm a *gay*, a normal *gay*… I only dress up for work. Usually I dress as a *gay*, a *hua pok*." Here, Participant 2 clearly avoids the word *kathoey*. This participant is a *gay* or a *hua pok* because of his everyday dress. Participant 8 tells a story that implies the connection between feminine dress and *kathoey*. While Participant 8's father wasn't initially very supportive of his child's drag career, he was relieved to see his child out of drag: "[My dad] was like 'Oh. You're a *phuchai*. You look like a *phuchai*.' He just chatted like normal. He still had a son." Again, implicitly omitting the term *kathoey* (this time on the father's part) marks the absence of Participant 8's feminine presentation. The participant's father was relieved to still have a son, which might not have been the case if he had been wearing feminine clothes or makeup, which would have pushed Participant 8 decidedly into the category of *kathoey*. In all of these instances, *kathoey* seems to carry the same meaning as *sao praphet song*—someone identified male at birth who now presents femininely. What defines the category of *kathoey* and separates it from other *phet* categories here is a feminine presentation.

In other instances, *kathoey* describes a category that includes more than just people who have feminine presentation. As was described above, sometimes the words *gay* and *hua pok* fell into a larger category of *kathoey*. Already quoted above, Participant 5 expressed that before doing drag "I was a *hua pok*, a *kathoey* who liked doing makeup." Here *hua pok* is a subset of *kathoey*. The fact that *hua pok* indicates someone with a more masculine presentation demonstrates that *kathoey* does not always refer to a feminine presentation. In fact, all but one of the participants who present masculinely (who all chose the *phet* label *gay*) used the word *kathoey* to describe themselves and their communities. In one instance, Participant 8 discussed his reluctance to perform as a cabaret showgirl after he started drag, saying "I didn't want to be a *kathoey* like that. I didn't want to be a *sao song*." Participant 8 expresses here that *sao song* is just one kind of *kathoey*. Not wanting to be a *sao song* doesn't remove him from the *kathoey* category altogether. At other points, this participant uses the term

kathoey to refer to himself. It's not that he doesn't want to be a *kathoey*; rather, he just doesn't want to be a *kathoey* like *that*. In other instances, participants had to qualify the word *kathoey* to specify that they were specifically talking about feminine-presenting people. Discussing drag, for example, Participant 1 explains that Thai drag will never compete with Western drag, because "sometimes [Thailand] still had *kathoey* that do drag. But really [the West] doesn't take people who present as women [*phuak taeng ying*]. They don't take people with breasts and long hair." While Participant 1's understanding resonates somewhat with Pangina Heals's interview and differs from all the younger performers' definitions of drag, her qualification is enlightening: she specifies that she is referring to *kathoey* who present as women (suggesting some *kathoey* don't present as women). Participant 2 makes a similar qualification telling a story about going out when he was younger: "I liked to go out. I had a gang of *kathoey* friends, the long-haired mothers [*pheuan khunmae* phomyao]." Participant 2 uses the term *kathoey* and then immediately qualifies it, stating that he's referring to a group of *kathoey* mentors (*khunmae*, mothers) with long hair. This specification implies that some people that fall into the category of *kathoey* (likely including the speaker himself) do not have long hair. All of these instances above demonstrate that the category of *kathoey* is larger than just *sao praphet song* or people who present femininely but still connects to someone who was assigned male at birth (AMAB) but does not identify as a *phuchai* (straight man). This includes people who identify with the term *gay* or *hua pok*.

There is still one more usage of the term, which is defined by a certain behavior or attitude. Two participants used the phrase *kathoey a noe*, translating essentially to "*kathoey*, you know what I mean?" It is a humorous and somewhat self-deprecating way to indicate certain behaviors or attitudes associated with or expected of *kathoey*. Participant 4, for example, expresses that it is harder for *kathoey* to get a Chinese visa, saying "[the Chinese government] is afraid we will go do sex work. *Kathoey*, you know what I mean?" It's as if Participant 4 is suggesting that it's a frustrating and unfortunate reality for Thai *kathoey*, but also she kind of understands why. Talking about his experience as a child, Participant 8 explains "I would get dressed up. The makeup was more like pageant makeup…. But I liked it. I would just do whatever. Then there were hair pins, Thai outfits. And I would dress up with it. *Kathoey*, you know what I mean?" The implication in both of these examples is that these things are just things that *kathoey* do, part of what makes someone a *kathoey*. Recounting the first time she saw cabaret showgirls as a child, Participant 7 says "I saw them and I knew I really wanted to do that work. I don't know if it was just my *kathoey* nature or not." She implies that her desire to perform is just another attribute of *kathoey*. In all of these instances, kathoey are connected with behaviors that are beyond what is socially expected of or acceptable for either *phuchai* or *phuying* (sexual promiscuity, cross-*phet* dress-up, cabaret performance). In this way, all of these things that are considered typical *kathoey* behaviors are marked as excessive or over-the-top. Participant 2 explicitly connects *kathoey*-ness to drag performance, saying that in drag "everything is doubled. That's drag…. It's about being a woman [*chanee*], but a woman that has a *kathoey*-ness. Everything combines into an over-the-top (*wer*) demeanor; it's big." While in other circumstances, Participant 2 uses the term *kathoey* to refer to a feminine presentation (unlike his own), in this moment *kathoey* is defined by a certain *wer* demeanor, one that he does indeed possess.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Talking *phet*

The participants in this study show how *phet* terms are used contextually and with fluidity. In the English language, gender categories (man, woman, nonbinary, etc.) are modified with adjectives related to gender/sexuality (trans, gay, bisexual, asexual, etc.). This language remains consistent throughout different contexts (e.g., a bisexual trans woman still claims all of these labels as she may choose to articulate certain terms in different spaces). The participants in this study, however, demonstrate that the distinctions between different *phet* categories "are neither clear nor fixed" (Käng, 2012, p. 473). That was first apparent by participants' hesitance to choose a *phet* identity at all. In Thai *phet* discourse, these terms are constantly redefined contextually to make provisional categories that help a speaker communicate a point in a given circumstance. Sometimes, for example, *hua pok* is used to define a category distinct from *kathoey* (Participants 2, 4, 7), reflecting a difference in presentation (masculine vs. feminine). At other times, *hua pok* is just a subset of the category *kathoey* (Participant 6). Similarly, *phuchai* is sometimes used to refer to straight men (participants 5, 7), and at other times used to index a masculine presentation (participants 7, 8). When *phuchai* references presentation, it is aligned with *gay* and *hua pok*; but at other points these latter terms are used to describe positions that are not *phuchai*. This corresponds with Nithiwana (2021), who observes that *kathoey* in her study would identify with multiple different categories or change their identification at different times.

Jackson (2000) traces how Western sex/gender/sexuality categories and related English terminology have been adopted and adapted into contemporary Thai language for *phet* categories. The language that the participants used to talk about *phet* shows that this is true. Many of the terms used by the participants (*trans*,

LGBT(Q), *gay*) have been borrowed from English. However, the distinctions between these categories are not as clear cut as they are in English. In particular, all of the terms identified in this study fall under the category of *kathoey* at one point or other. That is to say that while the term *kathoey* might be deployed to create a category that is distinct from *gay* or *hua pok* in one instance, it does not fully remove these *phet* categories from the category of *kathoey*. This creates the possibility that in one instance, a person might express that they are a *kathoey* to indicate their connection to this larger *phet* category, while in another instance they would say or imply that they *aren't* a *kathoey* in order to suggest that they do not present femininely. This is different from how language regarding sex/gender/sexuality or other elements of personal identity are used in English, in which the terms that a person claims generally don't change even if they are left unspoken.

In particular, participants used six terms related to *phet* categories beyond *phuchai* and *phuying*: *trans*, *gay*, *LGBT(Q)*, *sao* (*praphet*) *song*, *hua pok*, and *kathoey*. *Trans* was only used once (Participant 8) to indicate very specifically that the person described no longer wanted to be a *phuchai*, but wanted to be a *phuying*. The usage of this English loan word suggests that the English term offered a specific possibility that was not described by other terms the participant used (*kathoey*, *sao praphet song*). Or perhaps the term is gaining popularity among younger Thai people (Participant 8 is the youngest). The word *trans* seems in this instance to stand in for *sao praphet song*, which according to the participants indicates someone who was assigned male at birth and presents femininely through surgery, hair, clothing, and a feminine demeanor. In other instances, though, Participant 8 uses the term *sao praphet song*, so where the boundary lies between *trans* and *sao praphet song* is unclear (or perhaps they are effectively the same thing). Regarding *sao prophet song*, while Käng (2012) suggests the term is a more polite term for *kathoey*, the participants' usage suggests it is not necessarily more polite but is more specific. Participants use both *kathoey* and *sao praphet song*, and while some instances of the word *kathoey* index a specifically feminine-presenting person, at other times, *kathoey* describes a much larger category. *Sao praphet song*, on the other hand, always refers to someone who presents femininely. Additionally, the word *sao praphet song* is always connected by standards that are beyond the person described (standards of cabaret, femininity, beauty). Much like cabaret performance itself, the label *sao praphet song* comes with a much more specific set of expectations for the individual.

The second most common term was *gay*. However, while most literature divorces *gay* from the category of *kathoey* (Morris, 1994; Jackson, 2000; Käng, 2012), the participants' use of *gay* often fell into the category of *kathoey*. While Käng (2012) suggests that a Thai *gay* would likely be offended by being called *kathoey* except jokingly among friends, all of the masculine-presenting participants of this study (except for Participant 3) used the word *kathoey* to refer to themselves and their communities, and not simply as a joke. *Gay* was generally used to describe someone with a masculine presentation (represented largely through clothing and hair). This largely aligned with usage of the term *hua pok*, which was used to describe a *kathoey* with short hair—either someone who doesn't want to present femininely in their daily life (doesn't want to be a *sao praphet song*) or someone like Participant 4 or 7 in childhood who could not yet grow their hair out. Like the word *kathoey*, the word *hua pok* is understood and experienced by some as an insult. However, within the community of participants in this research, the word is deployed regularly as a matter of fact to describe a specific presentation, even the past presentation of someone who now presents as a *sao praphet song*. The terms *gay* and *hua pok* seem to occupy the same discursive place for these participants, and it's unclear if there is a significant difference between the way they are used. Notably, however, *gay* was never used to describe the past expression of someone who now presents femininely. Perhaps, then, *gay* is considered to be more of a consistent identity (that comes with a *hua pok* presentation).

The most common *phet*-related term used in interviews was *kathoey*. Sometimes the word was deployed to describe a category distinct from *gay* or *hua pok*. In these instances, *kathoey* was used to specifically indicate someone like Participants 1, 4, or 7 who present femininely. In these instances, the word *kathoey* effectively restricted the category of *kathoey* to only *sao praphet song*. Some participants, for example, described that at earlier points in their life, they were not yet *kathoey*, but were still *hua pok*. Sometimes the terms *gay* or *hua pok* to were used to refer to a category that was distinct from *kathoey*. In these instances, what defined *kathoey* and made it different from other *phet* categories was a certain feminine presentation. A *kathoey*'s femininity in these instances, however, is not her own; it is a convincing recreation of standards for feminine beauty that are created and judged by others. Her femininity is (and must be) perfect, and because she is in fact *more* perfect than anyone could expect to be, she becomes *hyper*-real; her femininity is *hyper*-femininity (Tan, 2014). It is this realer-than-real femininity that is demanded of cabaret stages and *kathoey* pageant runways. The implicit (particularly sinister) draw is that tourists, who thrive on spectacle and orientalist gaze, have the opportunity to watch someone convincingly portray what she is *not*.

However, participants in this research did not always use *kathoey* to refer to someone with a feminine presentation. At other times, the term *kathoey* was used to describe anyone assigned *chai* (*male*) at birth but is not a *phuchai* (straight man) now. In these instances, the word *kathoey* more expansively describes AMAB

(assigned male at birth) people who identify beyond what is expected of them. This usage of *kathoey* describes people who are diverse in presentation but who are unified by an internal feeling of being beyond the *phet* norm. This category of *kathoey* reflects perhaps a broader category that existed before the explosion of *kathoey* sub-categories (Jackson, 2000). It is harder to define or capture because it can't be observed in the same way; it isn't restricted by specific aesthetic standards, so just looking at someone won't tell you whether they fall into this label (but it might become clear listening to someone speak or watching someone move). While the first use of the term *kathoey* relates to how someone looks, this second usage relates more toward internal feelings that don't align with Thailand's *phet* expectations for *phuchai*.

Finally, in addition to indicating feminine presentation or a certain sense of self, the participants used the term *kathoey* to refer to an over-the-top demeanor. Participant 6, for example, claims at different times the terms *gay*, *hua pok*, and *kathoey*. Talking about his *gay* look, however, he specifically used the term "calm." This is explicitly different from his drag (implicitly more *kathoey*) look, which is over-the-top. Participant 2 also connected the over-the-top element of drag performance to a certain *kathoey* essence. Participants 4, 7, and 8 connected certain excessive behaviors with being a *kathoey*. Some, but not all, of these instances of *kathoey* referring to a certain demeanor or behavior were somewhat self-deprecating. It's worth noting, though, that the behaviors described (loudness, confidence, dressing and acting over-the-top, sex work and sexual promiscuity, wanting to perform, playing dress-up) are not inherently negative. They are, however, looked down upon within Thai society that values orderliness, saving face, and following the rules. Even *kathoey* femininity is "hyper-real" or "hyper-femininity" (Tan, 2014); it is defined by its excessive recreation of feminine beauty standards. All this excessiveness resonates with the *wer* aesthetic Nguyen (2018) identifies in Thai queer art. Like the artists Nguyen describes, the participants in this project don't shy away from being over-the-top. Rather, they lean into it and align that very over-the-top nature with the term *kathoey*. *Kathoey* for these participants is no longer an insult or a word that is only to be used jokingly among friends as Käng (2012) suggests; *kathoey* is a term that these participants are proud of. Whether or not they would use the term consistently in every context, it is a word that they claim as their own and a word they are proud of. Like the *wer* aesthetic of Thai queer art, leaning into outsider status and claiming the word *kathoey* and its associated *wer* demeanor is an act of defiance.

5.2 Drag and *Kathoey*

Much of the language used by the participants regarding drag performance comes from the English language, even as these conceptualizations of drag may contradict what is actually happening on drag stages in Thailand. Because the current brand of drag that is gaining popularity in Thailand first gained great traction on English language media, many Thai drag queens turn to English language discourse to understand drag. This can be seen in the conclusions of Rattanadilok na Phuket and Kasa (2020) and the language used in Pangina Heals's 2018 interview. English discourse regarding sex, gender, and sexuality is different from Thai discourse regarding *phet*, which means talking about drag in Thailand demands a navigation of different frameworks of thought. Participant 1 was the only participant who suggested that feminine-presenting *kathoey* aren't supposed to be drag queens. However, the context of this comment was as an explanation for why Thai drag will never measure up to drag in the West. In this comment, she acknowledged that in Thailand, feminine (specifically "long-haired") *kathoey* do indeed perform in drag, and she recognized that doesn't line up with the most common mainstream discourse around drag (see Levin, 2018; Pattanalertpun, 2018). If the international drag authorities (i.e., RuPaul, Pangina Heals) suggest that feminine *kathoey* are not allowed to be drag queens, then it makes sense that someone might say that Thailand is doing it wrong. As that language and performance style are adopted into Thai culture, however, they are adopted selectively, and the global product is adapted to the local cultural landscape, what Pieterse (2009) calls a "cultural mélange."

It is also worth noting that Participant 1 was the oldest participant, and for all younger participants, drag is for everyone. This might represent a change in the visibility of more inclusive drag in Thailand. Even Participant 3, who claims not to have seen a *sao song* drag queen, still expresses that it's not out of the question. Participant 7 explains that she realized that drag was open to herself (a *sao song*) and anyone else who wanted to perform long before RuPaul started allowing trans people on his reality show. This perhaps makes sense given how *phet* in Thailand operates discursively. In the West, where gay men and trans women are seen as two totally different categories, it becomes easier to restrict the art to either one category or the other. While trans women have always been an important part of the US drag scene and the underground ballroom scene from which drag comes, if RuPaul uses his platform to claim that drag is for men, then trans women are immediately excluded. Based on the way the participants in this study talked about *phet*, however, *gay* and *hua pok* and *sao song* all have a home in the category of *kathoey*, and the lines in between the categories are much more tenuous. This effectively makes it harder to restrict the art of drag to any specific *phet* category.

Perhaps most interesting, rather than excluding *kathoey*, the participants in this research conceptualized drag in a way that made it seem like a space specifically made for *kathoey*. In one notable

instance, Participant 2 explicitly aligned the *wer* nature of drag with *kathoey*'s own *wer*-ness. Participants who might otherwise see themselves as a "normal *gay*", a *hua pok*, or a *sao praphet song* can reclaim and celebrate an expansive and inclusive *wer kathoey* space through drag. These performers use drag to open possibilities of being that are not available through *kathoey* cabaret or *sao song* pageantry. While academics (Jackson, 2000; Käng, 2012), activists (Samakkeekarom, 2020; Nok Yollada, as cited in Käng, 2012), the Thai state (Villar, 2017), Cabaret stages (Wuen, 2007; Tan, 2014), and even Thailand's most famous drag queen (Pattanalertpun, 2018) try to define, describe, delimit, regulate, and otherwise restrict *kathoey phet* expression, the participants of this research use drag performance in a way that doesn't fit neatly into any one of these narratives of what *kathoey* are or should be. Whereas Thai cabaret is connected to the Thai state's own economic imperatives, drag performance in Thailand remains unstandardized and unregulated, open to creativity and artistic innovation at the ground level. If a simplified mainstream understanding of drag in the West is "men becoming women onstage," perhaps Thai drag is "*kathoey* celebrating *kathoey* onstage." The drag stage in Thailand is a place where everyone who feels some connection with the term *kathoey* can reclaim that very category on their own terms. It's a place to transform, to be big, to be *wer*, to be powerful, to celebrate individuals, and to imagine possibilities that aren't possible elsewhere.

6. CONCLUSION

This study had two objectives: to shed light on contemporary Thai *phet* discourse and to understand better how Thai performers conceptualize and perform drag in Thailand in a way that challenges dominant discourse on Thai *phet*. Regarding the first objective, the participants in this study demonstrated that language around Thai *phet* is much more fluid and contextual than English language regarding sex, gender, and sexuality. Participants used *phet* terminology variably to describe appearance, identity, and demeanor. While terms like *trans, LGBT(Q)*, *gay*, *sao song*, *hua pok*, and *kathoey* were all used at times to create provisional categories to describe distinct groups of AMAB (assigned male at birth) people in a given instance, at other times all categories could fall under the larger category of *kathoey*. In this way, a participant might claim a term in one instance and then suggest in a different instance that they are not part of that same category.

Regarding the participants' understanding of drag performance, it seems that language from prominent figures that seeks to exclude trans women and (feminine) *kathoey* has not had a great effect on how drag is discussed or performed in Thailand. The performers do not uncritically adopt this performance style and discourse from the West, but re-embodying it in a way that makes sense to them. While one performer expressed that Western drag would always be better than Thai drag because there were no feminine-presenting (trans women) queens in the West (which is not true), she still acknowledged that in Thailand anyone can do drag. All other participants said that drag was open to anyone who wanted to perform, regardless of *phet*. In fact, many participants conceptualized drag in a way that specifically aligned it with the category of *kathoey* and its element of being over-the-top.

6.1 Potential contributions

This study provides valuable insight into contemporary Thai discourse regarding *phet*. Specifically, it shows how a group of *kathoey* in Chiang Mai actually use *phet* terms variably and contextually, complicating any neat identity-based framework for understanding *phet*. This study also further contributes to the literature regarding drag performance in Thailand and provides the first look at drag performance in Chiang Mai and the first study to connect Thai drag performance to the Thai *phet* system.

6.2 Future research

Because this study focused specifically on Chiang Mai, future research is needed to explore how Thai discourses around *phet* are similar or different in other places in Thailand or within diasporic communities. Additionally, future research can explore distinctions between the categories of *gay* and *hua pok* or can further investigate how the term *trans* is operating within the Thai lexicon. Further research can explore the connection between *kathoey* and *wer* in greater depth, perhaps identifying how the relationship with or perception of the characteristic over-the-top demeanor has changed overtime. Yet another line of inquiry worth pursuing is *kathoey* pronoun usage, expanding on the work of Attaviriyanupap (2015) particularly to account for the expansiveness and diversity of presentation of the category *kathoey*.

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