



Lund University  
Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies  
Master's Programme in Asian Studies  
South-East Asia Track  
Spring semester, 2009

**EXPRESSION OF SEXUALITY AND LIFESTYLE IN  
SINGAPORE AND BANGKOK  
A CASE OF SINGAPOREAN HOMOSEXUAL MEN**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis discusses the expression of sexuality and lifestyle among Singaporean homosexual men in the context of Singapore and Bangkok respectively. The objective of this research was not to generalize the pattern of the expression but to provide examples from individual cases. There were in total 13 Singaporean and Thai interviewees included in this research. These interviewees consisted of 7 Singaporean male homosexual respondents, 6 informants- 3 Thai masculine men, 2 Thai homosexual men and one feminine Thai woman. I utilized the performativity theory as a framework and negotiation of sexuality as a concept of analysis to comprehend the expression of sexual identities of homosexual men from Singapore. Based on findings, the research concludes that the homosexual identities varied according to the sexual context. In Singapore it was performed in specific gay spaces in regard to strict heterosexual norms. In contrast, it was not performed in the public and family area. However, they can negotiate their sexual identities in the family and some public places with their financial support role. In Bangkok, Singaporean homosexual men openly performed sexual identities in relation to the tourism and over commercialized context. Moreover the power of being *kaek*, tourist and foreigner strengthened their confidence to negotiate and perform the overt sexual identities both in specific gay spaces and in public places.

**Key words:** Singapore, Bangkok, gay, homosexuality, sexual identity, negotiation of sexuality, performativity, tourism

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## Foreword

First and foremost, without their moral support, love, caring and concerns, I will not be able to survive and finish the study, I would like to gracefully express my gratitude to my Choomgrant family particular Mae Ked, Pa Wat, Ar Oui, Ar Edd, N'Boong, N'Wan and N'Woon as well as Dhurakit Pundit University for the financial support. I would like to deeply thank Dr. Ann Kull, my supervisor for her patience to keep giving constructive comments and providing a friendly academic discussion and also thank Dr. Monica who inspired me to work on a gender issue. My thanks also go to Dr. Arianne who gave a good article, suggestions and kept cheering up.

While at Lund University, I have received a lot of new knowledge and experiences from teachers and friends at the programme as well as at University Kabangsaan Malaya (UKM) while taking a fieldwork course, where I have obtained useful suggestions on the thesis topic which not many have done. Thank you all teachers and staffs at both universities especially Dr. Eric, Dr. Shamsul and Dr. Ong of UKM

We have been cheering up each other whenever we had a problem. We shared the joy and happiness and helped whenever needed. I was very delighted to be around by “friends”. Special thanks to Nadia, Sun Mee, Katharine, Elinor, Danchuan, Em, Ajarn Aei, P'Sook, Koy and Jim who were always there for me.

“Welander” family is not only where I stayed but also is the place I called my second home. Thank you for your warm welcome and understanding. I was very impressed and learned many Swedish cultural traditions over a dining table and numerous activities with you, Edgar, Ingrid, Jonas and Kattis.

I would also like to sincerely thank all interviewees for your valuable information and sharing experience. I wish my study could be a “voice” for you somehow and also wish you will be able to live your own lives happily. Although the research has already been finished, friendship will last forever.

Finally I would like to express my great gratitude to Por Nu who, I know, is always supporting silently from above.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Problem

This current thesis topic has been formulated initially from my personal experience as a student receiving a scholarship to conduct a research in Singapore and a tourism teacher in Thailand. Singapore is one of the world's most globalized nations but at the same time very conservative. The example of such a contradictory phenomenon is homosexual related issues. According to Singaporean law, paragraph 377A

#### Outrage on decency

“Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite this discriminating context, there are some male homosexual attempts to be visible but unsuccessful and subservient to government's policies and social norms. Homosexuals in Singapore are also generally perceived as deviant, abnormal and illegal. As such I preliminarily assume that there is a social stratification and tension occurring towards homosexuals. These factors might possibly be the main drives stimulating homosexuals to temporarily go abroad. Thailand is a well-known tourist destination and obtains large revenue and income from the tourism industry. Thai tourism is related to the image which presents the characteristic of being a good host with the best hospitality. Thus, it has a good reputation which tourists are look for. For instance, Bangkok is perceived as a gay friendly city and is still maintaining this image for the purpose of attracting international gay tourists. However, Thailand is also emphasizing on its traditional cultures and practices which, more or less, make homosexuality unacceptable.

In this thesis, I am exploring the expression of sexuality and lifestyle performed by homosexual men from Singapore. Due to different sexual contexts between Singapore and Bangkok, it regulates people's perception and form of expression and lifestyle

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<sup>1</sup> <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/> penal code, chapter 224 accessed 18 February 2009

variously. As such it can be assumed that it is easier for Singaporean male homosexuals to be able to perform their sexualities in Bangkok. Thus, this research is focusing on how they perform their sexualities and lifestyles as well as the possibilities and constraints that influence these expressions.

## **1.2 Purpose and Research Questions**

Not much research has been carried out on Singaporean homosexuals. This thesis aims at providing a further piece of research and bringing more understanding of homosexuality performed in different contexts. Besides, this thesis will hopefully provide a springboard for a future higher degree. The objective of the analysis is not to generalize the pattern of sexuality and lifestyle. Rather, it provides examples from individual cases. Another purpose is to give “voice” for those “who are outside the social mainstream” (Ragin 1994: 83). Giving voice in this thesis should not be regarded as a protest against the Singaporean government. Rather, it wants to exhibit the existence of homosexuals and the need of them to be treated as everyone else in their home country.

To achieve the purpose of the thesis, there are several questions prepared for scrutinizing the expression of sexuality of Singaporean male homosexuals. These questions have been divided in to two main categories. Firstly, the main research question which is the core of the thesis. Secondly the sub research questions which are designed to examine related issues or problems. Chapter 2, 3 and 4 are each organized around one of these sub questions. The main research question is

- How Singaporean male homosexuals perform their sexualities and lifestyles in different contexts?

The sub research questions are

- How different or similar is the sexual society in Singapore and Thailand?

- How do they construct/perform their sexualities in Singapore?

- How do they express their sexualities while being tourists in Bangkok?

### **1.3 Design of Study**

This research is a qualitative research and benefits from a case study design. The case presented in this research is the expression of sexuality and lifestyle of Singaporean male homosexuals in two contexts; Singapore and Thailand. Creswell defines this type of research as “an instrumental case study” where “the researcher only focus on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue”(Creswell 2007: 74). Although this research mainly focuses on Singaporean male homosexual identities, I also apply a comparative approach in order to explore the factors of each context that drive the male homosexuals from Singapore to perform their sexualities in diverse forms in their home country and Bangkok.

### **1.4 Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework used in this thesis, performativity theory, is derived from Judith Butler, a linguist at University of California, Berkeley. In her book *Gender Trouble* (2007) Butler says,

“[g]ender proves to be performative-that is, constituting the identity. It is purported to be. In this sense gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed /.../ there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender that identity is performatively constituted by the very expression that are said to be its result”(Butler 2007: 34).

Before her work was first published in 1990, there was a critical study done by West and Zimmernan called *Doing Gender* (1987). They conclude that doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, that are not natural, essential, or biological (West and Zimmerman 1987: 137). Those two works are supportive each other. Although Butler’s focus is mainly about feminist theory and its surrounding problems, it shows that there is a paradigm of a so called normal sexuality which is socially and culturally constructed. Butler calls the expression of sexuality and lifestyle of homosexuals as “gender trouble” because this expression is not following the “matrix of illegibility”, in other words, the correlation between sex, gender and sexuality (Butler 2007: 23-24). Accordingly, the performativity theory is somehow influenced by



the social constructivism paradigm which believes that “the world is filled with repetitions and regularities /.../ these patterns are socially constructed even as the world appears to us as objective fact” (Moses and Knutsen 2007: 196-197).

In addition, this research benefits from the concept of “negotiation of sexuality” from Linda Malam’s article *Spatialising Thai Masculinities: negotiating dominance and subordination in Southern Thailand* (2008). Malam concludes that the masculine identities could be shifted and changed according to the situation. So they will negotiate their sexualities diversely in each circumstance (Malam 2008: 146). Although the sexuality has to be performed in accordance with the “matrix of illegibility”, homosexuals can also negotiate their sexual identities depending on which context they are in. As such, this research also applies the concept of “negotiation of sexuality” to describe the homosexual identity. In a nutshell Butler’s performativity theory and the “negotiation of sexuality” concept are aptly suitable and helps conceptualize the framework for scrutinizing the expression of male homosexual identities in different contexts in Singapore and Bangkok.

Sex, gender, sexuality and homosexuality are terms used throughout this research. They are synchronized and defined by the author from studying, discussing and consulting with books and articles related to gender and sexuality (Butler 2007, Crower 2007, Deutseh 2007, Fausto-Sterling 2000, Jackson 1995 and West and Zimmerman 1987). Sex is defined as a natural and biological symbol that distinguishes all human beings to two types: male and female. In other words everyone is born with sex because sex is genetically fertilized, innate and fixed. Gender is described as males and females’ conformity that is constructed by socialization process, and which presents the differences between males’ masculinity and females’ femininity. The masculine and feminine conformities vary in each society. Sexuality is an expression of gender which is performed both consciously and unconsciously but not naturally since the set of expression has long been socially constructed. Homosexuality is an expression of gender that is not performed in accordance with the correlation between sex and gender. In addition, tourist is defined as “people who are traveling to and staying in places outside

their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited”<sup>2</sup>. This is of importance as Singaporean male homosexuals studied in Bangkok are limited to the tourist category.

### **1.5 Method and Selection**

Empirical data is important for this study since it is dealing with a subculture that a few academic researchers have done. To receive appropriate empirical data, there are three methods employed; interviews, participant observation and collecting documents. Sometimes these methods are combined and used in a case chosen, the so called triangulation method. Other researches in this field, K.F Lim (2004), E.B Lim (2005), Jackson (1995) and Jackson and Sullivan (1999), have largely employed this method as well. Therefore, employing the qualitative methods, and particularly triangulation one, is appropriate for this current study. Baszanger and Doddier comment that phenomena studies “cannot be deducted but require empirical observation” (Baszanger and Doddier 2004: 10). Referring to the participant observation defined by the educational psychologist John W. Creswell, “the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day of the people and observes and interviews the group participant” (Creswell 2007: 68). However, I was not able to immerse myself into all of their activities since tourists did not stay in Thailand for such a long period and they also needed their private lives. I, therefore, was unable to fully apply participant observation.

From the choice of methods used in this thesis, I applied semi-structured interviews which allowed interviewees to have an opportunity to speak apart from what they were asked and not too much push the interviewees into discomfort and frustration. Moreover, some stories told were useful and led to other interesting issues. Language of communication affects the reliability of the data. There was one Singaporean homosexual communicating with me in Thai because none of the surrounding Singaporeans could understand the conversation something that probably increased the level of reliability.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.atmosphere.mpg.de/enid/Nr\\_9\\_July\\_6\\_Air\\_traffic/C\\_Tourism\\_5rw.html](http://www.atmosphere.mpg.de/enid/Nr_9_July_6_Air_traffic/C_Tourism_5rw.html) accessed on 22 May 2008

Although the rest of Singaporean men were interviewed in English it was conducted in an appropriate place chosen by the interviewees, such as in the inner corner of a restaurant, in a car or in a public park during the day time when not crowded. All Singaporean interviewees were willing to be interviewed unconditionally which demonstrates their candid offers and frank assistances. The interviewees are aged 23-54 and have had the experience of being homosexual at home as well as being a tourist in Bangkok.

To access and obtain a proper number of interviewees in Singapore two options were prepared. First, I made use of [travvy.com](http://travvy.com) and [fridae.com](http://fridae.com), two of the “most visited gay and lesbian site in Singapore”<sup>3</sup> where I registered for a membership and posted my profile and objective of being there. I also used these and similar websites for additional materials (see below for a detailed account of my personal role). Second, I have selected the interviewees through some places such as gay clubs and shopping malls. The most effective strategy was the first one. However, the second plan was also useful although it did not provide an in depth interview environment. In Thailand, the selection procedure was similar to the one in Singapore. But I was more focused on the second plan-to go and select them randomly in some known gay areas in Bangkok. I also have contacted Singaporean interviewees who were coming to Bangkok while I was doing fieldwork in order to carry out interviews in both countries.

Since only one Singaporean male homosexual tourist was interviewed in Bangkok, the plan had to be adjusted due to the low number of interviewees to more observation and also include interviewing and informal conversation with Thais who interacted with those Singaporean homosexuals. These interviewees were randomly selected and most of them were working in the service industry (hotel, restaurant, taxi and street vendor). The information from them reflects their perceptions of being a good host and income receiver, which might distort the data in consideration to the code of conduct. Still the semi-structured interview method made the situation more comfortable. In addition, it also reflects the Singaporean homosexual’s identities from Thais’ perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the first page of the website [www.travvy.com](http://www.travvy.com) and [www.fridae.com](http://www.fridae.com)

The period of fieldwork in Singapore lasted from 20 December 2008 – 28 January 2009 and in Thailand from 29 January – 20 March 2009. Some interviewees bargained to have intercourse before giving an interview and therefore it was only seven persons who were willing to help and be interviewed unconditionally. In Thailand due to the problem of approaching the interviewees and the unforeseen situation of political conflict, the number of interviewees was lower than expected. In total, I have done one interview and one correspondence through email with Singaporeans while doing fieldwork in Bangkok. However, various observations in many places where homosexuals gather and meet such as Silom Soi 2, Surawongse Road, Lamsali district, shopping centers and Jatujak weekend market provide useful additional information. Although the number of interviewees seemed deficient, the interview questions included their experiences in Bangkok as well as their lives in Singapore. Moreover, I have interviewed four Thais who experienced interacting with Singaporean gay men in order to obtain additional data.

### **1.6 Analysis and Transcribing Interviews**

While doing fieldwork both in Singapore and Thailand, the interviewees did not allow a tape recorder to be used. Therefore, note taking has been done while interviewing and it did not distract the interviewees. As some interviews were done in a restaurant, it might not be appropriate to write down the note right there but all information were written down immediately after the interviews ended. For observation and informal conversation in a club, it was written down right after the discussion stopped. All data have been presented in a third person tone. Moreover, the data is not rephrased or cut or altered but is occasionally made grammatical correct. In some cases, where I have written it down after the interviews, I do not quote but rather I use them as paraphrased. The information obtained from interviews was analyzed by employing the “embedded analysis” in order to investigate the individual’s interview carefully (Creswell 2007:75). Additionally the data from each interview was compared and contrasted to explore the correctness and to complement each other. Data from interviews and observation are also sufficient to be analyzed in order to present the possibilities and constraints for Singaporean homosexuals to be able to perform their sexual identities. However, this thesis does not

aim at generalizing the pattern of sexual identities of Singaporean male homosexuals. Rather, it is analyzed as individual cases.

### **1.7 Criticism of the Sources**

The interviewees vary by age, educational level, family background and lifestyles, factors that influence their ideas towards the situation. For example, “D” is the oldest Singaporean respondent among seven. He has experienced the homosexual criminalization and difficulties for 31 years more than the youngest “E” who is 23 years old. The other interviewees are aged 30-38 which can be presumed that they almost grew up in the same generation. They received the same influence and impact from similar phenomenon such as economic growth, economic crisis and educational system.

Five respondents are ethnic Chinese and they all have received a higher degree or education. “A” and “B” were educated in England and Australia respectively. “C” graduated from a technical school. “D” received a bachelor in history from National University of Singapore where “E” is also taking a bachelor degree. Their works do not allow them to practice their sexualities. “A” and “B” are salesmen. “C” is a construction coordinator and “D” is a tutor. Considering their careers, it forces them into the situation of being in a “closet”<sup>4</sup> with an exception of “A” who performed his homosexuality at home and among friends but not with work colleagues. Two interviewees are Malay Muslim; “Y” and “Z”. One of the interviews was conducted via email, “Y” case. “Z” is 40 years old. He obtained a diploma and works as an instructor. “Y” is 27 years old. He holds an art certificate and works as an art teacher at an elementary school. Although their age gap is quite wide, Muslim culture forcefully confines them to follow a “matrix of illegibility”. “Y” said he has “come out”<sup>5</sup> to friends and colleagues but not to the family.

In the cases of Thai interviewees and informal conversations, they all vary by age, sex, educational level, career and family background. “F” and “G” are the same age and share

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<sup>4</sup> This word is generally used to define a homosexual person who still keeps his homosexuality secret.

<sup>5</sup> This word is generally used to define a homosexual person who no long keeps his homosexuality secret, rather he lets everyone know.

level of education (*Mattayom* 3 or equally secondary school). Both of them have migrated from rural areas to Bangkok to work. These two men are from a poor family background while “J”, female and studying for Ph.D at Chulalongkorn University is from a middle-class family. “I” received a bachelor and used to frequently travel to Singapore. In addition, there are also two informal conversations which are brought into this study. “K” is a taxi driver and “L” is a hair stylist. Information and comments from all Thai interviewees are also used to describe the characteristic of expression of Singaporean male homosexuals but are treated as individual opinions and secondary sources only.

**Table 1: Interviewee**

Name	Age	Sex	Education	Occupation	Sexuality
A(ch-sg)	32	man	B.Sc from UK	Salesperson	Homosexual
B(ch-sg)	38	man	B.BA from Aus.	Salesperson	Homosexual
C(ch-sg)	38	man	Diploma.	Construction Coordinator	Homosexual
D(ch-sg)	54	man	B.A from NUS	Tutor	Homosexual
E(ch-sg)	23	man	-	Bachelor Student at NUS	Homosexual
F(th)	23	man	Secondary School	Waiter at Siam Paragon	Heterosexual
G(th)	23	man	Secondary School	Street vendor	Heterosexual
I(th)	42	man	Bachelor	N/A	Homosexual
J(th)	32	woman	Ph.D candidate	Part time lecturer	Heterosexual
K(th)*	35	man	N/A	Taxi driver	Heterosexual
L(th)*	31	man	Bachelor	Hair stylist	Homosexual
Y(ml-sg)**	27	man	Art cert.	Art teacher	Homosexual
Z(ml-sg)	40	man	Diploma	Instructor	Homosexual

**Abbreviation note** sg-ch is Chinese Singaporean. ml-sg is Malay Muslim Singaporean th is Thai. \* Informal conversation \*\* Interview through email.

A,B,C,D and E were interviewed in Singapore while the rest were done in Bangkok.

## 1.8 Ethical Considerations

I presented myself as a master student who was conducting fieldwork and writing up a master thesis at Lund University with an introductory letter from Singapore Institution of International Affairs (SIIA). Moreover, I have declared my own sexuality when asked in order to be honest to the interviewees and it was helpful because I was perceived as one of them. It helped reduce the gender gap and all gay interviewees felt more relaxed and confident while being interviewed. I also shared my experiences in Bangkok if asked in order to develop a reciprocal relation. While doing fieldwork in Singapore, I have been asked to have intercourse in exchange for the interviews but I denied politely. This research issue is sensitive in Singapore since homosexual practices are criminalized, thus, all interviewees are kept under a pseudonym in consideration to their security and to demonstrate respect to their personal expression and lifestyle.

## 1.9 Previous Research

There are only a few numbers of researches dealing with homosexual issues in Singapore. In contrast, there are quite a large number of works on Thai homosexuals. Concerning Singapore there are, to my knowledge, at least 4 academic works in this field. Kean Fan Lim in the article *Where Love Dares(not) Speak Its Name: The Expression of Homosexuality in Singapore* (2004), Malvin Chng Eng Hee in *All Dressed Up but No Place To Go?: Gay Men's Space in Singapore* (1999), Jason Khoo Xuah Ju in *SQ21: Construction of Gay Identities in Singapore* (2006) and *Glocalqueering in New Asia: The politics of Performing Gay in Singapore* by Eng Beng Lim (2005). However, there are some additional gay related books published in Singapore. These are Joseph Lo and Huang Guoqin(eds) (2003), *People Like Us: Sexual Minorities in Singapore* and Ng King Kang (1999), *The Rainbow Connection: The Internet and The Singapore Gay community*. Nonetheless, in this section emphasis is on the first four researches.

Hee studies gay spaces with regards to the heterosexual environment in Singapore. The author presents gay reality in Singapore and tries to generalize the origin of gay spaces. In addition, Hee summarizes that the “twisted” gender identities of Singaporean gay men are important because they can practice gay behaviour in the specific spaces while in

public they do not (Hee 1999: 58-59). K.F Lim aims to study how social space is constructed and reinforces heterosexuality. He also examines the overt spatial expression of homosexuality by scrutinizing the subtle strategies such as the government reaffirmation of heteronormativity, homosexual's Nation Party and the media. This article mainly accentuates the expression in specific spaces constructed by Singapore homosexuals. K.F Lim concludes that homosexuals destabilize the heteronormativity by their spatial practices and subtle strategies which make them visible publicly (K.F Lim 2004: 1781-1782). This article is also useful regarding basic information of how Singaporean society has been constructed heteronormatively and how homosexuals react to this norm. However, K.F Lim studies homosexuals' reaction to the heteronormativity on the macro level, rather than the individual level. E.B Lim in his article discovers the characteristic of Singaporean homosexual identities through the stage performances called *Asian Boy Vol. 1* which was based on the homosexual situation and homosexual's desire in Singaporean society. This fiction used an angel representing the Singaporean government who was brought to the earth by a homosexual boy to witness a real world. This reflects the reality in Singaporean society and the need of homosexuals concerning social acceptance. Moreover the researcher argues that the homosexual identities in Singapore are unique and mixed between local and global queer identity as such they can make "their own queer world" (E.B Lim 2005: 404). Finally, Khoo explores gay identities by reviewing and scrutinizing the book named *SQ21: Singapore queers in the 21st century*. Khoo mainly analyzes the text and the story told by some gays and lesbians and comments that "gay identity is not discovered and then expressed, but it is actually produced through repeated discursive acts" (Khoo 2006: 15). However, Khoo's work is useful for the background of the context in Singapore.

There are a considerable number of books and articles that deal with Thai homosexual and most of them are about sex workers and social problems. Only a few researches tackle homosexual identity *per se*. These researches are Peter A. Jackson in *Dear Uncle Go: Male Homosexuality in Thailand* (1995), and Peter Jackson and Gerard Sullivan in *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys, Male and Female Homosexuality in Contemporary Thailand Thailand* (1999). Jackson's first book deals with almost every aspect of the



lives of male homosexuals, for instance, the development of male homosexuals in Thailand, terminologies, the gay scene and culture, and male homosexual identity. Jackson also differentiates Thai homosexual identity from the western one. This is due to the different historical background, and traditional and cultural practices in Thailand, hence, it affects the different idea of performing the homosexual identity (Jackson 1995: 292). The second book is similar in writing style and aspect but includes both male and female homosexual. Moreover it deals with the problem caused by sex workers such as HIV/AIDS and illegal sexual service (Jackson and Gerard 1999). In addition, Douglas Sanders's article *Some Say Thailand Is a Gay Paradise* (2002) discusses the status of Thailand as a gay paradise. Referring to Jackson's studies and his own experience, Sanders concludes that Thailand is a gay paradise in term of the cultural difference and easy access to sexual services but not in term of social acceptance and global gay culture (Sanders 2002: 61). These three researches are helpful when discussing the Thai homosexual reality, identities and background.

### **1.10 Disposition**

This research is structured into 5 chapters. Following the first introductory chapter, the second chapter provides an overview of the sexual society in both Singapore and Thailand. This aims to demonstrate the heteronormative reality as well as similarities and differences between the two countries. The third chapter describes and discusses the construction of sexual identities of Singaporean homosexual men as well as the possibilities and constraints of practicing homosexuality. The fourth chapter presents and analyzes the homosexual reality in Bangkok and factors that give opportunities or obstacles for Singaporean gay men to perform their homosexuality. Similar to chapter three, this chapter describes the characteristic of sexual identities studied during fieldwork. The last chapter provides conclusions of how Singaporean male homosexuals perform their sexual identities in different contexts at home in Singapore and as tourists in Bangkok.

## **2. The Sexual Society in Singapore and Thailand**

This chapter aims to describe and analyze the factors which influence and shape the sexual society in Singapore and Thailand, and which construct the perception towards sexuality. In addition, this chapter's goal is also to scrutinize the differences and similarities of the sexual society in both countries. These characteristics serve as a background to analyze the expression of sexuality performed by Singaporean homosexual men.

### **2.1 Characteristic of Singapore: Modernized and Globalized Nation**

Singapore<sup>6</sup> is situated in the South of mainland Malaysia with a population of four million people. Singapore has quickly been developed between 1960-1980 (Peebles and Wilson 2002: 5). It is evident that since the 1990s Singapore became significantly more modernized and globalized. In 2004 Singapore was the world's most globalized nation<sup>7</sup> and the sixth world's most globalized city in 2008.

Singaporean society is not homogenous but consists of diverse ethnicities. It means its society is multicultural and mixed. Many scholars have intensively studied and concluded the characteristics of Singaporean society in the same direction. L. Wee gives an intrinsic explanation that Singapore has the flexible management of culture and it leads to the national culturalism (L. Wee 2002: chapter 5). As well as L. Wee, Chua illustrates that Singaporean government has synchronized the creation of national identities and national capitalism. He also describes the "common bond" as "competitiveness, individual merit and individualization" (Chua 1998: 32-33). According to L. Wee and Chua, it is quiet clear that the government is the main actor in creating the stereotype of Singaporean characteristics, however, it overlooks the reaction from society something that is another push factor for the Singaporean government to synchronize and create the collective identities as well as the heteronormative practices.

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<sup>6</sup> For more general details can be found at CIA website <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sn.html> accessed 21 April 2009

<sup>7</sup> [www.atkearney.com/shared\\_res/pdf/2005G-index.pdf](http://www.atkearney.com/shared_res/pdf/2005G-index.pdf) accessed 4 April 2009

## **2.2 The Creation of Heteronormativity in Singapore**

Singaporean government has played an indispensable role in almost every aspect of the nation, such as national development, social formation, identity and private life. With a Chinese majority in the country Confucianism has influenced the government and society to sustain the traditional beliefs, practices and cultures. In addition, the other ethnic groups, Malay and Indian, have their own religious and cultural traditions which are also allowed to celebrate and demonstrate both locally and nationally. It means the government has to maintain the harmony and dampen conflict in terms of a culture clash. Although Singaporean government has not intervened into cultural and traditional practices, it subtly penetrates to other areas like family, education and law (K.F Lim 2004, B.H. Lim 2005 and Teo 2006). All these areas can be regarded as important in the continuous confirmation of the heterosexual norms of Singaporean society.

To begin with the family, Teo points out that due to the rapid economic growth, which might destroy the tradition and culture, the state takes a responsibility to take care of the family because it connects to the wellbeing of nation (Teo 2006 : 6). In addition, the state policies towards family aim at encouraging a couple to marry and bear children in an appropriate age and time when they both can financially support their own family. Also government stimulates its policies to be effective by providing many incentives, for example the Baby Bonus and The Third Child Paid Maternity Leave Scheme (ibid, 6-10). Clearly it shows the government's concerns towards family as well as highlighting heterosexual relations. Moreover Confucianism or Islam in the case of Muslims regulates the everyday life of Singaporeans. This value is relevant to the relation between people, their roles in the society and the reproduction of the family. As such, it formulates the concept of suitable conformity in regarding with the social norms. It affects even a male homosexual to decide to get married in order to fulfill the family need and follow the norms. This is the case with "Z" who said,

“At the age of 31 I got married but only for two nights. As everybody says guys must marry so I married a girl recommended by my sister. But I didn't love her and totally had no feeling towards girls” (interview “Z” 18 March 2009)

Secondly in reference to the Singapore's sex education syllabus homosexuality is taught not to be strange or repulsive but "it cannot fulfill the life and natural life experience" (K.F Lim 2004: 1774). K.F Lim concludes that this syllabus can demonstrate the role of the government on distinguishing homosexuality from the heterosexuality and on creating a mindset to students (Ibid). Upon the observation at National University of Singapore and the interview with "E", it seems sensitive to discuss homosexuality publicly. To answer my question if the instructor ever mentioned gay related issues, "E" revealed that it was mentioned but very briefly (interview "E" 18 January 2009). However, in some department at National University of Singapore, lecturers and students have occasionally done researches on homosexual issues. There are a few numbers of bachelor theses and academic researches of Department of Geography and English found such as Hee (1999), Khoo (2006) and K.F Lim (2004). Noticeably these three researches are related to the homosexual identities and spaces rather than directly discussing the homosexual right. It might be initially assumed that as long as education does not support homosexual practices against the law 377A it is allowed but restricted.

Lastly, the law, which is the most effective government tool to criminalize and marginalize homosexuality, explicitly states that homosexual men's sexual behaviour are illegal. Moreover, there is no law or policy providing rights or privileges to homosexuals similar to others and particularly to couples. For instance, to buy an apartment from Housing and Development Board (HDB), a heterosexual couple can afford a new inexpensive flat from the government while single persons can purchase a resale flat from HDB at the age 35<sup>8</sup>. It means homosexual couples are in a difficult situation to live together. Though they want to purchase their own flat before turning 35, they have to buy in the open market which is "far more expensive" (Young 2008). Additionally, being homosexual is reported as an illness in the soldier's medical file<sup>9</sup> (K.F Lim 2004: 1765). "E" elaborates that this record will be reported to the central department and affects applications applying for positions in the government office (interview "E" 18 January

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<sup>8</sup> There are more details regarding the Single Singapore Citizen Scheme at [http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10201p.nsf/WPDis/Buying%20A%20Resale%20FlatEligibility%20Scheme%20-%20Single%20Singapore%20Citizen%20Scheme?OpenDocument&SubMenu=Eligibility\\_Schemes](http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fi10/fi10201p.nsf/WPDis/Buying%20A%20Resale%20FlatEligibility%20Scheme%20-%20Single%20Singapore%20Citizen%20Scheme?OpenDocument&SubMenu=Eligibility_Schemes) accessed 29 April 2009

<sup>9</sup> All Singaporean males have to join the military service for 2 years

2009). It can be said that there is still difficult for homosexuals to take up positions in the government office, in fact, homosexual men are often considered as unacceptable.

From the above examples of the reiteration of heteronormativity, it is obvious that the government is the main actor in discriminating homosexuality. K.F Lim states that “the governance of subject is through disseminating expert discourses of social and/or medical pathology about the “deviancy” of homosexuality and to the extent that homosexual’s self regulation and self-censorship are affected” (K.F Lim 2004: 1763). On the one hand it means the strong heteronormativity is strengthened and repeated. On the other hand, as long as the society still has the firm heteronormative perception, it also influences the government to prolong the construction of heteronormativity. Therefore, it is not only the government who plays a significant role in reinforcing the perception of heteronormativity in society but also the society itself that pressures the government to maintain the normative sexuality.

### **2.3 Characteristic of Thailand: Land of Smile**

Thailand<sup>10</sup> is situated in the mainland Southeast Asia with approximately sixty-four million populations. Thailand has instituted the economic development since 1960s. The production structure has been drastically transformed from agrarian economy to a newly industrializing economy in 1990s. Particularly during 1980s because of many comparative advantages of the country rather than its neighbours, the tourism industry has been flourished and promoted, and has become one of the major industries. In this section, the important characteristics of Thailand will be briefly described; national identity and tourism.

It is widely accepted that there are three main principles related to Thai national identity; *Chat, Sas Sa Na* and *Pra Ma Ha Kasat* (literally nation, religion and monarch). The three colours on the Thai flag present national identity; red represents *Chat*, white represents *Sas Sa Na* and blue in the middle represents *Pra Ma Ha Kasat*. Additionally, *Chat* means

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<sup>10</sup> For more details can be found at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html> accessed 21 April 2009

the independence, *Sas Sa Na* refers to Buddhism and Finally *Pra Ma Ha Kasat* is the king of Thailand. Therefore Thai national identity shall be defined as every characteristic that depicts Thai people who are proud of the independence of their nation, believe firmly in Buddhism and unconditionally respect the king. In brief, a paradigm of national identity has been greatly influenced by these three main pillars which the Thai government uses as a tool to create perception of the homogeneity of the country.

Another important characteristic of Thailand is being a famous tourist destination. The notion of Thai tourism is not only the beauty of the country, the richness of culture and tradition, and friendly people but also the sex industry. The larger supply of sexual service became visible seen during the 1980s in the economic growth period. Bell analyzes the characteristics of export-led growth from many aspects and one of them is the use of tourism as an important source of foreign exchange, moreover, he also emphasizes that “the conceptions of beauty have tended to commodify women and turn them into sex objects and objects for the gratification of Thai and Western males” (Bell 1997: 63). Bishop, too, stresses the role of Tourism Authority of Thailand on indirectly promoting sex tourism throughout many commercials, brochures and magazines (Bishop 1998: 65-75). Additionally, the international tourism agencies presented “the exotic image of submissive” (Margar 2005: 244). Both national and international levels have, more or less, reproduced the perception of Thai sex tourism among foreigners. As such nowadays Tourism Authority of Thailand is trying to endorse Thai cultures, traditions and world heritages in order to diminish such a negative image and to restore the reputation of being the land of smile instead of sex.

#### **2.4 The Creation of Heteronormativity in Thailand**

Unlike Singapore, the heteronormative concept is not reinforced directly by education, family policy and law but it does not mean there is no heteronormativity. Rather, it is embedded with cultural and traditional practices as well as social norms which are regarded as significant areas of emphasizing heteronormative norms. However, it is loosely constructed. Hence, this section will present the establishment of heterosexuality through common traditional and cultural practices, and social norms.

To begin with the cultural and traditional practices, Buddhism plays a significant role in a majority of Thai's way of life as well as Islam in Thai Muslim life. Here Buddhist practices will be presented as it is regarded as being one of the three main national identities. *Buat Gon Biat* (literally be ordained before having sex) is a good example to confirm heterosexual practices, although there are several explanations of this belief. Buddhist men when they reach the age of 20 are expected to be ordained because it is a way to attain masculinity, donate merit to mothers and establish their own family. For women to be feminine, she has to be a mother. Whittaker's study on "staying by fire practice"<sup>11</sup> implies that in this practice women will achieve their destiny through motherhood (Whittaker 2002: 33). Clearly these two examples confirm heterosexuality.

Another aspect of heteronormative reaffirmation is the social norms towards gender. In Thai society the conformity of each gender is socially perceived as appropriate manners. Most Thai people assume that

"To be born as a woman, she should concern her prettiness and beauty, be graceful and polite, and be aware of contacting to other people in order to prepare to be a good wife and mother in the future. To be born as a man, he should have leadership, be strong and reasonable, be a family leader and responsible for the nation by doing a military service"<sup>12</sup>.

There are also various sexual norms which are reproduced through proverbs, poems and novels. Some of them are presented in the school books such as *Wicha Pasa Thai* (Thai language subject) and *Wicha Sang Kom Suk Sa* (social studies subject), which are used by all Thai students until *Mattayom 6* (high school equivalent).

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<sup>11</sup> This is a traditional belief and will be performed after delivering a child in order to restore the health and kill viruses by the heat.

<sup>12</sup> This is an excerpt from <http://www.oknation.net/blog/print.php?id=181042> accessed 12 April 2009 besides, there are many poems teaching how to be an appropriate woman and child for example, Sunthron Phu's poems and The Children of The Nation Song.

## **2.5 The Findings: Similarities and Differences**

Referring to an overview of Singaporean and Thai perception on heteronormativity, there are some similarities and differences between the two countries. To begin with the similarities, social norms and values regulate the thought, opinion, manner and perception towards gender although the degree of the emphasis is significantly different in each country. Confucianism and other religions in Singapore strictly confirm heterosexual practices such as all men have to marry to sustain the family, to reproduce beings to the nation meanwhile Buddhism and traditional practices in Thailand give examples of how to have a proper sexuality. To ordain is not a must for every Buddhist man, it is only the way to present his gratefulness to his mother and to reach heterosexual masculinity. There are still several alternatives to demonstrate masculinity such as being a good son, taking care of parents and serving a nation by being a soldier. Motherhood is not the only way to attain femininity. Women can express her femininity through other proper manners such as being polite, shy and modest.

Turning to the differences Singaporean and Thai governments are employing different strategies to fortify heterosexual values. The Singaporean government aims at the common areas such as family, education and law due to the diversity of cultural and traditional practices while common cultural and traditional practices regarding Buddhism are socially emphasized by Thai government. In addition, Thailand has no law sentencing homosexuals while Singapore's law explicitly does and the law in Singapore seems to be sustained and can not be abolished easily. This makes the legal role of each nation's government different. The law in Singapore provides authorized legitimacy to the government to keep society under surveillance, while Thai government does not have the legal right to intervene in individual's gender and sexuality.



### **3. The Construction of Male Homosexual Identities in Singapore**

#### **Introduction**

Singapore has at least 7 gay<sup>13</sup> clubs and one of the most famous is PLAY. On New Year Eve 2008, I was lining up and waiting at the dimly-lit decorated street for entering. In the queue, there were quite a number of local young male Singaporean homosexuals and a few westerners chit-chatting and exchanging their opinions on their clothes and appearances. They seemed so excited to gather and meet each other at PLAY. It transcended my expectation since the notion of law and the strict conservative society has created a negative perception of being homosexual in Singapore. Being inside, it was even livelier, some of the guests expressed passionate kisses and desire for each other while some of them danced topless on the stage and screamed happily. Regarding the first observation at PLAY, it proves that homosexuality in Singapore really exists (fieldwork note, taken on 2 January 2009)

The presence of homosexuality in Singapore cannot be excessively interpreted as homosexuals are socially accepted or that they have more freedom and ignore the law. In contrast, it demonstrates that homosexuals are struggling to have their lifestyles at least in some specific spaces. Therefore this chapter is structured in two main sections, these are: homosexual context; and the possibilities and constraints to perform the homosexual identities respectively. This structure is useful when answering the sub-research question: How do Singaporean homosexuals perform their sexual identities in their home country?

#### **Homosexual Context**

According to previous academic researches and books discussing homosexuality in Singapore, all of them conclude that homosexuals are perceived as deviant, unacceptable and contend with sexual discrimination (Hee 1999, Kang 1999, Khoo 2007, K.F Lim 2004, E.B Lim 2005, Lo and Guoqin 2003 and Offord 2003). Social defined deviance has

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<sup>13</sup> I used the term “gay” to define a male homosexual in Singapore context as the western world does because Singapore had been colonized by Great Britain for many years and their official language is English. Therefore when using the term “gay” I also mean male homosexual. Although Lesbian is included in “homosexuality”, it seems according to Law lesbian has more “legal” spaces than gay.

been emphasized through various discourses, such as the media and religious norms. Additionally, the reiteration of heteronormativity has a major impact on creating such a perception towards homosexuals who, according to Butler, “fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (Butler 2007: 23). Singaporean society as well as many other countries has the concept of “matrix of illegibility” which means the ability to maintain the coherence of sex, gender and sexuality, sexual practice and desire (ibid). Specifically, within the Singapore context, Chinese Confucianism and other religious beliefs provide an indispensable principle for how a person should behave and conform according to their genders and roles in a society. For instance, a man is supposed to be a family leader, marry with a woman and reproduce. All Chinese men in Singapore are supposed to follow Confucianism and the “matrix of illegibility”. Likewise, other ethnic groups follow their norms. Apparently homosexuals are unable to follow the “matrix of illegibility” and religious values.

The deviant defined characteristic, however, was seemingly mitigated according to the unprecedented answer given by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1998 when asked about the gay situation in Singapore.

“Well, it’s not a matter which I can decide or any government can decide. It’s a question of what a society considers acceptable. And as you know, Singaporeans are by and large a very conservative, orthodox society, a very, I would say, completely different from, say, the United States and I don’t think an aggressive gay rights movement would help. But what we are doing as a government is to leave their own lives so long as they don’t impinge on other people. I mean, we don’t harass anybody”<sup>14</sup>.

In his answer he clearly referred to societal acceptance rather than mentioning about government’s role on emphasizing heteronormativity. That is the subtle strategy of Singaporean government to stigmatize and marginalize homosexuals. Nevertheless, Singaporean government has not taken any actions to amend the above cited colonial

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<sup>14</sup> Cited from News Editor (a) 2007, Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew questions gay sex Law [www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/article.php?articleid=1905&viewarticle=1](http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/article.php?articleid=1905&viewarticle=1) accessed 15 February 2009

377A law that describes homosexuality as an illegal punishable behaviour or to reconstruct the perception towards homosexuality. To the contrary the law is still active and imposed constantly as shown in 2001 when two men were arrested for having oral sex at a sauna called “One Seven” (K.F Lim 2004, 1759). However this issue has been of public interest and the attempt of homosexuals to be visible has somehow influenced the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to allow homosexual employees to take up even sensitive positions. He announced that “homosexuals are not sick, but just different: we are born this way and they are born that way, but they are like you and me” (ibid, 1760). Practically, homosexuals are still banned as shown in August 2006 when the gay related public lecture by Professor Sanders on *Sexual Orientation in International Law-The Case of Asia* as well as the photographic exhibition depicting same sex counterparts kissing were not allowed to proceed<sup>15</sup>.

Recently in 2007 there was an intense debate in the Singapore parliament about section 377A, most of the issues presented at the parliament were related to the social acceptance of homosexuals and whether or not the section should be repealed. According to the debate, there were both supportive and disapproval groups, the then (and incumbent) Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed his opinion in the same way as the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew did nine years before about the majority acceptance of homosexuals. Lee Hsien Loong stated

“They too must have a place in this society and they too are entitled to their private lives. We should not make it harder than it already is for them to grow up and to live in a society **where they are different from most Singaporeans**” (Tan (a) 2007-emphasized by author).

However, he also said “gays should not set the tone for Singapore society” (ibid).

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<sup>15</sup> The details can be found at Tan (b) 2007 <http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/article.php?articleid=2005&viewarticle=1&searchtype=section&cat=&title=singapore%20authorities%20ban%20lecture> accessed 18 February 2009

Referring to Lee Hsien Loong's statement, homosexuality is still seen as deviant and unacceptable. Nonetheless, there are several reasons to be made to figure out why the Singaporean government did not repeal the Law 377A. One possible rationale is that it might be a disturbance of the Singaporean majority's sexual norms. Referring to Ho Kwon Pin's article in *Today*, it reflects the situation of homosexuals in the home country:

“In reality, rather than in Law, gays in Singapore today have never had it so good. Sure, if you compared our plight with the generation before us, we are certainly more visible today. However, we are far from ‘having it good’ ”<sup>16</sup>.

Clearly what Singaporean homosexuals lack and seek is the social acceptance which means that the heteronormativity perception has to be deconstructed.

### **3.1 Gay Scene in Singapore**

While particularly male homosexuals lack social acceptance and are still under the government surveillance, I have argued earlier that homosexuals exist, more obviously in specific areas. Doing fieldwork in Singapore, I was introduced to many cruising places, clubs, shopping malls and saunas for gays by interviewees. However, I personally chose to visit and observe only gay clubs, shopping malls and cruising areas with them. Because gay saunas are known to be a place for sex-seekers, one night stand and short term pleasure. Moreover it is still illegal and can be raided anytime, hence, for my own security and as a researcher I decided not to visit these places.

#### **3.1.1 Gay Bars and Clubs**

Gay clubs and bars are mostly situated in the Chinatown district and Clake Quay area<sup>17</sup> and run legally considering the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's announcement “They don't have to go underground” (Tan (a) 2007). There are additional 20 gay saunas mostly located in Chinatown area as well. The saunas are not as “legal” as bars and clubs since the notion of sauna is for sex which is against the law. Nonetheless, “if they don't

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<sup>16</sup> Cited from Ted Young (2008) [www.trevvy.com/scoops/article.php?a\\_id=392&c\\_id=3](http://www.trevvy.com/scoops/article.php?a_id=392&c_id=3) accessed 14 February 2009 Ho Kwon Pin is the most dominant business man in Singapore.

<sup>17</sup> For the name and exact location can be found at [www.utopia-asia.com/tipssing.htm](http://www.utopia-asia.com/tipssing.htm) accessed 14 February 2009

provide condoms, they can run normally” (interview “A” 21 December 2008) but there is a possibility that police can investigate and arrest gay men which happened previously. However, this phenomenon cannot be interpreted as government and social acceptance towards homosexuality but rather it is a resilient strategy which “A” noticed “they close one eye as long as we don’t do any gross actions publicly” (ibid). In contrast, the government can open the other eye any time and the law can be activated when necessary (K.F Lim 2004: 1772). It also shows the political power which maintains and stipulates the social normativity while allowing gays to have more spaces within the nation.

Noticeably, gay bars and clubs are within the same areas where heterosexual bars and clubs are located. It reflects, either intentionally or accidentally, that the gay scene might not be distinctively presented, rather it needs to be cohesive with the heteronormative ones. Some clubs such as Venom is not specifically for homosexuals but will “transform” into a queer space on Sunday night when the majority of its patrons are homosexuals (Hee 1999: 64). Once PLAY closed at 2am of 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2009, there were a number of people from both gay and other clubs and bars in that area waiting for a taxi or a bus. If I had not recognized them from PLAY, I would not have been able to distinguish homosexual men from other people on the street.

### **3.1.2 Shopping Centers**

Besides the gay bars, clubs, and saunas, there are some shops which are widely known about its reputation for gays. Regarding the observation and participating shopping activities with respondents, it was obvious that those boutiques sell colourful clothes, fashionable ornaments and accessories with affordable prices. The expensive shops are located on Orchard Road, the most famous shopping street. However, those shops are not labeled as specifically for male homosexuals. In fact all clients are welcomed but the repeatedly visit of male homosexuals makes it sound gay. If the heteronormativity is socially constructed, in the same way, gay people also construct their own places.

### **3.1.3 Cruising Areas**

A cruising place is where many gays frequently seek short term sexual pleasure. These places are, for instance, the gymnasium, the national stadium, City Hall train station, Raffle Place train station, swimming pool and public toilets (interview “C” 3 January 2009) as well as the beach and parks (interview “A” 21 December 2008). These named places are regarded as public and it is not always safe for gay people to express their desires as some misunderstanding might occur between male heterosexuals and homosexuals. One such occasion was reported in the newspaper on 8 October 2008 where a homosexual man offered oral sex to another man in the public toilet at Orchard Building. This other man turned out to be heterosexual and as a consequence, the homosexual man was murdered by a group of the other man’s friends (News Editor (b) 2008).

### **3.1.4 Gay Activism**

Homosexuals have been oppressed by various strategies through law, reaffirmation of sexual normativity and government intervention into media and press. Therefore PLU (People Like Us), the first grassroots organization for homosexuals in Singapore was founded but it is unofficial because the government has silenced and rejected its registration in 1997 with an ultimatum to punish the members and organizers (Ng 1999: 23-24). Nonetheless, PLU has run underground and expanded their network internationally. Moreover they have arranged many conferences within their group (Lo and Guoqin 2003). Apart from PLU, Singaporean male homosexuals are connected through the internet where they can discuss and express their opinions towards the situation around the world in general, lifestyles, and share experiences. Some homosexuals come out via the webpage (ibid). Additionally they can use the internet to search for friends and long term relationships as well as temporary contacts<sup>18</sup>.

## **3.2 Expression of Male Homosexuality and Lifestyle in the Singapore Context**

There are some researches aiming to scrutinize the expression of homosexuality in Singapore (Hee 1999, K.F Lim 2004, E.B Lim 2005). K.F Lim points out that

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<sup>18</sup> These websites are, for examples, [www.fridae.com](http://www.fridae.com), [www.trevvy.com](http://www.trevvy.com) and [www.yawningbread.org](http://www.yawningbread.org).

homosexuals have demonstrated through subtle strategies of overt expression in public spaces and that they are conscious and creative agents who are able to contest the heterosexual milieu in which they live (K.F Lim 2004: 1759). He concludes that homosexuals have their own way to express their identities in spatial spaces and it is more visible through the “nation party”<sup>19</sup> and artistic expression of homosexual issues as indicators (ibid, 1781-1782). Hee examines gay identity through the constructed spaces and summarizes that gay identity will be expressed according to spaces where they are in (Hee 1999: 66). Unlike these two researchers E.B Lim studies gay identity through the performance *Asian Boys Vol.1* which reflects the reality in Singapore, and concludes that “performing gay in this global city has many inter-Asian dimensions that are not accommodated by Euro-American models” (E.B Lim 2005: 404). Albeit these researches present homosexual identities in different frameworks, it seems that they are trying to generalize gay identities and the factors which affect gay identities rather than to present the identities *per se*. Therefore, the individual cases presented here provide a closer understanding of the constructed identities of individual male homosexuals.

### **3.2.1. Perception of “self” of male homosexuals in Singapore**

The perception of self as being gay is accordingly related to the heteronormative norms which everyone in the country should follow. Grower elaborates heterosexuality as

“The regime forces, in many instances literally under pain of death, the division of humanity into two and only two sexes/genders through the daily repetition of mental and physical acts” (Grower 2007: 490).

From his elaboration it shows the paradigm of normative sexuality which is socially constructed. As well as Crower, Butler also emphasizes on sexual identity constructed by “[a] political relation of entailment institute by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality” (Butler 2007: 24). Therefore, what is excluded from the regime of heterosexuality is supposed to be strange, deviant and abnormal. The individual cases below present their perception towards themselves as

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<sup>19</sup> Singaporean homosexuals used the national day as a subtle excuse to gather and celebrate as well as others celebrated the independent day which was called “nation party”

homosexuals in a country. The cases vary by their background, educational level and career.

#### **3.2.1.1 “C” case, interviewed on 3 January 2009**

“C” is Chinese, 38 years old and works as a construction coordinator. When asked about how his gay life in Singapore looked like he replied (with a tired face expression) “Nothing serious but mentally tired since I have to act straight”. Even when he went to a cruising place, he pretended not to know his acquaintances in case they met by chance. Although there is a law criminalizing male homosexuals, he said “Law does not mean illegal. You can do whatever you want to do but do not get arrested”. It then reflects the discreet life of Singaporean gays. Moreover he was trying to present himself as a “good gay”. The characteristic of a “good gay” in his own definition is when he referred to “bad habits” of other gays which for example “frequently seek for one night stand sex”. Clearly it demonstrates the fact that he does not want to be perceived as strange, deviant or abnormal, and wants to detach himself from the general perception of Singaporean gays. In addition, the need of being cohesive with the mainstream is clearly seen.

#### **3.2.1.2 “D” case, interviewed on 8 January 2009**

“D” is 54 years old Chinese and works as a tutor. He pointed that being gay in Singapore is “looked down, taboo and avoidable”. Additionally he mentioned “I cannot be myself”. As well as “C”, “D” did not want to be seen as gay and he would not be mixing with a young one(gay) because they were easily noticed. From the interview, the reflection can be presented accordingly. There are more visible physical signs for people to easily assume if another people are homosexual nowadays. Thus, heterosexuals can probably classify a person as different from them. At the same time, Singaporean gay men can also indicate if someone is one of them. “D” described those physical signs or gay identities as “wearing tight-t shirt, shorts/pants, sport wear look, well-built physics, very conscious about the look (overdo) and love the spa and salon”. It thus can be concluded that “D”’s perception of himself as being gay is uncomfortable and he has to always behave like heterosexuals do.



### **3.2.1.3 “E” case, interviewed on 18 January 2009**

“E” is Chinese, 23 years old and studying a bachelor’s degree at National University of Singapore. His case is very distinctive, if Butler is right that gender is a doing process, how this case can be analyzed. He stated confidently that “I believe I am born gay”. There is a scientific proof that there are five sexes referring to Fausto-Sterling’s article *The Five Sexes, Revisited* (2000), she argues that there are three sexes (intersexes) in addition to male and female. These are “herm”, “mems” and “ferms”. To illustrate, she is describing in order to give normativity to these three intersexes. Likewise, “E” is trying to normalize his sexuality. Additionally, it also reflects his perception of self as different from others so that is why he seeks to be seen as natural.

### **3.2.1.4 “Y” case, corresponded via emails 18 February 2009**

“Y” is 27 years old Malay Muslim and teaches art in an elementary school. Because of his ethnicity and religion he writes

“I have been in the closet for 23 years. Feeling confused, being criticized by my school mates and peers in high school. Being contentedly bullied and pushed around for being ‘different’ and I did not fit in [...] it was not easy, again even in the gay society. Malay Muslim like me is being marginalized”.

He stated that he “comes out” to friends and others but not to the family and it makes him feel more comfortable to be around. However, what he was concerned with is the standard of “gay community” in Singapore. As what “D” sampled, here it is emphasized by “Y” who writes

“If you are not young, if you do not have a nice body, an acne free face, do not bother fitting in! It is the fact. Being a dark, fat, and pimple faced Malay gay man is even worst! You are unwanted and because the society is so judgmental”.

From his perspective, there is another fact regarding homosexuality in Singapore. This is the discrimination among gay people due to ethnicity and physical appearances.

### **3.2.2 Possibilities and Constraints**

As given above about the self perception of individual cases, I also would like to argue that in some individual cases there is a “negotiation of sexuality” which strengthens the confidence to express their sexual identities. As such, possibilities and constraints will be analyzed to present that some individual cases can possibly express the homosexuality while some are in a difficult situation to do so.

#### **3.2.2.1 Possibilities**

The concept of “negotiation of sexuality” somehow relates to the power that comes to a person in different situations. In the case of Singaporean interviewees, there are some cases found benefiting from the “negotiation of sexuality” which encourages gay men to perform their sexual identities.

One example is the case of “A”: He is the only son in a Chinese family, received a bachelor from UK and works as a medicine sales manager. I would like to argue here that even in a sensitive place such as in a Chinese family he could be able to present himself freely and contentedly. Upon the visit and discussion with his family and friends on Christmas Eve night, it was revealed that he took the role as family financial supporter. He paid for his sister’s education and bought a very luxurious private condominium. Apparently he uses his financial supporter to negotiate his sexuality, without him his sister would not obtain a proper education and the family would not have such a decent place to reside. As well as in the case of “A”, “E” also informed that when he is free from the family’s financial subsidy, i.e when he graduates and has a decent job, he will “come out” to the family.

The second instance of “negotiation of sexuality” is the case of “B” (interviewed on 27 December 2008). “B” frequented Thai community in Singapore called Golden Mile where he told he could be able to see many Thai masculine construction workers. He even gave free drinks to some of them. Although he said no one in Singapore knew he

was gay, he was usually mocked by Thai construction workers that he was *Katoey*<sup>20</sup> but it seems he did not pay much attention to it. Obviously, the role of giver can negotiate with his gay identities. Additionally, it is within a foreign community where he perceived himself as a stranger among Thais, who are there temporarily to work and earn money.

### **3.2.2.2 Constraints**

In every aspect in Singaporean Society, apart from the gay spaces, there seems to be obstacles for male homosexuals to perform their identities, from small social units, family to the larger one, law. Family is the smallest unit in society and is the hardest place to perform one's homosexuality. Clearly in the case of "B", "C", "E" and "Y" they all live with their family or siblings. In the case of "B" and "C", although they work and earn money by themselves, the strong Chinese Confucianism values are overwhelming in the entire family. It makes them not "come out". On the contrary, they prefer to be in the "closet". The case of "E", who still needs money from the family to support his education, is similar. "Y" lives within a strict Muslim family, although many of his friends know he is gay.

At work, considering the features of their careers, they all have contacted with clients and students as a sales person and a tutor respectively. It shows the difficulty to disentangle the self from the social role. "D" mentioned the characteristics of Singaporean people and said "Singaporean is like a robot, well-controlled people, they are aware of what they are doing". They will not do something that ruins their social life, which here means job and income. Singaporean homosexuals as citizens are also within these features, hence, they do not want to lose their social life by exposing their homosexuality. This possibly influences homosexuals to become very self-conscious and self-censored.

Law is the most problematic constraint. Homosexual intercourse and behaviours are criminalized. The punishment is not only sentenced up to 2 years but also reported

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<sup>20</sup> Thai word mainly referred to a male who is cross dressing, and acts like a woman both mentally and physically. *Katoey* will be discussed in details in chapter 4 since this word does not only mean the Thai three sexes system but also means the general perception of Thai people to call someone who is having the mentioned behaviour.

publicly. The more the government and media discuss, the more heteronormative perception is reproduced. The news presented on the newspaper first page does not only state the real name but also obviously show the picture of criminals. From 2006 until nowadays, there were 6 cases reported to be punished according the section 377A and the most recent case was reported on 29 of Jan 2009 (News Editor(c) 2009). To conclude, the government has sent a warning message criminally and socially, as such, it constructs the fear of being penalized and publicly known.

### **3.2.3 The Findings: Sexual Identities of Singaporean Homosexuals**

To sum up the findings in this chapter a number of reflections will be presented. Firstly, the expression of sexual identities is firmly related to space. Stated earlier, gay spaces in Singapore are relatively important for gay men to perform their sexualities for instance gay clubs, bars and saunas. For shopping centres and cruising places, these spaces are communal and homosexually constructed by frequent visits. However, homosexual men, when performing their sexual identities in these areas, have to discreetly participate and do not obviously express themselves. Secondly, Singaporean male homosexuals are very concerned about their sexual identities when in public. They are reluctant to let other know their identities and rather confidentially conceal it, particularly in the family and work place. Thirdly, the need to be cohesive with the social norms is really important for Singaporean male homosexuals especially in accordance with the strong and strict Confucian, Islamic and other beliefs. Some of them even got married to be defined as normal. Hence, they sometimes present their male gender identities when they are out of the gay spaces.

Finally due to the “negotiation of sexuality”, it stimulates and encourages some Singaporean male homosexuals to perform their sexual identities in the family and to others in society. The “negotiation of sexuality” found in this study is related to a power of being the financial supporter and the giver. This power can strengthen and provide the confidence to perform their sexual identities. In a nutshell, the characteristics of homosexual identities analyzed from the individual cases are not obvious in public. In contrast, it will be shown in some specific spaces. Referring to performativity theory,

what Singaporean gay men perform can present their sexual identities which occasionally make them cohesive with the mainstream norms while sometimes make them be who they are.

#### **4. The Expression of Sexual Identities of Singaporean Male Homosexual Tourists in Bangkok**

##### **Introduction**

Arriving at the most famous gay street in Bangkok, Silom Soi 2<sup>21</sup> on the night of 25 February 2009, there was a distinctive blue sign saying Silom Soi 2 in both Thai and English. Surely if tourist visits this *soi*, they will not get lost. Wandering around that area, there were many stalls and small shops selling food, clothes, accessories and souvenirs. Moreover, lots of people were heading to night clubs and bars although it was Wednesday. Upon walking in the *soi*, there are 6 clubs and bars located quite close to each other. Each club and bar was full of domestic and international guests. No one paid much attention to those guests, gay or straight, who also did not pay much attention to those who were selling products on the street or to the pedestrians. They were walking to the Silom Soi 2 and mixing with other people on the street. (fieldwork note taken on 25 February 2009)

This observation poses some questions: Does this mean Thai people accept homosexuality? or Do homosexuals ignore others' reaction? It has been argued in academic sphere about the social acceptance towards homosexuals of Thai people whether Thai people really do or there are some factors behind the scene which influence them to accept and tolerate. Apart from examining the Bangkok homosexual context, this chapter aims to describe and scrutinize: How do Singaporean male homosexuals express their sexualities while being tourists in Bangkok?

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<sup>21</sup> *Soi*, Thai word, means the branch of the main road. Silom is the name of the main road where many clubs, bars, restaurants and shopping malls are located.

### **Homosexual Context in Bangkok**

The studies of homosexuality and homosexual-related issues in Thailand have been critically done by many researchers in various field of study. Most of them suggest that Thai society tolerates homosexuals rather than fully accepts them (Aggleton 1999, Bishop and Phillips 2003, Jackson (a) 1995, Jackson (b) 1996, Jackson and Sullivan 1999, Sander 2002). Because of the tolerance, many tourists from around the world perceive Thailand and its people, particularly in the big cities Bangkok, Phuket, Chiang Mai and Pattaya, as gay friendly. Time Magazine even rated Thai people as the most gay friendly people in Asia in 2001 (Sander 2002: 50).

The homosexual circumstance in Thailand has long been developed and the latest development occurred during the economic boom in 1980s. Since then Bangkok as well as Tokyo, London, Paris and New York is rated as a gay capital city. Bishop and Phillips describe the characteristic of a gay capital city as “[o]ften sites of in-migration from rural areas which seem to be morally conservative and sexually oppressive. They are sites of commercial gay culture: gay bars, gay magazines, gay service industries and of late national and international tourism” (Bishop and Phillips 2003: 153). But the perception towards homosexuality in Thailand can be historically traced back when Buddhism settled in Thailand (Jackson (b) 1996). Thai people know homosexuality by the Thai term *katoey*. Does it mean Thai people are familiar with homosexual phenomenon? The use of word *katoey* is likely to be negative and unpleasant in Thai society because it is related to the sin in the past life. It has been defined as a man who is cross dressing, behaving like a female in every aspect. This definition was also used to explain the English borrowed term “gay”<sup>22</sup> around the 1970s and 1980s as a cross dressing or effeminate homosexual male (Jackson (a) 1995: 227). The influx of western culture in Thailand has drastically changed the meaning and images of gay to “masculine-gym-enlarged biceps and pectoral muscles, accentuated body and facial hair” (ibid). These new images can present the attempts of Thai homosexual men to detach themselves from the negative image of *katoey* and to construct their own identities. Moreover the word gay has been merged

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<sup>22</sup> The discussion of gay meaning in details can be found in Jackson(a) 1995: 228-230

with some suffixes to identify the sexual role of each gay such as Gay King (insertive role), Gay Queen (receptive role) and recently Gay Both (versatile role)<sup>23</sup>.

The notion of the gay friendly cities of Thailand is presented widely through the internet<sup>24</sup>, gay guide brochures and pamphlets in various languages that contain gay clubs, bars, hotel and masseur service in English and Thai (G.M Guide issue 2009 March). This phenomenon is unacceptable if considering the Thai traditional way of life as discussed in chapter 2. Here is an example of “K”’s opinion, presenting his sentiment towards homosexuals as

“Now the society is so open, look at many famous and respectable people in the society. They are also gay. I can accept them” (informal conversation 6 March 2009).

But when asked if his son was gay, he replied

“I don’t know as it has not happened yet. Though it happens I will try to gradually change him” (ibid).

Apparently, it mirrors the reality of Thai traditional way of life, the concept of the family and appropriateness which make it necessary for Thai people to behave correctly and to know *Ka-la Te-sa* (space and time). In other words, Thai society also emphasizes “matrix of illegibility”.

If a person fails to conform, for instance if a man does what a woman is supposed to do or *vice versa* they will be stigmatized as *Kon Pra Lard* or *Pid Phet* (literally a idiosyncratic person, against the natural sex respectively). For me personally being born and raised within Thai culture, the concept of face is also meaningful for Thai people. It is not only related to the image of self but also to social acceptance. The appropriateness

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<sup>23</sup> There are also many combined words between English and Thai words to describe the sexual role such as gay ruk (active role), gay rub (passive role) and much more which can be found in Jackson (a) (1995). Noticeably some words are out of date and rarely use in Bangkok.

<sup>24</sup> Such as [www.gmguideline.com](http://www.gmguideline.com)

and face are tightly attached. The simplest example is if a family is known to have a homosexual son, this issue will be the talk of the town and spread quickly and widely. The consequence is that the family will lose face and social acceptance because they raised a son to become gay.

The difficulty of male homosexuals in Thailand still exists, although homosexuality is no longer a mental problem which was stated clearly in the announcement of Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health on 29 January 2002<sup>25</sup>. In addition, there is no law prohibiting or penalizing homosexual practices but the cultural norms and the traditional way of living effectively frame what constitutes the appropriate manners. Therefore, it is possibly right to state that homosexuality is not fully accepted in terms of traditional culture and way of living in Thailand. Jackson's study of male homosexuality in Thailand reveals that Thai gays prefer to be socially perceived as a man so that they are presenting their masculine gender identity rather than homosexuality (Jackson (a) 1995: 267-268). To some extent homosexual situation in Thailand is similar to Singapore. While male homosexuals are attached with the social norms of family values and cultural practices they construct a set of identity that makes them cohesive with the heteronormative world. In contrast, once these gay men are out of cultural norms they deconstruct their sexual identities expressed in their home country and are able to perform their homosexuality emotionally and physically because they graft themselves with the overly commercialized gay scene and benefit from tourism promotion.

#### **4.1 Gay Scene in Bangkok**

In contrast to the traditional culture and norms in Thai society which influence the expression of Thai male homosexual identity, the gay scene in Bangkok has been shaped and constructed actively in regard to two main factors; tourism, and the media and commercials.

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.oknation.net/blog/print.php?id=181042> accessed 12 April 2009 this is the draft report of the Human Right Organization in Thailand evaluating the human rights situation especially the sexual discrimination



To begin with tourism, it has been internationally promoted since the 1980s and become the major industry. Recently it was a political chaos in Thailand and the airport was blocked by the protest during the end of the year 2008 when was the high season for Thai tourism. It devastated the image of the country and the nation's economy. After the protests, the Thai government and Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) were taking action to activate and restore Thai's economy by promoting tourism activities. Upon my return to Thailand in early December 2008 there was on a highway from the airport a distinctive huge bill board which reads "*Nak Tong Tieow Kue Kon Sam Kan Khong Chat*" (literally tourist is a very important person of the nation)<sup>26</sup>. Intentionally, TAT aims at the international tourists rather than the domestic and encourages Thais to welcome guests friendly.

Second the media and commercials, where *katoey* and gay constitute as a part of many TV programs and films, such as the Naturegift commercial<sup>27</sup>, *Kang Chanee Kab E Abb*<sup>28</sup> and the most famous one *Beautiful Boxer*<sup>29</sup>. Because of the reproduction of homosexuality and *katoeys* in several forms, it makes tourists conclude that Thailand is open for homosexuals and that Thais consider homosexuality normal (Jackson and Sullivan 1999: 4). Apart from the above two factors which make homosexuality more visible and acceptable in Thailand, the places, activities and gay community in Thailand will be presented regarding fieldwork, to affirm the overt visibility of Thai gay scene.

#### 4.1.1 Gay Bars and Clubs

According to observation, there are three major areas where gay bars and clubs are situated, Silom Soi 2, Surawongse Road and Lamsali. Silom Soi 2 is easily accessible by

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<sup>26</sup> My arrival in Thailand was 4 December 2008, this sign was seen when I was on the express way from Suvarnaphumi Airport to my home. This is the prudent sign when using the word *Khon Sam Kan* (a very important person) because it builds a sense of a visitor or *Kaek*. There is a Thai proverb which to some extent gives a similar meaning of this sign. It is "*Kaek Ma Teuang Reuan Chan Tong Ton Rab*" (when the visitor comes to one's home, we must welcome them). It also shows Thai hospitality and friendliness. Hence, in this thesis will use "*Kaek*" as referring to *Khon Sam Kan*.

<sup>27</sup> In this commercial, a plump girl would like to lose some weights motivated by a handsome star. Later she finds he is gay but she does not care because she will lose weights for her health.

<sup>28</sup> The movie presents the group of females who are trying to expose their friend's boyfriend homosexuality. Finally when everything is revealed, they become good friends and everyone accepts his sexuality.

<sup>29</sup> This is the true story-based movie of a boxer who later becomes *katoey* and famous.

sky train and the underground. Its location is in the heart of Bangkok and is quite close to many tourist attractions. There are 6 clubs and bars in total. They will be crowded from Friday to Sunday but operates daily. The entrance fee is costly. Buying drinks and snacks are expensive. Taking DJ STATION club as an instance, guest number is equally between Thais and foreigners and it is also very popular for Singaporean male homosexual with reference to interviewees. It runs from around 10pm to 2 pm but will be most crowded after 11pm. The entrance fee from Monday to Thursday is 100 Baht and from Friday to Sunday is 200 Baht which is expensive but cheaper comparing to Singaporean condition<sup>30</sup>. There are stage performances by *katoeys* and gays. In addition, there are also discreet sex workers who, I was told, take off their shirt on the stage, which was a symbol of selling sex (“L” informal conversation, 25 February 2009).

Surawongse Road is situated quite close to the red light district, Patphong Road, and is full of ago-go bars. Most of the guests are foreigners due to the expensive drinks (there is no entrance fee but it is compulsory to buy at least two drinks, each drink costs 200 Baht). Inside, there are many sex shows. During the late night, the performers sell sex services to the audience. Unlike Silom Soi 2 and Surawongse Road, Lamsali located in an outskirt of Bangkok is a cheaper place. There is a cluster of gay clubs and bars situated behind the late night restaurant and gardening accessory shop. Taking ICK club into consideration, there is no entrance fee. Drinks and snacks are relatively cheap in comparison with DJ STATION. All of the guests were Thai according to observation on 6 March 09. It is obviously noticeable that each area focuses on different groups of customers from the expensive to the inexpensive. Moreover these areas are dominantly seen as it detaches from so called heterosexual clubs and bars.

#### **4.1.2 Gay Saunas and Cruising Areas**

There are over 20 gay saunas in Bangkok<sup>31</sup>. The price and service vary depending on areas, facilities and reputation. The two most expensive saunas in Bangkok are called Babylon and Chakran located at Sathorn Road and Paholyothin Road respectively. The

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<sup>30</sup> In Singapore the entrance fee is 5 times of DJ STATION entrance fee.

<sup>31</sup> Name and its location can be found at <http://www.utopia-asia.com/bangsaun.htm> accessed on 12 April 2009.

number of saunas in Bangkok not only shows an overly commercialized scene but also shows the need for places to express sexuality of both Thai and foreign gay men. In addition, there are some known public cruising areas such as Lumpini Park situated on Rama IV Road, Sanam Luang which is surrounded by Thammasat University, Ministry of Defense and the Emerald Buddha Temple. Sex workers also seek clients around these areas as well as gay men who search for temporary intercourse. In addition, Thai gays can make use of the internet and free gay websites to seek friendship, relationship and one night stand<sup>32</sup>. Like in clubs, bars and cruising areas, there are also sex workers selling their services on web pages which sometimes put the website under police surveillance.

#### **4.1.3 Shopping Centres**

Since being homosexual in Thailand is not forbidden by law, various activities such as hairdressing salon, beauty salon, boutiques and stalls are not only for heterosexuals but also for homosexuals especially in some known areas-Silom soi 2 where most of the stalls are for gays. The most popular shopping areas for Singaporean male homosexuals are Jatujak weekend market, Maboonkrong Shopping Center and Siam Paragon (interview “C” 3 January 2009).

#### **4.1.4 Gay Activism**

Unlike Singapore, the movement or activism in Thailand is not political, rather it is cultural seeking social acceptance. Clearly seen from the many homosexual organizations in Thailand, they operate their organizations with the purposes of constructing understanding of homosexuality in society, spreading the knowledge of sexual deceases to homosexuals and acting as a center of the groups when having activities or disseminating news<sup>33</sup>. Nowadays it is transforming to a more political movement particularly for *katoey* and same-sex marriage rights<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Such as [www.gboysiam.com](http://www.gboysiam.com) and [www.giggay.com](http://www.giggay.com).

<sup>33</sup> For example , Bangkok Rainbow Organization <http://www.bangkokrainbow.org/> accessed 12 April 2009 and <http://www.anjaree.net/> accessed 12 April 2009

<sup>34</sup> For more details about this issue can be read at <http://www.oknation.net/blog/print.php?id=181042> accessed 12 April 2009

## **4.2 Expression of Sexual Identity of Singaporean Male Homosexual Tourists**

As described and analyzed in chapter 3 about Singaporean male homosexual identities in their home country, it can be performed in relation to spaces and the “negotiation of sexuality” also in Bangkok. To start with spaces: tourism, and the media and commercials are seen as vehicles for homosexuals to perform their identities. Gay spaces even have been commercially constructed. Although the “matrix of illegibility” exists, it is within the social level. Rather, the gay scene as pictured earlier is relevant to the nation’s economy.

There are many factors which stimulate gay men to openly perform their sexual identities in Bangkok. It might be because either they are foreigners or they have a pre-conception of Bangkok as a gay-friendly city. Additionally, “negotiation of sexuality” is strengthened by the power of being *kaek*. It encourages gay men to overlook the “matrix of illegibility” and social norms and motivates gay men to express their sexuality flamboyantly.

### **4.2.1 Perception of “Self” in the Bangkok Context**

Within the Bangkok context, which is somehow different from their home country, most of the interviewees perceived themselves in a positive way. They were not looked down on and stigmatized or criminalized. “C” mentioned “Firstly when I visited Thailand, I disclosed my sexuality because I thought Thai people could accept me and they did not mind” (interview 3 January 2009). “D” stated “Thailand is more open” (interview 8 January 2009). “Z” acknowledged he visited Bangkok because “I was told I could see the boy, touch the boy and take the boy if I like” (interview 18 March 2009). The samples of the interview are best to extrapolate that they are more comfortable to live a gay life in Bangkok. Although they are more comfortable and relaxed, if asked directly about their sexualities, the self-censor mechanism can proceed as if it is automatically switched on. According to observation, I have directly asked two Singaporean tourists whether or not they were homosexuals, and accepted to be interviewed. At the first reaction, they agreed but later they refused (observation 28 February 2009). All pedestrians, waiters and waitresses, taxi drivers, street vendors and hawkers might possibly know these two

Singaporean tourists who visited Silom Soi 2 were gay men but never spoke it out in order to be a good host and not to judge *kaek*. There might be several reasons that institute their reaction, such as the feeling of being publicly known and reported to Singaporean government or feeling wasting time to be interviewed. It can probably be the condition you know I am gay but do not ask.

#### **4.2.2. Thai's Perception of Singaporean Male Homosexuals**

Due to the low number of Singaporean interviewees in Bangkok, there is a problem to describe and analyze their perceptions towards themselves in the Bangkok context. However, the additional data gathered from Thai informants who interacted with those homosexual men from Singapore provides a possibility to discuss the sexual identities of Singaporean tourists.

##### **4.2.2.1 "F" Case, interviewed on 12 March 2009**

"F" is a 23 year old male and works as a waiter at Vanilla café, Siam Paragon and has never visited Singapore. He could not be able to communicate in English but he knew which customer was gay because they usually came to this café with a Thai boy. He also added "they look generally just gay". Clearly "F" perceived Singaporean gay identities by witnessing them in the Bangkok context. As stated, because of the over commercialized gay scene and tourism, expression of gay identities are obviously seen almost everywhere. It also reflects the fact that Singaporean gay men are practicing their identities in a similar way to Thai homosexuals, openly without an eye of the government.

##### **4.2.2.2 "I" Case, interviewed on 12 March 2009**

"I" is a 40 year old male homosexual who frequently visits Singapore and have worked there for quite a while. It means he is familiar with the homosexual context in both countries. "I" strongly insisted that

"Thai gays and Singaporean gays are not different when talking about their expression. They are in the globalized world and everyone has their own rights to express"

“I” described the similarity between Singaporean and Thai homosexuals from his perspective. In Bangkok, “I” could enjoy his gay life in relation to the over commercialized sex and tourism scene while in Singapore he could also do the same as there is a “closing one eye” strategy of Singaporean government to allow some gay spaces to exist. Moreover, the Thai gay scene is visibly noticed and indirectly promoted. It, thus, makes gay identities likely to be natural. Therefore it influences “I” to see Singaporean gays in Bangkok indifferent. In addition, the case of “I” can present a sample of Thai homosexuals’ lack of awareness of performing sexuality in Singapore as well as the earlier case of Singaporean gay men who demonstrated self censorship mechanism in Bangkok. From “F” and “I” cases, it does mirror the problems and difficulties in Singapore context and the reality in Thai society that the obvious gay identities are performed in the category of specific milieu.

#### **4.2.2.3 “J” Case, interviewed on 12 March 2009**

“J” is a 32 year old female, former guest service agent at Patumwan Princess Hotel and is now a Ph.D candidate at Chulalongkorn University. “J” was quite familiar with homosexuals as “J” has many gay friends and frequents Singapore for her holidays. According to her experience at Patumwan Princess Hotel, she concluded that they came as a couple and expressed their intimate passion for each other overtly. Moreover some of them greeted her in a *Sao*<sup>35</sup> way (literally effeminate action) at the reception desk where other guests registered their arrival and checked out. “J” also stated that during her travels in Singapore, she never saw this phenomenon in public.

#### **4.2.3 Possibilities and Constraints**

From the above discussion and presentation, this section is the analysis of possibilities and constraints of Singaporean gay men in Bangkok. It seems there are only possibilities with regard to tourism and overly commercialized circumstances. However, there is one possible constraint as well.

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<sup>35</sup> “J” explains “*Sao way*” as waving hand and calling her name with high voice like a woman greets each other.

#### 4.2.3.1 Possibilities

The privileged status, approachable sexual service and a properly arranged environment are the three main possibilities for Singaporean gays to perform their identities. To commence with privileged status, being a *kaek* is understood to be “a very important person of the nation” for Thai people who are assumed to be good host. Being a tourist is supposed to be a money distributor for many business owners and being a foreigner is seen as a stranger who neither has knowledge about Thai cultural norms nor understands Thainess profoundly. These three privileged statuses strengthen the “negotiation of sexuality” at the same time. It makes Singaporean male homosexuals confidently perform their sexual identities.

Approachable sexual service is the second possibility for Singaporean gay men to practice their sexualities. Most of the respondents visited Bangkok in order to obtain sexual pleasure which is against the law in Singapore and they had to discreetly seek. Although prostitution in Thailand has not been legalized, excluding in the red light district, there are still a number of persons<sup>36</sup> who sell sex. This situation promotes one sort of Singaporean gay tourist activities as, for example, “B” accepted that whenever he came to Thailand, he intentionally visited Pat Phong area to watch sex-shows, to visit gay saunas and massage shop (interview 27 December 2008). “C” used to take a Thai boy from the street and to visit Babylon (interview 3 January 2009). “Z” brought a Thai boy from a bar back to the hotel (interview 18 March 2009).

Lastly, the properly arranged environment refers to the easy-to-get information or pamphlets which navigate first time tourists to acquaint themselves with areas and gay scenes. Many brochures advertising gay lifestyles, gay friendly hotel, clubs and bars are accessible for short time tourists like the Singaporean male homosexuals studied in this research. More comfortably they can retrieve some information and share personal experience with other gay men through web pages.

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<sup>36</sup> Both men and women, in case of men they sell sex service to everyone so it is difficult to identify if these men are homosexuals or heterosexuals

#### **4.2.3.2 Constraints**

There is, however, one case during my fieldwork that I met by chance in Silom Soi 2 and asked for an interview (observation 28 February 2009), which demonstrates the constraint of performing sexual identities in Bangkok. This is the self censoring. It seems, as argued about the over commercialized gay scene and tourism promotion, impossible to reveal any obstacles of performing the gay sexuality. Considering the problem while doing fieldwork when asking two Singaporean gay men to be interviewed and they were unwilling to, they were really concerned of being known publicly although they have already been noticed as homosexual. Mentioned earlier about “you know I am gay but do not ask” condition, it shows that they were still feeling uncomfortable and very self-censored. It might be argued that it is a “trust” problem but it may also be regarded as a possible problem of insecurity. This feeling has been politically and socially constructed in Singapore where they have been raised and grown up, hence, it affects one’s perception of self although they are out of “matrix of illegibility” and social norms in their home country. However, this may be an over interpretation and needs a further and deeper study in the field of psychology.

#### **4.3 The Findings: Sexual Identities of Singaporean Gay Tourists**

From the analysis and discussion of the individual Singaporean male homosexuals in the Bangkok context from interviews and observation as well as from Thai informants, there are three characteristics of sexual identities that are expressed by Singaporean homosexual men. Firstly, the overt sexuality is performed both in the public and gay spaces. In the gay spaces, they performed their sexualities openly. They can bring a Thai man together with them into the café, the street stalls and shopping centers as well as a hotel where all of these areas are regarded as public because Singaporean male homosexuals ignore the Thai “matrix of illegibility”. Secondly, the “negotiation of sexuality” helps increase the obvious expression of sexual identities. Since Singaporean male homosexuals are seen as *kaeks*, tourists and foreigners who distribute income and revenue to Thai people and country. They benefit from these privilege statuses and can negotiate their sexual identities accordingly. Finally, it is possibly assumed from the above constraint that although Singaporean male homosexual’s identities are noticeably



seen in the Bangkok context, when asked, the self censored mechanism works automatically. If the analysis of this case is correct, it means some of them who have been raised in the strict heterosexual normative Singaporean society are always aware of their expression. It also reflects that at least Singaporean government has successfully constructed a strong social norm towards its citizens.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research has been structured to explore the expression of sexuality and lifestyle of Singaporean male homosexuals in different contexts by employing Butler's performativity theory which explains that gender is a doing process and is proved to be performative. Moreover, Butler's explanation of "matrix of illegibility", which refers to the correlation between sex, gender and sexuality that constructs the heteronormativity in society, is also useful. Homosexuality does not fit into the "matrix of illegibility" and is therefore perceived as deviant or abnormal. The performativity theory proposes that there is no gender behind the performances. Hence, what people perform can represent their gender and sexuality no matter how it is embedded with or follows the social "matrix of illegibility". Another concept which helps analyze the sexual identities of homosexual men from Singapore is the "negotiation of sexuality" strengthened by the power of being financial supporter, *kaek*, tourist and foreigner. This is an additional factor which encourages homosexuals to perform their sexual identities in both Singapore and Bangkok.

Although there are some previous researches dealing with Singaporean homosexual identities, it generalizes the pattern of gay identities in their home country. This research questions whether or not those identities are performed generally and what it looks like if Singaporean gay men are out of their home country. To attain the objectives this study is designed to be a case study and focuses on individuals. The method used in this qualitative research is the so called triangulation method, which is a combination of interview, observation and collecting documents. This method brought information from individuals that are helpful in order to analyze individual homosexual identities.

Singaporean male homosexuals are able to perform their sexual identities in certain spaces, although homosexuals are seen and perceived as deviant within their society and are criminalized by law. Their performances are generally not an overt expression of sexual identities. Rather it is discreet and self-controlled in order to be cohesive with the surrounding sexual majority in society. Homosexual identities are performed differently and depending on the situation. Within both society and family, ethnic religious beliefs are important, Confucianism in the case of Chinese Singaporeans and Islam in the case of Malay Singaporeans, and these beliefs regulate the perception of being normal and the expression of sexuality as well as influence of the law and state policies. In some spaces, however, such as clubs, bars and saunas, homosexuality is openly performed since these places are outside the social and traditional norms. In other constructed gay spaces like shopping centres and cruising areas they can express homosexualities but have to be carefully because these areas are considered as public. Because of the law 377A, official gay activism is impossible, instead, it has to be operated underground. Somehow with the “negotiation of sexuality” strengthened by financial supporter power, the sexual identities of Singapore gay men could possibly be shown even within the family. However, it seems like most interviewees are reluctant to perform their homosexual identities among friends and colleagues.

In Thailand, due to the overly commercialized sex and tourism scene, there are much more possibilities for Singaporean male homosexuals to openly perform their sexual identities, although in the greater Thai society, considering the traditional and cultural norms and practices, homosexuality is still unacceptable. Therefore, the expression of sexuality and lifestyle of Singaporean male homosexuals in Bangkok are subtly embedded with the “negotiation of sexuality”. The situation in Bangkok provides more privileges to these Singaporean men as *kaek*, having a tourist and foreigner status which means they are treated with Thai hospitality, similar to other tourists who bring enormous income to the country. Moreover, they are seen as strangers who do not understand Thainess profoundly. Hence, there are fewer barriers for Singaporean male homosexuals to be themselves. It also means that the “negotiation of sexuality” is strengthened and

provides a confident feeling to express their homosexuality. In short, there are various opportunities for them to perform from approachable sexual service to shopping.

Thus, the expression of sexuality and lifestyle of Singaporean male homosexual can be summarized as follows. They have constructed a set of sexual identities in accordance with the heterosexual norms in their home country but they reconstruct these identities in Bangkok. They expressed the overt sexual identities and lifestyles in regard to the reality in Bangkok, which was over commercialized and tourism-oriented.

This study has presented individual cases derived from interviews and observation. Due to the small number of respondents it is unable to generalize the whole expression of sexual identities of Singaporean male homosexuals. Most of the interviewees in this research are aged between 30-50 years old, if the interviews are conducted in a younger generation, the findings may differ. For example, “E”, who is 23 years old, insisted he was born gay in order to normalize his sexuality while the other interviewees did not present themselves likewise. Another issue of further research interest is to study Singaporean male homosexuals’ expression when they return to their home country from Bangkok. Do their experiences in Bangkok affect the self expression in Singaporean society?

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