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Chiang Mai: The Gay and the City

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Chiang Mai has been one of Thailand's top vacation destinations for both international and domestic tourists. Many tourists from around the world visit this magnificent city located in the midst of mountainous landscapes, with a natural environment, kind people, and a rich culture. Yet, it is not only traditional culture that attracts tourists. As mentioned in the popular gay guide book 'Spartacus'², Chiang Mai is also a well-known place for gay culture and therefore a popular destination for gay tourists: "Thailand is a gay and a tourist paradise ... This do not use the artificial western way of putting us all into classifications like 'gay' or 'straight'. The most heterosexual young man may readily make love with you if he likes you" (Stamford, 1980).

During the last decade, the gay population in Chiang Mai has increasingly revealed itself. Gays nowadays openly identify themselves as such at schools, universities, and workplaces. Gay, 'ladyboy', transgender, and lesbian people can be found everywhere in the city, even in the religious institutions. It is claimed that homosexuality seems to be accepted by the local people, but it must be carefully reconsidered whether this really holds true for the city of Chiang Mai.

This article aims to take a closer look at the local experiences relating to the relationship between the city (of Chiang Mai) and the marginal group of gay people. It does so by describing the attitudes of advocates of 'traditional culture' towards

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2 Stamford, J. (1980). *Spartacus 1980 International Gay Guide for Gay Men*. Amsterdam: Spartacus.



gays, and the prejudices, constraints, and struggles the gay community is confronted with.

Anti-gay: Self-identified 'Gay Activists' and 'Gay Politicians'

During the last two years, Chiang Mai, the capital of the former Lanna Kingdom, has seen the appearance of many movements against gays, ironically led by activists who are gay and call themselves 'gay politicians' or 'gay activists'.

One striking example was the Gay Pride Parade in downtown Chiang Mai in 2009. During the parade, local politicians (including 'gay politicians') argued that 'those people' [gays] were ravaging the decent cultural heritage of the city. Also, Red Shirt demonstrators opposed the event, and finally the parade organisers decided to cancel it as they feared riots and violence. After the Gay Pride Parade, the same group of 'gay activists' came up with similar accusations against the owner of the biggest gay hotel in Chiang Mai, since they found out that his hotel was being promoted as a place where gay tourists would be able to meet handsome and charming local young men. Such an advertisement, they argued, is not suitable for the 'decent cultural heritage' of Chiang Mai.

Being a tourist city, Chiang Mai offers a wide variety of recreational and entertainment facilities. The city offers entertainment places for gays as well as for straight people, and there are several gay clubs, bars, and saunas. Previously most of these facilities kept a low profile or were even kept secret. Only people informed of their whereabouts – mostly gays of course – would recognise and find these places. Once these facilities stepped into the public sphere, they received unexpected and even invidious reactions towards their customers and owners. The cruelest comments were put forward by 'gay activists'.

Their argument was that Chiang Mai's cultural focus should rest with the old Lanna traditions and nature. That way, Chiang Mai would promote the natural and historical beauty of its region as well as the suavity, hospitality, and generosity of its people. Being gay, however does not seem to fit into this image. In the perspective of conservative local politicians, the local Chiang Mai tourism industry would not only easily go without gay-oriented tourism, however, the latter distracts or obstructs the concept of a cultural and tourism capital as they define it. Promoting Chiang Mai

or Lanna with the uniqueness or the sexiness of Lanna boys to – as they would say – ‘sexually deviant’ tourists, would damage Chiang Mai’s tourism reputation.

However, for the attentive Thailand traveller and tourist, it will not stay unrecognised that in the whole country more and more gay people nowadays openly display their identity and meet acceptance. Even though there is no reference to gay people or a specific protection clause in the Thai constitution, there is a widespread acceptance and respect for members of the gay community.

Rationale Behind the So-called ‘Gay Activists’

So what is the rationale behind this group of so-called ‘gay activists’, who ironically campaign against people who share their own sexual orientation in Chiang Mai? Apparently one reason is for them to publicly distance themselves from their own sexual orientation, and furthermore their criticism of other gays seems to be grounded in a general fear of oppression based on sexual orientation stemming from mainstream society. Even though there seems to be a widespread acceptance of gay culture in Thailand, sometimes gays are still demonised and scapegoated, have become victims of police brutality and housing isolation, and suffer from informal exclusion from and access to certain jobs.

Another problem seems to be one of a linguistic nature. Gays in Thailand openly use the description of ‘gay’ for themselves; what they however fear, is being called *kathoey*, a Thai word describing a hermaphroditic person as well as an effeminate, transvestite man. In Thai *kathoey* is a word that carries negative connotations and that means ‘transvestite’ or ‘transsexual’. In contrast, the English word ‘gay’ positively embraces the idea of being a masculine-identified homosexual. For most Thais this sounds much more positive and not too effeminate like *kathoey*. However, the Thai language did not borrow the English notion of straight or masculine-identified to connote the concept of *kathoey*. Especially gays of a higher socio-economic or educational status are afraid of being called *kathoey* since they feel this term would stigmatise them in Thai society and complicate their lives. In the Thai media and television shows, *kathoey*s are portrayed as queer clowns who are noisy, rude, and inferior to ‘ordinary people’. So besides sexual deviance there is also an element of low social status linked to the term *kathoey*.

Especially since Chiang Mai defines the origins of its own richness as based on a diversity of ethnicity and culture, it has to deeply re-examine whether it fulfils the character it likes to display – and whether it provides openness and tolerance towards all its inhabitants and guests, regardless of them being ‘different’ to mainstream culture or sexual preference categories.

Recently at the Loy Krathong festival³ 2010, one of the most important cultural events in Chiang Mai, ladyboys and gays were banned from taking part in the Krathong street parade. The organisers argued that since the obvious aims of the parade would be the beauty of the parade participants and decorations, only ladies and gentlemen would fit as participants. If there was any controversy about parade applicants, they would not be permitted to join the parade. Only after filing a complaint to the administrative court was an injunction given that led to a temporary allowance for gays and *kathoeys* to join the Chiang Mai Loy Krathong festival.

These are just some highlights of how gays and *kathoeys* are still facing difficulties in expressing themselves and openly participating in cultural life in Chiang Mai. Even though one could speak of a general mood of tolerance towards gays and people of alternative sexual identities in Thailand, there apparently still are some specific shortcomings if one turns an eye to Chiang Mai and especially its formal concept of cultural identity. Apparently it is the latter which leads to a situation that tries to exclude gays and *kathoeys* from social and cultural life and stimulates others to depict them as disgusting and abnormal.

The Old Chiang Mai Tradition and the Way Forward: A Personal Outlook

In my personal view, the difficulty in expressing sexual preference and tolerance of this is the consequence of the lack of education and knowledge about how gender or sexuality is produced. It appears as a lack of respect for the diversity of Chiang Mai’s various inhabitants and visitors who however are all entitled to equal rights.

Chiang Mai is a growing city with many development plans that aim to enhance the quality of life. Those plans, however, seem to give priority to mainstream tourist businesses rather than to the people living in the city. Chiang Mai heavily promotes

³ The Loy Krathong festival is a time to accumulate/generate merit, and some of Thailand’s most elaborate celebrations can be seen in Chiang Mai. The festival is believed to originate from an ancient practice of paying respect to the spirit of the waters.

a staged culture of old Lanna traditions for tourists. It thereby overlooks the point that the development of the cultural sphere must be seen as part of a long term inclusionary process mixing old and new, incorporating traditional aspects as well as leaving space for development and creativity which rely to the social reality on the ground. Culture in that sense does not only consist of cultural artefacts such as temples, ruins, and old Lanna traditions, but also of changing and diversified lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviour. Those people who often refer to the ‘the old Chiang Mai tradition’, ‘the uniqueness of Lanna’, ‘the decent and proud culture’ do not realise that the ‘true cultural city’ should be a city that is open to different cultures, different people, different ethnicities, and definitely different gender and sexual preferences. Aside from educating its people to quit using plastic bags, the city should as well start promoting and respecting gender diversity, especially in such a way that gender is not limited to being only masculine and feminine, gay or lesbian, but also includes other, alternative sexual orientations which are even greater in their complexity.

Today one can see that there is some space in Thailand for gays to articulate and express themselves. When they are however suspected of bringing any kind of “disgrace to the social rules”, a lot of people will be tempted to quickly revert to the notion of “gays” and “normal people” as an instrument to distance themselves, or as a means of exclusion. As things now stand it appears there is still a long way to go to reach a situation where persons of diverse sexual preferences are able to self-confidently claim and express their own identities. Chiang Mai’s people, however, can already grow and live together more peacefully by calling for greater analytical attention, by respecting and tolerating cultural and personal rights of identity and expression, and by allowing some space for alternative ways of life.