


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Keeping Condition”: Gender Ambiguity and Sexual Citizenship of Queer Male Thai Classical Musicians

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Abstract

Gender pluralism has become a rich scholarly topic in Southeast Asia, especially with the rise of LGBT mobilisations across the region in the past decade. Transgender ritual specialists dominate the field of study, with a growing body of literature on Southeast Asian queer expressive cultures. However, queer performances in several classical performing arts are often excluded from the scholarship due to the field’s association with the “traditional”. In this article, I address this scholarly gap by examining the social lives of queer men in Thai classical string music. I focus on a strategy called *kep aakaan* or “keeping condition” in which the musicians in question carefully articulate and disarticulate their femininity to render their gender nonconformity ambiguous under the heteronormative gaze. Using ethnographic methods to investigate the lived experience of queer male musicians on and off the stage, I show that “keeping condition” is not just about managing the display of queer potential but is also closely intertwined with morality and citizenship. Drawing on the ideas of tacit subjects and contextual sensitivities, I argue that “keeping condition” exposes the fluidity in which queer musicking bodies move between queerness and heteronormativity in ways that are more reconciliatory than confrontational. By focusing on the complexities of queerness and heteronormativity, I argue that non-normative classical performing arts can be a productive site for critical gender, sexuality, and queer studies in Southeast Asia, cutting through the “traditional” and “modern” divide that looms large in the region.

Keywords: *kep aakaan*; queer performances; gender; sexuality; Southeast Asia; Thailand; Music

Introduction

In the last three decades, there has been a significant improvement in queer scholarship in Thailand. The field has greatly contributed to the understanding of heteronormative sexual behaviours as a discourse constructed and controlled by the state authority that underlies the history of Thai sexual citizenship. At the same time, the literature sheds significant light on the multiple and complex ways in which Thai queer people forge their identity. To that end, expressive cultures such as Thai cinema, magazines, visual arts, and music have received considerable attention. These avenues, whether deemed inherently normative-resistant or sites of non-normative refuge, offer not only insights into the lived experiences of those whose gender and sexuality are marginalised but also a situated, critical lens that pushes the interdisciplinary boundary of queer studies in all directions.

However, most of the scholarship that engages with queer theories in Thai expressive cultures focuses on the contemporary and popular domain, such as magazines (Jackson 2016), private karaoke as a queer catharsis (Ekasart 2003), contested identities of transgender women cabaret dancers (Premprida 2006), the adaptation of Korean drama’s soft masculinities by queer Thai women (Sinnott 2012), the theorisation of over-the-top aspects in Thai queer cinema (Nguyen 2018), queer epistemology and online collective identity formation (Tinnaphop 2017) and most recently queer and religious cultures in late-capitalist Southeast Asia (Jackson and Baumann 2022). Scholarship in this field continues to grow as the Thai authorities do not consider queer performances in contemporary and popular expressive cultures a direct

threat to its socio-political stability unless they deal with institutionally sensitive subjects like Buddhism and the monarchy (Jackson 2016: 54). These performances are at best loosely controlled by the authorities and thus poised to generate works of cultural critique, directly and otherwise, against heteropatriarchy and trans- and homophobic anxiety.

On the other hand, much less scholarly attention has been paid to queer subjects in the Thai classical performing arts, despite the large population of queer performers. Thai classical dances and theatres seem to be the only exception, but they are often treated as historical evidence preceding larger Thai queer popular performances (Narupon 2022: 148). The scholarship on Thai classical music, an art form closely associated with Thai classical dance, has largely overlooked aspects of gender, sexuality, and queerness. This struggle of Thai classical music scholarship, and that of other classical performing arts, to catch up with the current conversation in queer studies, anthropology and Southeast Asian studies is not new, as ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff notes:

...ethnomusicologists interested in gender issues continued to struggle with a feminist theory that did not seem to apply outside the West, with an anthropological theory that did not often address music, and with an ethnomusicology that did not see its true potential (2014: 71).

A few scholars have pointed out this musical tradition's patriarchal conventions that have ensured the peripheral position of, and limited contribution by, women musicians (Thattaphon 2016; Wong 2001: 220), but the consideration of women musicians as agentive actors remains to be undertaken. This is not to undermine the value of writings that focus on the musical works and lives of notable women musicians, especially funeral books (*Nibha Aphaiwong* 1999; Pat and Rawee 1988; Rawee and Marut 2000). My point is to emphasise the apparent lack of open discussion on how women musicians challenge, resist and even invert the unequal power relations due to gender differences. Substituting "feminist" with "queer", and the state of scholarship is no different. The relationship between Thai classical music and sexuality is only mentioned in passing and thought to be irrelevant to an individual's musical performance (Anant 2003). The struggle thus bears three major consequences. First, the unmarked status of heteropatriarchy in Thai classical music remains unquestioned. Second, it has led many to a presumption that the lived experiences of queer subjects in this field are no different than those in popular and contemporary performances and last, it has reaffirmed the trope that the Thai classical performing arts are isolated from and unaffected by broader social events.

In this article, I address these gaps by first considering the fluid identity formation of queer men in Thai classical music. This article revolves around classical music but does not treat it as an autonomous object. As an ethnomusicologist, I am ethnographically interested in how queer musicians position their non-normative identity within their musical tradition's strictly heteronormative constraints. I focus on "keeping condition", or *kep aakaan* in Thai, a process that involves withholding and controlling any display of gender nonconformity by queer subjects on and off musical stages.¹ By doing so, these musicians render their non-normative identity ambiguous. My theorisation and examination of "keeping condition" are greatly informed by Carlos Ulises Decena's idea of tacit subjects (2011) and Peter Jackson's theorisation of *kaala theesa* contextual sensitivity in Thai gendered culture (Jackson 2020), and I draw on these ideas throughout this article. I argue that "keeping condition" is activated variously depending on contexts to render queerness ambiguous—understood but not necessarily spoken. This, in turn, allows these musicians to negotiate with and thrive in Thai classical music, a tradition deeply entrenched in heteronormative constructs and ethnonationalism. Second, I problematise the consequences of "keeping condition", particularly its complicit nature that reconciles with, rather than confronts, heteronormativity. As a response to a call to interrogate queer theory's applicability outside of global modern contexts (Spiller 2020: 200), I demonstrate its utility in examining the relationships between non-normativity and

¹My focus here is on the way these musicians negotiate their otherwise problematic gender expressions within the gender-defined rules and norms in Thai classical music. Sexual orientations are equally significant in determining what is and is not normative in this musical tradition, but this is usually private topic and is often overshadowed by and assumed along with the outward gender expressions.

normativity in Thai classical music performances. Ultimately, I aim to collapse the traditional/modern dichotomy that holds sway not only in Thai classical music but also in Southeast Asian Studies.

Thinking and Writing about Queer Musicking Bodies

At the centre of this article are queer male musicians in a string ensemble, or *khrueng saai*, of Thai classical music, especially those whose gender performances are deemed “effeminate”. Queer male musicians are not an uncommon sight among Thai classical music practitioners, being active participants in a diverse range of music events, ranging from competitions to *waikhruu* or the teacher-honouring ritual. A string ensemble (see figure 1), featuring Thai fiddles (*sau duang* and *sau uu*) and the floor zither (*jakhee*), is well recognised among Thai classical practitioners as being heavily and visibly populated by queer musicians more than any other ensemble in this tradition. The queer symbolism of a string ensemble is perhaps most emphasised in the floor zither or *jakhee*. There is even a running joke among Thai musicians that the instrument is cursed to strip off the player’s masculinity (*jakhee duut winyaan khwaam pen chaai*). Queer male musicians who participate in string ensembles are thus referred to playfully, though by straight musicians, as *khrueng saai chaai suay*, literally translated as “string music, pretty men”. Despite their ubiquitous presence in and contribution to Thai classical music, their identities have rarely been considered a topic of serious discussion.

While it can be argued that, like other realms in Thai culture, queerness is tolerated but not accepted in Thai classical music, it would be a mistake to quickly presume that queer invisibility is a corollary of the hegemonic heteronormative discourse. Carlos Ulises Decena warns about the premature judgement of gay Dominican immigrants in New York based on their investment in normative masculinity as simply a denial or failure. He argues that “some queers of color have an uneasy relationship with the closet because they resist the depoliticized ‘liberation’ that coming out promises, which currently resides in a gay identity as a sociocultural formation and as a niche [neoliberal] market” (Decena 2011: 6, 18–19). Decena



Figure 1. Vjivitvatn, a group of *khrueng saai* musicians during a rehearsal in September 2020. Instruments from left to right: *sau duang* (higher-pitched fiddle), *khluai phiang au* (middle-pitched flute), *jakhee* (floor zither), singer, *ching* (hand cymbals), *khim* (dulcimer), *jakhee*, *khluai lip* (higher-pitched flute), *sau uu* (lower-pitched fiddle) and *thon-rammanaa* (a pair of handheld drums). Photo by the author.

proposes the idea of tacit subjects to get at various complicities that structure social relations and to remind us that coming out is always partial and that the closet is a constantly negotiated social formation (Decena 2011: 38). “Keeping condition” similarly challenges the clearcut line separating closet and coming out. My theorisation of “keeping condition” borrows heavily from tacit subjects to approach queer male musicians’ gender nonconformity as “something present yet not remarked upon, something understood yet not stated, something intuited yet uncertain, something known yet not broached by either person in a given exchange” (Decena 2011: 31). However, “keeping condition” takes the idea of queerness as understood but not spoken to a different axis of intersectionality, one that involves social status, morality, musicianship, and citizenship.

Balancing social surveillance and queer recognition is indeed a poietic act. Queer male musicians navigate and carefully curate their fluid identities to be appropriate to a specific place and time. According to Peter Jackson, these spatial-temporal contextual sensitivities, known as *kaala theesa* in Thai, may be considered a modality of power through which the multiplicity of gendered cultures are managed in Thailand (Jackson 2020: 5). Drawing on Penny Van Esterik’s (2020: 61) theorisation of *kaala theesa* as a time-place contextualising factor that shapes multiple gender norms and differently structured gendered contexts in daily lives, Jackson notes that the Thai cultural strategy of contextualisation has “historically tolerated and indeed encouraged a proliferation of distinct social and cultural settings, each with its own norms of speech, dress, behaviour, and bodily comportment” (Jackson 2020: 24). These ideas thus form a theoretical throughline as I examine the queer musicking bodies in question. Queer male musicians thus demonstrate Decena’s tacit subjects as they variously “keep condition” under the contextual sensitivity toward the multiplicity of gendered norms while balancing their social status and sexual citizenship.

The sense of queerness invoked by the presence of queer male musicians in the string ensemble cannot be fully understood without considering the gender roles underlying Thai classical music practices. The emphasis placed on gender expressions and performances, as well as the obscurity of sexual orientation as a discreet identity marker, are crucial in conceptualising non-/normativity in Southeast Asia (Jackson 2000; Morris 1994; Peletz 2006; Sinnott 2004). The ostensibly “queer” expressive cultures in this region are often marked by the spectacle of cross-gender performances. Notable here are what Michael Peletz refers to as transgender ritual specialists, male-bodied individuals who dress in female attire while performing certain rituals associated with royal regalia, births, weddings, and key phases of agricultural cycles (Peletz 2006: 312). Some works in this regard include *nat kadaw* in Burma and their transition into the beauty industry (Ho 2009), *bissu* and their negotiation with Islamicisation and Modernity in Indonesia (Blackwood 2005; Davies 2007) and the spirit medium’s attempt to cope with the modernising ethnoscape of Northern Thailand (Morris 2000). Although practices of transvestism or transgenderism cannot be assumed to lead to an underlying homosexual “nature” (Blackwood 2005: 850), they reflect the three-gender ontology—male, female and the “third gender” or those who engage in cross-gender practices—prevalent in pre-colonial Southeast Asia.

Like their cultic or ritualistic counterparts, non-normative performing arts in Southeast Asia are driven by a spectacle of complex relationships between maleness and femaleness. In the traditional dances of East Java in Indonesia, some female dancers deliberately embody male characters to map maleness’ physical strength onto female bodies and vice versa to harness female “magnetic power” of sexual appeal onto male bodies (Sunardi 2015). Through the embodied process of dancing, these dancers not only push the conceptual and physical boundaries of gender but are also able to sidestep, using nonconforming gender performances on stage, any discussion regarding their sexual orientation (Mrázek 2005; Spiller 2010; Sunardi 2020). Cross-gender performances in Thailand can be observed in a few performing arts where boys or men take on female characters. *Lakhaun nauk*, an all-male traditional drama, is perhaps the only Thai classical performing art that is treated through the frameworks of queer studies. However, scholars dealing with *lakhaun nauk* tend to focus more on the historical evidence of male homosociality (Chanan 2019; Chalalai and Vijjuta 2020) and associating male-to-female cross-genderism with possession of inherent artistic skills (Narupon 2022: 148) than on the discussion that surrounds the dominant heteronormative culture. However, I am treading my thinking about gender-informed non-normative performances critically, noting the potential pitfall of simply valorising the third gender’s disruptive potential and reinforcing the gender binary itself (Loos 2020: 933). I draw on these works rather as a point of departure toward the unsettling relationship between queerness as an analytical perspective (Sinnott

2012: 472) and the fluid, heterogeneous and constantly shifting notions of the third gender, particularly in Thailand.

Some Brief Overview on Gendered Practices in Thai Classical Music

As illustrated above, the presence and status of queer men in Thai classical string music are also deeply informed by the power relations between gender roles, i.e., masculinity and femininity. I will not dive into the musical and socio-cultural details of each ensemble in Thai classical music since these have been extensively discussed by several ethnomusicologists (Adler 2014; Becker 1980; Dusadee 2003; Hood 1975; Miller and Sam 1995; Morton 1975, 1976; Myers-Moro 1993; Wong 2001) but will instead emphasise the gender aspect that shapes conventional practices of this musical tradition. As a former court music and representative musical tradition of the nation, Thai classical music adheres to the same code of sexual and gender morals as practised by the ruling class people of Thailand. These values in turn form a system of power that controls gendered musical behaviours, often in a hierarchical manner (Koskoff 2014: 22–27). For example, *piiphaat*, an ensemble that accompanies classical dances and is used in rituals, is considered masculine and played by men. With its historical evidence dating back to the seventeenth century, *piiphaat* (see figure 2) consists of xylophones (the *ranaat*), gongs (the *khaung wong*), a reed (*pii*), the drums (*ta-phoon* and *klaung that*) and a hand cymbal (*ching*). *Piiphaat* represents masculinity for its loud and penetrating tone colour, speed, high physical demands of mastering its instruments, and certain highly sacred musical pieces that are exclusively accessible by men.

String ensembles, or *khrueng saai*, are believed to have been historically present alongside *piiphaat* but differ greatly in their use and functions. Their uses are wholly secular, i.e., they play for entertainment, and the instruments have a much mellower tone colour. String ensembles were once reserved for male musicians until the emergence of court women musicians—trained by male teachers—in the 1920s. After the 1932 revolution, these women musicians became the authoritative representation of the string ensemble as they left the palaces and variously took up teaching jobs in schools and universities. Many of these women musicians continued teaching well into the 80s, and several of the renowned queer male musicians of today can trace their musical lineage to former court women musicians (see figure 3). Former court women musicians also appeared on television playing string instruments along with their male counterparts who, for the most part, were playing *piiphaat* instruments. This gradually gendered the string instrument as a woman’s space. Such gendering reached its peak in the 90s when a hit television series *Khuu Kam* featured Angsumalin, the female protagonist, playing *khim*, a Thai dulcimer, and enchanting a Japanese soldier, Kobori, her eventual love interest, in the process.



Figure 2. *Piiphaat* ensemble performs during a Buddhist ordination ceremony in April 2023. Note the relatively relaxed and spread-out postures of the musicians. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. Musicians from the Government Public Relations Department perform for a television show, circa 1970. Chaluay Chiyachan (front row, right) plays the *sau uu* while Rati Wisetsurakan (on a raised platform) plays the *jakhee*. Chaluay and Rati are considered two of the most influential women string musicians. Their respective styles are now two major lineages among Thai string musicians today. Photo taken from Chaluay's commemorative funeral book.

The binary gendering of Thai classical music extends beyond musical practices to the musicians' bodies. Musicking bodies, ones that come alive in the moment of musical performance, hold as much knowledge and reflect as much social value as the sonic elements (Rahaim 2012). Gestures (bodily movement) and postures (bodily position) of musicians simultaneously reflect and inscribe the music's social etiquette, including that of gender practices. The bodies of *piiphaat* musicians are masculinised for their somewhat "spread-out" seating position: crossed-legged and with a wide range of movement, whereas the body of string musicians are characterised by the more feminine "tucked in" seating position called *phapphiap*: one leg folded inward and the other leg folded outward. The accented curvature of the string musician's torso also makes for a more "graceful" posture, much like that of a Thai classical dancer.

Queer male musicians, particularly those who appear feminine, are attracted to the string ensemble because of the shared values of femininity. The string instruments provide a "fleeting queer space" (Klotz 2021: 15) that unsettles the gender norms assigned to both the instruments and the musicking bodies. These string musicians cross the established gender boundary by embodying the refined postures characteristic of an idealised woman: elegant, graceful gestures and reserved. Furthermore, they articulate these feminine characters through subtle musical gestures, including tilting the chin, flexing the fingertips and overbending the torso. Regarding this feminine articulation of queer male string musicians, Mark, a seasoned queer male musician, illustrates with an example during an interview with me:

When you play the *jakhee*, you sit in the middle of the front row of the ensemble. And every time you swing the plectrum, it's as if you get to [*pumping up his chest and slightly shaking his shoulder*] lift yourself up and feel proud. It's like you get to look like an aristocratic woman [*khunying*]. The way you sit in the *phapphiap* position, move your hands and all those body movements [*straightening his right arm and flexing fingers on his left hand like he was playing an air jakhee*] exude that distinctive feminine character. ...It...it...it [*rolling both his hands away from his chest*] exudes the

feeling of being beautiful. The playing techniques of the instrument also help in driving this aspect of being a woman. (Interview with Mark 2021)

Of note here is how Mark instantaneously embodied feminine musicking gestures (in brackets above) while explaining the femininity of the *jakhee*. Mark's account is significant as an example of how the display of the queer erotics is inseparable from gender expression. At the same time, his illustration does not point toward greater acceptance of cross-genderism or non-normative performances in the classical performing arts. Rather, it reveals the fleeting queer space and moments where tolerance toward non-normativity is increased. Let us not forget, however, that the increased tolerance enabled on stage does not carry over to the social life off stage. With the tolerated-but-not-accepted attitude toward non-heteronormative identities (Jackson 2016: 97) and the hostile reactions toward explicit displays of non-normativity (Käng 2012), these musicians face double pressure to conform. In addition to navigating their gender nonconformity while musicking, queer male musicians must also curate their gender practices under the institutionalised, heteronormative gaze of Thai classical performing arts. This double-sided interplay between queerness and normativity in Thai classical music forms the point of entry for my discussion of "keeping condition".

Situating Queerness

I first developed an academic interest in the musical and social life of queer male Thai classical musicians in 2019, when I realised that queer male string musicians are a common sight but never a topic of serious conversation. This curiosity was indeed recent, but my familiarity with queer male musicians was not. As a straight, cisgender male trained in Thai classical music, queer male musicians are a part of my musical upbringing. I started learning Thai classical music from my father when I was eight years old. Since my father was a Thai classical music professor at a university in Bangkok, most of my music lessons took place in his department where my father would also introduce me to his undergraduate students, including queer men. Many of these students went on to become established music teachers. A decade later, I was a Thai classical music major undergraduate student and spent five years in my father's department. During this time, I met several queer male musicians whom I called friends. These friends introduced me to the string tradition and shared some inside gossip and rumours that spread within the circle. These musicians and those with whom I acquainted as a child later became my interlocutors for my research project. As such, my relationship with the musical tradition and musicians in question is one in which I am a practitioner.

Despite being a Thai classical music practitioner, I am also somewhat of an "outsider" to this tradition at some moments due to my positionality. Musically, my training is primarily in the *piiphaat* tradition and is mostly in academic settings. That is, it mostly took place in the music department at a university, my father's workplace. I do not claim to be an expert in any string instruments, but I musicked regularly with queer male string musicians during my fieldwork between 2020 and 2021 by playing rhythmic instruments such as drums and hand cymbals or *ching*. Additionally, I occasionally took informal music lessons on string instruments with my interlocutors. These activities proved vital to my fieldwork not because of the esoteric aspect of musical performances but because of the transformative effects of musicking that blurred the insider-outsider distinction (Rice 2008) and revealed gender cues that would not have been possible otherwise. I equally emphasised the everyday life of queer male musicians outside of the musical stage, which included interviews, participating in rehearsals, driving, and hanging out. The ethnographic readings that I present in this article are grounded in the lived experiences of queer male musicians off stage, but as will become clear later, the on-off stage distinction is, too, not that clear-cut.

Performing research about gender and sexuality among queer male Thai classical musicians is bound to raise some eyebrows, particularly when it is carried out by a straight, cisgender man like me. Fortunately, my connection with queer male Thai classical musicians helped alleviate any suspicion and scepticism among my interlocutors. However, not all queer male musicians were willing to discuss their gender and sexual identities in front of me, who checks all the normative boxes. The accounts and interpretations that follow do not in any way reflect the views of all queer male musicians in Thai classical music. The ethnographic experiences I present are thus only partial (Clifford 1986) and not representative of all queer male Thai classical musicians.

I have so far been using the term “queer” quite generously in denoting feminine men musicians in the Thai classical string tradition. However, my use of the term is intentional and specific in its meaning and implications, and it is imperative that I clarify my approach in this regard to avoid any ‘problems relating to “queer” [that] result from unanalyzed slippages between emic and etic usages’ (Boellstorff 2007: 21). This means that, on the one hand, queer studies as a conceptual tool have undoubtedly shaped my thinking by providing a lens to critique the normalising discourses with an emphasis on resistance and transformation (Boellstorff 2007: 21). On the other hand, as a theoretical framework, queer studies is “most useful in its ability to reference an analytical perspective that explores the ways in which heteronormativity is challenged and subverted” (Sinnott 2012: 472) and to shed light on genders and sexuality deemed non-normative by such discourse.

Despite the utility of queer studies’ conceptual framework, queer as an identity marker does not map neatly onto the Thai genderscape because the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is understood quite differently in Thai culture. The Thai language does not distinguish between sex, gender, and sexuality, all of which are subsumed in the umbrella word *pheet*. Non-normative genders, such as *kathoey*, are usually lumped into the “third gender” or *pheet thii saam* category and their sexual practices are described in a negative light, for example, *phit pheet* (wrongly sexed), *biangbeen thaang pheet* (sexually deviant) or *rak ruam pheet* (same-sex love). Despite the increased awareness in gender and sexuality studies in Thailand since 2007 that has seen the non-exclusionary Thai terms for gender (*pheet phaawa*), sexuality (*pheet withii*), same-sex relationships (*rak pheet diaw kan*) and “alternative genders” (*pheet thaang lueak*) (Narupon 2013: 42), everyday conversations are still rooted in the traditional three-gender concept that portrays both gender-nonconformity and homosexuality in a negative light.

According to Rosalind Morris, the Thai system of sexual identities is based on the “system of three” logic, consisting of *phuuying* (female), *phuuchaai* (male) and *kathoey* (transvestite/transsexual/hermaphrodite), in which sexual and gender identity is conceived as a repertoire of public appearances independent of the sexual practices within the private realm (Morris 1994: 19–20). Peter Jackson also notes that the “[s]exuality conceived in Foucauldian terms has no history in Thailand, remaining discursively bound to gender” (Jackson 2000: 417) meaning that sexual orientations are considered part of the “categories” of eroticised genders. Even as the concept of hetero-/homosexuality was introduced into Thai understanding, *kathoey* was not replaced. Rather, identities such as gay and lesbian are given localised meanings as a shade of masculinity and femininity with homoerotic desires, a hybrid form of gender and sexual identities (Narupon 2013). The *kathoey* identity may be comparable to that of transgender women but it can also include that of feminine men on some occasions and be very specific on others.

It appears there is no consensus on how queer male musicians identify themselves. Some of my queer male interlocutors would use a catch-all term *kathoey* to refer to both feminine men and transgender women. Some would use the term *tut* or sissies to differentiate feminine men from the *kathoey* population. Some voiced strong opposition to the *kathoey* and *tut* labels due to their derogatory connotations. They either turned to LGBT as a more “modern” term to describe their gender nonconformity or adopted the gay identity, a gender-normative homosexual man, to maintain a gender-conforming public persona. Again, it is just as problematic to use gay as an umbrella term because, in Thailand, “gay” is given a localised meaning as gender-conforming men who date men.²

In addition to *what* my interlocutors self-identified with, I also paid special attention to *how* they did so. For example, when someone identifies with a gendered identity in Thai, they will say, “*chan pen phuuying* (I am a woman)” or “*chan pen phuuchaai* (I am a man)” or “*chan pen kathoey* (I am *kathoey*)”. While the first two statements are common, the third is almost never said explicitly in everyday circumstances, and the same applies to other non-normative labels. Many of my interlocutors chose to identify themselves indirectly by just saying “...am like this (*pen baep nii*)”, or just simply “am (*pen*)” without explaining any further. These indirect, open-ended responses were the answer. They needed no further explanation, and I took this cue respectfully.

The beauty and mystery of the open-ended, indirect responses of my interlocutors about their identities encapsulate queer social formation, affect, and the world. By saying *pen*, queer male musicians

²There are also a host of slangs to describe non-normative gender/sexual identities, such as *keeng* (a deer, referring to “gay” men), *saao* (a girl, referring to young feminine men or transgender women) and *mae* (mother, referring to respected and often older *kathoey*), but I have not included them here to avoid further confusion.

refuse to be pinned down into categories and ask to be left inconspicuous, and the discursive effect of saying *pen* informs my use of queer. Queer male musicians do not necessarily refer to those who refuse to conform to the heteronormative “boxes”, but rather those whose nonconforming gender performances in social and musical interaction place them in a marginalised position as being “sexually deviant”. I understand that “queer” is rarely embraced as an identity marker among the Thai *kathoey* and “gay” male populations, nor is the term interchangeable with any of the local understandings of sexual/gendered constructs. However, the term queer allows for the sidestepping of any fixed gendered sexualities of my interlocutors—just like how they described themselves simply as *pen*. Instead, I want to reflect and reassert the fluidity of my interlocutor’s identities, creating “a location of radical openness and possibility” (Doty 1993: 12).

Having laid out the frameworks and some necessary contexts, I now turn to their methods of “keeping condition” by first examining the subtle strategies in which queer male musicians control and negotiate queerness on stage before considering the stakes when such negotiation translates to their off-stage social lives.

Saao Mai Group, “Keeping Condition” and Gentleperson

On the first weekend of February, the Thai and Asian Music Department of Srinakharinwirot University, my alma mater, holds an annual *waikhruu* or teacher honouring ritual. In 2023, the date fell between the 4th and 5th of February. The main event, *waikhruu*, usually takes place on Sunday, but Saturday is equally eventful as current students and alumni gather to help prepare the venue. The Saturday night, known as *khuen suk dip* (literally the “cooked-and-raw” night), is when the students, along with some outside guests, take turns to perform in a rather relaxed, informal environment. Saturday is somewhat considered a casual homecoming. This year, I attended the event on both days as it was special for a few reasons: It was the first public *waikhruu* after a two-year hiatus due to COVID-19 and it was the first time the *waikhruu* was held in a department building because the university’s auditorium—their usual venue—was closed for renovation. Most importantly, it was my return to the *waikhruu* after six years of graduate school in the US.

In the past seven to eight years, there has been a continuing tradition in which a group of queer male students and alumni come together to perform a closing piece on the string ensemble for the informal “concert” on the Saturday night. This year was no different. The group of musicians responsible for the closing performance collectively call themselves *saao mai*, a phrase that means “weaving silk” and works as an interrogative pun meaning “Are you girlish?” I asked around my queer male friends about this performance and learned that the group was missing a drummer. I offered my service to my friend Ton, an accomplished fiddle player who was the main decision-maker of this year’s *saao mai* group. Ton accepted my offer, and for the first time, I was included as a part of the *saao mai* group.³

If the name *saao mai* is a rhetorical question about one’s femininity, the rehearsal of the group is an affirmative answer. About twenty queer male musicians along with their preferred string instruments were present, including me. We practised in the department’s study room, located ten floors above the *waikhruu* venue. The room could barely hold all of us, and we spent about an hour and a half rehearsing. The rehearsal itself was intermittent, and only about half of the time was dedicated to fine-tuning and polishing the performance. In the other half of the time, the members were catching up, cracking jokes, and making fun of one another as they struggled to keep up with the speed of the musical piece. Playful curses were flying about as members made minor mistakes throughout. We managed to rehearse twice with a lengthy, noisy break between rehearsals. Labelle, another member of the group, aptly described the situation of the room to be “like an agitated hornet nest” (*taek taen*). As I mentioned, it was indeed informal.

What was striking in this intimate rehearsal space was the free-flowing over-the-top display of queerness. None of the feminine members held back their feminine gender expressions. Their speech tone and

³The genderscape of the *saao mai* members was heterogeneous. Some of the members were visibly feminine in their comportment, some had the metrosexual look—well-groomed and neatly dressed—while others had sunburnt skin and uncombed hair typical of a straight male. The irony between *saao mai*’s connotated gender nonconformity and the wide gamut of gender performances of its members is noteworthy. *Saao mai* implies non-normative gender expression, but its members shared same-sex desires, not feminine masculinity. This is perhaps an example of the reconciliation between queer male musician’s perception of queerness according to Thai genderscapes and the emerging “gay” identity that is “uncategorisable” by the traditional gender boxes, as it were.

bodily comportment were obviously girlish (*auk saao*) and little to no efforts were made to hide it. Of course, not all their feminine members were equally over-the-top, but there was undoubtedly a sense of relaxation from having to “keep condition”, particularly for the feminine queer male musicians. In a low-stakes, private setting like this, the heteronormative gaze was lifted, and there surfaced a fleeting queer musical space. Let us not forget that this was not a common scene in Thai classical music performances. However, this fleeting queer musical space was only ephemeral as the musicians would codeswitch to “keeping condition” and assume dramatically subdued musicking postures on stage.

It was about half past ten when our turn to perform the closing piece of the night arrived. We moved quickly and spread ourselves across the two-tier raised platform. I was sitting in the middle of the upper platform, holding a large *klaung khaek* drum between my arms. As we were settled in our position, Opor, one of the vocalists, took the microphone and started an impromptu MC. He went from left to right of the stage, giving a brief “history” or *saao mai* and introducing each member. He seemed relaxed with his feminine comportment, and so were the others. The introduction was followed by a cue where all musicians simultaneously produced a small flower and tucked it behind each of their left ears. I was told later that this unusual antic is *saao mai*’s trademark move since tucking a flower was a feminine adornment (see figure 4). The gesture’s uncanny effect may have drawn heavy laughter from the audience, most of whom were straight, but it was unmistakably a bold display of queerness. However, as we began our performance, signs of an obvious display of queerness—in this case, femininity—almost completely disappeared. Unlike the rehearsals, all members of *saao mai*, for seventeen minutes, assumed the carefully curated musicking bodies. Traces of femininity were observable among some queer male musicians, but they were never over-the-top. They surely kept their condition well.

Literally, “keeping condition” or *kep aakaan* in Thai means to withhold one’s obvious display of emotional expressions, such as happiness, sadness, or anger. “Keeping condition” does not mean that an individual appears entirely emotionless but rather a controlled channelling of one’s gendered affect so that it does not appear to be over-the-top when displayed. Some examples are abstaining from jumping under



Figure 4. Members of *saao mai* group, each with a red flower tucked behind the left ear, appear composed during a performance on the eve of *waikhruu* ritual at Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok in February 2023. Photo courtesy of Sahapop Phoomphuang.

elation, speaking softly despite being furious and avoiding shedding tears when sad. “Keeping condition” also includes controlling mundane gestures like how to walk, speak, sit, prostrate, socialise etc.

As an affective and bodily conditioning, “keeping condition” is crucial in shaping the performance of a good manner, which in turn serves as an important indicator of one’s manners and “civility” or *siwilai*. Those embodying refined manners and appropriate conduct, as a result of controlled emotional expressions, are considered gentlepersons or *phuudii* (Jory 2021: 15), whereas those whose bodily gestures are abrupt and exhibit no sign of self-control are regarded as uneducated and vulgar. It follows that *phuudii*, while not a marker of class itself, often refers to aristocrats and royal family members, all of whom embody “civility” since they have access to the knowledge of manners. They know where, when to keep condition and with whom; since Thai classical music, like other Thai classical performing arts, was once a palace-centric expressive culture, its performance practices and conventions are based on the presentation of controlled, finely tuned bodily gestures that are characteristic of *phuudii*.

Phuudii’s code of normative behaviour goes well beyond bodily and affective conditions to include controlling one’s expression of desires, gender performances and sexual practices. Several practices in Thai classical music echo this gendered aspect of “keeping condition”, especially in the string music ensemble. The tucked-in seating postures and minimal yet graceful bodily movements, combined with the soft and slow melody, reflect softness and submissiveness, an idealised trait of femininity according to the Thai authority.

I wish to treat the concept of “keeping condition”, particularly in musical performances, as more than just old-fashioned notions of desirable social etiquette but instead as “binding, state-sanctioned codes of *normative* behaviour” (Jory 2021: 8, emphasis mine). A musician is expected, for example, to appear calm throughout a performance and minimise any overt facial expressions or bodily movement in formal contexts. Although there is no dedicated lesson about bodily discipline in Thai classical music teaching, musicians are aware of its significant impact on the efficacy of their musical knowledge and performance (Hemarat 1998: 90; Narongchai 2015). Just as refined manners make for a gentleperson, “keeping condition” presents a neat and tidy (*riaprauy*) musical performance, visually and aurally. On the contrary, musicians who fail to keep condition are considered as rough, in need of behavioural polishing. Despite their awareness of the rather relaxed performance context, the queer male musicians in the *saao mai* group were quick to assume “keeping condition” as soon as the performance started. They knew that an explicit display of femininity, being girlish or *aok saao*, would be comfortably tolerated at that moment, but such a display would not only make themselves look “untidy” (*mai riaprauy*) but also immediately invoke the stereotypes of *kathoei*’s exaggerated disposition.

When queer male musicians perform in the string ensemble, they incur a dissonance between their gendered musicking bodies and the ensemble’s assigned gender role. The feminine gestures articulated by these musicians, while aligning with the string ensemble’s femaleness, conflict with their male-gendered bodies. This dissonance unsettles the integrity of the gender-sex alignment of normative behaviour and consequently creates a queer space illegible through the heteronormative gaze. “Keeping condition” is thus needed to mitigate this incongruity to keep the gender dissonance under the threshold, such that the femininity is articulated just enough to fulfil the string ensemble’s expected gender roles but does not compromise the musician’s masculinity. This then begs the question: why is “keeping condition” needed? Why does it matter?

“Keeping condition” matters because queer performances in Thai classical music are implicated with the weights of morality and citizenship. Let us not forget that Thai classical music is a tradition rooted in top-down conservative royal nationalism, the ideology that has dominated Thai historical scholarship (Winichakul 2008). Echoing Tes Slominski’s remark on the consequence of ethnic nationalism on Irish traditional music, royal nationalism similarly exerts a profound effect in the reproduction of “appropriate” citizens who maintain social orders and uphold “correct” sexual behaviours among other things (Slominski 2020: 26). Thai classical music practitioners are perceived among Thais as the preservers of the national heritage and since most Thai classical musicians are teachers and professors, they are expected to set a good example for their students, including appropriate gender expression. Showing obvious signs of femininity could associate these musicians with the *kathoei* label, a doubly “uncivilised” identity that is both unrefined and non-normative (Jory 2021: 8–13). *Kathoei*’s overboard femininity not only poses a threat to the modern Thai gender regime but also embodies incivility in terms of

Thai manners. Queer male musician's gender nonconformity is held in check by the heteronormative moral standards and these standards legitimise their social status as musicians and as "civilised" Thai citizens.

The intersection between musical performances, morality and citizenship means that queer male Thai classical musicians' performances resist a wholesale comparison with other Thai queer expressive cultures, especially dances. For example, Wonder Gay, a queer Thai K-Pop cover-dance group capitalised on K-Pop's global popularity and the Trans-Asian media flow to refashion performances of femininity by Thai queer men as a kind of modern Asianness (Käng 2014: 568). However, this level of open queerness in cover dances and by extension cabaret, which challenges the appropriate expression of masculinity in Thai society, cannot be replicated as explicitly in the Thai classical performing arts as it poses a direct threat to the notions of cultural purity baked into the latter. Queer male musicians' performances constantly move between gender nonconformity and hegemonic heteronormativity and with morality and citizenship at stake, this balancing act goes well beyond the stage to their social life.

"Keeping Condition" Offstage

A queer male teacher/musician Jack worked at a state-funded Thai performing arts conservatory. In his late 40s at the time of my fieldwork, Jack was serving as the Deputy Director of Student Affairs, responsible for overseeing administrative tasks, mostly student disciplinary actions. To be clear, Jack held a high position in the hierarchy of his organisation. Jack was wearing a male government official uniform that day: a khaki-coloured shirt and trousers with royal regalia on his shoulders and chest (see figure 5). He also used *khrap*, an ending particle for a male speaker, in my conversation with him. Despite all these masculine indicators, it was not difficult for me to discern Jack's femininity. His bodily comportment—how he moved his arms and hands during the conversation—and his tendency to elongate words were the main telltale signs. Yet, Jack's femininity was not over-the-top. It was so curated that Jack's



Figure 5. Jack and I had a photo together after an interview with him at his workplace in September 2020. Note Jack's khaki-coloured uniform and his DFA gown behind him.

feminine comportment looked more like a slippage from normative masculinity than a natural disposition (Decena 2011: 149).

Jack plays the *jakhee* as his major instrument and went through many disputes over his nonconforming gender expression during his student days. Despite his struggle, Jack was adamant that Thai classical music, like other classical performing arts, has long been LGBT-friendly. For Jack, the increasing awareness of gender diversity meant that more LGBT Thai classical music students could display gender nonconformity openly while being in a government-funded, conservative institution. Jack stated that when LGBT students had an idea for a performance, they would frequently seek his approval, which he mostly supported. His only condition is that, in his own words, “If you [the students] think that this has a chance to become a shitshow, just don’t do it” (Interview with Jack 2020). Jack did not explain what he meant by “shitshow”, but I would assume that he referred to something embarrassing that could worsen the already negative attitude toward LGBT students. This reaffirms the tolerated-but-not-accepted status of the third gender or the LGBT communities in today’s Thailand.

Jack’s observation about the openness of Thai classical performing arts towards gender diversity is quite ironic because the presence of LGBT classical performers is rarely acknowledged officially. Also notable was Jack’s ambiguous self-identification. His frequent indirect reference to gender nonconformity through the word *pen* stood out to me throughout our conversation. Using *pen* allowed Jack to avoid having his gender nonconformity pinned down as either *kathoe*y, “gay”, LGBT or even avoid being categorised at all. However, this open-ended self-identification also implied queer male musicians’ internalised negative perceptions of *kathoe*y identities and tendency to distance themselves from it. In fact, the use of *pen* and “keeping condition” were mutually complementary and this relationship went beyond Jack’s word choice and could be sharply felt in terms of his reserved bodily expression.

It can be argued that Jack did not restrain his femininity during my conversation because he and I had known each other for over twenty years; the need for him to “keep condition” in such a private and acquainted setting was minimal. However, when Jack made a public appearance, particularly in the conservatory, the pressure to “keep condition” rose sharply as the heteronormative gaze was upon him. Jack whispered to me that when he received his doctoral degree and started working in an administrative position, he had to “keep condition”, especially during ceremonies and social events. Although his gender and sexual identity are no secret to his students and colleagues at the conservatory, he had to do his best to minimise his femininity and look as “normatively” manly as possible, but when he met his students privately in his own office, including the conversation with me, he could relax the condition-keeping and let his femininity show as appropriate. The *kaala-theesa* contextual sensitivities thus determined whether and how much Jack should keep his condition and remain composed.

Those familiar with Southeast Asian LGBT and queer culture might not find Jack’s strategy of “keeping condition” so groundbreaking. My point is not so much about the strategy as it is about how it reveals an instance in which queerness reinforces heteronormativity. Similar to queer musicking bodies on stage, at stake in Jack’s “keeping condition” is his public social prestige, especially when gender nonconformity—not homosexuality—becomes much more precarious as one gains upward social mobility. “Keeping condition”, loaded with the acute heteronormative pressure to conform, allowed Jack to distance himself from the *kathoe*y label and achieve the gentleperson or *phuudii* status.

Ethnomusicologists too have theorised the management of queer potential in the face of a heteropatriarchal expressive culture and with moral values at stake. Alisha Lola Jones (2020: 59, 84) notes similar pressures faced by the countertenor in Black gospel performances. As a male vocal range that overlaps with that of a female, countertenor challenges the expectations of how gendered bodies make sound. Once detected, the display of queer potential is proof that a performer is “spiritually afflicted” by homosexuality and must be “delivered from it”. As a result, queer Black male countertenor performers must consciously maintain a gesture of ideal masculinity as a necessary device to be viewed as a competent and appropriate minister. In a sense, “keeping condition” is a strategy to minimise the display of queer potential and mitigate social sanctions based on national morality in the case of Thai classical music and spiritual morality in Black gospel performance. According to Jack’s account, “keeping condition” does not refer to the fixity of queer identity formation. It is rather a negotiated strategy that renders queerness into ephemeral traces (Muñoz 2009: 81), allowing it to be lost in the logic of heteronormativity and waiting to surface in the appropriate place and time.

The Limits of “Keeping Condition”

As younger queer male musicians increasingly embrace LGBT as an identifiable positionality, they develop a stronger sensibility toward hetero- and homosexuality. However, the encounter between old and new discourses in Thai gender culture can be described as a palimpsest (Van Esterik 2020). That is, Thai gender culture is a complex palimpsest in which newer discourses are written on top of older ones, which, in turn, have not been fully erased (Jackson 2020: 26). This sometimes proves confusing for some senior queer male musicians. Mark, a seasoned fiddle player who openly acknowledged his gender nonconformity (see figure 6), admitted to me during an interview that he sometimes had difficulty making sense of his students’ gender identities. Mark mentioned one of his male students who appeared to be a “normal” man and showed no sign of femininity. When this student was in a relationship, he once brought his male partner along to a music lesson and exhibited noticeably feminine comportment. Soon after, the same student had another relationship, but this time he appeared to be highly masculine in the presence of his new partner. Mark observed that gender identities today are too diverse to be categorised as “left” or “right”.

Notable in Mark’s confusion is his reference to the localised meanings assigned to the gay identity. According to Peter Jackson, Thai “gay” identity claims to be recognised as a form of masculinity, placing homoerotic relations at the centre of one’s sexual and social life (Jackson 2004: 181). For many younger queer male musicians, “gay” is considered more desirable than *kathoey* because it eschews the over-the-top femininity of the latter and resituates queer male into the tolerated spectrum of masculinity. As a shade of masculinity, being “gay” does not threaten to upend the heteronormative constructs underlying Thai classical music. I have met a few “gay” Thai classical musicians who were strongly against the *kathoey* label, even though they were equally reluctant to identify themselves as “gay”. This is because embodying the *kathoey* label is regarded as an “uncivilised” mannerism. Becoming “gay” is different from “keeping condition”. It means the removal of the nonconforming condition altogether, albeit temporarily, making obvious displays of queer potential “undetectable” and thus causing confusion even among queer musicians.

My point is not to polarise the local concept of *kathoey* as “premodern” and the Western gay as some kind of inevitable destination. Rather, I aim to challenge the idea that a *kathoey*’s desire to become “gay” is a sign of upward mobility (although many still hold this belief). The pressures discussed above mean that queer male Thai classical musicians must carefully navigate their gender expression to avoid the accusation of being *kathoey*. One misstep can lead to an irreversible outcome for their social status and could immediately spell the difference between national pride and shame. However, according to ethnomusicologist Christi Anne-Castro, whether “queerness hides or is simply waiting for recognition may



Figure 6. Mark (left) gives a *sau uu* lesson to me (right) during an interview in May 2021. Screenshot of a video recorded by the author.

be for the observer or reader to decide, but there are occasions for obvious display” (Castro 2020: 107). I am particularly interested in the interplay between queerness and heteronormativity. If these musicians do not—or rather are not allowed to—connect with modern Asianness but instead are tied to the undesirable values of being *kathoey*, they must find a way to assimilate, at least obliquely, to the very gender and sexual norms of which they are a part.

Concluding Remarks: Queering or Unqueering?

From “keeping condition” to embracing the localised “gay” identity described above, queer male Thai classical musicians present a confounding example of what is/is not queer, at least from the Western perspective. Rather than openly disavowing the heteronormative constraints of the musical tradition, these musicians “articulate quite comfortably with the dominant values of the societies that fostered them, and often serve as conservative, rather than transgressive purposes” (Spiller 2022: 822). This begs the question of whether “keeping condition” is queering or unqueering Thai classical music. To answer this question, I argue that “keeping condition” is an insight into queerness in the sense that it is not considered normative by the standard conventions of Thai classical music. But because of the complicities in which queerness and (hetero)normativity work in tandem, it is tempting to write off “keeping condition” as simply an archetype of traditional values, a failure to come out, a defeat in the closet.

However, let us not forget David Halperin’s (1995: 66) remark that states:

[r]esistance to normativity is not purely negative or reactive or destructive, in other words; it is also positive and dynamic and creative. It is by resisting the discursive and institutional practices which, in their scattered and diffuse functioning, contribute to the operation of heteronormativity that queer identities can open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms.

Queer male musicians in the string ensemble are doing just that. The so-called new cultural form of queer musicking bodies may not suggest a clean break from the dominant cultures, but it demonstrates the survivability, if not thriving, of non-normative musicians when their morality and citizenship are always under scrutiny. Their social life demonstrates that “the oppositions between complicity and critique, and between conformity and dissidence, cannot fully account for the complexities of queer erotics and aesthetic expression within the Thai context” (Nguyen 2018: 142).

“Keeping condition” and investment in normative masculinity by queer male Thai classical musicians, be it through *kathoey* or LGBT discourses, demonstrate the unique agency and resilience of Thai queer politics that focus on hard issues, albeit implicitly, yet portray it softly (Chachavalpongpun 2020: 169). At the same time, its oblique identification with queerness and heteronormativity, with morality and citizenship at stake, inevitably constrain—not closet—the extent and degree of queerness, a complex intersection that underpins the limited freedom of queer activism in Southeast Asia (Rydstrom, Nguyễn, and Hoàng 2023; Yue and Zubillaga-Pow 2012; Yu 2022). The narratives I have presented here do not represent the entire gamut of queer musicians in Thailand—queer male *piiphaat* musicians and queer female musicians are the two outliers—nor are they translatable to other queer performers in Thai performing arts. However, just as queer ritual specialists display a profound intersection with the market and media (Jackson 2022: 225), I wish to use their lived experiences to challenge the binary opposition between pre-modern classical performing arts and modern queer popular expressive cultures. “Keeping condition” serves as an example of a critical scholarly approach that attends to intersectional power relations underpinning Thai classical music. Queer male Thai classical musicians are never isolated from broader social events. They draw on gender resources and discourses as they see fit to refashion their negotiated identities, sustaining Thai classical music for the past fifty years and in the foreseeable future.

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