

# ***Thang Sai Thee Sam* (The Third Pathway) Novel As Archive: Inspiring a Kathoey ‘Herstorian’**

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*Abstract: This essay studies the Thai novel Thang Sai Thee Sam, or ทางสายที่สาม (The Third Pathway), as an archive. This novel was written by Kiratee Chanar, the first Thai transsexual woman novelist, who drew from her own emotions and sex-change experiences in the USA in 1975. The first edition of Thang Sai Thee Sam was published in 1982. In summary, this essay elucidates how a novel can be a historical source by contextualizing its formation. Thang Sai Thee Sam reflected the broader political contexts in Thailand during the Cold War, the development of a world sex-change capital in/outside of Thailand, and the visibility of white transsexual autobiographies. By situating it within this context, I demonstrate that it is possible to examine Thang Sai Thee Sam as a “transgender archive” — or more specially a katoey archive — and a historical source of development of trans medicine in national and global contexts.*

**Introduction: *Thang Sai Thee Sam* and How I Read It**

*“We are born to walk in the Third pathway. The first pathway belongs to men who were born with strength and responsibility for family leadership. Another pathway belongs to women who were born with tenderness and giving birth for humanity. The pathway we are walking is in-between.”<sup>1</sup>*

– Kiratee Chanar (2002)

In 2018, when I first came to Canada to attend the Moving Trans History Forward conference at the University of Victoria (UVic), I took a copy of *Thang Sai Thee Sam* in my suitcase together with my personal stuff, paper for the conference, and the confidence to do a presentation in an international conference for the first time. Before leaving, I donated the novel to the UVic Transgender Archives, as the book is valuable not just as an outstanding work of Thai literature, but as a kathoey or transgender archive.<sup>2</sup> *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is both a fictional romance as well as a semi-autobiographical novel. It was published in *Sakul Thai Magazine* from Volume 1348 on 19 August 1980 to Volume 1436 on 27 April 1982 (88 volumes).<sup>3</sup> Later, it was published as a first edition novel in the same year 1982 by Wannakam Pue Cheewit (or Literature for Life) Publisher. The author Kiratee Chanar is the first Thai transsexual woman novelist who received a sex-change operation in 1975 performed by Dr. Stanley Biber at Mount San

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<sup>1</sup> Kiratee Chanar, *Thang-Sai-Thee-Sam*, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: Arun, 2002), 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Thang Sai Thee Sam* which I donated to the Transgender Archives at UVic is the 3rd edition published in 2002 and it consists of 870 pages.

<sup>3</sup> Kiratee Chanar, *Thang Sai Thee Sam*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Wannakam Pue Cheewit, 1982).

Rafael Hospital in the USA.<sup>4</sup>

I found *Thang Sai Thee Sam* when I began work on my Master's thesis in the field of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Thammasat University. I still remember the first time I began reading the novel; I approached it without a critical lens or positioning myself as a researcher or graduate student, but as a younger generation kathoey or Thai trans woman myself. Turning page by page, I was nostalgic about my first love, stuck in my sentimentality, and compassionate towards all the kathoey characters in the novel. Even though I chose to walk in the same pathway, I cannot completely understand how difficult the lives of older kathoey were, nor how society in their generation treated them. At the very least, I can sense how they felt, as it reflects how they had struggled and how Thai society has changed over my generation.

In addition to providing a history of sexual reassignment surgery based on the writer's experience, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is inspired by the author's own feelings. One of the biggest challenges I found from reading *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is encountering the oppressive feelings of the kathoey protagonist, such as self-hating, being trapped in the wrong body, feeling pessimistic about love, or feminine incompleteness. Chanar admitted that she wrote this novel

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Stanley Biber was an American physician and a pioneer in sexual reassignment surgery. Biber graduated in 1948 from the University of Iowa's medical school and became the chief surgeon of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) unit in South Korea. After his military service ended, Biber applied at Trinidad's Mount San Rafael Hospital. He performed sex-change surgery from 1969 until 1996. Over a three-decade career, it is estimated that he performed the operation for 5,800 patients. Claire Martin, "Pioneer Sex-Change Surgeon Dies at 82," *Denver Post*, January 18, 2006.

from her friend's experience and from her own feelings.<sup>5</sup> She narrates the stories of kathoey to spread a new understanding towards kathoey people. As she clarified in the afterword of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition novel, which was added in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition:

My real intention to write *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is to be a part of revealing the emotions of the one who is degraded by nature and surroundings, and who is judged by society as being worthless. In fact, their abnormalities should not be considered as a social problem, if they received the correct understanding.<sup>6</sup>

The novel reflects the genre conventions of Thai romance except that the main character is kathoey. The protagonist's name is Kaew (or แก้ว), meaning glass, which can imply fragility, purity, and femininity. She is feminine, beautiful, and passes as a woman; however, she came from a lower class of society, growing up as an orphan and dek-wat (a temple kid).<sup>7</sup> After Kaew finished secondary school, she moved to Bangkok to work as a bus ticket taker. That was until she met Jun, another kathoey character who is non-passing, funny, and completely different from Kaew, but one same thing is that Jun is a lower class kathoey who lives in Ging Petch (a slum area of Bangkok) and works as a lottery seller. Jun suggests Kaew work in a beauty salon while helping Kaew transition into a woman: teaching her how to do makeup and wear

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<sup>5</sup> Anonymous, "Gay vs Laws Seminar," *Nitisat Journal* 12, no. 2 (1984): 112.

<sup>6</sup> Kiratee Chanar, *Thang-Sai-Thee-Sam*, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: Arun, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Dek wat or a temple kid generally refers to a boy who lives in a temple, assists or works for monks. They also are taught Buddhist morals, reading and writing. Some become a dek-wat due to lack of educational opportunity or being an orphan.

female clothes. Aside from Kaew and Jun, another remarkable kathoey character is Chat. She is a kathoey sex worker who received an unethical sex-change surgery in Thailand, and has a tragic ending. Besides romantic stories, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* also portrayed the non-monolithic identity, morality, and self-formation amongst kathoey.

After she befriended Jun, Kaew meets three men. First is Thiraphron, an art student, friend, and Kaew's forever first love. Then there is Navin, a married man who helps Kaew by giving her a job as a receptionist in his restaurant and supporting her financially in pursuing her dream of obtaining sex-change surgery. Last is Pongphol who comes from an elite family and falls in love with Kaew. Near the ending, Kaew, in her postoperative body, loses her virginity to Navin, the married man who is always kind to Kaew. At this scene, the secret affair reiterates the mythical and religious belief in Theravada Buddhism: that being born as kathoey is a karmic consequence of adultery in a past life.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Kaew had not only committed the sin of adultery but had also encountered forbidden love. At the end, however, Kaew leaves every man behind, finding that her true love is for all of humanity, and choosing to walk down the idealist path. Kaew becomes a volunteer teacher in a rural province of Thailand. At this final scene, the protagonist stands in a complex position between being a good woman or a sinner, and there is the blurring of moral boundaries

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<sup>8</sup> Peter A Jackson, "Male homosexuality and transgenderism in the Thai Buddhist tradition," in *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1998), 55-89. The two stories include the story about Phra Ananda concerning kathoeyes and the second story is about Vakkali, who is indirectly identified as a male homosexual. In Buddhist accounts, kathoey are seen as an immoral and ambivalent subject.

between religion and humanism.

With an outstanding plot, unique characters, and complex narratives, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has been favorably selected by Thai literary critics and foregrounded in Thai literary criticism since the 1980s. The pioneer critic on *Thang Sai Thee Sam* in the area of comparative literature was Arin Pinijvararak. Her research found that between 1973-1982 there were fifteen Thai novels with sexual/gender non-conforming characters and narratives. At that time, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was categorized as Niyai Ruk Ruam Phet (a homosexual novel).<sup>9</sup> In other words, it was included in the same genre with lesbian, gay, or bisexual novels. In the 1970s, many English gender/sexual identity terms – for instance, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and homosexual – had been disseminated in Thai society. These novels had a crucial role in giving an explanation of these categories, but only *Thang Sai Thee Sam* specifically describes transsexuality. The fifteen novels in Pinijvararak’s work were also grounded in the Thai social and political contexts during the Cold War. As she pointed out:

The October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1973 event<sup>10</sup> brought not only huge

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<sup>9</sup> Pinijvararak defined Rak Ruam Phet (Homosexuality) as “having sexual pleasure with a person of the same sex.” Arin Pinijvararak, “The Theme of Homosexuality in Thai Novel, 1973-1982,” MA thesis (Chulalongkorn University, 1984), 8.

<sup>10</sup> The October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1973 event in Thailand is known as the “Day of Great Sorrow.” It took place in Bangkok where half a million people gathered at the Democracy Monument to demand democracy and an end to the autocratic regime of the so-called “Three Tyrants”: Thanom Kittikhachorn, Narong Kittikhachorn, and Praphat Jarusathien. As the protest was led by students and intellectuals, they also protested against the arrest of political campaigners and continuing military dictatorship. It became severely violent when soldiers fired into the crowd; seventy-seven were killed and 857 were injured. Christopher John Baker and

changes to Thai politics but also a huge impact to Thai literature; Thai publishers changed and put more attention toward the ideologies of socialism and communism. At the time, there were an increased number of books related to political issues.<sup>11</sup>

I considerably agree with her point that the Thai political context of the 1970s impacted Thai literature in terms of content and ideology. It shaped the author to intervene in social issues through their writings and criticisms of Thai politics and society, while Thai students in the 1970s gave their attention to leftist writings, discovered and translated from Europe and America.<sup>12</sup> More than shifting the fictional narrative, it thus also transformed the character and narrator, as Chanar bravely stepped out to write her first novel *Thang Sai Thee Sam* and represent kathoey or gender non-conforming characters to Thai audiences in the early 1980s.

After four decades, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* continues to be examined for its literary merit and production by Thai literary scholars, including Wanna Numun, Natthanai Prasannam, and Bongkotchakon Thongsuk.<sup>13</sup> Only Prasannam emphasizes the

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Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 186.

<sup>11</sup> Pinijvararak, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Wanna Noomuan, "Novels on Homosexuality: Problems and Human Value," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 4, no.2 (2008): 35-75; Prasannam, 240-256; Bongkotchakon Thongsuk, "Character Reflection of (LGBT-Themed Novels) in Thailand B.E.2516-2557," *INTHANINTHAKSIN JOURNAL* 12, no.2 (2017): 35-57. Besides academia, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has also been read by Kham Phaka (a well-known feminist writer, critic and journalist). She criticized it in her book

construction of transgender identity in *Thang Sai Thee Sam* novel through the lens of representation and cultural studies. Prasannam considers this novel as a discursive practice, as it is composed of various discourses, including medicine, religion, or myth in Thai society towards kathoey people.<sup>14</sup> Prasannam also noted that the intention of Chanar in creating this novel with a kathoey protagonist who conforms to the idea of femininity under heteropatriarchy may not be subversive, but she is still giving the voice of sexual minority people, claiming a space, and making them visible in literature.<sup>15</sup> However, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has not yet been understood as historical evidence of kathoey people or the development of “sex-change” surgery in national and global contexts. Therefore, in this essay, I demonstrate how *Thang Sai Thee Sam* can be considered an archive, as it records Chanar’s experiences and feelings, alongside the development of sexual reassignment surgery in Thailand and the globe. To do so, next I will weave Chanar’s life, work, and her influential sex-change experience in the USA, and then I will leave some ideas to re-write the history of trans treatment in Thailand.

### **Kiratee Chanar and her Journey to the World Sex-Change Capital**

Kaew took a flight from Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok and landed in Hawai’i where she went through the immigration process. Then, she took a connecting flight from Hawai’i to Los Angeles. Upon her arrival, Phongphol’s friend picked her up at the

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*Kra Too Dok Thong* (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Prasannam, 248.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 254



airport. Kaew spent a night with them. The next morning, she took a domestic flight from Los Angeles to Denver, Colorado. She stayed there with Sirinya's friend for a while to get a recommendation letter from two psychologists.<sup>16</sup> After receiving the letters, Kaew took a Greyhound bus from Denver to the nearby small-town of Trinidad that was once colloquially known as the global capital for sex-change surgery.<sup>17</sup> Chanar's sex-change experience in America inspired Kaew's journey in *Thang Sai Thee Sam*. For that reason, this novel does not only tell the romantic story of a kathoey crossing gender or moral boundaries, but also the journey of a kathoey crossing borders.

It is noticeable that *Thang Sai Thee Sam* paralleled increasing representations of white transsexual women in the 1970s and 1980s. After Christine Jorgensen's famous 1952 debut as "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty," as well as the 1967 release of her autobiography, many white transsexual celebrities walked in Jorgensen's shoes. Aren Z. Aizura found that many of the earliest European and American transsexual autobiographies feature a trip to Morocco to undergo surgery; for example, April Ashley's memoir *April Ashley's Odyssey*, Coccinelle's *Coccinelle*, Renée Richards's *Second Serve*, Caroline Cossey's *My Story*, and Jan Morris's *Conundrum*.<sup>18</sup> According to Aizura, the sex-change destinations featured in white transsexual autobiographies were exoticized and framed through Orientalist lenses.<sup>19</sup> The uniqueness of *Thang Sai Thee Sam* as a

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<sup>16</sup> Sirinya is Navin's sister.

<sup>17</sup> Claire Martin, "Pioneer Sex-Change Surgeon Dies at 82," *Denver Post*, January 18, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Aren Z. Aizura, *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 60.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

semi-autobiographical novel which included Chanar's sex-change experiences in the USA reflects the Oriental author's perceptions of supposed Western modernity, including representations of Global North medicine, gender identity categories, laws, and citizenship.

In this section, I will explore the background life of Chanar and her sex-change experience. But first, I would like to acknowledge that Chanar's life background here is incomplete. With respect to the pathway of her life, Chanar lived her life quietly into old age, even after she courageously wrote *Thang Sai Thee Sam* when there were too many closed doors in society for gender non-conforming people. In the age full of white transsexual celebrities and stories, Chanar was bravely and publicly out in the media. To piece together a narrative of her life, I draw from fragmentary historical materials, including her published works and her interviews in Thai newspapers, as well as a report of a debate event in 1983. Kiratee Chanar attended the public debate on the issue "Gay vs Laws" as a speaker. The event was organized on February 18<sup>th</sup> at Thammasat University. Chanar was one of the speakers in the event who shared her medical and legal experience in the USA.

What I found from tracing Chanar's works is that her novel writings – e.g., *Duang Jai Nai Sai Rom* or *Love in the wind* (1999), *Kanom Jeen Pa Thongdi* (2000), *Buang Ban ja Thornor* or *Love beyond time* (2001), and *Hanale* (2001) – can be categorized as romantic and moral fictions. She is not only known as Kiratee Chanar but also as Ratacha (or รัตชา), another pen name which she used in novel writing guidebooks, such as *To Write a Novel: Art and Craft of Storytelling* (2004). She was also a columnist on women's and kid's

issues in *Prachamati* which is a Thai newspaper in the USA.<sup>20</sup> More outstandingly, she is a professional floral designer. She wrote many books on floral arranging and taught an online course.<sup>21</sup> She also wrote a book about Porntip Nakhirunkanok (Bui Simon), a Thai-American who was crowned Miss Universe in 1988.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, she was a founder of an American-Thai foundation to help children living in poverty. However, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was Chanar's most recognizable publication, and its publication was a turning point in her writer career from a "no-name writer" to a S.E.A. Write award nominee in 1983.<sup>23</sup> *Thang Sai Thee Sam* got huge attention from Thai film and TV drama producers who wanted to visualize it onto the screen, but it was rejected by Kor-Bor-Wor (กบว.), the Radio and Television Broadcasting Commission.<sup>24</sup>

Aside from her writing works, Chanar was known for social work; a Thai newspaper described her as "a humanitarian" and "a social worker." She sometimes was called "Mae Nheng" or "Mother

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<sup>20</sup> Magrum, "Tracing back 'Thang Sai Thee Sam' Opening the literature world of Kiratee Chanar," *Siamrat*, October 23, 1988; Sunthron Chavalsil, "Deepen in the society and the Pathway where 'Kiratee Chanar' passed through," *Matubhumi*, July 11, 1983.

<sup>21</sup> Her books on floral arranging are *Professional Floral Design Theory* (1993) *Basic Floral Arranging* (1995) *Professional Floral Design* (1997), *The Art of Bouquet Arrangement* (2000) *Arranging Rose: Queen of Flowers* (2002), and *Floral Arranging Workshop 1-3*. I discovered Kiratee.com when I searched from the internet archive. This site opens for writing workshop. Moreover, there is also a Floral Arranging teaching by Kiratee Chanar on YouTube.

<sup>22</sup> The book is "Porntip" *The Garment of Life* or in Thai "ภรณ์ทิพย์" *อาภรณ์แห่งชีวิต* published in 1988.

<sup>23</sup> The S.E.A. Write Award, or Southeast Asian Writers Award, is a prestigious award that has been presented annually since 1979 to a Southeast Asian writer.

<sup>24</sup> Kor Bor Wor is a state agency which was responsible for broadcasting regulation and censorship from 1975 to 1992.

Nheng” (Nheng is her nickname) for helping children in poverty. Her foundation supports an orphanage in Kanchanaburi province, and she visited there in 1982.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, she was also known as “Kru Nheng” or “Teacher Nheng” since she did several teachings in novel writing and floral arranging.

What I found from the interview that she shared in Thai newspapers and in the debate event in 1983 is that Chanar grew up with divorced parents. She also seems closer to her mother than father. At a young age, Chanar studied at Wat-Benchamabophit School (one of the oldest all-male schools in Thailand) and then got a higher education at the College of Fine Arts in Bangkok. She moved to the US in 1968 and received a sex-change surgery in 1975 when she was twenty-five-years-old (close to her twenty-sixth birthday).<sup>26</sup> She stayed in the USA with her mother and siblings while her father lived in Thailand with other siblings.<sup>27</sup> Before her surgery, she had spent about four and a half years receiving hormone treatments (both injection and capsule) and worked for five years to save money. While living in the USA, Chanar worked as a writer and journalist.<sup>28</sup> Later, she owned a flower and greeting card shop in Los Angeles.<sup>29</sup> By opening this business, I assume that

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<sup>25</sup> Kiratee Chanar. *Ban Rai Thee Paimek* (Bangkok: Children Foundation, 2004), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Chavalsil, Sunthron, “Deepen in the society and the Pathway where “Kiratee Chanar” passed through,” *Matubhumi*, July. 11, 1983; Anonymous, 110. This means that maybe she was born around in 1950 or 1951 and I assume that she is now probably in her 70s. Chanar is still alive. I met her in Thailand in April 2018 after I returned to Thailand from the Moving Trans History Forward conference trip in Canada. She organized a writing camp at her house in suburban Bangkok.

<sup>27</sup> Chavalsil, Sunthron, “Deepen in the society and the Pathway where “Kiratee Chanar” passed through,” *Matubhumi*, July. 11, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Magrum, “Tracing back ‘Thang Sai Thee Sam’ Opening the literature world of

Chanar's life in the USA was mainly based in Los Angeles, California.

At the time, the cost of sexual reassignment surgery was around 5,000 USD for the operation and 3,000 USD for accommodations. This excluded the expenses for four-and-a-half years of hormonal therapy.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that Chanar made history as the first Thai person to receive a sex-change surgery abroad; however, she claims this was not the case:

I myself received a sex-change operation in 1975 but I was not the first. There was another person who got the surgery but she disappeared and I don't know where she is ... she was a famous costume designer who had worked in a tailor's shop near Siam Square ... her name is Nhong Anirut . . . Nhong was the first Thai who got the sex-change surgery but she did it in Casablanca in North America.<sup>31</sup>

Her assertion that Casablanca was "in North America" is misleading. In fact, Casablanca is a town in Morocco, which is in North Africa. Following this clue, I have found that there was indeed a surgeon who performed sex-change operations in Casablanca, Morocco, Dr. George Burou (1910–1987). He is the surgeon who invented the penile skin inversion technique and performed the operation in his Clinique du Parc at 13 Rue Lapébie (currently Rue Mélouia).<sup>32</sup> It

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Kiratee Chanar." *Siamrat*, October. 23, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous, 112.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> J. Joris Hage, Refaat B. Karim, and Donald R. Laub, "On the Origin of Pedicled Skin Inversion Vaginoplasty: Life and Work of Dr Georges Burou of Casablanca," *Annals of Plastic Surgery* 59, no. 6 (2007): 726.

seems that not only Trinidad but also Casablanca was a sex-change capital between the 1960s and 1970s. Even though the story of the first Thai person to receive a sex-change surgery outside Thailand remains a mystery, Chanar claimed that she was the first Thai patient to receive a sex change surgery with Dr. Biber in the USA, and the first non-US citizen transsexual woman to get legally married with her American husband, receive a green card, and change the gender marker on her identity document.<sup>33</sup>

At present, it is not necessary for a Thai trans woman like Kaew, Chanar, or a younger generation kathoey like myself to travel to another country to get a sex-change surgery because Thailand has become the new global sex-change capital. Ironically, trans people from around the world can buy a medical package and come to Thailand for the surgery, as Thailand has been a destination of non-Thai trans patients who were seeking for gender-reassignment surgery (GRS) since the mid-1990s.<sup>34</sup> Thai GRS boomed in the early twenty-first century by the expansion of the Thai tourism industry. Jillana B. Enteen recognizes the change in reputation of Thai tourism industry from sex tourism to the forefront of sex-transition tourism in the same way that Aizura points out that “Thai GRS must be theorized not as a phenomenon but as a market.”<sup>35</sup> Thailand was renowned as a transgender treatment hub for worldwide trans patients due to several factors. One prominent factor was the marketing strategy of a local clinic and domestic government authority that intentionally appealed to international medical tourists, especially Western or, in Aizura’s words, “a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Aizura, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Jillana B. Enteen, “Transitioning Online: Cosmetic Surgery Tourism in Thailand,” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (2014): 240; Aizura, 179.

self-orientalizing strategy.”<sup>36</sup> These strategies included endorsement by the Thai government of the medical tourism industry, the affective labor of Thai clinic staff, the marketing of local clinics in promoting GRS service packages, and even the designing of internet websites to advertise the service to non-Thai patients.<sup>37</sup>

To sum up, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is evidence of world sex-change capital history, as it shows the experience of Chanar herself as a non-white/Western transsexual in accessing trans medicine in the USA before Thailand became a new global sex-change capital at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### **“I” and A Journey to Re-Write a History of Sex Change Surgery in Thailand**

Even though *Thang Sai Thee Sam* novel includes Chanar’s American-based sex-change operation, it leaves me just a few hints about trans medicine in Thailand. Before traveling to the USA, Kaew received hormonal therapy under the guidance of a Thai doctor, and Chat (a kathoey sex-worker character) received a likely unethical and unsafe surgery without a medical letter from a psychologist in a private clinic in Thailand by a Japanese surgeon. What is overshadowed from the novel is the formation of trans medicine in Thailand. Therefore, it prompts me to trace its beginning.

Stepping back to the year 1975, the same year Chanar received sex-change surgery with Dr. Biber in Trinidad, two Thai doctors (Dr. Preecha Tiewtranon and Dr. Prakrob Thongpeaw) performed a MtF sex reassignment surgery in Thailand at

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Chulalongkorn hospital.<sup>38</sup> This was not long after Dr. Harry Benjamin first officially published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* in 1966. Then, sex-reassignment surgery began to be taught in Chulalongkorn University Hospital in 1983.<sup>39</sup> The year 1975 was historically recorded in medical papers as the start of MtF gender reassignment surgery in Thailand by Thai doctors.<sup>40</sup> The 1970s are also seen as a milestone decade when the GRS techniques were developed by a Thai doctor.<sup>41</sup> However, I would note that this record obscures the period that Thai doctors began to medically study kathoey people, and also overlooks the experimental stage of related-genital surgery in Thailand.

My first clue to retrieve the history of trans medicine in Thailand came from the thesis of Terdsak Romjumpa, which studies gay discourses in Thailand between 1965 to 1999 through various sources including a group of medical texts.<sup>42</sup> Romjumpa's work showed that, before 1975, there were two Thai doctors that

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<sup>38</sup> Prayuth Chokrungrvaranont and Preecha Tiewtranon, "Sex Reassignment Surgery in Thailand," *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 87, no.11 (2004): 1402.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Prayuth Chokrungrvaranont, Gennaro Selvaggi, Sirachai Jindarak, Apichai Angspatt, Pornthep Pungrasmi, Poonpismai Suwajo, and Preecha Tiewtranon, "The Development of Sex Reassignment Surgery in Thailand: A Social Perspective," *The Scientific World* 2014, (2014): 4; Burin Wangjiraniran, Gennaro Selvaggi, Prayuth Chokrungrvaranont, Sirachai Jindarak, Sutin Khobunsongserm, and Preecha Tiewtranon. "Male-to-Female Vaginoplasty: Preecha's Surgical Technique," *Journal of plastic surgery and hand surgery* 49, no. 3 (2015): 159.

<sup>41</sup> Aren Z. Aizura, "Feminine Transformations: Gender Reassignment Surgical Tourism in Thailand," *Medical Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (2010): 429.

<sup>42</sup> Terdsak Romjumpa, "Discourses on Gays in Thai society, 1965-1999" (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2002), 41-54.



medically studied kathoey: Dr. Sood Sangvichien<sup>43</sup> (sometimes his surname was spelled in English as Saengvichien) conducted medical research on 18 kathoey prisoners<sup>44</sup> in Lad Yao prison in Bangkok with the support of Dr. Arun Bharksuvan, the director of Somdet Chaopraya hospital<sup>45</sup> at that time. They both presented their findings in the grand annual meeting of the Medical Association of Thailand on January 28th, 1961. In July, their papers were both published in the *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* in the same volume.

The two doctors proposed the term Lak-Ka-Phet or ลักกะเฟต which was coined from the idea of transvestitism in English. Dr. Sangvichien considers that the word kathoey should describe people with hermaphrodite (or intersex) conditions. This idea came from the original meaning of the word kathoey in the Royal Institute Dictionary which refers to “human or animal without male or female sex characteristics.”<sup>46</sup> With his expertise in Anatomy, he applied a variety of scientific methods — e.g., a physical measurement method of Decourt and Doumic, a sex chromatin test, sperm examination, and a 17-ketosteroids urine test — to examine

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<sup>43</sup> From my current medical archival research, I found that Dr. Saengvichien seems to be a leader in this field, as he published several works concerning hermaphroditism, transvestitism and transsexualism between 1950 and 1980 and he was also a co-researcher in studying these issues.

<sup>44</sup> Dr. Sangvichien reported that these kathoey prisoners were arrested by being Lak Ka Phet, while Dr. Bharksuvan’s informed that some of them were arrested for sex-work.

<sup>45</sup> Somdet Chaopraya Hospital is the first psychiatric hospital in Thailand, and it was founded at the behest of King Chulalongkorn in 1889.

<sup>46</sup> Sood Sangvichien, “Homosexuality-Anatomical Aspect,” *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 44, no. 7 (1961): 435.

Lak-Ka-Phet prisoners.<sup>47</sup> He concluded that the abnormality of Lak-Ka-Phet, the man who wears female clothes and expresses female behaviors — or people who were generally recognized as kathoey in Thai society — is the result of mental disorder rather than physical.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, Dr. Bharksuvan, whose expertise was in Psychology, reported three cases and analyzed the cause of being Lak-Ka-Phet. He had three assumptions on heredity, glandular disease, and psychological disorder which mentioned Sigmund Freud's psychosexual development theory.<sup>49</sup> However, Dr. Braksuvan did not make a clear conclusion; rather, he proposed the treatment and the protection of Lak-Ka-Phet.<sup>50</sup>

Following this clue, I found that Dr. Sangvichien devoted his attention to kathoey or hermaphrodite research subjects after he published the paper, "An Unusual Hernial Sac Content," in 1951. In it, he received a report on a surgical specimen from a case of right congenital inguinal hernia which presented the resembling infantile uterus inside. The case concerned a Thai patient who appeared as a normal man externally in Chiangrai province but, from hernia surgery in 1946, was found to have a mass. Later, in 1950, this surgical specimen was forwarded to Dr. Sangvichien by Dr. Sem Pringpuangkao.<sup>51</sup> In addition to these mentioned doctors, it is likely that trans-related surgery was a noticeable issue among Thai medical providers. Before Chulalongkorn Hospital provided the first

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<sup>47</sup> Sangvichien, 437.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 442.

<sup>49</sup> Arun Bharksuvan, "Homosexuality-Psychiatric Aspect," *Journal of the Medical Association of Thailand* 44, no. 7 (1961): 445.

<sup>50</sup> Bharksuvan, 448-450.

<sup>51</sup> Sood Saengvichien, "An Unusual Hernial Sac Content," *Siriraj Hospital Gazette* 3, no. 2 (1951): 57-58.

MtF surgery to a patient in 1975, a FtM sex-change surgery had been performed by Dr. Kampee Mallikamas and his colleagues at Central Hospital (Klang Hospital or โรงพยาบาลกลาง) in 1973.<sup>52</sup> By tracing these clues, I would demonstrate that the emergence of transgender medicine in Thailand can be traced back to at least the 1950s.

Although *Thang Sai Thee Sam* sparked my enthusiasm for tracing the history of trans medicine in Thailand, I leave more in-depth analysis to future scholastic works. To fully re-write the sex-change surgery history in Thailand, we need much more work to examine the connection of GRS in Thailand and global contexts, to understand the circulation of European sexology, and to historicize American influence on Thai medicine during the Cold War. Additionally, it also needs a radical paradigm to analyze the medical archive. Jules Gill-Peterson proposes that we read the clinical archive “to contest the historiography of the trans past monopolized by the parameters of transsexuality.”<sup>53</sup> By doing this, it will create a bridge between intersex and trans medical history and broaden the history of GRS in Thailand.

Besides the Thai popular uprising of the 1970s, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was also embedded in the rise of the development of trans medicine in Thailand. As such, I argue that the novel *Thang Sai Thee Sam*, inspired by Chanar’s sex change experience, can be interpreted as evidence of the development of modern gender reassignment surgery in Thailand, as well as in a broader global context.

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<sup>52</sup> Kampee Mallikamas, “Operative Technics,” *The Journal of the Central Hospital* 22, no. 2 (1985): 66.

<sup>53</sup> Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 11.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I demonstrated how *Thang Sai Thee Sam* emerged from the Thai social and political influence of the 1970s, and how these local and international political changes transformed Thai literature. Meanwhile, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* was also grounded in the formation of trans medicine in Thailand, emerging in comparison to white transsexual celebrities and autobiographies of the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, my main argument here is that *Thang Sai Thee Sam* has the potential to be an archive, rather than merely a novel.

*Thang Sai Thee Sam* can be read as an archive in two ways. Firstly, Chanar's novel can be counted as a "transgender archive," since it functions as "a technology of identity."<sup>54</sup> As K.J. Rawson explains, "Far from a neutral or objective record of the past, a transgender archive is thus a rhetorical institution that is intentionally adapted to an audience for a particular persuasive purpose."<sup>55</sup> Clearly, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* serves the author's purpose, as Chanar wrote this novel to demythologize kathoey people and propose a new understanding to Thai society. More than that, it convinces the reader to accept what Kaew chose: the surgical operation and becoming a woman after the surgery. Secondly, *Thang Sai Thee Sam* functions as a record of the development of GRS in Thailand and the broader global context, as Chanar wrote this novel in a semi-autobiographical form by adding her sex-change experiences in the USA. From these two points, I propose to read

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<sup>54</sup> Valerie Rohy, "In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*," *GLQ: Journal of Gay & Lesbian Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 345 (cited in Rawson, 25).

<sup>55</sup> K.J. Rawson, "Archive," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 24-26.

*Thang Sai Thee Sam* as a historical text.

*Thang Sai Thee Sam* is a complex and incomplete site of analysis. There are still many issues to interrogate; e.g., the lives of Thai kathoey in 1950s and 1960s, the complex moral and political position in the novel, kathoey feelings that made up of Chanar's emotions, the hegemony of kathoey protagonist's femininity, and the relationship between men and kathoey character in heteronormativity and patriarchy. However, we should be mindful that kathoey or Thai gender non-conforming history is still obscured and overshadowed. Therefore, I suggest we re-narrate and re-write our history rather than just read this novel repeatedly.

It has now been over forty years since the release of *Thang Sai Thee Sam* and the emergence of representations of kathoey characters in world literature. I am not sure how far Thai society has come to the point that Chanar imagined a better place for kathoey/trans people. As a younger generation kathoey/trans woman myself, there are still many points in this novel that I cannot understand, entirely agree with, or stop questioning. We need many more historical works to bridge kathoey people in each generation and understand social history in/outside of Thailand. However, I cannot deny that *Thang Sai Thee Sam* is one of the sources of inspiration for me to become a kathoey 'herstorian' to discover the genealogy of Western sexology, the history of sex-change in Thailand, and its capitals in previous decades. It also inspires me to build up the oral history of kathoey elders and weave the history of Thai sex-change surgery in its global context, the subject of my current PhD dissertation. I give thanks to Chanar for paving this pathway for me.

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