Late-twentieth century imaginings of Thailand in the West revolve around a sexualized exoticism, in which AIDS and the sex trade have become synonymous with a national identity. Both academic and popular writings have tended to construct Thailand as a seamless and homogenous whole, with little attention to local ethnic and class differences. *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, edited by Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook, is a compilation of essays from the diverse fields of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, literature, history, and critical theory that attempts to complicate orientalist stereotypes of Thailand. Through an examination of both Western constructions as well as Thai self-renderings, the book’s contributors address such themes as the conflation of prostitution and sexualised femininity, the
silence of female desire, the representation of gender roles in literature and the media, and the assumed unbound sexuality of Thai men in the context of widespread HIV/AIDS. Ambitious in its scope, the book contains fifteen essays that cover a wide range of topics centred on sexuality and gender construction in twentieth century Thailand.

The essays share an attention to grounded analysis that links constructions and representations of gender and sexuality with localised interpretation. While each essay is well crafted and admirably argued, the compilation as an edited volume lacks concrete organisation. The comprehensiveness of the project, in some ways, has contributed to its weakness. Despite the organised layout of the introduction, the varied essays are not categorised along any thematic lines, but rather are loosely clumped according to academic discipline. The carefully defined themes laid out in the introduction are left implicit and unarticulated. In the first five essays, the authors write from a social scientific perspective and use quotes and thick description to convey the impact of capitalism on the construction of femininity and women’s status and the tolerance (or lack thereof) of sex workers and extramarital affairs in the context of the AIDS epidemic. Lyttleton examines adolescent courting against a backdrop of the public regulation of sexual practices, while Whittaker takes a close look at the impact of wage labour on women’s domestic power. In an effort to explicitly problematise the notion of a single Thai identity, Bao examines the formation of gender as linked to the ethnicity of Chinese immigrants. Saengtienchai, et al. draw on extensive interview transcripts to illustrate the ways in which married women accept and resist their husbands’ extramarital affairs, while Knodel et al. use the same pool of qualitative research to understand the relationship between sexual experience and spousal choice.

In chapters six through ten, the book shifts abruptly from anthropological and sociological analysis to semantic and literary criticism. The authors of these next chapters rely on rich textual analysis to historicise changing notions of gender and sexuality throughout the twentieth century. Chirasombuti and Diller examine the links between language, gender roles, and power through their analysis of the situational uses of the Thai first person referent. Barmé views proto-feminist discourses in early twentieth century writings as both a reflection of advances in female education and as a form of agitation for further equality. To expose the ambiguous relationship between Thailand and the West in the early twentieth century, Fishel explores the ways in which nationalistic sentiment is projected onto and reflected in gender roles, marital patterns and beauty ideals, as exemplified in two fictional period pieces. Harrison asserts that twentieth century female Thai writers reinforce a conservative morality that divides good Thai women from bad Thai women along the Madonna/whore dichotomy, but also distinguish themselves as sexually progressive by virtue of their courage to address edgy topics such as prostitution in their work. Bishop and Robinson, in an insightful, albeit scathing, critique of two contemporary texts on the “demand side” of international sex tour-
ism” (191), link the exoticism of the sexual other in Diderot’s work on Tahiti two hundred years ago to an orientalist 1994 Internet guide on the Thai sex market and a recent anthropological work on an American woman’s self-indulgent view of the sex trade.

In the remaining five chapters, the book shifts gears again to critical theory and discourse analysis, in which the authors explore the tensions between the ideological construction of gender as a monolith in Thailand and the diversity of experiences that complicate this perspective on the ground. Borthwick explores the ways in which tactics of AIDS education and prevention must be tailored to the unique cultural contexts and communities of Thailand in order to be effective, while Jackson examines the contradictions that distinguish tolerance versus acceptance of transgenderism and homosexuality in Thailand. Tannenbaum, like Bao, attempts to deconstruct the seamless construction of gender in Thailand by criticising the ideological emphasis on Buddhism as the sole source of gender roles across historical and geographical boundaries. Reynolds also moves towards a more nuanced approach of the contradictions implicit in a single gender ideology, by examining the effects of globalisation, hybridity, and diaspora on nationalistic constructions of gender. Finally, in a thoughtful concluding essay, Van Esterik synthesises the commonalities of Thai gender and sexuality research to date, explores the theoretical understandings of the body in the Thai sex-gender system, and points to new directions for future research.

On the one hand, Gender and Sexualities in Modern Thailand should be praised for crossing disciplinary boundaries and attempting to unite a variety of perspectives and objects of inquiry around a discrete set of themes. The breadth of methodological approaches and the range of topics covered in the individual essays make this compilation useful in both undergraduate and graduate courses on Southeast Asia, gender, and sexuality. But, on the other hand, because the editors did not explicitly arrange the essays thematically—as exemplified by the absence of subheadings in the table of contents—the salient points of the book are rendered less powerful and less apparent to the reader. In fact, clustering the chapters along disciplinary lines rather than thematic ones is starkly counterproductive to a true interdisciplinary approach. The reader is led to view disciplinary boundaries as fixed rather than flexible and to overlook common themes whose appearance in a variety of texts and contexts underscores their cultural and historical significance.

Had the editors chosen to highlight shared foci across the varied fields of literature, history, and anthropology and to organise the chapters accordingly, the compilation would indeed have provided a uniquely pluralistic approach to understanding gender and sexuality in Thailand. For example, Harrison’s literary essay might easily have been linked to the sociological chapters by Knodel et. al. and Saengtienchai et. al. around the common theme of bounded versus unbounded female sexuality. Similarly, Bao’s grounded anthropological essay, coupled with the rhetorical analyses of Tannenbaum and
Reynolds, would have illustrated the importance of locating a seamless ideological discourse on gender and sexuality within the complexities of local difference. Despite this organisational shortcoming, we should be careful not to overlook this comprehensive collection of informative, theoretically critical, and ethnographically rich essays that makes a significant contribution to research on gender and sexuality in Thailand.

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