In June 1995 a visiting American professor of psychology gave a talk at Thammasat University in Bangkok on the topic of current psychological approaches to homosexuality. Because the audience was mostly Thai, an interpreter was provided. The speaker explained that same-sex sexual behavior does not necessarily lead to a sexual identity. The professor’s statement that “some women have sex with other women but do not consider themselves as lesbians” was translated with the Thai word for “men” (phu-chai) replacing the English word “lesbians.” After murmurings from the disconcerted audience (which consisted of university students, activists, and faculty members) and a discussion between the speaker and the interpreter, the interpreter retranslated the sentence with the English word “lesbians” carried over into the Thai translation. Apparently “lesbian” was an untranslatable, culturally specific term.

The interpreter’s original substitution of the Thai word meaning “men” for “lesbians” was no accident. Females who are sexually attracted to “women” are commonly understood by Thais to be masculine beings. The sexuality implied in the term “lesbian” was elided and replaced with an assertion of gender—these females are simply considered “men.” The feminine partners of these “men” are linguistically exterior—no reference to them is made in the translation “men.” There is a Thai term (“dees”) for these feminine partners of female “men,” but the exclusion of dees from the Thai translation of “lesbian” indicates their ambiguity in the dominant discourses of the Thai sex/gender order, as well as their peripheral status in the Thai articulation of the Western concept “homosexuality” when describing local transgendered practices. In the case of the Thammasat lecture, the presence of West-
ern and Thai feminist activists in the audience made this commonsense translation of “lesbians” as “men” awkward. The Western professor’s statement on lesbianism was loaded with cultural implications that snagged and buckled when forced into translation. This incident offers a glimpse at the process of cultural production, in which complex and contradictory borrowings, adaptations, and transformations of categories of gender, sexuality, and self are made.

In Thailand these female “men” who look to “women” for love, romance, and sex are called—and call themselves—*toms*. The term “*tom*” is derived from the English word “tomboy.” Their feminine partners are called “*dees,*” a term derived from the last syllable of the English word “lady.” This book is about the way that *toms* and *dees* construct their identities and their vibrant, growing, and highly visible communities.¹ It is also about the social discourses in Thai society that form the contours of being *tom* or *dee*. *Tom* and *dee* identities are relatively recent. They emerged in Thailand in the late 1970s, corresponding to profound socioeconomic changes that characterize that period. These identities are new, but they have important links to preexisting cultural understandings of sexuality and gender, which will be explored in chapter 2.

**TOMS AND DEES**

Although *tom* and *dee* identities are recent linguistic categories of identity, female homosexuality itself is, of course, not new to Thailand or anywhere else. A *tom* is a *tom* by virtue of her self-assumed masculinity, and sexual attraction to women is an assumed extension of being masculine. *Dee* “identity” is the result of having a sexual or romantic relationship with a *tom*. However, *dee* identity is less formal than *tom* identity, and many women involved with *toms* stated in interviews that they thought of themselves not as *dees* but simply as women. In contemporary Thailand, *dee* is something less than a fully formed identity and something more than a behavioral description. The term “*dee*” overlaps with other terms, such as “ordinary woman.” For example, Pek, a girlfriend of a *tom*, told me that she was a woman and not a *dee*. Pek said, “A *dee* is only for *toms*, but a ‘woman’ can be with either a *tom* or a guy. For now, I cannot stand being with a guy because I like [my *tom* partner] so much better.”

Some *toms* and *dees* said that a *dee* is any woman with a *tom*, while
others made distinctions between “real” *dees* and “fake” ones, saying that real *dees* would be only with a *tom* whereas fake ones would be with either men or *toms*. Some *toms* said that the latter may be true, but they knew of very few “real” *dees*.

*Toms*, as transgendered females, share some common discourses of self with transgendered males (*kathoey*rs) in Thailand, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3. However, there are some notable differences between transgendered males and females in Thai discourse. *Toms* are not women “passing” as men, whereas *kathoey*rs often do make efforts to pass as women, including opting for sexual reassignment surgery.

*Tom-dee*ism is not a category that encompasses all female homoerotic experiences or identities. Not all female homosexuality is as highly gendered as *tom-dee*ism, nor are all female homosexual experiences necessarily labeled or discursively situated; in other words, not all homosexual experiences lead to an identity. Homosexual behavior in Thai cultural logic does not necessitate the same all-encompassing identity and resulting stigma that such behavior in a Western context almost automatically entails. Som’s story exemplifies the experience of same-sex relations that are relatively common among Thai women.

Som is a rural woman in her thirties who worked at various factories as an adolescent and lived in factory dormitories for some periods of time. While in one factory dormitory, Som had a sexual relationship with a young woman, Tuk. Som shared a room with Tuk for several years, and they formed a tight friendship. Som said they divided daily chores and lived together “like a couple.” Som would clean the house while Tuk cooked the food. As they slept at night, they would touch and caress each other as they masturbated. One day Tuk came home and said that her parents had decided it was time for her to marry and had found a suitable young man in the village to which she would soon return. Som said she was depressed and responded simply, “You’re going to get married, huh?” Tuk left, and they lost contact. Som was clearly disappointed and hurt at the breakup but had no language to express her feelings about the relationship—it fit no meaningful category of marriage or building a future together. Som said she did not consider herself or her female partner to be a *tom* or a *dee*, nor did she identify herself with the increasingly recognized term “lesbian.” Som married at about age sixteen, and after a few years she had a child, like many of
the other young village women. Som’s story was like many I collected through the course of my research—I was told of such past sexual experiences while discussing topics unrelated to homosexuality or tom and dee identities (e.g., factory working conditions). Homosexual behavior does not necessarily lead to an identity, nor does it necessarily constitute a distinct transgression of sexual or gender norms.

Tom identity does not exhaust all possible female masculine identities in the Thai context. Saipin Suputtamongkol’s study (2000) of prison life in Thailand describes the female prison world, in which masculine female inmates who are involved sexually with other female prison inmates are categorized as either a tom or a “man.” The term “man” is a transliteration of the English word “man” into Thai. Toms are understood to have been masculine, homosexual females before their prison terms, and thus their masculinity is an extension of their “real” life. A “man,” on the other hand, is a woman who chooses a female sexual partner and a masculine gender as a survival technique during the time she is in prison, which may amount to several decades. Being a man is seen as a temporary, situational gender change as women adapt to the necessities of prison life. Most of these prison women assume that a man, upon release, will revert to her previous feminine heterosexuality (Saipin 2000, 206–222).

Som’s story and the prison man indicate that focusing on tom-deeism as a given and obvious identity by virtue of the sexuality of these women would be misleading. Neither tom and dee identities nor their imagery in mainstream discourses can be assumed to be a “natural” or obvious interpretation of gendered and sexual activity—they are culturally and historically specific interpretations of both female homosexuality and transgenderism that exist within a range of possibilities.

THAI SEX/GENDER TERMS AND CATEGORIES

The meanings of Thai terms for sex and gender categories have changed over time and are neither static nor homogenous. Even within dictionaries contradictions abound, as writers attempt to link Thai terms to their understanding of Western terms for sexuality within the context of an expanding vocabulary of sexual and gender categories in contemporary Thailand. Thus a Thai word such as “lakkapheet,” for example, may be simultaneously interpreted as transsexual, transvestite, and homosexual. A brief description of the key terms and concepts in the Thai sex/gender order follows.
**Pheet (Sex/Gender)**

Jackson (1997b) demonstrates that Thai terminology reflects the absence of rigid conceptual distinctions between sex and gender, for both are denoted by the word “pheet.” “Pheet” can indicate sexual acts; “to have sex” is expressed as “ruam-pheet”; and “pheet” can also mean “sex,” as in “female sex” (pheet-ying). “Pheet-ying,” like the masculine referent “pheet-chai,” can also refer to the gendered identity of an individual rather than specifically to biological status—transgendered males or toms may refer to themselves or be referred to as “pheet-ying” or “pheet-chai,” respectively, indicating their gendered status as feminine or masculine. A female’s statement that she is pheet-chai is not a claim to a male body or physical hermaphroditism.

**Phit-pheet**

The term “phit-pheet” can be translated as “misgendered” or “mis-sexed,” implying that one is acting against one’s normative gender. Thus a kathoey (feminine male) or a tom (masculine female) may be called phit-pheet.

**Kathoey**

“Kathoey” means an indeterminate gender or a combination of masculine and feminine gender and is commonly translated into English as either “hermaphrodite” or “third sex/gender.” “Kathoey” can be used to describe any animal or plant that does not have a clearly distinct male or female sex or is infertile. For example, I have heard some mangoes called kathoey mangoes, meaning mangoes without fertile seeds, although some Thais have interpreted the phrase as referring to mangoes that are a hybrid of mango types. “Kathoey” has been used to refer to either males or females who physically have both male and female genitalia, corresponding to the English term “hermaphrodite.” More commonly, “kathoey” is used to refer to a male or a female who seems to embody the characteristics, or “gender,” of the opposite sex, such as “feminine males” or “masculine females.” These males and females are presumed to be homosexual as a result of their blended gender. “Kathoey” is a blending of “pheet,” which can refer to either sexed body (hermaphrodite) or gender (a transgendered tom, for example). Not only are homosexuality and hermaphroditism typically considered to be indistinguishable, but erotic interest in the same sex, hermaphroditism, and bisexuality are also linked. An
English-Thai dictionary defines “bisexual” as “having two sexes (pheet), having male and female genitalia in the same body, being a katboey, and/or having sexual desire for both men and women” (Wit 1994). “Katboey” now refers almost exclusively to males, and masculine females are usually referred to as toms. Katboeys, or feminine men (presumed to be homosexual), are sometimes referred to as “tut,” which is pejorative Thai slang perhaps translatable as “fag” or “homo.”

Gay
Homosexual Thai men who are normatively masculine often identify themselves as “gay,” as a way to distinguish themselves from the very visible, feminine, and stigmatized katboeys. Masculine gay men are not highly visible in Thai society, because they do not participate in transgenderism, which is widely held by Thais to be synonymous with homosexuality (with the gender-normative partner of these transgendered males not distinguished from “men” in general). However, many Thais understand the term “gay” to refer to katboeys and feminine homosexual males. Some transgendered males also call themselves “gay” because the term does not carry the same stigma that the term “katboey” does and because it sounds modern and international.

Third Sex/Gender
The term “third sex/gender” (pheet-thii-saam) is used in many academic articles, particularly in the field of psychology, and in the press to refer to toms, dees, gays, and katboeys. The term “third sex/gender” is relatively new, and none of the elderly people I interviewed recognized it. Exactly how this term was introduced into Thai discourse is unclear, but it most probably was through academics and psychologists as they introduced Western sexology. The term “third-sex/gender” is closely associated with preexisting understandings of katboey as an intermediary sex/gender category. However, most toms I met did not think of themselves as “third sex/gender.” Kralok, an urban tom in her forties, explained, “If somebody calls me third sex/gender (pheet-thii-saam), I won’t agree with that. ‘Third sex/gender’ means you are neither man nor woman, maybe some kind of monster. So there isn’t any third sex/gender for me. I am female (phu-ying), but mis-gendered/sexed (phit-pheet). Mis-gendered/sexed means that naturally a man and a woman live together as a family, but if some woman lives with another woman or some man lives with another man, that is being mis-gendered/sexed.
We have only two sexes/genders \textit{(pheet)} in the world.” The term “third gender/sex” is now fairly well known among Thai urbanites and the educated middle classes, who have access to both the print media and academic texts.

\textit{Rak-ruam-pheet} / \textit{Homosexuality}

The formal, medically derived term for homosexuality, “rak-ruam-pheet,” is of relatively recent origin and smacks of academic jargon. “Sexual deviance” (biang-been-thaang-pheet), like “homosexuality,” is a Western-derived academic term that is used increasingly by the media and academics. The term “rak-ruam-pheet” is paired with another new term, “rak-tang-pheet” (heterosexuality). However, unlike the relatively neutral connotations of the English term “homosexuality,” “rak-ruam-pheet” tends to carry an inherently negative meaning, according to Thai gay and lesbian activists. The first word “rak,” meaning “love,” is followed by two syllables that form the word “ruam-pheet,” a direct and formal term for “sexual intercourse.” So a possible reading of the term “rak-ruam-pheet,” in spite of its medical and academic origin, is “loving to have sexual intercourse” or simply “sex-crazed.” Explicit associations with sexuality are particularly offensive to Thai women, including toms and dees, and they tend to feel uncomfortable with the term “rak-ruam-pheet.” Anjaree, a Thai lesbian activist organization, is concerned that this term conveys a negative image to mainstream Thai society by implying that homosexuals are unduly interested in sexual acts. Anjaree has recently suggested a new term, “rak-pheet-diau-kan” (literally, “to love the same sex”), to replace the term “rak-ruam-pheet” in academic and journalistic writing. The term “homosexuality” and other Western-inspired academic terms, such as “sexual deviance” (biang-been-thaang-pheet), are interpreted by many Thais as referring to transgenderism, consistent with the Thai concept that homosexuality is a form of “gender deviance.”

\textit{Lakkapheet}

In addition to “katboey,” “lakkapheet” is perhaps the closest Thai equivalent to the Western concept of an overarching category of sexual and gender “deviance.” The term “lakkapheet” means literally “to steal another’s sex/gender,” implying that one is acting against one’s “proper” sex or gender. Academics and authoritative-sounding journalists often use “lakkapheet” as an equivalent to the Western category of “transvestite.” For example, a journalist defined “lakkapheet” as people who
“gain satisfaction from wearing clothing of the opposite sex” (Ophat 1984a). “Lakkapheet,” unlike “third sex/gender,” has an inherently negative implication and is almost never used as a positive self-identity.

Thais often use specific terms for homosexual or transgendered individuals, such as “gay,” “tom,” “dee,” “tut,” or “katboey” rather than trying to reach for an overarching term that could encompass all these categories, such as “homosexual,” “third sex/gender,” or “lakkapheet.” Thais use the specific terms primarily as references to a gender identity, with homoeroticism as a necessary corollary.

**DISCOURSES OF “SEXUAL DEVIANCE” AND THE QUESTION OF “TOLERANCE”**

Although this book aims to demonstrate that toms and depois are active participants in constructing the framework and meaning of tom and dee identities, it is imperative to recognize that toms and depois, and the concepts they deploy, are not free-floating in a sea of semiotic creativity. Toms and depois as individuals are grounded in a social system that often discourages and criticizes their identities and life choices. They exist in a contemporary social situation in which some toms and depois experience oppression, insults, and intimidation regarding their gender and sexuality. Jackson (1999b, 229) makes the useful distinction between “tolerance” and “acceptance” of homosexuality in the Thai context: “Tolerance denotes a preparedness to endure, put up with, or permit to exist, but does not necessarily imply the lack of criticism or the favorable or approving attitude connoted by acceptance. It is possible to tolerate something even while considering it inappropriate, misdirected, or wrong.” Although Jackson’s discussion focuses primarily on male homosexual and transgender identities in Thailand, his distinction is useful in making sense of attitudes toward tom and dee identities.

As tom and dee identities and subculture experience a dramatic popularity and growth, a virulently anti-homosexual/tom-dee discourse has been produced by academics and medical professionals under the guidance of the Thai state. Discourses of “homosexuality” (rak-ruam-pheet), “misgendering” (phit-pheet), and “sexual/gender deviance” (biang-beenthaang-pheet) have been disseminated by state-based Thai educational and academic institutions in cooperation with the media, particularly the print media. These hegemonic discourses of the Thai state and its agents are presented in chapter 7.
The coexistence of tolerance and intolerance was evident in many of the interviews I conducted with dees. For example, I was struck by the relative openness with which some women would discuss with me past love affairs with toms or dees. Nok, a mother and wife in her mid-thirties, freely volunteered information about her past love affairs with toms when she learned of my research topic. Nok is a professional, well-educated woman from an affluent family in Bangkok. She seemed to have fond memories of her experiences with several toms in her teens and twenties and said that her family was accepting of, even nonchalant about, her girlfriends and her dee lifestyle at the time. Later I decided to interview Nok to get details about her life to include in this research, and a different picture emerged. In the interview, Nok said she always felt unnatural when she was with her girlfriends and was afraid that her friends would not accept her. She said she had little social life at that time for fear of being criticized about her tom lover, and she felt that her family was pleased when she finally ended her relationships with toms and married a man.

Many of the dees I interviewed expressed similar feelings of ambivalence about society’s attitudes toward them. Many Thais classify dees as “normal women” and therefore believe that dees do not face the same social pressure that transgender toms face. However, dees are not effortlessly incorporated into either the tom subculture or mainstream society. Dees often recounted more resistance from family members and others to their choice of taking female lovers than did many toms. Although dees could easily move between relationships with men and toms and were not obviously “homosexual” to outsiders, their lives were full of difficult compromises that both toms and people in general seemed to fail to appreciate fully. Masculine women have long been evident in the Thai system of sex and gender, but the linguistic and social marking of feminine women who are partners of masculine women creates a new and precarious field of identity. Dees, as feminine women, do not fit Thai understandings of “homosexuality.” Dees are not as stigmatized as toms are, but they are rendered invisible and collapsed into the category “ordinary women,” which does not acknowledge or validate their life choices. In the politics of toms and dees, as will be seen in the following chapters, this instability of dee identity allows dees fluid movement in relationships but prevents them from appropriating a discourse that validates their choices in female partners. This is one of the many complexities of tom and dee identities and relationships that are explored in the chapters 3 through 5.
CHINESE AND THAI ETHNICITY

The *toms* and *dees* of this study can be generally placed in two main ethnic categories—Thai and Sino-Thai. Ethnic differences between Thai and Sino-Thai *toms* and *dees* are largely subsumed by class differences. One of the significant findings of this study is that although Thai and Chinese traditions differ in the position of women in the family and in models of ideal marital arrangements, the overall result of these cultural differences is less significant than class and social position in determining the life choices of both Thai and Sino-Thai women. When I contrast “Thai” and “Sino-Thai,” it should be remembered that this is an ethnic distinction that is relevant only in some contexts, and all the people of this study are Thai in terms of nationality and citizenship. Here I will briefly outline the differences between Thai and Sino-Thai culture regarding women and discuss how these differences play out in *tom* and *dee* identities in contemporary Thailand.7

Despite its reputation as a relatively homogenous country, Thailand is home to people with a variety of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic traditions (Keyes 1987). Thailand is typically described as comprising four regions—southern, central, northern, and northeastern. Each region has its own dialect, but the central Thai dialect is the standard national language. Nuanced regional differences in discourses of sex and gender exist, embedded in local myths, rituals, and popular expressions. The ways in which these regional differences influence local constructions of *tom* and *dee*, or of male homosexuality and transgenderism, have yet to be formally described. The general form of *tom* and *dee* identities is fairly consistent, however, and regional differences have become absorbed in a growing national culture of gender and sexual identities. The most significant ethnic differences for Thai society as a whole involve the Chinese/Sino-Thai population and the ethnic Thais.

Although most of the population practice Buddhism, there is considerable variation in belief systems throughout Thailand.8 The urban Chinese practice Confucian-based ancestor worship, as well as Mahayana Buddhism, whereas ethnic Thais practice a blend of Theravada Buddhism and beliefs involving the propitiation of spirits and deities. The pantheon of deities and spirits is large and includes Chinese deities, indigenous animistic spirits, local ancestor spirits, spirits of historical figures, and Hindu Brahmanistic deities. Sino-Thais have adopted many of the Thai practices, such as sending their children to become Theravadin monks or novices, as well as praying at the shrines of Hindu deities and local animistic spirits. Thais also participate in Chinese cer-
emonies, such as Chinese New Year celebrations and the traditional lion dance. Thus, although differences still exist between the religious practices of Sino-Thais and Thais, considerable syncretism has occurred.

This Chinese-Thai syncretism is particularly obvious in Bangkok. Bangkok society is largely influenced by Chinese immigrants, whose descendants constitute a significant portion of the urban middle class. Thai and Chinese traditions have become blended, and Bangkok residents often are not clear exactly what constitutes “Thai” and “Chinese” traditions. The ethnic distinctions that are the most relevant for this study of toms and dees concern the position of women in the family and the meaning of marriage for Sino-Thai and Thai families.

Chinese families, influenced by Confucian tradition, tend to place importance on the patrilineage, represented through the clan name. Sons are highly valued as the bearers of the clan name. Ideally, a wife is expected to move into her husband’s family home, to serve the needs of her mother-in-law, and, most importantly, to bear a son for the patrilineage. The ideal Chinese family contrasts with the ideal Thai family in postmarital residence patterns and kinship systems. Traditionally, a Thai husband is expected to move into the family compound of his wife and to provide labor for her family before setting up a household nearby, ideally in or near the wife’s family compound (Hale 1984; Rabibhadana 1984). The youngest daughter is expected to care for her parents and receives the family house as compensation for her service. The general Thai family structure is characterized by equal inheritance between sons and daughters or inheritance rules that favor women; bilateral kinship reckoning; and postmarital residence patterns that tend to favor matrilocality (Hale 1984, 4). In northern Thailand and parts of the northeast, matrilineal tutelary spirits link generations through females, in contrast to the Chinese Confucian patrilineage (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). In practice, family form does not always follow these ideal forms. Increasing urbanization has forced couples to move away from their extended families, and practical considerations often take precedence in deciding who will live where and with whom.

Like the Chinese, Thais highly value duty to parents. Sons and daughters are expected to repay their debt to their parents (nii bun khun) in gender-specific ways. A son performs a highly meritorious act for his parents by becoming a Buddhist monk, thereby transferring merit to his parents, particularly his mother. Thai women thus depend on sons to achieve this merit, which they cannot achieve on their own
because women are forbidden from full ordination in Thai Theravada Buddhism. A daughter, barred from monkhood, is expected to be a caretaker of her parents and younger siblings. This caretaking often takes the form of financial support, with professional and wage-earning women sending money to support their parents and siblings (Rabibhadana 1984; Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1987). Tantiwiramanond and Pandey (1987) argue that the Theravada Buddhist practice of ordaining only males has led to a preference for sons and to pressure for women to be mothers in order to obtain merit from their sons. This general outline of family structure and social values was borne out in my research. Both Sino-Thai and Thai women were under pressure to help financially support their parents and siblings. Both Sino-Thai and Thai women reported a need to express gratitude to their parents by following their wishes and being responsible for others as good daughters.

Chinese women are often encouraged to marry in order to give “face” to the family. Chinese women explained to me that it is considered embarrassing to have older unmarried daughters. When a woman is married, it means she has been “chosen” and given the status of wife, which in turn gives status to her family. The husband’s family will also provide a “brideprice” (kha-sin-sort or kha-nammom in Thai) for the wife’s family as compensation for their raising his wife to adulthood. The brideprice may consist of money, gold, farming equipment, and animals. An unmarried daughter is considered to be a burden to her family and a possible source of shame if she delays marriage and takes a lover instead. In Chinese families a son is also pressured to marry, because it is imperative for him to have a son to carry on the clan name. Jackson (1995) has noted that there tends to be pressure for Chinese and Sino-Thai men to marry, and thus homosexual men find it difficult to pursue relationships with men if it means neglecting their family duty to marry and have children. However, as is discussed in chapter 2, the rising employment rates and opportunities for Chinese and Sino-Thai women have allowed them to postpone marriage or avoid it altogether, while providing economic resources for their family (see Guest and Tan 1994).

Social scientists have described Thai women as having a relatively high status because of their central role in the family structure, and their late marriage rates are evidence of their relative importance in the family (Phongpaichit and Baker 1996). However, Thai women are also pressured to marry in order to promote “face” of the family. Thai and
Chinese marriage ceremonies are less religious ceremonies in the Western/Christian sense than public presentations of face and social ties created between families. Both Thai and Chinese marriage ceremonies involve presenting the brideprice, usually in the form of gold and cash, to impress guests with the status of the husband’s family and the value of the wife and, by extension, her family’s value (this wealth is often borrowed for the ceremony for the purpose of maintaining face).

The Sino-Thai communities differ from communities in China in that the family cycle in China was typically broken through the act of immigration to Thailand. Notably, the first generation of Chinese immigrants often formed families without the presence of the dominating mother-in-law and other family elders (see J. Bao 1998). Also, Chinese immigrants usually settled in urban areas, engaged in commerce, and achieved relatively high educational levels for the descending generations. The middle-class offspring have greater career and life choices than their elders had, but they often feel indebted to their family and under pressure to follow their parents’ decisions concerning marriage. Sino-Thais are presumed by most Thais (and Sino-Thais) to be relatively wealthy, educated, and of high status relative to ethnic Thais. Therefore, stereotypical Chinese physical features, such as lighter skin tone, are interpreted by both Thais and Sino-Thais as reflecting high social status. In contrast, the typically darker-skinned people of the northeast, presumed to be farmers with little education, are often ridiculed as “country bumpkins” (baan nork for rural people in general, or siaw for northeastern people in particular). These ethnic stereotypes play out in the ways toms and dees present their ideal masculine and feminine types. For example, toms and dees both described the ideal tom as having a Chinese appearance, such as light skin, and the corpulence commonly associated with the wealth and prosperity of urban Chinese men.

These cultural differences between Thais and Sino-Thais play out in varying ways in the context of contemporary industrializing Thailand. However, ethnic difference does not clearly structure the social attitudes toward female same-sex relations and transgenderism in Thailand. Class is the more significant factor because women who are financially independent and educated, regardless of their ethnicity, tend to have more options in terms of life choices and marriage. For example, according to census statistics for 1970, Chinese women in Thailand tended to marry later than Thai women, but when educational levels were factored in, the numbers evened out, which was not true for Chinese and Thai men
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—regardless of educational levels, Chinese men tended to marry later than Thai men (Chamratrithirong 1979, 31–32).

Marriage is a survival strategy for many families. Marriage of a daughter is a way to get brideprice for both Sino-Thai and Thai families. Andrea Whittaker (1999) and Chris Lyttleton (1999) present evidence that brideprice exchanges are increasingly monetary and expensive in northern and northeastern Thailand, because of greater dependence on wage labor and cash, and a reduction in agricultural land per family. Brideprice is an important source of money for a financially strapped family, can provide the funds necessary for a son’s marriage, and may be a way to obtain support and security for a daughter. If other possibilities for income, security, and support are available, such as employment, the pressure for women to marry is less intense. Also, tom and dee relationships can fit into the survival strategies of poorer families if a daughter is involved with a female partner who is well-off, as the stories in the following chapters will illustrate.

Both males and females from both ethnic groups have faced pressure to marry and to end same-sex relationships. I also found numerous cases where this was not the case for both Thai and Sino-Thai women. No common patterns strictly linked ethnicity to the attitudes of families toward their daughters’ decisions to marry or to pursue relationships with toms or dees. However, one common feature of both Sino-Thai and Thai attitudes toward women stood out—the overriding belief that women need to avoid shaming themselves and their families through illicit sexual encounters and promiscuity. This sexual threat was nearly universally defined as heterosexual, and herein lies the main difference between women’s and men’s experiences of homosexuality in the context of contemporary Thailand. For both Sino-Thai and Thai women, the rumor of illicit heterosexual sex is more dangerous to their position in society than are homosexual encounters and even long-term relationships with other women. Taywaditep, Coleman, and Dumronggittigule (1997) reported that women in northern Thailand used the expression “hit her feet with a hammer” to describe what a wife must do if she has sexual feelings that her husband cannot satisfy. The expression refers to the need to do anything necessary to suppress such dangerous feelings in a woman. Thais have borrowed a Chinese expression that compares a daughter to having a toilet in the front yard, meaning that in being female, a daughter is vulnerable to being disgraced through illicit sex, which would in turn disgrace her family. Thai and Sino-Thai discourse
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Abounds with aphoristic expressions of the shame of illicit (heterosexual) sex for women—movies, soap operas, stories of all kinds, conversations, writings by academics and the print media, and sermons continuously repeat this theme of the shame of a woman’s promiscuity. These attitudes toward women’s heterosexuality, which are important factors in the way that toms and dees express themselves and structure their relationships, are explored in chapter 4.

Unlearning Sex and Gender in Anthropology

To make sense of local Thai discourses that position toms as “men” and as categorically different from dees, an accounting needs to be made of the concepts, terms, and paradigms used within the discipline of anthropology to explain sexuality and gender cross-culturally. Anthropology has long questioned the assumed “naturalness” or “timelessness” of practices, institutions, and beliefs of both the anthropologists’ home culture and the culture under study (see Marcus and Fischer 1986). For example, scholars have shown that the characteristic norms of modern Western society, such as the nuclear family, normative heterosexuality, and monogamous marriage, are particular social and historical products, not universal standards.12 The implicit association between gender and sexuality on the one hand, and changeless truths of human nature on the other, has proven to be difficult to dislodge. Even the preeminent social historians Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels start their study of social history with a presumption of the naturalness of the system of gender distinctions within the family. Feminists and scholars of cross-cultural sexuality and gender have challenged simplistic assumptions of the naturalness and precultural status of gender and sexuality. A sizable literature has been produced on the historical development of sexual practices, family forms, and, in Sherry Ortner’s words, “gender hegemonies” (1990).13

The pathbreaking work of Gilbert Herdt (1987a, 1987b, 1992) and Maurice Godelier (1986) on semen transmission rituals in New Guinea compelled anthropology to take serious notice of the importance of sexuality in the transmission of culturally significant practices, statuses, and beliefs. Herdt’s and Godelier’s studies of male same-sex sexual practices in male initiation rituals among cultural groups in New Guinea powerfully demonstrated that even the most embedded assumptions about the naturalness of heterosexuality and “deviance” of homosexuality are culturally defined beliefs of Westerners, not universal truths.
Herdt’s study of the initiation rituals of the “Sambia” of Melanesia/Papua New Guinea describes the practice of boys’ ingesting the semen of older men through a ritual cycle lasting years, marking the initiates’ entry into the social status of manhood. The semen, ingested through oral stimulation of the older man’s penis, is believed to build the masculinity of the initiates. Herdt concludes that homosexual acts do not imply sexual identity or social deviance and must be understood as part of local meanings systems.

The works of Herdt and Godelier were seminal in promoting greater anthropological focus on sexuality as a key cultural practice. However, these works on ritualized homosexuality unintentionally reveal further embedded Western cultural assumptions about what constitutes “homosexuality” and even “sexuality” itself. Deborah Elliston (1995) has critiqued these studies of “ritual homosexuality” by arguing that the concept of “sexuality,” as understood by Western researchers, is a cultural discourse, not an objective or neutral category. Elliston notes that anthropologists, including Herdt, have astutely avoided labeling people “homosexual” based on their sexual acts, recognizing that “homosexual” is a type of personal and social identity with a particular history within the Western cultural context. However, Elliston points out that although it is widely acknowledged that observers cannot conclude that certain acts are indicative of a homosexuality identity, there is still an assumption that homosexuality is a behavior that can be identified cross-culturally. The assumption that genital contact and stimulation are somehow analogous to Western conceptions of sexuality is a flaw in the studies of ritual homosexuality, according to Elliston.

Elliston, influenced by Michele Foucault, argues that the Western concept of sexuality as an intrinsic aspect of the individuated self is not applicable to these ritualized expressions in New Guinea. She describes the wider cultural patterns of the Melanesian area in which a variety of symbolic exchanges of substance are performed in the formation of social hierarchy. Therefore, the ingestion of semen by boys through ritual is not any more erotic or sexual than the rituals of nose bleeding or expurgating that also characterize the cultural constellation of which the Sambia are a part. Elliston (1995, 861) emphasizes that “to assume that genitally organized activities between same-sexed bodies signifies eroticism is simplistic.” The categorizations of homosexuality that have also been introduced into anthropology are faulty simplifications of the larger contexts in which these acts take place and wrongly imply that
these acts are extensions of Western concepts of sexuality, concludes Elliston.

In order to understand what being a tom or a dee means in the Thai cultural context, the goal of this book is to critically engage preconceptions about gender and sexual categories. Appreciation of local cultural understandings of sexual practices will be lost or subtly skewed if researchers use the categorizations of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” without conscious awareness of the implicit cultural meanings embedded within this binary construct. The term “homosexuality” implies a primacy of sexuality in the definition of tom and dee identity, as well as a sameness between the two based on their sexuality—both problematic assumptions for the understanding of toms and dees. Gender difference is more relevant and important to toms and dees than are notions of sexual identity. Rather than assuming commonality between toms and dees as “homosexuals,” this book explores constructed and contested meanings deployed by toms and dees in the creation of their identities, relationships, and communities.

The a priori primacy given to the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality is so entrenched in Western thinking that it is nearly impossible to discuss sexual practices or forms of intimacy without reference to these terms. For example, Stephen Murray (1992a) has attempted to demonstrate the variety of homosexuality that exists historically and cross-culturally by providing a schema of four categories of homosexuality: age-stratified, gender-defined, profession-defined, and “modern” egalitarian relationships. This pluralization of homosexuality allows for recognition of cultural variation in sexual practices but still asserts “homosexuality” as a category with universal relevance. Cross-cultural studies of this type imply that homosexuality may vary but, underneath the cultural variation, remains a coherent and stable subject. The assumption of a stable, universal homosexual subject is precisely what this study of toms and dees challenges. Also, Murray’s categorization refers almost exclusively to men, reproducing cultural biases (both Western and often those of the culture studied) in which women’s sexuality, apart from their role as recipients of men’s sexuality, is rendered invisible.

The aim of this book is to place tom and dee identities within their cultural context, including the transnational linkages that form the basis for these categories of selfhood. Tom and dee identities can be appreciated only with an understanding of discourses of nationalism,
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Buddhism, sexual propriety, and gender performances—all topics that are explored in the following chapters.

METHODS

This book is based on research conducted between 1992 and 2001. The primary data were derived from ethnographic research, such as interviews and participant observation with toms and dees, academics, activists, and the staff members of Thai publications. I have gathered information and interviews from more than a hundred toms and dees from fifteen to sixty years of age. As anthropologists have long recognized, understandings of other societies and cultures often comes equally from daily interactions, friendships, informal discussions, and socializing and from the formal interview, complete with tape recorder and question list. I found this to be true for my research as well. The toms and dees I interviewed were usually introduced to me by friends or acquaintances. I developed long-term friendships with some of the people I interviewed, which led to extensive conversations over the following months (and in some cases, years) and further introductions. These interviews and prosaic interactions were the core of my research. I spoke with people from both rural and urban areas; people from working-class, middle-class, and upper-class backgrounds (students, professionals, and housewives); people with university degrees; and some individuals who had never set foot in a classroom.

Most of the toms and dees I interviewed were currently residing in Bangkok. Some had come from rural areas to work in the factories of Bangkok, and others had come to Bangkok for education or employment in the office economy. I also spent approximately a month in several rural villages in Chonburi Province, and this experience has helped me understand dimensions of class and sexuality in rural communities. Interviews were also conducted in Chiang Mai Province. Given the high levels of migration that characterize Thai society, it has proven difficult to definitively categorize individuals as either “rural” or “urban.” Many of the people currently living in urban areas are originally from rural areas and still maintain important links to their home villages, often returning to live there temporarily or permanently. Class is a more salient category for understanding differences in life experiences and outlooks among groups of people because it relies less on the ephemeral location of people and more on their social positions. I have located informants according to relative class backgrounds.
The majority of toms and dees in my study were between the ages of twenty and fifty. I had originally intended to talk with elderly women who were toms or dees or had same-sex relationships, but they were difficult to approach. Many of the toms and dees I interviewed said they knew of elderly women in their neighborhood or village whom they called toms or who had relationships with women. Five of the toms and dees in my study said they had an elderly relative who had had a same-sex relationship or was a tom, but either they did not feel comfortable about talking to that relative directly about her gender identity or sexuality or the elderly relative was deceased. For example, Ung, a woman in her early twenties who took part in this study, told me of her elderly aunt: “Upcountry I have a very old aunt who lived with another woman who acted like a tom. Before, I thought my aunt sent her to school because she thought this woman was a good person—I didn’t think that they had any kind of relationship. But now I think back that they did have a relationship for sure. Nobody in the family talked about it, but I think they knew, because when I came home with my partner/lover (faen), she would see that it wasn’t an ordinary friend I came with. She would be like, ‘Oh, is that her girlfriend (faen)?’ She would ask others but would never ask me directly.”

In another example, Nuu, a tom in her mid-forties, laughed when she recalled that her elderly aunt was called “iron cunt” (hii-lek) by her relatives and neighbors, meaning “untouchable for a man.” Nuu remembered that when she was eleven or twelve years old, the elderly aunt asked to meet this niece (Nuu) because the aunt had heard about her. Nuu met her and said that when her aunt smiled, Nuu felt that the aunt was making a special connection to her, knowing that they were alike.

I also collected interviews with twenty men and women in general over the age of sixty about attitudes toward female transgenderism and homosexuality in the past. Most of this material is covered in the discussion of the history of female masculinity and female homoeroticism in chapter 2.

Tom and dee identities are a cross-class phenomenon and exist in both rural and urban areas. Some toms and dees are commercial sex workers, and I interviewed several of them. Being tom or dee is perhaps less stigmatized among sex workers than in mainstream populations because of the different experiences sex workers have had and their different valuations of sex. Most sex workers with whom I spoke have
practical attitudes about marriage and sex and see them as tools to gain things that are wanted in life. This does not mean they are callous or that they do not have loving relationships with men. Rather, sex workers are realistic about what is required of them in these relationships and what role these relationships play in their lives. Sex workers acknowledged to me that sex with men was risky in terms of disease and pregnancy and that heterosexual sex could be painful or cause injury. Sex with women was widely understood as “softer” and less risky. It was not uncommon for sex workers to have relationships with each other, in addition to having sex and even long-term relationships with their male clients. However, toms and dees are not particularly or necessarily associated with prostitution in Thailand.

Additional data for my research came from media stories and academic literature on the issue of homosexual/transgenderism in Thailand dating to the mid-1970s. I also consulted material on female same-sex eroticism in the palace in past centuries, collected by Thai historians. I researched the Thai press and its attitudes toward toms and dees by interviewing reporters, columnists, and editors for most major Thai publications (including Matichon, Siam Post, Khao Sot, The Nation, Bangkok Post, Daily News, Krungthep Turakij, and Chwit Tongt) and two DJs from Bangkok’s Channel 5 Radio. I interviewed Thai academics in the fields of media studies, law, and political science who have spoken or written about the subject of homosexuality/tom-deeism. This material is discussed throughout the following chapters but is given specific attention and analysis in chapter 7.

I have also drawn on the rich and exciting data of several master’s theses in Thai on the subject of toms, dees, and female same-sex sexuality in order to bring this important information to an English-speaking audience. In particular, I have cited material from the theses of Matthana Chetamee (1995), Chonticha Salikhub (1989), and Manitta Chanchai (2003).

Two Thai organizations with tom and dee membership, Anjaree and Lesla, served as additional research sources. Chapter 6 presents the principles, activities, and strategies of these organizations. Anjaree is a feminist organization established to serve “women who love women,” in terms of both lobbying and providing social functions for members. I attended discussion groups, field trips, and parties held by Anjaree and interviewed women who attended its functions and who were members. I have also included material from a WebBoard hosted by Lesla, a rel-
ately new tom and dee social group. Lesla holds social functions and runs a Web site; its WebBoard has hundreds of recorded discussions among Lesla members. Lesla is not only an Internet group but also a large community of friends who meet and socialize together, so their WebBoard conversations are only one aspect of their relationships. Lesla has grown rapidly since its inception in the middle of 2000, with parties routinely attracting several hundred women.

One of the most striking features of Lesla is that it is composed of mostly young members, and they tend to follow gendered tom and dee roles strictly. Lesla members often indicate their tom or dee status on the WebBoard by using gendered terms, such as first-person pronouns (which are gendered in Thai) and other parts of speech that indicate a masculine or feminine speaker. Most of the members are in their late teens and twenties, although some members, including the organizer, are in their thirties. Although most people attending Lesla activities are younger women, older women have participated in the WebBoard chats. Lesla members are mostly urban and almost all are middle-class, as their access to the Internet and expensive group activities indicates. The Lesla Internet discussions are unique in that they are not face-to-face and not edited, which allows for greater openness on sensitive subjects, such as sexual role playing. I have found that face-to-face group discussions on the subject, attempted by Anjaree and myself on occasion, have not been successful, because both toms and dees are uncomfortable talking about these subjects in front of others. I have therefore presented Lesla WebBoard discussions at times where relevant, as well as interviews with Lesla members.

I spent a total of eight years in Thailand conducting the research presented in this book, the last five years of which I was employed as a lecturer at Mahidol University. My conversations with students and faculty over the years provided invaluable information about my topic, and some students volunteered to be interviewed.

Unless otherwise noted, all interviews and Internet conversations were in Thai, and their translations are mine. Most of the names of people interviewed are pseudonyms in the form of Thai nicknames, usually one-syllable words. I have used the real names of people quoted in the press, academics interviewed by me, and other prominent people with their permission, such as the founder of Lesla. As for the spelling of Thai names, I have used the standard romanization of place-names and the preferred romanization of individuals’ names. Where no
such standard spelling was available, I transcribed the names or terms according to a modified version of the Haas transcription system without the tone markings. There are several systems in use for the transliteration of Thai words into romanized script, and individual Thai words, proper names in particular, can be found transliterated several different ways. Thus my rendering of some names may differ from their spellings in other sources. Following convention, works in Thai by Thai authors are listed by the first name of the author in both the text and the bibliography; works in English by Thai authors are listed by the last name.

The choice of using romanized script for titles of works in the bibliography was based on providing information necessary for those interested in finding the original document. I have translated the names of journals that could be directly translated into English, such as *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. Other journal names were proper names that could not be sensibly translated, so I phonetically transcribed the names into romanized script. In some titles of Thai articles and books where some English words, such as “sex” and “gay,” were transliterated into Thai, I used the English spellings in translating the titles.

Some *toms* use the masculine pronoun “phom” to refer to themselves, and I have indicated such usage in my translation because it indicates a purposeful masculine gender term as a self-referent. When *toms*, like Thai men and women in general, used gender-neutral terms, such as “phii” (elder sibling), “chan” (me/I), or their personal name, I have not indicated those terms in the text. Therefore, the reader may assume that if no Thai translation is provided for personal pronouns used by *toms* or *dees*, the pronouns were not indicative of masculine speech patterns or explicitly feminine speech patterns for *toms*. Using third-person pronouns when referring to *toms* is awkward because of the distinction between feminine and masculine pronouns in English. I chose to refer to *toms* in the feminine form (“she,” “her”) to reflect the common understanding among Thais that *toms* are female, and although they are masculine, they are distinct from males. The range of ways in which *toms* incorporate femininity and masculinity into their sense of self makes this either-or choice of masculine or feminine pronoun seem inappropriate, yet for the sake of consistency in the text, a feminine form has been used for all third-person references to *toms*.

Although my research would not have been possible without the kind efforts and assistance of many Thais, my topic has not always been
a popular one for Thai audiences. One of the Thai organizers of the Sixth International Conference on Thai Studies (held on October 14–17, 1996, in Chiang Mai, Thailand) asked me what topic I would like to present at the upcoming conference. My response of “toms and dees” was met with an awkward chuckle, a look in the other direction, and a quick change of conversation topics. I realize it must seem strange to some Thais that Westerners seem compelled to study “unseemly” topics such as homosexuality, toms, dees, or kathoey in Thai society. Recent Thai researchers on these subjects have also faced some degree of disapproval over their choice of topics (although this seems to be changing as more Thai students are pursuing these topics). However, I sense that some Thais feel particularly awkward that “outsiders” are probing the realm of the personal and private and exposing it in a possibly salacious manner to an English-speaking, foreign public. To be fair, perhaps it is strange—this compulsion to tell people what Thai toms and dees are really like. I have to remind myself that I too am fully embedded in a cultural discourse as I expose what I see to be the “truths” of Thai paradigms of gendered sexualities and transgender culture. I may be indulging in what Foucault (1978, 71) labels as a particular Western obsession: “[the] pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it . . . of capturing it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.”

Perhaps I am motivated to reveal the unsaid “truths” of tom and dee by critiquing in the following chapters the social beliefs that are responsible for the litany of stereotypes heard about toms and dees. But more than that, my goal is to shed light on a misunderstood, trivialized, and often maligned group of people who have forged gendered and sexual identities in the cultural milieu in which they find themselves.