

## Transitioning in Thailand Online

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### Abstract

This paper argues, via transnational cyberculture studies and the examination of English language websites generated in Thailand marketing gender-related surgeries, that both sexuality and gender are diffuse sets of social, political, and interpersonal expectations with particular histories and effects. It shows three distinct websites generated in Thailand to attract Western medical tourists by depicting bodies in transition: both from the perspectives of sex/gender surgeries and transnational travel. The shifting strategies and multiple translations deployed by the Thai medical tourism industry via an online presence, which have been compiled in a database that spans three years, are suggested through these three representative websites.

### Keywords

Cyberculture Studies, Gender/Sexuality Studies, Queer Theory, Transnational Communication, Medical Tourism, Thailand, Internet Studies

### Booking Surgeries in Thailand on World Wide Web Medical Tourism Sites

Transnational cyberculture studies highlights the importance of legal and social control over sexualities and normative, albeit highly differentiated among cultures, gender roles for individual nations, and brings to the fore the problems with both understandings of sexuality as sexual practices and presuming gender is a fixed, legible set of affects. This paper will show, through the examination of English language websites generated in Thailand marketing gender-related surgeries, that both sexuality and gender are diffuse sets of social, political, and interpersonal expectations with particular histories and effects.

In this talk, I will explain the potential of “trans” theory to suggest a crucial way of thinking through the circumstances undergirding transnational cyberculture studies. To do this, I examine how Thailand’s burgeoning medical tourism industry reassignment surgery is produced as a product available in Thailand for international consumption via internet communication in ways that reflect Thai notions of “trans” as body modification according to one’s own desire and financial means rather than western ideals of complete, pre-ordained, sexual reassignment surgery.

Thailand has expert plastic surgery—more sexual reassignment surgeries take place here than any other country—Iran is second in the world—yet sex reassignment in total is not the goal of most hospital visitors. Instead, people choose how, when and where to transition and what requires transmodification—in terms of their personal choice and their pocketbooks. This marks a site where a non-teleological process of body modification may be performed. Westerners may book a visit through online tour operators, and full disclosure about doctors and their qualifications are advertised on plastic surgery hospital websites. Most people do not go to these hospitals to transition from one sex or one gender or one ethnicity (here I am referencing eyelid surgery) or one location—transition takes many forms and suggests a multiple range of trajectories with or without endpoints.

It is from this angle that I find “trans” a particularly promising point for thinking through and about cyberculture in a way that includes globalization, transnationality, nation, race, ethnicity, borders, bodies and communication on the internet, and from this perspective it is clear that although the English language is beyond deployed to attract westerners to Thailand, the influence of Thai beliefs remains strong.

*A small picture of a larger trend:*

The work that I examine comes from a database I have collected between June 2010 and June 2013 that captures websites in English that promote, advertise, or offer Gender Confirmation Surgery, broadly conceived, in Thailand. The database captures the sites as we've been able to note their emergence as well as cataloguing a past that is incomplete, but reaches as far back as 2004. Overall, the database represents websites present between June 2007 and June 2013. These websites—now over 180 in number—are by and large captured and categorized, and changes have been tracked between June 2012 and June 2013. The website database is supplemented by interviews with webmasters, surgeons that host clinics advertised online, and medical tourism providers located in Bangkok. These interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013. This paper is a small piece of a larger project that surveys the rise of medical tourism to Thailand and its transnational and local effects.

## References

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Database of Thai websites collected between 2009 and 2013 that range from 1998-June 15 2013.

Personal interviews conducted with doctors, surgeons, clinic workers and webmasters in Thailand between Dec 2011 and January 2012.