

In Chiwin, the young male prostitute who is the protagonist of Kōn Kraiat's "In the Mirror," we are presented with, as it were, an amalgam of Si and her anonymous cousin. For Chiwin is just as much a victim of the new society as Si, but, as educated as the narrator of "The Book-Learners," he can see himself "in the mirror," in a way that she can not.

Chiwin earns his living as the male actor in a live sex-show at one of Bangkok's specialized 'clubs.' In its simplest terms, the story describes the traumatic night on which he comes to a final full awareness of his degradation. As he writhes mechanically with Wanphen, his regular partner, on the neonlit stage:

*"What have I become?" [he] asks himself. He feels like a male animal in the rutting season, brutishly copulating with a female animal, right before the eyes of a group of stud-masters. The more powerfully he performs, and the more varied the couplings, the more they're satisfied.*

He is jolted into recognizing that he knows next to nothing about the woman, though he has had intercourse with her countless times; and still less about her enigmatic husband, who waits each night in silence to take her home when the club closes. His own life is one of virtually total isolation and alienation. He has neither lover nor any circle of close friends; and he feels forced to lie to his lonely, aging parents back home in his native village, to maintain their pathetic illusion that he is making good in the big city. In his recollection of the process whereby he came to take up his present occupa-



tion, we see a sort of grim parody of Sujit's Thīan and Chatcharin's anonymous narrators:

*When he'd set off for Bangkok, carrying his teacher's certificate with him, who could have known that for months he'd be clutching at straws, trying to compete with tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, of others, taking test after test? And then go home, waiting to learn the results of his applications, place after place, day after day. At first his hopes had still been bright and clear. But, as time passed, they'd faded, like a candle that melts itself completely away, dimming down to his last baht. Then a friend of his, who worked as a bartender in a go-go club, had invited him along to try this kind of work...*

Yet the importance of "In the Mirror" lies less in such reflections than in the context surrounding, and the gender assigned to, the reflector. For the live sex-show can be seen as a symptom of the forces transforming Thai society in the American Era, forces which changed the face of Thai prostitution along with everything else. If the American military presence during the Vietnam War brought 'partners' and *mīa chao* (rented wives) to Thai culture, more permanent innovations were instituted by the industrialization of travel in the 1970s. Jumbo-jets, chain hotels, air-conditioned buses, and the like, turned Bangkok from an exotic byway for the adventurous into a standard port-of-call for mass international tourism. Processing the sexual needs of these novel hordes required a sort of managerial revolution in the traditional world of prostitution. We need think only of the complex logistics of the organized sex-tour; or of the armies of plumbers, interior decorators, architects, builders,



launderers, parking-attendants, cashiers, and receptionists required to construct and maintain the luxurious new massage-parlors. And to prostitution itself industrial capitalism brought, as in everything else, its characteristic elaborate division of labor and specialization of product. Among the new specialties--or consumer perishables--was the live sex-show.

Sociologically speaking, the most novel thing about the live sex-show was that it required a prostitute of a new gender (in addition to the older kind). This "real" novelty has provided Kōn Kralāt with an opportunity to wage cultural and political war in an unexpected, but striking way. For the central fact about "In the Mirror" is that the author has chosen to make its protagonist, not a woman, but a man. Chiwin is described as a young, handsome and heterosexual male: precisely the traditional hero of countless Thai novels, films, and short stories--not to speak of 'Love in Ruins.' In a mordant juxtaposition that reminds us of Sujit's *ramwong*-dancers "oblivious of the *Chronicles of Si Ayutthaya*," Kōn borrows the hero of one conventional literature and displays him as the victim of another: the thousand banal, sad tales about female and, on occasion, effeminate male (*krathōey*) prostitutes. The effect is twofold. On one level, Kōn consciously roils the "stagnant water" of Bangkok's conventional commercial literature. On another, he means the Thai reader to experience freshly the bitter *political taste* of prostitution by having an upstanding Thai male sell himself for the sexual entertainment of other Thai males. The nationality of Chiwin's customers--they are exclusively Thai--is central to Kōn's purposes. It reminds his readers that, in the late 1970s, such specialized sexual entertainments are no longer only responses to the foreign tourist tide, but have become embedded in metropolitan Thai society. It also reveals something of which Chiwin gradually becomes aware--that at bottom he is an actor in a drama, not so much of sex as of power, in a *Thai* social hierarchy:

*They come to sit and watch others expose their genitals and perform every type of sexual intercourse. This allows them to feel contempt for people they can then regard as lower than themselves...*