

Thai Women, Cross — Cultural Marriage and Sexuality

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Abstract—This article is a part of my research entitled *Farang's Thai Wives in London*¹. It studies the lives of Thai women married to English men in London. The study investigates how these women adjust themselves to cultural differences, problems they encounter, their attitudes towards cross-cultural marriage as well as their sexuality. The research spans ten in-depth interviews with Thai women. The research shows that all of the informants are submissive and face problems due to cultural gaps. Eight informants have to make their own money to send back to Thailand. Five informants face domestic violence, which caused their marriages to fail. However, none of them regret marrying English men or missed Thai men. According to this research, marrying English men was found to be preferable to marrying Thai men due to better sexuality and living standard.

Index Terms—Cross-cultural marriage, Thai women, sexuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural Marriage has existed in Thailand for a long time because of the ethnic diversity of the region. Only recently, however, have Thai-Caucasian marriages become commonplace. There are many possible reasons for the historical lack of Thai-Caucasian marriages. In the first place, such marriages were expressly forbidden by the first Thai code of law, the Three Seals Law, practiced in the early 18th century. The following excerpt shows that ancient law placed harsh punishment on Thai-Caucasian unions:

Whoever gives his daughter or nieces to be the wife of English, Wilanda, Java and Malayoo whom are religiously different, in exchange of material or money from businessmen of foreign countries, that person is the foe of the country, deserves to be punished by beheaded and household to be taken or to be imprisoned to death or to be degraded to be an elephant rearer.

Thai Three Seals Law [1]

Codified rules caused Thai-Caucasian marriages to be frowned upon, but so also did cultural developments in the region. During the Vietnam War, for example, the so-called 'rented wife' phenomenon made cross-cultural marriage unpopular in Thai society. In other words, being a Caucasian man's wife has historically had many bad associations in Thai society.

The following is anecdotal evidence that demonstrates how Thai people perceive Thai women being with a

Caucasian man, or a "Farang" in Thai.

Nobody can explain how they feel seeing Mr Dennis Garton, an American man sitting on the wedding stool together with a Thai lady who is as beautiful and as graceful as the painting of a court lady hundreds years ago. Uncomfortable? Unacceptable? Or disappointed? ...Don't bother about those prostitutes. It's their job. Western men give them dollars; they have to give their body back as an exchange. But for a good woman with good education from a good family to go and get married with a Western man is interesting. It is a heart-breaking thing to see [2]

The above examples were taken from a novel written by one of the most famous female Thai authors, Kritsanaa Asoksin who is well-known for her vibrant illustrations of Thai society through written work.

It is not only Thai people who feel the discrimination and negative attitude towards Thai women marrying to Western men. Western men also experience the phenomenon of discrimination, as illustrated it in the following quotation:

Although I was initially ignorant of international sex tourism, my inheritance as a North American male traveling the country with a Thai woman became increasingly apparent. No matter where we went, regardless of the fact that my wife dresses in a way that marks her as being of a particular class and that she speaks in a way that indicates an educational level not attained by the vast majority of sex workers, the assumption by all we met in all situations was that she was a hooker. [3]

This kind of perception and prejudice stopped many Thai women with good education from dating or marrying Farangs. The only kind of women who dared to go out with Farang men were 'unfortunated' women i.e. sex workers, widows and divorcees with dependants. For those experiencing great misfortune, it was more acceptable, as illustrated in Kritsanaa's earlier works.

However, societal perceptions have now changed. Many Thai women with decent careers and education long to have Farang partners. Research reports that marrying a Farang has become an ideal in some communities. For instance, Ratana Bunmattaya's *Farangs' Wives: Isan Women and Cross Cultural Marriage* discusses this exact theme [4].

Bunmattaya's research focuses on a village in the Roi-Et province in the Northeast of Thailand. She found that the majority of parents in this village did not want to have sons. They preferred to have daughters because when the daughters grew up, they could marry them off to Farangs and then the families would become rich. In addition, the girls in this village agreed with their parents. Instead of planning to work hard at school and get a good job in the future, the girls wanted to rely on Farang husbands.

However, this research, *Farang's Thai Wives in London*, had a different result from the mentioned research, as Thai

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women in London were from many different parts of Thailand, including Bangkok. Most of them married their English husbands with love as the primary reason and economics as the secondary reason. Sexuality was not a driving force towards marriage for any of the informants for this research.

II. SEXUALITY AND THAI SOCIETY

Contrary to Thailand's reputation in the Western world as being a destination for 'sex' tourists, Thailand has a rather modest sexual culture. Sexual issues are hardly ever openly discussed in Thailand, especially among women. According to Harrison (1999), to be considered "morally good", Thai women are not supposed to have personal sexual desires, much less act upon them. Talking or writing about sex is considered culturally and morally improper.[5]

In addition to keeping quiet about sexual issues, Thai women were also expected to be sexually demure and virginal in order to maintain respect in society. A woman who lets more than one man to gain access to her body was a 'bad woman' according to Thai cultural standards.

The situation has been improved in present Thailand. Many young Thai couples adopted the Western lifestyle to live together before marriage. This style of life faces criticism from some conservative Thais for undermining good Thai culture and women's value. The following is a quotation from a Thai academic and critic, Thanet Wetpaadaa:

"When a woman has a belief in sexual liberation, enough to make her go and sleep with any man, it illustrates the (moral) decline of society" [6]

The traditional value set still pervades Thai society as it is confirmed by Harrison (2000) that Thai women are controlled by the patriarchal Thai society:

Such a response must be considered within the context of Thai cultural prescriptions for the "good" behavior for women. Contemporary Thai society has retained many elements of the traditional views pertaining to the role of women expressed in religious, legal and literary texts alike. [7]

Although non-virgins are now acceptable in Thai society, virgins are still greatly preferred by Thai men. Non-virgins are relegated to the status of 'used' object. This value set has an impact on Thai widows and divorcees, as they are often looked down upon by people around them. Women have to face many difficulties after being discredited by people in society. There is a traditional belief that in any divorce, the woman is to blame. By extension, there must be something wrong with that woman for the husband to abandon her. One difficulty faced by widows in Thai society is that they are thought to be women full of sexual desire. Men around the widows and divorcees look down on them and want to court them for sex without commitment. The following text was cited from Suwannee Sukhontha's novel.

"Why don't you try to get her? It's good to get it for free. That way you can save the money from going to the prostitute." [...] "A widow like her is nonsense. She is just dying to have a husband. Can't you tell from her eyes?" [8]

Suwannee is well known for illustrating Thai women's lives and sexuality as well as Thai men's attitudes towards Thai women. The above quotation is a Thai man talking to his friend about the heroine of the story, a divorcee. This story is a good illustration of the stigma encountered by Thai widows and divorcees.

Non-virgin women in Thailand, especially widows and divorcees face this insult from Thai men and Thai society. They seek escape from negative stigma through marriage to foreign husbands.

III. THAI WOMEN IN LONDON AND SEXUALITY

From the in-depth interviews with 10 Thai women living in London, this research finds that the subjects were from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Although they were considered inferior to Thai men when they lived in Thailand, they did not become superior to men living in London. All of the informants live a submissive life with their English husbands. Five out of ten informants suffered domestic violence, both verbally and physically. All of them face problems of cultural differences trying to fit themselves into a completely new and different society.

Before going to live in London, all of informants, like many of the Thai women with the "Farang Dream," hoped to receive money from their Farang husbands to send to their family in Thailand. However, this research finds that eight out of ten informants had to work and make their own money to support their parents and extended family in Thailand. The informants also hoped to have a successful marriage with Farang husbands, especially those who had previously failed in marriage with Thai husbands. Unfortunately, half of the informants still had unhappy marriages that resulted in divorces.

All of the informants for this research had many problems adjusting themselves into a completely different culture and society. Despite all of the problems encountered, none of the informants regret to marry a Farang. They thought marrying Farangs was better than marrying Thai men. For those who had been married with Thai men before, their former husbands were described as drunkards and womanizers. They all agree that Farang husbands are more responsible and faithful. Although some lived with abusive Farang husbands, they took it as being unfortunate anomaly. They would look forward to marrying another Farang and would definitely never marry Thai men again. Their conclusion was that Farangs are better husbands than Thai men, and living in London is more convenient than living in Thailand in terms of facilities and freedom.

More open sexuality was one of the things the subjects found improved from Thailand. As sexuality is a taboo subject in Thai society, some of the informants seemed to be uncomfortable to talk about this issue. The modest informants only mentioned "English men are very romantic".

However, there were two informants who had a background as sex workers and were rather open to discussing sexual issues.

These two women were happy with their English husbands because they behaved as gentlemen and never mentioned their pasts as sex workers to hurt them, even during quarrels. In addition, their husbands showed

sympathy for their backgrounds.

This would never have happened if the women still lived with their Thai husbands. One of these two had married a Thai man who was hired as a motorcycle rider in Bangkok. His occupation is considered to be a poor working class career in Thai society, but he frequently insulted her for being a sex worker. He was also an unhealthy drunkard who could never fulfill her sexual desire. Following was her remark about her sexual life:

“My Thai husband made me feel like I was sleeping with another client whereas my English husband made me feel loved and understood the word ‘make love’ for the first time in my life” [9]

The above remark was agreed by the other two informants, who were divorcees. One of them provided further information that:

After I divorced my Thai husband, other Thai men always gave me sexual harassment through their words and eyes.

...They just want to sleep with me but nobody wants to marry me because they don't want to be teased by their friends for eating a dead wine melon² [9]

This information confirmed the Thai traditional belief, as described earlier, that widows and divorcees in Thai society are looked down as used or unwanted objects. Marrying a Farang is not only a good opportunity for these Thai women to live in a society with higher living standard but also an opportunity for them to feel the value of their bodies. According to Rose (1996), bodies involve varying degrees of control and constraint as quoted:

Bodies are regulated through the subtle wishes of government as well as through legislation, whereby strategies operate to construct good citizens who conform to norms of sexuality, appropriate behavior and good health and regulate themselves. [10]

Woodward (2008), explains the importance of the bodies in gender and women's studies and suggests women's need to reclaim control over their bodies, as cited:

Bodies have been both subjects of theoretical analyses in gender and women's studies and central to political campaigns of the women's movement, which has striven to enable women to reclaim control over our own bodies in aspects of life such as health, reproduction and sexuality. [11]

For these Thai women in London, to marry Western men, therefore, was not only to upgrade their living standard economically; but also an opportunity for them to reclaim control over their own bodies and sexuality.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thai women marrying Farangs and living in London had to face many difficulties adjusting themselves to a new society with cultural differences. They faced domestic violence and the expectation of submissiveness at home. They also had to work hard to make their own money in order to support their parents and family in Thailand.

However, none of them regret marrying Farangs. For those who had an unsuccessful marriage, they interpreted it as being unlucky. Despite all of the problems and difficulties, their conclusion was that Farang husbands are better than Thai men, and living in London is better than living in Thailand.

This phenomenon is interesting and hard to understand; they were unhappy but they did not want to leave. Instead of telling other Thai women, not to come to London or not to marry a Farang, the informants of this research advise those women to leave Thailand for London and leave Thai men for Farangs. This could be because the way of life in London suits those women as divorcees better, possibly due to heavy prejudice in Thai society. Moreover, London is a place of opportunities, especially compared to the small villages from which some of the informants come. Living in London, therefore, fulfills their dreams of a better future. In addition, Farang husbands made these Thai women feel the value of their bodies and sexuality.

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² A Thai idiom to refer to a divorcee, insultingly.