

# Transnational Relationships, *Farang - Isan* Couples, and Rural Transformation

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**บทความ**

## ความสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติ คู่สมรส “ฝรั่ง”-อีสาน และการเปลี่ยนผ่านในสังคมชนบท

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บทความนี้พัฒนาจากงานวิจัยที่ได้รับการสนับสนุนโดยทุนวิจัยของมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งชาติสิงคโปร์ ระดับ 1 (R-111-000-120-112) ทุนวิจัยจากกระทรวงศึกษาธิการ สาธารณรัฐสิงคโปร์ ระดับ 2 (MOE2015-T2-1-014) และโครงการวิจัย “เขยฝรั่ง: การแต่งงาน ครอบครัว และชุมชนหมู่บ้านอีสานในกระแสด้านชาตินิยม” ศูนย์วิจัยพลักษณ์สังคมลุ่มน้ำโขง คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น.

*Farang* (foreign, Caucasian) men and their relationships with *Isan* (Northeast Thai) women simultaneously transform and sustain a number of aspects of rural Isan society. These include providing from economic stimulus to the rural economy, to reproducing matrilineal kinship relationships, and influencing patterns of sociability in rural *Isan*. This article draws on ongoing research in rural Thailand, including extensive interviews with *farang-Isan* couples and their relatives. It illustrates how matrilineal, matrifocal kinship in particular can incorporate in-marrying foreign men while sustaining traditional values and kinship patterns. The article considers in particular the effects of an influx of *farang* men on the traditional smallholder economy of the *Isan* region and the ways in which their presence not only transforms that economy and society but also supports its persistence.

keywords: transnational relationship, rural transformation, *farang*, *Isan*

ABSTRACT

## บทคัดย่อ

ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างชาย “ฝรั่ง” กับหญิงไทยในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ (อีสาน) มีบทบาทในกระบวนการเปลี่ยนแปลงและธำรงรักษาสังคมชนบทของอีสานในหลายมิติ ทั้งในแง่ที่มีส่วนกระตุ้นเศรษฐกิจ ผลิตซ์ความสัมพันธ์ในโครงสร้างสังคมที่ให้ความสำคัญกับเครือญาติฝ่ายหญิง ตลอดจนมีอิทธิพลต่อแบบแผนการรวมกลุ่มทางสังคมในชนบทของอีสาน บทความนี้พัฒนามาจากโครงการวิจัยสืบเนื่องในชนบทของประเทศไทย ซึ่งรวมถึงการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกกับคู่สมรส “ฝรั่ง”-อีสาน รวมทั้งเครือญาติของพวกเขา โดยได้เน้นย้ำให้เห็นว่าระบบเครือญาติที่สืบเชื้อสายทางมารดา สามารถหลอมรวมชายชาวต่างชาติที่แต่งงานเข้ามาเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของครอบครัว ควบคู่ไปกับการรักษาระบบคุณค่าและแบบแผนทางเครือญาติดั้งเดิมไว้ได้อย่างไร นอกจากนี้ บทความยังสนใจพิจารณาบทบาทของ “เชยฝรั่ง” ที่มีจำนวนเพิ่มขึ้นอย่างต่อเนื่อง ว่าไม่เพียงมีบทบาทในการเปลี่ยนแปลง แต่ยังมีส่วนช่วยสนับสนุนการดำรงอยู่ของระบบเศรษฐกิจของอีสานที่แต่เดิมเน้นเกษตรกรรมรายย่อยเป็นส่วนใหญ่อีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ความสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติ, การเปลี่ยนผ่านในสังคมชนบท, ฝรั่ง, อีสาน

*Farang* (foreign, Caucasian) men and their relationships with *Isan* (Northeast Thai) women are transforming rural *Isan* society. This article examines three general domains in which the influence of *farang* men, *Isan* women, and their relationships can be observed: in reproducing kinship relationships, in providing economic stimulus to local economies, and in influencing patterns of sociality in rural *Isan*. In particular, the article considers the effects of an influx of *farang* men on the traditional agrarian smallholder economy of the *Isan* region and the ways in which their presence not only transforms the smallholder society and economy but also supports its persistence.

The purpose of the analysis is to move away from the rather narrow focus in the literature on the transnational dimensions of relationships between these men and women (e.g. Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Sunanta and Angeles 2013; Hoefinger 2013; Lafferty and Maher 2014) as well as a narrow stereotyping of the men as undesirable “sexpats”<sup>1</sup> (e.g. O’Connell Davidson 1995; Manderson 1997; Bishop and Robinson 1998; Garrick 2005; Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016). In doing so, we do not intend to ignore or reject the problematic and moral dimensions of these relationships. But we do suggest that there is much more to the marriage-migration of foreign men into *Isan* than scholarship on the subject has explored to date. Our objective is to open up a broader discussion on the ways in which the tens of thousands of *farang* men settling down in *Isan* influence social relations, local economies, and even patterns of local politics in rural northeast Thailand.

A great deal has been written about the phenomenon on *farang* men in Thailand. Much of this literature focuses on sex tourism (Cohen 1993) and transnational marriage (Cohen 2003). Scholars have examined the difficulties and opportunities that transnational relationships afford Thai and *Isan* women

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<sup>1</sup> A term used to refer to men who have traveled or settled overseas largely to indulge their sexual pleasures.

(Muecke 1984; 1992; Cohen 1993; Askew 1999; Lisborg 2002; Ratanaolan-Mix and Piper 2003; Boonmathaya 2005; Ruenkaew 2009; Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Spanger 2011; Lapanun 2012; 2013; Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013; Sunanta 2013; Sunanta and Angeles 2013) and the ways *farang* men's lives are transformed through travel or migration (Cohen 1982; 1986; Lafferty and Maher 2014; Maher and Lafferty 2014; Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016). Scholars have also pointed out the significance of transnational relationships to the overall economy of Thailand (Truong 1990; Bell 1997; Wilson 2004). In this article, we focus more specifically on the ways in which these relationships affect rural Thailand.

Rural *Isan* and rural Thailand generally has primarily been a smallholder, family-farm agrarian economy. Despite—or arguably because of—the large disparity between rural and urban incomes and diversity of economic opportunities, up to the present, agrarian rural households and villages in the countryside have persisted as the predominant locus of livelihoods in the northeast and other regions of Thailand. Rigg and Salamanca (2012) explain how rural households have maintained themselves in the face of declining farm incomes (particularly relative to urban incomes) through economically pluriactive, extended family households. In this model, the “household” is not simply those who remain in the rural household and continue primarily agrarian economic activities. Rather, households encompass the extended family of children and siblings who venture to Bangkok and elsewhere for work, but remit earned income to the household and frequently themselves return intermittently to the family home and continue to play an active role as household members. This has been well documented for both sons and daughters of such households (e.g. Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Kitiarsa 2014; Mills 1999).

Thailand's industrial and urban-centered development in the mid to late twentieth century changed the basis of traditional matrilineal values. Women increasingly migrated out of their villages and to Bangkok and other

urban centers in search of employment, material gain and a desire to join the “modern” world (Mills 1997; 1999; 2005; Muecke 1984; 1992). Nevertheless, matrilineal patterns anchored in women’s and wives’ natal villages have remained strong up to the present. It remains an expectation, or at least pattern, among *Isan* migrants (as well as migrants from Northern Thailand; Bowie 2008) that when a woman marries, she will maintain ties to her natal family and village and that the orientation of an *Isan* or Northern Thai couple will be more strongly toward the wife’s village and family rather than the husband’s (Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016). In this social and cultural context, *farang* men as marriage partners hold particular value not only to their partner but to the family and village society more generally.

A common stereotype of *farang* men in *Isan* is that they are “sexpats” who have settled down with *Isan* wives. The relationship between readily available commercial sex and the allure of Thailand for *farang* and other foreign men has undeniably played a part in the ultimate influx of so many men into Thailand and the relationships forged between *farang-Isan* couples in the rural northeast. We have discussed that relationship in detail elsewhere (Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016). That said, there are many couples for whom their story does not fit into a simple transition from sex tourist to *Isan* son-in-law. Many couples met overseas rather than in Thailand. Many couples are men and women who were neither “sexpats” nor sex workers. We would also suggest, based on reviews of this and other articles, that researchers themselves (or at least reviewers) tend to stigmatize women in particular but also men as forever marked as “former sex workers” (or “sexpats”) as if that were the only part of their long life experiences that matter.

This matrilineal pattern is one in which sons-in-law marry into their wives’ family and village. Much more has been written about in-marrying daughters-in-law in patrilineal, patriarchal societies (such as societies across China, India, the Middle-East, and traditionally much of Europe). In patrilineal societies, daughters-in-law bear a heavy burden of producing male heirs to continue

the patriline (Kandiyoti 1988). In-marrying daughters are valued above all for their reproductive value. The situation is rather different in matrilineal societies. In-marrying sons-in-law are more valued for their productive rather than reproductive capacity; or in other words, the productive labor and material resources they can bring to the family and village into which they marry. Under traditional agrarian conditions, this was tied primarily to the labor power men could contribute to village and family farming. Under modern conditions, men's value is measured more by money and other material resources they can contribute. *Farang* men are involved in reproducing *Isan* matrilineal family and kinship relationships, as in-marrying sons-in-law who provide material and financial contributions as well as non-material care work. More broadly, they provide economic resources and stimulus not only to the immediate families into which they marry but to the wider rural economy as well. Overall, the economic, business stimulus that *farang* men bring to the rural economy is of two types – consumption and productive investment. Consumption involves the commercial stimulus created by the capital they bring into the rural countryside. The flow of cash into the economy occurs through remittances and money the men bring with them when settling in *Isan*. The men and their wives also invest productive capital into a variety of business ventures.

As the relative economic value of farming activities has declined relative to urban incomes, extended family households in rural Thailand have become heavily dependent on a remittance economy (Rigg and Salamanca 2012). The influx of money from remittance and that couples bring with them when they settle down in the countryside plays a key role in sustaining an agrarian smallholder activities which on their own are not economically viable. The contemporary agrarian “household” conceptually cannot be well understood as an economic unit by looking only at those who live under one roof in rural areas. More often than not, the material wellbeing of rural households and families is dependent on remittances from urban centers or even from abroad (e.g. Kitiarsa 2006). *Farang* men who enter into relationships with *Isan*

women become an important source of remittances. It is common for younger *farang-Isan* couples to relocate to the husband's home country and to send back remittances from either the husband's or wife's earned income, or both (Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013; Ratanaolan-Mix and Piper 2003). In other cases, a *farang-Isan* couple will live in Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya or other urban or tourist destination in Thailand, from where the wife will remit money to her natal village and family.

In addition to reproducing traditional matrilineal patterns and supporting the rural economy, *farang* men's presence in *Isan* introduces new social and political patterns. The men assimilate to *Isan* society and culture to varying degrees, but also bring with them and disseminate new sensibilities around personal space, privacy and sociability. As non-citizens, they also have a different relationship to patterns of local politics as compared to in-marrying Thai or *Isan* men (cf. Bowie 2008). In what follows, we expand on the details of how these domains – of matrilineal kinship, rural economy, and social-political relationships are being influenced by the proliferation of *farang-Isan* couples settling in the Northeast. But before detailing these influences, the following section provides a profile of the couples, based on our 2008-2009 fieldwork.

## Profile of *Farang-Isan* Couples

For Northeast and other parts of Thailand, heteronormative relationships between *farang* men and Thai women are a highly visible addition to the rural-based extended family household.<sup>2</sup> Estimates of formal *farang-Isan* marriages

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<sup>2</sup> These are by no means the *only* transnational relationships in *Isan*; others include many, somewhat 'less visible' heteronormative relationships between *Isan* women and a variety of Asian expats (Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, Singaporean, etc.), relationships between *farang* women or other transnational women and *Isan* men (albeit much less common; see Malam 2004) and various non-heteronormative (e.g. same-sex) relationships.



put the number in the tens of thousands (Maher and Lafferty 2014, 432). Many more couples maintain marriage or marriage-like relationships that are not formally certified. Our analysis of the impact of these relationships on the society and economy of rural *Isan* is based on fieldwork interviews and observations carried out over the past decade, but particularly around 2008-2009. In research carried out in December 2008 to August 2009,<sup>3</sup> we conducted 144 interviews pertaining to *farang*-Thai relationships in villages and small market towns of central and lower *Isan*; 43 were with *farang* husbands, 22 with *Isan* wives and 19 with *farang-Isan* couples together (84 interviews). An additional 60 interviews were conducted with others, including other relatives of *farang* in-laws (e.g. *farang*'s mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, children of *Isan* wives from previous relationships, and other relatives), other villagers, shop owners, various officials (teachers, district officers, etc.) and in four cases with *farang* men who were not in long-term relationships with *Isan* women.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this article, the terms "*farang* husband" and "*Isan* wife" are used loosely to refer to partners in long-term, heterosexual *farang-Isan* relationships. These range from legally registered marriages (registered either in Thailand, overseas, or both), to socially recognized but not legally registered marriages (e.g. where formal ceremonies have been conducted and wedding gifts such as the traditional form of bride-wealth known as *sin-sod* have been exchanged; but the marriage has not been legally registered) to more informal but nevertheless sustained relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> While the main data reported here was collected in 2008-2009, our ongoing fieldwork in *Isan* (albeit on different topics, with different focus and emphasis) as well as what we find in the literature from others working on transnational marriage and *Isan* society in Thailand does not suggest that there have been dramatic changes over the past decade.

<sup>4</sup> Detailed descriptive statistics can be found in Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016 (online Supplement A); they broadly correspond to the demographic profile of couples reported elsewhere (e.g. National Economic and Social Development Board [NESDB] 2004; Boonmathaya 2005; Phromphakphing et al. 2005; Lapanun 2013).

Most of the *farang* husbands were from Europe (83.3%), with the rest from the United States (11.4%), Canada (2.0%) and Australia (3.0%). Overall this set of *farang* husbands is similar to finding in other studies, in that they largely come from Northern European countries with strong social welfare systems. The *farang* husbands encountered in this study ranged in age from 28 to 80 years of age; their median age was 60 years old. About three-quarters of the *farang* husbands were age 50 and above. Only two were below the age of 40. Their *Isan* partners (wives) ages ranged from 20 to 70 years old; with a median age of 39.5 years old.

As other researchers have observed, the beginning of modern *farang-Isan* marriages most specifically traces back to the American military presence in the region during the Vietnam War period of the 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. Maher and Lafferty 2014; Lapanun 2013; Boonmathaya 2005).<sup>5</sup> But the bulk of the marriages date to the beginnings of mass tourism into Thailand in the 1980s and accelerating into the 1990s and 2000s. The *farang* husbands encountered during fieldwork were largely from lower middle-class and working-class backgrounds. In terms of income among the *farang* husbands, about half derived their primary source of income from running a business or working and an equal number derived most or all of their income from retirement savings or pensions, including a considerable number drawing on disability pensions.

About three-quarters of the *farang* husbands had previously been married, and almost all of these had children from their previous marriage. Nearly two-thirds of *farang* husbands did not have children with their current *Isan* wife, while just over one-third did. Conversely, the great majority, about

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<sup>5</sup> Historians (Mattariganond 2006; Loos 2008) point out that the social significance of Thai and *Isan* intermarriage with foreigners did not begin with the American War in Vietnam and dates back much earlier – by many centuries.

eighty-percent, of *Isan* wives had children from previous relationships, almost all with *Isan* or Thai men. With regard to kinship relationships, the primary influence of *farang-Isan* relationships is that they provide a means through which the matrilineal tradition in of in-marrying sons-in-law is successfully reproduced – albeit with a less-than-traditional set of men and with some differences from past practices. In addition to becoming husbands and sons-in-law, *farang* men sometimes also become fathers and step-fathers to *Isan* children, providing various sorts of material and non-material support in raising children. In the economic domain, *farang-Isan* relationships provide local economic stimulus in several ways through remittance, investment and entrepreneurship, as well as significant stimulus to the socio-religious economics of Buddhist institutions. In addition to kinship and economics, *farang* men’s presence in the *Isan* countryside and villages also introduce new social patterns including sensibilities around public life and privacy, homosocial relationships and the social organization of local politics. These influences are detailed in the sections to follow.

## Reproducing Kinship

The first domain to consider with regard to ways in which *farang* men are both reproducing and changing rural, agrarian *Isan* (Northeast Thailand) is with regard to matrilineal kinship systems. Here, overall, we argue that *farang* men are (unwittingly) involved in providing a material and non-material basis for the perpetuation and reproduction of *Isan* matrilineality. Traditionally, it was customary (though not obligatory) after marriage for *Isan* couples to settle in the wife’s village and to generally maintain stronger ties to the wife’s family as opposed to the husband’s. Prior to the 1970s, this usually involved *Isan* men from relatively nearby villages or the same village marrying and moving in with a woman and her family. Since the 1970s and mass migration of both women and men to Bangkok and beyond, marriages have increasingly involved

couples meeting further afield. But the tradition of maintaining a strong tie to the wife's natal home and family has continued up to the present. As in-marrying sons-in-law, men provide material and financial support to their wives families, as well as various sorts of labor and care work, not least of which is varieties of support for their children and more generally the children of the family. Here we sketch out the matrilineal foundations of *Isan* society, *farang* men as in-marrying sons-in-law, and their relationship to the family's children.

Most accounts of the presence of *farang* men in *Isan* attribute their arrival to the extensive sex tourist trade in Bangkok and elsewhere, growing out of the establishment and expansion of entertainment venues for American soldiers during the American War in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Without doubt, sex tourism and tourism more generally is a key vector through which *farang* men develop relationships with *Isan* women and eventually come to settle in Thailand. However, at least as important, we argue, are *Isan*'s matrilineal traditions. Many, many places around the world are thriving sex-tourist hotspots (e.g. Brennan 2004; Cheng 2010; Cole 2003; 2008; Yea 2005). Few if any of these places see the permanent settling of such tourists on the scale seen in *Isan* and Thailand more generally.

Both northeast (*Isan*) and north (*Lanna*) Thailand have matrilineal traditions, in which a typical pattern is for women, particularly the youngest daughter in a family, to inherit their parents' house and agricultural land (Bowie 2008; Keyes 1984). Women typically would remain in their own villages and sons would marry-out, move out of their own villages and move to their wives' villages after marriage. These matrilineal patterns were not based on rules as strictly adhered to as in other matrilineal societies, such as Minangkabau in Sumatra. Rather, they were (and are) based on somewhat more loosely enforced customs and norms (Keyes 1984). In particular, men are expected to earn merit and honor their parents by joining the Buddhist monkhood for at least a short period during their lives. Whereas daughters are expected to more directly and materially take care of parents as they age and to make

merit through their care work as mothers (Angeles and Sunanta 2009; Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1985). Traditionally, in a very general way *Isan* men were seen to have repaid their debt to the parents through Buddhist ordination. After which, they can marry and become providers for their wives' matrilineal families.

Patrilineal societies place extremely high value around the virginity of in-marrying daughters-in-law, due to concerns over paternity of their offspring. Such concerns are not at play in matrilineal societies (there is almost never a question over maternity). In general, matrilineal societies place fewer restrictions around pre-marital sexual relationships for women (and men). In *Isan* society, while pre-marital sexuality is not necessarily encouraged, it is common and to some degree expected. This factor frees *Isan* women to engage in sexual encounters with men with relatively little stigma attached, particularly outside the village and in urban settings. In our fieldwork, across ninety-nine interviews with *farang-Isan* couples, we found that the large majority (68%) had met in Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket, all rife with sexually-oriented entertainment districts (cf. Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016).

Seeking out a *farang* husband and becoming "*mia farang*" (wife of a *farang*) has become a wide-spread, cultural aspiration among *Isan* women. This is not to say that it is an aspiration for all, nor that it is not stigmatized among some, but that it is widely – i.e. "culturally" – recognized as something that many women desire. Simply put, *farang* men are generally expected to be relatively wealthy and therefore ideal candidates as in-marrying sons-in-law who can contribute materially to the matrilineal family and village. The proliferation of *farang-Thai* or *farang-Isan* marriages, while in some respects introducing new kinship and relational conditions into rural Thailand, is in other respects reproducing long-standing rural, matrilineal conditions of in-marrying sons-in-law and matrifocal families.

As one 48-year-old woman from Kalasin told us, "*village women nowadays consider having farang husbands as a fashionable trend. It is a way*

*to escape from poverty. Having a farang husband is like having a personal ATM (Automatic Teller Machine). Your financial well-being is guaranteed. Some women would be happy to divorce their Thai husbands and go straight to Pattaya, Patpong or Phuket to work in the bars and get themselves farang lovers or husbands.*” Other informants in Chumpae district, Khon Kaen, also described this new attitude of village women in a similar way. They used the term, “*go hunting for some good farang men*” or “*go getting themselves some responsible and rich Farang men in Bangkok or Pattaya.*”

Marrying a *farang* husband is considered a livelihood strategy adopted by village women from rural poor backgrounds. As Thailand is deeply embedded in global cultural economy, contemporary Thai women are encouraged to “*go inter*” (go international). The international space has become a source of wealth for many of them. In the popular perception among rural villagers and urban working class, marrying *farang* husbands or having them as in-laws are considered good fortune comparable to “winning a lottery prize.” According to one village elder in Khon Kaen province, having a generous *farang* son-in-law is equivalent to an unexpected arrival of a reliable source of fortune for his daughter and his own family: “*(having a farang son-in-law) is even a greater luck than winning a lottery. You will get your lottery fortune only once and it is gone*” (quoted in Phromphakphing et al. 2005, 70).

Whereas elsewhere, matrilineal traditions may be organized around formal clans or rules of property inheritance (e.g. Minangkabau of Sumatra), in *Isan* the primary cultural expression of matrilineality is the filial duty of daughters toward parents. Marrying a husband (therefore son-in-law) who can provide material and non-material support is one important strategy for women in fulfilling this filial duty. Over the past century, the geography within which *Isan* women seek out opportunities – marital as well as income-generating – has expanded from the rural-local, to the urban-national, to the transnational (cf. Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013; Mills 1999; Sunanta and

Angeles 2013). While the basic cultural principle of filial daughter duty has persisted, values and evaluation of eligible marriage partners who can support women in meeting these cultural expectations has changed substantially in an increasingly commercial, urban-oriented and globalized world. The desirability of *farang* men (though by no means exclusively *farang* men) is one index of these changing values and socioeconomic circumstances.

It would be a mistake to reduce *Isan-farang* relationships (marital or otherwise) to mere financial and material exchange (cf. Lapanun 2012). In-marrying *farang* sons-in-law contribute to material provisioning but also to the raising of children and other forms of care work in rural *Isan*. The details of these relationships vary widely. In some cases, the support *farang* husbands provide can be tangential. In our field interviews, some wives and husbands reported that the husband had little to do with children from previous relationships and any support these children received was funneled second-hand through their mothers. But more frequently, the *farang* husbands would take on more direct responsibility for these step-children. This took the form not only of material support but various other forms of care work as well.

In one instance, a woman spoke passionately of how her *farang* husband cared and provided for her Down-syndrome child, who had been rejected by the biological Thai father. Her *farang* husband was instrumental in obtaining special schooling and other support for her child. In another (albeit unusual) instance, we encountered a *farang* man taking care of two young children in a rural village, whose *Isan* mother had abandoned to pursue her own life and drug-seeking addiction in Bangkok. In yet another case, the following account of an *Isan* woman, whose English husband took on responsibility for raising her three children from a previous marriage, illustrates her husband's everyday care work as well as cross-cultural clashes that can be involved:

My *farang* husband is a good man. He loves my sons. He teaches them computers and English. He likes to have them stay with us. He loves to

cook breakfast of scrambled eggs for them. However, my sons do not eat it much because he does not put any fish sauce, except some salt in it, and I cannot force them to eat it.

While in-marrying sons-in-law are not generally as valued for their reproductive capacity, in contrast to the cultural value of daughters-in-law in patrilineal-patrilocal societies (cf. Kandiyoti 1988), that does not mean that a son-in-law's contribution to the birth and raising of offspring are unimportant. One interesting aspect of the discourse around *farang* men is that they are often (rightly or wrongly) viewed as more responsible toward children and families generally as compared to Thai-*Isan* men. Women who have sought out relationships with *farang* men usually do so after failed and negative relationships with Thai-*Isan* men. The positive perception of *farang* men may have to do with cultural expectations, in which *farang* men are coming from traditionally patrilineal-patriarchal cultures (of "the West" – Europe, North America, Australia) in which the male head-of-household is expected to be responsible for the family in general. Matrilineal cultures place a less central expectation on men, as husbands and fathers, to be the key "patriarch" and therefore ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of their wives and children. But in *Isan*, the discourse around *farang* men re-values masculinity by idealizing forms of masculine and paternal responsibility derived at least in part through traditions of Western patrilineal-patriarchal culture.

## **Economic Stimulus**

Our interviewees report a wide range of experiences with *farang* men in relationship to supporting their *Isan* partners and extended families – with common characterization at the poles of generous to stingy. Conflicts over money often arise due to differing expectations of the *farang* husband's obligations toward the wife's family. One common point of contention is the *Isan* custom of bridewealth paid by the groom to the bride and her family.



Some *farang* husbands pay this willingly, but others do not. *Isan* women and their families however often point out that although the *farang* men may not pay a specific bridewealth at the point the couple marry, they usually make a variety of other investments in the woman and her family. While some men refuse to provide financial support to any family members other than their wives, the large majority of our interviewees reported that *farang* husband usually support parents, siblings and other family members either directly or indirectly through their wives. The most common and largest form of support comes in paying for home construction or renovation.

The *farang* currency injected into the rural economy provides capital for and jobs in the construction industry, undertaken primarily by local *Isan* men. They also stimulate the local rural economy in other general and specific ways. Generally, the infusions of cash into the economy circulate in local general goods shops, restaurants and the like. More specifically, particular businesses rely heavily on *farang-Isan* customers. For example, owners of furniture stores around rural *Isan* report that a very important part of their clientele are *farang-Isan* couples furnishing their newly constructed homes. Likewise, car and motorcycle dealerships likely gain substantial income from the injection of currency that *farang* men bring to the countryside.

Beyond consumption, *farang* men in collaboration with their wives and wives' families also invest in and run businesses in rural *Isan*. Overall, several common themes tie together the most typical of the *farang* businesses in *Isan*: 1) *Farang* men/husbands invested their money in businesses. 2) These businesses mainly aim at attracting other *farang* expatriates, who have some nostalgia for their familiar Western lifestyle. 3) Thai women legally own the properties as the Thai legislation limits the foreigners' ownership of land and other properties. 4) *Farang* husbands provide skilled labor and expertise.

Some of these are agrarian in nature. *Farang* men, through their *Isan* wives, purchase agricultural land and engage (through paid or kin-based labor)

in farming activities. After residential land, house and durable consumer goods, farm land is likely the next most common investment that *farang* men make in rural *Isan*. Usually, agricultural endeavors involve various arrangements with family members beyond the immediate couple. As one wife of a *farang* recounted:

My husband spent a large amount of money to buy 19 *rai* of farm land for me. It is still under my sister's name. Next year, it will be transferred to my name.... It was a vacant lot because the previous owner has not done much with the land. Now my sister and her family grow grass for our herd of cattle. We have invested for myself and for the family of my sister too.

According to many of our interviewees, the purchase of land by *farang* has led to an increase in the price, which of course may be good or bad depending on whether one is a seller or buyer. As one village man told us, typically *farang* do not bargain for the land, they just buy it at the price offered. Some *farang* farms involve introducing or attempting new or innovative farming, such as the introduction of non-rice crops or new farming techniques. As one *farang* husband we interviewed told us about his plan:

We grow three avocado trees in our farm now. (My wife) wants to make facial cream from avocado in the future. We think that a positive change is to keep young women here working on the land, not to be slaves in Bangkok where bosses treat them like dogs. We wish to set up an organic farm model for villagers to see for themselves.

*Farang-Isan* couples invest in a variety of non-agricultural businesses as well. These *farang* enterprises, include a wide variety of business investments and transaction, either carried out by *farang* men themselves or by their wives and in-laws. Many *farang* men come to Thai villages with a spirit of entrepreneurship. Most *farang* men are members of working- or middle-class in their Western worlds. They had earned their living all their life. They cannot stay idle without work, even though many of them have been living their retired

life in the Thai countryside. Many indeed do not have to work and can live comfortably on their life-time saving or pension. However, many of them have developed some businesses based on their professional skills, interests, and local conditions. Among the couples we interviewed, approximately half of the husbands were working or running a business.

Some examples of *farang* enterprises are so complex as to involve international export, such as one we learned of run by an Italian man who set up a factory making salami and other kinds of Italian sausages. He trained his wife's relatives to run the factory and hired villagers to help out. The factory exported beef and pork sausages back to Italy. However, its main products are sent to Pattaya, where the Italian man and his wife run a few pizza bars.

But most *farang* businesses are mainly local, operating in the rural *Isan* economy either in villages or small market towns. One form is investment in business property. "*Daeng*"<sup>6</sup> was twice divorced when she met her *farang* husband. She was no longer young or favorably eligible in the local marriage market. She was a grandmother since her married eighteen-year-old daughter already has her own three-year-old son. *Daeng* told us that her family was poor and she had to go to Bangkok to look for a job to support her seventy-eight-year-old mother. Luck was on her side. By marrying "Dave", who is now 60 years old, she "*hit the jackpot*" – a phrase referring to winning the lottery, which is commonly used by our informants with regard to finding *farang* husband.

My husband and I spent his money to buy a 100 square meter plot of land. We then built an eight-room, one-story shop house. We rent out rooms to store owners. Each room brings us 1,200 THB (approximately, 35 USD) monthly rental fee. Our new house is built on another plot of land. My husband has invested the total amount of 8-9 million THB (approximately,

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<sup>6</sup> All informants are referred to with pseudonyms.

235,000 to 265,000 USD) since our marriage, which took place three years ago. We also bought one pick-up truck and one motorcycle.

Many *farang-Isan* couples' businesses are specifically *farang*-oriented, such as small restaurants and pubs in rural market towns. Such businesses play an important role in connecting and localizing *farang* and their transnational married life with Thai village women to the rural *Isan* society. In a village in Nakhon Ratchasima, we interviewed "Andrew," 69, a retired policeman from Sweden, and his wife, "Wan," 47, an ex-migrant workers, who spent years as domestic workers in Hong Kong. They have run their own Western-style restaurant serving Western cuisine such as, home-made pizza, hamburger, to spaghetti and sauce. During an interview, Andrew told us that *"more than half of our customers are well-to-do Thais, e.g., government officials and rich merchants. Another half is farang men, who have married Thai wives and lived in villages nearby. Our business is quite good. Now people have a choice. You do not have to drive to the city if you want to have some pizza. They come to us."*

Many of the examples of business enterprises among our interviewees highlighted the social as well as entrepreneurial aspects of these endeavors. "Michael," the owner of a beach resort, is among the early group of *farang* men marrying local women in Khon Kaen. He invested his money in land and house properties and developed them into a small-size resort with an aim to attract other *farang* men and their families on their weekends and long holidays. Similarly, "Jan," opened his minimart and restaurant at their place, not very far from *Mitraphap* Highway, linking *Isan* and Central Plain towards Bangkok. With his wife, "Pen," 41, who speaks Danish and had lived in Demark for more than ten years, as a cook, they aim for both local and *farang* customers. Jan said, *"we have regular friends who are on the way to Bangkok and wish to have Danish or European meals with us. They visit our restaurant on their way to Khon Kaen or Bangkok."* Jan's next project is a small resort with bars, spa facilities, and a swimming pool, which was under construction by a Danish

contractor, who married a village woman in Nong Khai province and runs a construction firm there.

A final economic – but also social – stimulus that *farang* sons-in-law bring to the rural countryside is money and other material resources channeled into Buddhist institutions, particularly the local village Wat. Some *farang* men become directly involved in local Buddhist practices. But more often, their contributions to Buddhist institutions are mediated by their wives. Lapanun (2013) for example, provides a detailed discussion of how *Isan* wives of *farang* sponsor elaborate ceremonies at their local Buddhist temple, a pattern reported by other researchers as well (e.g. Sunanta and Angeles 2013). Thus, while *farang* men rarely are themselves ordained as Buddhist monks (as compared to *Isan* men, who usually do so during their lives), they contribute financially to the maintenance and perpetuation of Buddhist institutions in rural *Isan*.

Buddhist institutions – specifically the local village temple – are key sites for the remittance and merit-making economy. As one villager observed:

*Farang* husbands took their village wives from here to live with them (in their own countries). They raise their families there. They always send money to make merit if they cannot come for their holidays. They also have modern new houses built for their parents-in-law. For those who are rich, they come for a few holidays in Thailand every year.

In cases such as these, remittances flow both to the immediate family and to the village society more generally through the institution of the village temple. Donations go toward renovating, expanding and beautifying the physical structure of the temple itself, sustaining the local monks, and redistribution in the form of charity. Villagers interviewed commented, for example, on donations of tens of thousands of Thai Baht or thousands of US Dollars toward new structures honoring local abbots and similar works (cf. Lapanun 2012).

## Social Relations

Support of the local temple is just one way in which *farang* men develop connections to local communities. There are a range of local activities, which *farang* men through their wives and in-laws can take part. In addition, they contribute to local schools' scholarship funds, and support local leaders, such as the village headmen, and the sub-district administrative organizations. Sometimes this is seen as burdensome. "Kaew," 44, from Kalasin and married to a Frenchman, said:

I do not like some double standards imposing on *farang* and their families when it comes to public donation. We are expected to donate more for public good because villagers thought that we have plenty of money. Sometimes, it is not true. Not all *farang* men and their wives are wealthy. We want to be treated just like ordinary village people. We do not want two different rates, local/Thai vs. foreign/*farang*, when we use some public facilities.

Burdensome or not, in many instances, special attention is given to integrating *farang* sons-in-law into local communities. Officials from many provinces have sponsored public ceremonies of "soul-tying" (*baisri sukhwan*) to welcome the mixed marriage couples to their home provinces and, thus, to publicly acknowledge *farang*'s in-laws membership to local communities and their contributions to local economy and society. For example, in February 2006, Sisaket's Provincial Administration Organization organized the *sukhwan* ceremony, entitled "Kheui Thai-Saphai Thet" (Thailand's sons-in-law and foreign daughters-in-law) as part of the province's annual fair. Similar events were also held in Nakhon Ratchasima and Khon Kaen in the same year.

*Farang* men introduce new sensibilities around privacy and home construction in *Isan*. Traditionally, it is common for multiple houses to be built close together on a single small plot of land. A main house, occupied by

parents or grandparents is commonly supplemented by adjacent houses built by adult children. These are usually funded in part and often directly built by in-marrying sons-in-law. But as one travels around rural *Isan*, in nearly every village, one sees a number of houses built in converted paddy fields outside the village center. *Isan* villages are typically organized as a tight cluster of a hundred or more houses surrounded by paddy fields. These new houses built outside this center and amongst the peripheral paddy fields are known as “*baan farang*” (*farang* houses). In most cases, these *baan farang* constitute only a handful of homes scattered around the outskirts of a particular village. Though in some cases, villages have become intensive sites of in-migration due to the effects of migration networks, where a single or small core of *farang-Isan* couples create a proliferation of such marriages. Ratana Tosakul (Boonmathaya) for example, has written about a particular “Swiss village” in *Isan* where nearly a hundred Swiss-*Isan* couples have settled (Boonmathaya 2005).

*Farang* men bring with them a different view of private-public constructs. They highly value their privacy and often question local villagers for their lack of respect to other people’s privacy and rights. Villagers often point to the pattern of how *farang* men buy land away from their in-laws’ families and other neighbors, then build large, modern houses surrounding with walls, fences, and heavy gates. One village elder man in Roi-et provided this account: “*It is easy to identify a farang’s house, even when it is under construction. The construction work always starts with marking boundaries and building the walled fence. Of course, their houses are beautiful, expensive, and modern. They are equipped with home appliances and furniture.*”

In general, *farang* men have greater expectations of personal privacy as compared to their *Isan* kin and neighbors. Such expectations and norms may in turn affect the sorts of ties that kin and neighbors maintain. *Farang* men living in rural *Isan* experience a range of relationships with kin and neighbors in the villages in which they settle. Some live solitary lives, interacting

almost exclusively with their *Isan* wives. Others develop friendships largely or exclusively with other *farang* men who have settled in *Isan*. These are perhaps the largest group. Yet others, develop important relationships and friendships with *Isan* neighbors.

Language ability plays an important part of *farang* men's relationships with others in the village. Most men settled in *Isan* learn to speak some Thai and/or northern *Isan* dialect, though most do not become fluent in Thai. In part this may be due to the fact that most settle in *Isan* at an older age of 60 years or older, when learning a new language is more difficult than for younger individuals. It is more common for *farang* men to frequent shops, restaurants and pubs where other *farang* congregate and develop friendship networks at those sites. Even for those men who become fluent in Thai and develop close relationships with *Isan* men, their identity in *Isan* is perpetually marked by their *farang* identity. For many reasons, from formal citizenship to their visible physical characteristics (phenotype) to cultural attitudes and expectations, the *farang* men always remain as "*farang*" and foreign, making it impossible for them to completely integrate into the village.

*Farang* men also introduce a variety of lifestyle innovations to rural *Isan*. They are more familiar with their cosmopolitan ways of living and most *farang* men can not abandon these entirely in order to be part of his wives' local communities. This may include indulging in activities, such as visiting bars, associated more with sex tourism than permanent residence (cf. Thompson, Kitiarsa, and Smutkupt 2016). *Farang* men and their wives have developed some distinctive lifestyle patterns in the Thai countryside in other ways as well. The following are some notable features in the *farang* lifestyle, which are different from the local villagers. *Isan-farang* families visit shopping malls, movie houses, and other facilities in the town-centers on regular basis. Even though they live in a rural village proper, they drive to the provincial market towns for weekly shopping, meeting with friends, or doing some personal business. Most of them also travel to sea-side resorts in Hua Hin, Pattaya, Samui or Phuket regularly.



They also take annual or long holiday visits to the husbands' home countries. For many, their life has little to do with farming or menial jobs like villagers. They live, eat, shop, and entertain themselves as cosmopolitan urbanites.

It is very important for most *farang* men to have satellite TV, mobile phone, car, computer with internet connection, credit card, and a comfortable modern home. "Alan," a 60-year-old Englishman married to "On," 47, and living in a village near Sisaket town, points out that "*living in an Isan village is not difficult. I am online at home. I can do my e-banking, keep in touch with folks and friends, and travel anywhere I want from here. Good thing is the cost of living is not expensive. I have a lovely wife and a wonderful house.*" During our visit, he showed us his house with a Victorian septic tank and chimney. In his backyard, he runs his farm, keeping cattle, geese, fish, and other plants as his hobby.

Criticizing Thai politics and voicing out their dissatisfaction over some public concerning the Thai society at large are a way for *farang* men to stay connected in the Thai countryside. "Ray," a 48-year-old German who married a woman in Roi-et and run a restaurant in that market town, had a long list of complaints about his life in Thailand. He related a litany of complaints in our interview:

Road safety is horrible. Road accidents are very high. Immigration regulations are too complicated and do not make sense. Why do we have to travel to the checkpoint every three month to have our passport stamped?... Education in Thailand is very poor. Students are not able to speak English. If you don't speak English, you will not succeed anywhere in the world.... Thai politics is hopeless. Vote buying is infectious. I have never seen ordinary people or true professionals win elections and become MPs in Thailand. All politicians are business people, who only care about their own interests. Corruption is also a very big obstacle in Thailand.... As a *farang* man with an intention to make Roi-et my second home, I do not think

the government has recognized our contributions to local economy. It is not fair. There are around 70 to 100 *farang* men marrying and living in this town. Each of us has invested at least 3 million THB (approximately, 87,902 USD). The local economy is booming. We invest in properties, restaurants, resorts, constructions, etc., but what does the government do for us? Nothing!

Throughout the interview, Ray was rather emotional, but genuinely spoke his mind. It is the voice of a foreign man living under some accumulated tension and dissatisfaction. At the same time, it sounds like a verbal expression in responding to the life situations, which he really wishes he could do something in order to contribute to the local community. Ray sounds very much like a man who wants to get out of the place where he founded himself rather powerless and semi-relevant (cf. Lafferty and Maher 2014; Maher and Lafferty 2014). Ray seems very uncomfortable with his marginal position and identity as a “foreign Other” in a Thai provincial town. Indeed, his interview is full of idioms, which demand a greater recognition of membership, if not citizenship, in the Thai countryside.

## Conclusion

Our findings and analysis are primarily qualitative. While there is a rather large literature on the phenomenon of *farang-Isan* relationships and an even broader literature on transnational marriage migration, in this article we have outlined a set of issues that go beyond the focus of most of this literature which has theorized mainly gender relations and transnational processes. In the present article, we have argued that the lives of *farang* men in Thailand involve much more than the stereotyped issues around sex tourism (though we are not arguing against the significance and extent of the problematic elements that sex tourism and global economic inequality bring). Our findings and conclusions should not be read as endorsing marriage-migration of

older *farang* men to Thailand or elsewhere as an unbridled benefit, let alone solution to the economic and social problems faced by rural society in less affluent nations. Rather, the point here is that we should expand our scope in research on phenomenon such as marriage-migration to understand the multifaceted impacts for contemporary society, particularly in the places that such couples settle.

Our conclusions can only be preliminary and many points raised in this article are ripe for further, more detailed study—such as quantifying the impact of investments and consumption of *farang-Isan* couples on the local economy and small businesses, the ways in which matrilineality supports the position of women under contemporary conditions, and the social relationships between and among *farang* and others in rural *Isan*. All of these require further consideration and more extensive data to be fully explored. We hope that our presentation of these domains which we found to be significant through our interviewing and fieldwork can be a guide to further such work and provide important points to consider for scholars and others who observe and experience changing rural society in Thailand

The story of *farang* men settling in rural *Isan* is still a story in the making. In this article, we have sketched—in a preliminary fashion—the main domains in which *farang* men married to *Isan* women and settling in rural *Isan* are contributing to agrarian transitions. Their presence is influencing changes in a variety of ways – specifically, patterns of sociability, privacy, kin and friendship networks and possibly local politics. But in other ways, *farang* men are invigorating the local rural economy, providing economic stimulus through remittances, consumption and various sorts of investments. Moreover, *farang* men, as in-marrying sons-in-law are reproducing (albeit in perhaps somewhat altered form) longstanding matrilineal, martrilocal and matri-focal *Isan* practices. Through the economic resources, provisioning and even the care-work they provide, *farang* men are sustaining as much as they are transforming rural *Isan*.

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