

Foreigners' wives: Cross-cultural marriage of rural Thai women in Isan, Thailand

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Abstract –*The purpose of the study was twofold: 1) To study the background of cross-cultural marriage in Isan, Thailand; 2) To study cross-cultural marriage rituals of Isan women, Thailand. The study was carried out from February 2012 to February 2014 and was conducted in Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, and Nong Khai provinces. The research sample was composed of 80 individuals. The data collection tools were survey, interviews, observations and focus-group discussions. Results found that the main reason for Isan women marrying foreign men was poverty. They not only wanted to raise family income, but also reciprocate their parents for raising them. As for the foreign men, all had been married before. Some had divorced their former wives, some sons or daughters and some had health problems. Most foreign men were impressed by the good care provided by Isan women, who also had no debt burden. Prior to their marriage with foreign men, most Isan women in the research sample used to work in restaurants in Bangkok, Phuket or other tourist areas. The study found that most weddings followed Isan traditions. The parents, seniors, and relatives participating in the wedding ceremony were seen as witnesses. The bride's parents received a dowry in cash. Most newly wedded Isan women went to live abroad with their husbands. Their children from previous marriages often went to live with their grandparents. Although many couples have successful marriages, some may experience problems later on. Further study should concern these problems.*

Keywords – *Ceremony, cross-cultural marriage, Isan, wedding.*

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a major condition of family life and, moreover, it controls sexual behavior. Each society and culture may have a different form of family and matrimonial law, which requires the member of society to select a partner in marriage, determine the form of the wedding ceremony and determine the number of partners in marriage [1]. During the Vietnam War (1955-1975), many American troops lived in Thailand and a number of women lived together with the soldiers as a 'rent wife' or 'prostitute' [2]. For this reason, Thai society rejected cross-cultural marriage, especially between Thai and western couples. Thai ladies married to foreigners were seen as prostitutes rather than wives [3]. However, Thai society has changed over time. Conservative attitudes towards partner selection have been liberalized with increasing cases of cross-ethnic and cross-cultural marriage [4]. Young Thai ladies living in rural areas in the northeast of Thailand, such as Khon Kaen, Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Mahasarakham, Chaiyaphum, Srisaket and Sakon Nakhon hope for cross-cultural marriages, especially

with western men. According to Phrompakping [5], this is due to faster and more convenient modern communication.

In the past, society valued the process of getting an education and career to provide for oneself and one's family. Nowadays, Thai society is focused on materialism and marriage to foreigners is one way to wealth and comfort. This idea leads to the popularity of cross-cultural marriage by creating the understanding that foreign husbands can improve the quality of life, financial status and social status of Thai women and their relatives. Public attitudes to cross-cultural marriage have changed for the better [6]. Young Thai ladies from the North-east of Thailand seek opportunities to interact with foreign men, being introduced by friends and family members, the Internet and match-making companies. The overall aim of this investigation was to analyze cross-cultural marriage in Isan because there is currently little scholarly attention given to the complexities of Thai-foreign relationships in this aspect of society.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This qualitative investigation has two primary aims to study the history and background of cross-cultural marriage in the north-east of Thailand; to study cross-cultural wedding ceremony procedures in the north-east of Thailand. Data were collected by documentary research and field study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researchers used structural theory, cultural diffusion theory and relativism as the base to analyze collected data. Data were collected from government office documents and people involved in cross-cultural weddings, for example community leaders, community elders and their relatives. Data were collected between February 2012 and February 2014.

The research population was composed of Isan ladies from three villages: Nonghin Village in Khon Kaen, Thatoom Village in Udon Thani and Jangsawang Village in Ubon Ratchathani. Researchers determined the criteria for research area selection as follows: 1) The village was located in the north-east of Thailand; 2) The village had at least 5 cross-cultural couples; 3) The village followed traditional Isan wedding rituals; 4) The ladies succeeded in their lives after across cultural marriage. Moreover, the

researchers selected the sampling group purposively and divided the sample of 80 individuals into three categories. The first category, key informants, was composed of fifteen individuals able to confirm the history and background of cross-cultural weddings and traditional Isan wedding ceremonies. The second category, casual informants, was composed of 40 individuals able to confirm background of the Isan ladies before they married with foreign men. The third category, general informants, was composed of 25 individuals able to confirm the lifestyle and financial status of Isan ladies after they married foreign men. All informants participated on condition of anonymity. Where group discussion was required, participants were informed and agreed beforehand. All names and sensitive details were treated confidentially.

The researchers used basic survey, structured and unstructured interviews, participant and nonparticipant observation and focus group discussions as data collection tools. The collected data were analyzed by typological analysis and verified by a triangulation method. The results are presented below as a descriptive analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Table 1. History and background of cross cultural weddings in the North-east of Thailand**

	Nonghin Village, Khon Kaen	Thatoom Village, Udon Thani	Jangsawang Village, Nong Khai
Isan lady's background and career	100% have a domicile of origin in Nonghin village and all are Buddhists. One (out of five) is a businesswoman and four are unemployed.	100% have a domicile of origin in Thatoom village and all are Buddhists. Four (out of six) are businesswomen and two are unemployed.	100% have a domicile of origin in Jangsawang village and all are Buddhists. Three (out of five) are businesswomen and two are unemployed.
The foreigner's background and career	100% have a domicile of origin abroad and all are Christian. Three (out of five) are businessmen and two are engineers.	100% have a domicile of origin abroad and all are Christian. Three (out of six) are business men and two are engineers. Another is a university instructor.	100% have a domicile of origin abroad and all are Christian. All are businessmen.
Life status before marrying foreign men. (financial, social, health and education)	80% of the Isan ladies were destitute and 60% divorced 80% are undergraduates. While 100% of the foreigners are wealthy, 80% were divorced and 60% of them had graduated with at least a Bachelor's degree.	Five of the Isan ladies were destitute and four divorced. Five had a undergraduate degree. 100% of the foreigners were wealthy, three divorced and four graduated with at least a Bachelor's degree.	100% of the Isan ladies were destitute and 80% divorced. Three have an undergraduate degree. While 100% of the foreigners are wealthy, 60% were divorced and 80% of them graduated with at least a Bachelor's degree.
Prior marriage background, family status and communication	80% of the Isan ladies were single moms, 60% divorced & 20% were single. 40% of the cross-cultural couples were introduced by friends & 60% communicated through the Internet.	Four of the Isan ladies were single moms and five of them divorced. Two of the cross-cultural couples were introduced by friends & four communicated through the Internet.	80% of the Isan ladies were single moms & 60% of them were divorced. 40% of the cross-cultural couples were introduced by friends & 60% communicated through the Internet.

Table 2. The cross-cultural wedding ceremony procedures in the North-east of Thailand

	Nonghin Village, Khon Kaen	Thatoom Village, Udon Thani	Jangsawang Village, Nong Khai
Ceremony and master of the ceremony	Traditional ceremony (<i>Baisrisukwan</i>), conducted by the ceremonial leader of the community Mr. Prayong Lachanthuog	Traditional ceremony (<i>Baisrisukwan</i>), conducted by the ceremonial leader of the community Mr. Sobhon Nammongkhon	Traditional ceremony (<i>Baisrisukwan</i>), conducted by the ceremonial leader of the community Mr. Nikom Autamamool
Participants	Bride and groom, relatives, community leader, extended family and friends	Bride and groom, relatives, community leader, extended family and friends	Bride and groom, relatives, community leader, extended family and friends
Equipment, dowry and ceremony cost	<i>Phanbaisri</i> , wrist thread and dowry. The ceremony costs a hundred thousand baht	<i>Phanbaisri</i> , wrist thread and dowry. The ceremony costs a hundred thousand baht	<i>Phanbaisri</i> , wrist thread and dowry. The ceremony costs a hundred thousand baht
Time, place and ceremony	The ceremony is conducted following the Isan traditions and belief at the bride's home. The bride and groom's family and friends are the witnesses of the ceremony	The ceremony is conducted following the Isan traditions and belief at the bride's home. The bride and groom's family and friends are the witnesses of the ceremony	The ceremony is conducted following the Isan traditions and belief at the bride's home. The bride and groom's family and friends are the witnesses of the ceremony
Ceremony procedure	The ceremony procedure was conducted as in traditional Isan wedding ceremonies, lead by the spiritual leader of the community, called the <i>morsutra</i> .	The ceremony procedure was conducted as in traditional Isan wedding ceremonies, lead by the spiritual leader of the community, called the <i>morsutra</i> .	The ceremony procedure was conducted as in traditional Isan wedding ceremonies, lead by the spiritual leader of the community, called the <i>morsutra</i> .

History and background of cross-cultural weddings in the North-east of Thailand

According to the study, the North-east of Thailand faced drought and destitution throughout its history. Both men and women from Isan left their family homes to work in Bangkok and other areas in order to increase family revenue and solve debt problems. Destitution led to family problems and divorce. For this reason, young ladies from the North-east area tend to marry with foreigners to solve destitution problems.

Foreigners were introduced to Isan ladies by friends and match-making company on the Internet. It can be clearly seen that the quality of life of the Isan ladies is much better after marriage due to the foreign husband's financial status. For this reason, many Isan ladies want to marry with foreigners to improve their quality of life, financial status and for the well-being of their families. The history and background of the cross-cultural wedding is summarized in Table 1.

The cross-cultural wedding ceremony in the North-east of Thailand

According to the results the researcher has conclude the equipment used in wedding ceremony and wedding ceremony procedure as follows. There are four components to the wedding ceremony: 1) The ceremony conductor; the ceremony will be conducted by a community spiritual leader called a *morsutra*; 2) Ceremony attendees; the bride and groom, their family members and friends, community leaders and community members; 3) Equipment; The *phanbaisri* and dowry; 4) Place, date and time; the wedding ceremony is held at the bride's home. The date and time of the ceremony is set by the *morsutra* following traditional Isan beliefs. There are four stages to the wedding ceremony: 1) The groom and his party will make the *kan mak* parade to the bride's house; 2) The bride's family will conduct a *baisrisukwan* for the bride and groom. A *phanbaisri* is made from banana leaves sewn into a cone and decorated with fortune flowers, such as marigolds, crowned flowers and

amaranth. This is believed to bless the couple's love forever. Other equipment used at the wedding were *khao tom mad*, two boiled eggs, bananas, thread, *tiean hob hua*, *tiean kha king*, fortune candles, which are all contained in the cone; 3) The wrist tying ceremony; The *morsutra* will bring the thread from the *phanbaisri* and tie it on the bride and groom's wrist, telling them to be obedient in their married life. After the spiritual ceremony is done, the wrists are tied by the bride and groom's parents and relatives, who also give blessings; 4) The bride and groom will be sent to their bedroom by the bride and groom's parents and relatives.

The results from focus group discussions show that the cross-cultural wedding ceremony procedures in Nonghin Village, Khon Kaen, Thatoom Village, Udon Thani and Jangsawang Village, Nong Khai have the same steps, which are summarized in table 2

Due to poverty and lack of education most Isan ladies lack opportunities in their lives; however they are patient, purposeful, assiduous and dutiful. They take a chance to marry foreigners in order to improve their financial status and the quality of their family's life [7]. This is related to the research of Addsakul [8], who studied cross-cultural weddings and found that the ladies who married foreigners had a previously poor quality of life. Their marriage was intended to improve their financial status. In the researchers' opinion, finding solutions to personal struggle is a basic human instinct. Before their cross-cultural marriage, almost all of the Isan ladies were married to Thai men and their families had a poor quality of life and unstable financial status due to the shortage of arable land, drought and the lack of education opportunity. These are national problems that need solving as soon as possible so that marriage to foreigners is not the only solution for Isan ladies. The Thai government should support education and work opportunities for people in the Isan area in order to improve their quality of life. This is related to the structuralism of Bronislaw Malinowski [9], which highlighted that culture serves the needs of the individual, especially the basic needs, in this case the need to make a living to pay for food, shelter, clothing, relaxation, health, growth and reproduction. Moreover, modern communication makes the connection and relationship progress faster. Cultural diffusion is getting faster than in the past. Boas's [10] cultural diffusion theory argued that culture spreads out from an epicenter. This is independent of geography. Although the evidence of this investigation would seem to indicate that cross-

cultural marriage in North-eastern Thailand has not altered traditional marriage ceremonies, steps must be taken to ensure this situation remains and marriage customs are not changed, as has been the case in other cultures [11]. In the researchers' opinions the traditional Isan wedding ceremony is one of the unique Isan traditions that should be conserved and inherited. Marriage is a symbol that can cause individuals to think about other people or things, even if the person or the object is not present. It is a vital part of Isan culture that must be protected regardless of cross-cultural relationships.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results shown that Isan ladies married to foreigners and living in rural Isan originated from the area, are all Buddhist and graduated from high school, with high vocational certificates or bachelor degrees. Their former occupations were housemaid, businesswoman, agriculturist, flight attendant and some were unemployed. The researchers found that the foreigners married to Isan ladies used to be married, some of them are single fathers and some of them have health problem, but all of the foreigners in this study had a stable financial status. The foreigners' careers were as university instructors, engineers and businessmen.

Before they got married to foreigners, most of the Isan ladies faced both poverty and family problems, some of them used to be married to Thai men and have kids. On the other hand, foreigners had a much more stable financial status and better quality of life. The cross-cultural couples were introduced by friends and match-making companies on the internet and after 6-24 months of dating they got married under traditional Isan wedding ceremonies and lived happily, both in Thailand and abroad.

After marriage, the cross-cultural couples lived both abroad and in Thailand. Some of them live separately, the foreign husband does his business abroad while the Thai wife lives in Thailand and they meet once or twice a year. Some of the couples move abroad and some of them live in Thailand. The communication in cross-cultural families is done in both Thai and English language. The results show that some cross-cultural couples focus on legal obligations, while some do not. The researchers found that the cross-cultural couples continued practicing their former religions without relationship problems. After marriage, the foreign husband took responsibility for his wife's children and family, both for the improvement of their quality of life and financial

status, while the Thai wife was warmly accepted by her husband's family too.

The cross-cultural wedding ceremonies were mostly held following traditional Isan beliefs. The groom and his family will parade to the bride's home with the dowry, including money, gold and jewelry, to show that he can take care of the bride in future. Moreover, the groom's parents should make a marriage proposal for their son with the bride's parents and the bride's parents will set the ceremony date and time.

The Isan wedding ceremonies will be conducted by a morsutra. The bride and groom's parents, families, bridesmaids and best men will encompass the Phan-Pa-Kwan and be witnesses to the marriage. The equipment used in Isan wedding ceremonies are a Baisri for the Sukwan ceremony, which is made from banana leaves and decorated with a variety of items. The ceremony will usually be conducted at the bride's home at 9 am, according to Isan beliefs.

The research team wishes to make the following suggestions for further research topics as a result of these findings: 1) The problems and obstacles in cross-cultural marriage; 2) The trends of cross-cultural marriage and cultural diffusion; 3) Physical abuse and human rights violations in cross-cultural families abroad; 4) Life and society of children from cross-cultural families; 5) Establishment of the women's organizations in Isan for support in culture, education and counseling in cross-cultural marriage problems. Research on these topics will further enhance the growing body of knowledge on cross-cultural marriage in Thailand.

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