

Demographic Context of Thai-Western Partnerships in Thailand

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Abstract

Marriages between Thais and Westerners have become more frequent in Thailand, which could have significant social and economic implications for the country. However, we currently lack information on the exact number of Thai-Western couples and their demographic characteristics. To address this, we conducted a study using Thailand's 2010 Population Census to explore the scale of Thai-Western partnerships and identify some basic demographic traits of these marriages. Our findings revealed that in 2010, Thai-Western couples made up less than 1% of all married couples. Additionally, more male Westerners partnered with Thai individuals than female Westerners with Thai partners. The nationalities that predominantly formed partnerships with Thais were British, American, and German, comprising more than half of all Westerners in such unions. We also observed that approximately one-third of Westerners in these partnerships were 60 or older, indicating a significant age difference between Western men and their Thai counterparts. Furthermore, most Thai-Westerner couples reside in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand.

Keywords

Marriage; partnerships; Thailand; westerners

Introduction

Marriages between Thais and foreigners have a long history, dating back to the Ayutthaya period, around four centuries ago. During that time, the old Siam capital was a bustling hub for foreign trade, attracting traders from regions like Europe, China, Japan, and the Middle East (Mattariganond & Thongyou, 2011). Historical records indicate that at least 16,000 foreigners lived in the capital in 1687 (La Loubere, 1691, as cited in Reid, 1999). Large-scale mixed marriages between Thais and foreigners were also observed after World War II, especially between Thai women and German or Austrian men, as well as during the Vietnam War in the 1970s. However, many Thai-foreign couples eventually returned to their partners' home countries (Suksomboon, 2009).

Recently, Thai-Western marriages have gained increased public attention, and anecdotal evidence suggests a rising trend in such unions. Unfortunately, specific data on the number of Thai-Western couples remains elusive, and there is a lack of reliable information on the total number of married couples and the demographic characteristics of Thai and Western partnerships. However, it is believed that many mixed Thai-American couples live in the United States, seeing as around 7,000 children have been born to Thai and American parents (Weisman, 1997). Despite the rich history of Thai-foreign marriages, current data on the prevalence and details of Thai-Western partnerships require further investigation.

Research on the number of foreigners living in Thailand mainly focuses on general foreign populations (Huguet, 2014; Huguet & Punpuing, 2005; Vapattanawong, 2015). Using data from Western embassies on estimates and registered residents, Howard (2009) estimated that during 2005–2006, there were around 100,000 Westerners, including those from South Africa and Israel, residing in Thailand. Another study by Vapattanawong (2015) utilized data from the 2010 census to calculate the total number of foreigners living in Thailand. They revealed that approximately 2.58 million foreigners were residing in the country, and among them, around 260,000 were Westerners, including individuals from Europe, North America, Australia, and Oceania. These references provide valuable insights into the foreign population in Thailand, particularly Westerners, contributing to a better understanding of the diverse demographic landscape in the country.

In 2019, the United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (Harkins, 2019) reported that approximately 4.9 million foreigners were living and working in Thailand. Nearly 3.9 million were migrant workers from neighboring countries like Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Although statistics on the total number of foreigners in Thailand have been collected for decades, these reports do not include specific information on Thai-Western partnerships. Some outdated data on Thai-Western couples exist, like a survey conducted by the National Economic and Social Development Board (2004) among Thai women with *farang* [slang for Western or Caucasian] husbands in 17 provinces of the Northeast Region, excluding two provinces. The survey found 15,284 women married to foreigners, with many Thai-Western couples living overseas. However, this survey's limitations, including its regional focus, make it insufficient to represent the entire population of mixed marriages in Thailand, especially since it excluded data from other regions like Bangkok and coastal provinces, where many foreigners reside.

As the number of retired foreigners in Thailand is expected to increase, the government needs accurate data to plan for future tax, healthcare, housing, and other social services. Hence, this

study aims to provide essential information about Thai-Western marriages, including their scale, demographic characteristics, and distribution within Thailand. The study will contribute to a better understanding of this aspect of Thai society and aid policymakers in making informed decisions.

Methods

Data

The present study utilized microdata from a 1% sample of Thailand's 2010 Census (National Statistical Office, 2014). This census encompassed all individuals, including foreign civilians, who had long-term residence in Thailand. For foreigners, long-term residence was defined as residing in Thailand for at least three months before the census date on September 1 of that year. The census form also included information about the nationality of all individuals. The marital status of all individuals aged 13 and older was collected. Still, the analysis in this study only considered opposite-sex married couples due to the lack of recognition for same-sex marriages under Thai law, which makes them unavailable in the Census data.

The researchers employed relationship-to-household-head questions to match husbands and wives to identify Thai-Western marriages. This matching process focused on private or residential households, amounting to 20,364,332 households, where information about the relationship to the household head was available. The results presented in this paper were weighted to ensure representativeness. Table 1, included below, illustrates the process of matching husbands and wives within a household.

Table 1: Matching of Husband and Wife in Thai-Western Marriage Based on Relationship to Head of Household

Person number	Age	Sex	Marital status	Relationship to household head
1	43	Male	Currently married	Head
2	39	Female	Currently married	Spouse
3	14	Female	Never married	Child
4	12	Female	Never married	Child

Terminology

In this study, a Westerner is defined as an individual whose nationality belongs to a country in Europe, North America, Australia, or New Zealand. For this research, "married" refers to Thai men or women legally married to Westerners or living together as husband and wife. It is important to note that the Thai census does not have distinct codes for legal marriages and cohabitation or de facto relationships. As a result, the information on marital status provided in the census form combines these two groups and cannot be analyzed separately. Consequently, only opposite-sex couples are included in the analysis. Finally, for this study, a Thai-Western couple is defined as a Western man or woman legally married to a Thai national or living together as husband and wife.

Findings

Estimate the number of Thai-Western partnerships

To estimate the number of Thai-Western couples, we used data from the 2010 census, where we initially calculated the number of such couples by identifying spouse-spouse relationships in each household based on the relationship to the head of the household. The results presented in this paper have been weighted for accuracy. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the number of Thai-Western couples, categorized by their relationship with the head of the household and their gender. Overall, our calculations revealed that there were 60,220 Thai-Western couples in 2010. Among these couples, the largest group consisted of spouses of the head of the household, which included 40,155 Westerners, followed by the head of the household with 18,377 Westerners. Notably, women outnumbered men in all categories related to head-of-household relationships.

Table 2: Number of Currently Married Westerners Where Spouses Are Thais by Relationship to Head of Household and Sex, 2010

Region (of origin)	Head		Spouse		Married child		Son/daughter-in-law		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Australia & New Zealand	1,530	0	1,781	70	0	0	13	0	3,394
Europe	6,466	61	16,483	998	33	0	593	20	24,654
Scandinavia	1,771	38	4,022	1,194	4	0	240	50	7,319
United Kingdom	5,483	0	8,928	148	0	0	347	167	15,073
United States & Canada	3,028	0	5,537	994	0	0	221	0	9,780
Total	18,278	99	36,751	3,404	37	0	1,414	237	60,220

Note: Calculated using 1% Thai 2010 census microdata

To estimate the current number of Thai-Western couples, we based our calculations on the results from the 2010 Thai census, which identified 60,220 such couples. An online survey of 1,003 Westerners indicated that approximately 47% had Thai partners, suggesting there were about 50,000 Thai-Western couples during that period. Considering the current migration flow from Western countries, we assumed an annual increase of 2% in the number of Westerners partnering with Thai individuals and residing in Thailand, as discussed with Thai migration experts. Our estimate also considered the gender disparity among Western migrants. In 2010, 94% of Thai-Western couples comprised Western men. We assumed that this proportion of 94% men and 6% women remained constant. The estimated figures from 2010 to 2017 are shown in Table 3.

According to our calculations, the current number of Thai-Western couples is approximately 69,174. However, it is essential to note that foreigners will likely be under-reported in the census due to language barriers and other challenges in accessing accurate data. In Thailand, it is believed that around 10,000 foreigners overstay their visas (Huguet, 2014). Considering

this and the potential margin of error in under-reporting, the current number of Thai-Western couples living in Thailand could range from 65,000 to 72,000.

Table 3: Estimated Number of Thai-Western Couples Living in Thailand by Sex

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Men	56,480	57,739	58,894	60,072	61,273	62,498	63,748	65,023
Women	3,740	3,685	3,759	3,834	3,911	3,989	4,069	4,150
Total	60,220	61,424	62,653	63,906	65,184	66,488	67,817	69,173

Note: Calculated based on microdata of 1% sample Census 2010. Figures from 2011 onwards are the product of a 2% increase in Thai-Western couples from 2010 figures. The 2% increase was calculated from the number of granted visa extensions for Westerners living in Thailand.

Demographic composition and regional distribution of Thai-Western couples

Diverse nationality and gender disparity in relationships

Westerners who enter marriages with Thai nationals come from various countries, and the most common nationality among them is British, comprising approximately 15,074 individuals, representing about 25% of all Thai-Western couples. The second and third most common nationalities are from the United States (15.9%) and Germany (13.4%). These three nationalities account for over half of all Westerners partnered with Thai nationals. Among the Westerners partnered with Thais, the majority are men. Western women outnumber Western men across all nationalities. Notably, Sweden and the United States stand out as two nationalities, with a relatively high proportion of women married to Thai nationals, representing 30.2% and 10.5%, respectively. It is also worth mentioning that Russians had the highest percentage of women married to Thais, with 38.9% out of 665 Russians, although these specific results are not included in Table 4.

Table 4: Top Fifteen Most Common Nationalities of Married Westerners Where Spouses Are Thais by Sex

Country	Percentage			Male and Female	
	Male	Female	Total	Number	Percent
1 United Kingdom	97.9	2.1	100	15,074	25.0
2 United States	89.5	10.5	100	9,008	15.0
3 Germany	97.6	2.4	100	7,852	13.0
4 France	97.3	2.7	100	5,228	8.7
5 Sweden	69.8	30.2	100	3,474	5.8
6 Australia	97.8	2.2	100	3,144	5.2
7 Italy	96.2	3.8	100	2,558	4.2
8 Netherlands	96.7	3.3	100	2,120	3.5
9 Switzerland	92.1	7.9	100	1,839	3.1
10 Austria	94.6	5.4	100	1,475	2.4
11 Norway	94.2	5.8	100	1,380	2.3
12 Denmark	95.8	4.2	100	1,251	2.1
13 Belgium	100	0	100	1,127	1.9
14 Finland	92.3	7.7	100	949	1.6
15 Canada	93.7	6.3	100	772	1.3

Table 5: Regional Distribution of Married Westerners Where Spouses Are Thais by Sex

Country or Region	Male %	Female %	Total %
Europe (exclude Scandinavia)	41.7	28.8	40.9
United Kingdom	26.1	8.4	25.0
United States & Canada	15.6	26.6	16.2
Scandinavia	10.7	34.3	12.2
Australia & New Zealand	5.9	1.9	5.6
Total	100	100	100
	(N = 56,482)	(N = 3,740)	(N = 60,222)

Table 5 provides insights into the regional distribution of married Westerners with Thai spouses, categorized by the countries mentioned in Table 4. The data illustrates the percentage of male and female spouses within each region. Among the regions, Europe (excluding Scandinavia) stands out with the highest rate of male spouses at 41.7% and female spouses at 28.8%. Following this, the United Kingdom has 26.1% male spouses and 8.4% female spouses. The United States and Canada show 15.6% male and 26.6% female spouses. Scandinavia accounts for 10.7% of male and 34.3% of female spouses. Lastly, Australia and New Zealand have 5.9% male and 1.9% female spouses. The percentages represent the overall composition of married Westerners with Thai spouses in each region, with a total sample size of 56,482 for males and 3,740 for females.

Age and age differences between couples

The study found that 20,399 (33.7%) Western men and women aged 60 years or older were in partnerships with Thai individuals. Among Western couples, men tended to be significantly older than their female counterparts. Specifically, those aged 70 and over comprised 6% of men compared to less than 2% of women (Table 6). Table 7 presents the mean and median age differences between husbands and wives. The data reveals clear patterns of age differences among Western husbands and Thai wives, with the majority having an average age gap of 12 years or more. Among different nationalities, Canadian-Thai couples had the most prominent age gaps, with about half of the 772 couples having an age difference of 20 years. Wider age gaps were also observed among Swedish, Norwegian, British, and Australian couples. In contrast, when examining Thai husbands and Western wives, there were no distinct patterns of age differences. However, there were two nationalities, Italian and Danish, in which women tended to be much older than their Thai husbands, with average age differences of 16 and 4.5 years, respectively.

Table 6: Age Distribution of Married Westerners Where Spouses Are Thais by Sex

Age	Male	Female	Male and Female
< 20	0.1	0	0.1
20-29	1.3	18.5	2.4
30-39	14.3	12.1	14.2
40-49	26.1	9.4	25.1
50-59	24.3	25.7	24.4
60-69	27.7	32.5	27.9
70-79	5.7	1.8	5.4
80+	0.4	0.0	0.4
Total	100	100	100
	(N = 56,481)	(N = 3,741)	(N = 60,222)

Table 7: Median and Mean Age Differences Between Couples by Selected Country

Nationality of westerners	Westerner husband and Thai wife		Thai husband and Westerner wife	
	Median	Mean	Median	Mean
United Kingdom	17	17	-2	-5
United States	16	15	3	3
Germany	15	15	-0.5	-3
France	13	15	-4	-9
Sweden	18	17	2	2
Australia	17	17	-2	-1
Italy	11.5	13	-16	-14
Switzerland	15	14	1.5	3
Netherlands	14	15	4	0
Austria	15	15	-0.5	0
Norway	18	17	-8	-11
Denmark	16	16	-4.5	-4
Belgium	11	14	-	-
Finland	11	12	1	-4
Canada	20	18	1	0

Education of Thai-Western spouses

Education of Thai and Western Couples

The study found that a similar proportion of women whose husbands were Westerners had primary (34.5%) and secondary (36%) education, while one in four women had a university education (Table 8). However, there were notable differences in educational levels among Thai women married to farang spouses from different regions. Those married to Australian and New Zealanders, as well as those married to partners from the United States and Canada, tended to have higher education levels compared to other regions. On the other hand, only 16% of Thai women whose spouses were Scandinavians had secondary education, and a significant majority (54.9%) had only received primary education. Regarding Thai men's education, a more substantial percentage (60.3%) had a university education than Thai women (26.7%). Thai men with Scandinavian (81.5%) and British (74.9%) partners were highly educated. Acknowledging that education information was unavailable for approximately

one-third of Westerners was essential. However, as expected, most Western women and about half Western men had a university education. Additionally, educational levels of Westerners varied across regions, with a higher proportion of those with university education observed among Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, and Canadians (Table 9).

Table 8: Education of Thais Where Spouses Are Westerners by Sex and Region of Spouses (%)

	Australia & New Zealand	Europe	Scandinavia	United Kingdom	United States & Canada	Total
Female						
Primary or less	25.5	33.4	54.9	32	30.5	34.5
Secondary	30.4	37.8	26.3	45	23.8	36
Bachelor	39.7	22.5	16.1	18.7	32.6	23.2
Master or higher	4.4	3.4	2.5	1	8.8	3.5
Unknown	0	2.9	0.2	3.3	4.3	2.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	99.9
Male						
Primary or less	82.6	57.6	0.2	2.9	23.7	24.8
Secondary	8.7	13.9	18.3	22.2	2.1	12.8
Bachelor	8.7	15.9	81.5	74.9	12.9	42.4
Master or higher	0	5.5	0	0	62.3	17.9
Unknown	0	7.1	0	0	0	2.1
Total	100	100	100	100	101	100

Table 9: Education of Westerners Where Spouses Are Thais by Sex and Region of Westerners (%)

	Australia & New Zealand	Europe	Scandinavia	United Kingdom	United States & Canada	Total
Female						
Primary or less	0	29	0.2	0	0.1	8.5
Secondary	0	13.1	4.4	18.2	2.6	7.5
Bachelor	8.7	28.8	87.8	1.9	87	61.9
Master and higher	0	6.1	0	57.9	9.5	9.1
Unknown	91.3	22.9	7.5	22	0.7	12.9
Total	100	99.9	99.9	100	99.9	99.9
Male						
Primary or less	0.6	1.6	3.7	2	4.7	2.3
Secondary	8.3	9.1	7.7	8.7	7.2	8.5
Bachelor	40.1	35	45.2	37.5	48.3	39.2
Master and higher	23	12.9	4.9	15.8	18.9	14.3
Unknown	28	41.4	38.5	36	20.9	35.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Regional distribution

Approximately two-thirds of Thai-Western couples reside in urban areas, with a higher proportion of Western men living in rural areas than Western women (Table 10). There are regional variations in the residence patterns of Thai-Western couples. Most of these couples live in the Bangkok Metropolitan area (35.3%) and the Eastern Region (24.7%). Interestingly, the Central Region is the least preferred place of residence for Thai-Western couples. Surprisingly, only 15% of these couples choose to live in the Northeast region, despite anecdotal evidence suggesting that many Thai women with foreign partners come from this region. In terms of gender differences, the majority of women (66%) live in Bangkok and its surrounding areas. In contrast, men are more evenly distributed across regions, with significant percentages residing in Bangkok and its vicinity (33.3%), the East (25.8%), the Northeast (15.6%), and the South (14%).

Regarding Westerners who marry Thai nationals, they can be found residing in nearly any province in Thailand. However, the most popular place of residence for Thai-Western couples is Bangkok, regardless of the nationalities of the Western partners. Approximately 60% of Thai-Western couples reside in Bangkok, Chonburi, and Phuket. Interestingly, eight provinces in the Northeast region are among the top 20 places in Thailand where Thai-Western couples live. However, the number of couples in these provinces is smaller than in the Bangkok Metropolitan area.

Table 10: Place of Residence of Married Westerners Where Spouses Are Thais by Sex

Place of residence Urban-rural	Male	Female	Male & Female
Urban	77.0	84.0	77.4
Rural	23.0	16.0	22.6
Region*			
Bangkok and vicinity	33.3	66.0	35.3
Central	0.8	0.2	0.8
East	25.8	8.2	24.7
North	8.3	5.2	8.1
Northeast	15.6	11.2	15.3
South	14.0	8.5	13.6
West	2.3	0.7	2.2
Total	100	100	100
	(N = 56,481)	(N = 3,740)	(N = 60,221)

Note: * NESDB divides Thailand into seven economic zones: Greater Bangkok (Bangkok plus six adjacent provinces), Central (7 provinces), East (7 provinces), North (14 provinces), Northeast (20 provinces), West (6 provinces), and South (14 provinces)

Table 11: Regional Distribution of Married Westerners With Thai Spouses by Region and Country

Region	Australia & New Zealand	Europe	Scandinavia	United Kingdom	United States & Canada
Bangkok Metropolitan	50.5	28.1	33.9	36.7	47.2
Central	0.1	1.0	1.0	0.6	0.5
East	14.3	26.0	21.9	31.3	16.9
North	5.4	6.8	8.1	9.2	10.6
Northeast	16.0	17.5	14.1	13.7	13.2
South	12.9	18.4	17.2	6.6	9.9
West	0.8	2.2	3.9	1.9	1.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100
	(N = 3,613)	(N = 24,691)	(N = 7,227)	(N = 15,056)	(N = 9,635)

Table 11 provides valuable insights into the regional distribution of married Westerners with Thai spouses, categorized by specific countries and regions. In the Bangkok Metropolitan area, most married Westerners are from Australia and New Zealand (50.5%) and the United States and Canada (47.2%). Europe, on the other hand, exhibits the highest percentage in the Central (1%), East (26%), and South (18.4%) regions. Scandinavia stands out with the highest rate in the North (8.1%) and Northeast (14.1%) regions, while the United Kingdom leads in the West (3.9%) region.

Discussion

The phenomenon of Thai-Western marriages has become a topic of widespread interest in recent years, attracting attention from both the media and the public. However, despite the attention it receives, it is crucial to note that the actual number of such marriages in Thailand is relatively small, constituting less than 1% of all married couples in the country, as revealed by the 2010 census data.

One possible reason for the under-reporting of these marriages in the census data is the presence of various factors that hinder accurate data collection. For instance, difficulties in reaching foreign residents, language barriers, and confidentiality concerns during face-to-face interviews might contribute to the lack of comprehensive data on Thai-Western marriages.

An interesting trend observed in Thai-Western marriages is that Westerners marrying Thai nationals and living in Thailand are predominantly men and tend to be older than their Thai wives. This pattern is expected to persist due, in part, to the Thai government's policy promoting foreign retirees. Over time, the number of Western retirees in Thailand has been increasing steadily, and many of them choose to settle in their wives' hometowns after returning from abroad. However, registering foreigners in the country can be complex and time-consuming due to a lack of clear guidelines.

The most common Western nationalities in Thai-Western partnerships are from the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States. Among these, British nationals constitute a

significant proportion of Westerners married to Thai spouses, and most migrants are men. Similarly, American migrants exhibit gender disparities, with a higher proportion of American women having Thai husbands than British women.

Contrary to anecdotal evidence or common stereotypes, it is noteworthy that most Thai women who marry Westerners have higher levels of education. Approximately one-third of these women possess educational qualifications beyond the secondary level, which surpasses the educational attainment of Thai women married to Thai husbands. This improvement in the education of Thai women may be attributed to increased career opportunities and language skills, which have facilitated their encounters with and marriages with foreigners.

The distribution of Thai-Western couples across regions in Thailand shows that about two-thirds of these couples reside in municipal or urban areas, with Bangkok being the most popular location. Provinces with high economic growth and well-known tourist destinations, such as Chonburi and Phuket, attract many Thai-foreign couples. However, the Northeast region, known to be the origin of many Thai women marrying Westerners, is less favored as a permanent residence.

To gain a deeper understanding of Thai-foreign marriages and to address the limitations of census data, it is essential to consider other sources of information, such as immigration records, vital registration data, and marriage and divorce registration data. By drawing insights from various data sources, researchers and policymakers can better comprehend the dynamics of these marriages and their impact on individuals and society. Additionally, this data can provide valuable insights into potential challenges faced by Thai-foreign couples and inform the formulation of appropriate policies to support and integrate them into the broader society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the phenomenon of Thai-Western marriages has attracted significant attention. Yet, the number of such unions remains relatively small compared to the number of married couples in Thailand. Despite potential under-reporting in census data, key insights emerge regarding the prevalence and characteristics of these partnerships. Westerners married to Thais are predominantly men, often older than their Thai wives, and the top three nationalities are British, American, and German. Contrary to expectations, Thai women marrying Westerners display higher levels of education. Bangkok is the primary residence choice for most Thai-Western couples, followed by provinces with economic growth and tourist attractions. The continued growth of Thai-Western partnerships, mainly due to the policy promoting foreign retirees, underscores the importance of further research and data sources to understand better this dynamic social phenomenon and its potential implications for Thailand's demographic landscape and social dynamics.

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