

Intraethnic Othering among Thai Wives of White American Men: An Intersectional Approach

Panu Suppatkul

Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University
Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand
Email: panusu@kku.ac.th

Received: July 11, 2020

Revised: October 29, 2020

Accepted: November 24, 2020

Abstract

This article examines how Thai women from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds married to white men, engaged in strategies to cope with the negative stereotype of “*mia farang*” – the term commonly used to refer to their status as Thai wives of white men. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 38 Thai immigrant women married to white American men, the findings show that these strategies involved an “intraethnic othering.” This specific othering process occurs when members of racially subordinated groups adopt an oppressive view from the dominant racist society toward their own group and start to believe the racist stereotypes made about members of their own group. In this study, some class-privileged respondents drew on socioeconomic and cultural differences (e.g., educational attainment, occupational status, and ethnic backgrounds) to distance themselves from less-privileged Thai wives, rendering themselves not representative of all *mia farang*. This article concludes that class intersects with race, ethnicity, and gender in relation to the coping strategies which the respondents employed in deflecting the negative stereotypes made about them, while at the same time perpetuating such stereotypes. The consequences of utilizing these strategies demonstrate that the multidimensional nature of structural oppression is difficult to resist because none of these forms of oppression exist separately from each other.

Keywords: intraethnic othering, intersectionality, cross-racial marriages, Thai wives

Introduction

In Thailand, media representations have often constructed Thai women involved in romantic relationships and/or sexual exchange with “*farang*” (white Western) men as poor, uneducated, and seeking to marry *farang* men as a quick way to escape poverty. Contemporary discourse in mass media, and sadly, among some academics, still depicts these women as former prostitutes who met their clients through sex work (Cohen, 2003), or as helpless women in need of economic security (So, 2006). In December 2019, Pensri Phaoluangthong, a columnist for *Matichon Weekly*, a well-known Thai language political magazine, sparked a national backlash against her disparagement of “*mia farang*” (Thai wives of white Western men) when she wrote in her column that “poor women from Isan (the northeastern region of Thailand) only seek to marry white Western men as a shortcut to lift themselves from economic difficulty instead of focusing on their studies and careers” (Rojanaphruk, 2019). She then received extremely strong criticism from many Isan women who claimed that her article defamed and insulted them as well as Isan ethnic people in general. *Matichon Weekly* had to issue an apology to readers for Pensri’s controversial article. When the backlash occurred, it was too late to recall the printed magazines, and thus, *Matichon* decided to remove the article from all online platforms and terminated Pensri’s column. Although Pensri’s article was extremely unfair to women from the northeast, her writing reflected widespread stereotypes in Thai society about Thai women married to white Western men. It is obvious that these stereotypes are incorrect because not all *mia farang* are former sex workers, nor did they all come from impoverished backgrounds. There are growing numbers of middle-class and highly-skilled professional Thai women who have engaged in cross-national marriage with white Western men (Sinsuwan, 2018; Suppatkul, 2018). Moreover, it would be unwise to assume that all white Western men are wealthy because they are not. However, many people, including Pensri, still believe the negative stereotypes of women who engage in romantic/sexual relationships with white Western men as simply gold-diggers or former sex workers.

It is worthwhile noting that stereotypes made about *mia farang* come from the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. To put it in Patricia Hill Collins' terminology (2000), they are caught in "interlocking systems of oppression". Being women from a less-developed country, *mia farang* are often criticized for utilizing romantic/sexual relationships as mechanisms for upward mobility to more-developed countries (e.g., Europe and North America), while heterosexual Thai men involved in sexual relationships with white Western women are left blameless (Malam 2004). This is an example of the intersection of gender and racial oppression. Furthermore, *mia farang* who are heterosexual, class-privileged, non-Isan Thai women (e.g., famous actresses, celebrities, from upper-class families) have hardly been criticized for their choice of marriage with white Western men. This kind of double standard has recently motivated scholars to take a closer examination of how the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity shapes the ways in which stereotypes of *mia farang* operate in our social world.

The objective of this article is to examine how the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class operates under the stereotypes made about *mia farang*. By doing so, I illustrate how *mia farang*, who vary in their socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, engage in strategies to cope with the negative stereotypes people make about them. I draw on the concept of "intraethnic othering," which refers to the dynamics in which members of racially-subordinated groups adopt an oppressive viewpoint from the racially/ethnically dominant group toward a racial/ethnic minority, and start to believe the collective derogatory stereotypes imposed on their own groups (Pyke and Dang, 2003). I also employed the intersectional framework (Collins, 2000) in the analysis of the othering process. This framework suggests that when members of a subordinated group attempt to overthrow one form of oppression in which they are disadvantaged, they somehow overlook, or even perpetuate, another form of oppression in which they benefit, hence reproducing a new form of inequality in the process.

Literature Review

Intraethnic Othering: The Construction of Otherness within One's Own Group

Sociologists studying the symbolic interactionism tradition define "othering" as a process of constructing collective identity which requires the categorization of individuals in hierarchical orders based on the viewpoint of the dominant group in society, hence creating inequalities (Schwalbe et al., 2000). However, the othering process can take place in many forms. First, there is "oppressive othering," which is a form of othering when members of a more powerful group define members of subordinated group in a negative way, rendering them as inferior (Mills, Gabrielle and Wiebe, 2010). There is "defensive othering," which occurs when members of a subordinated group internalize the worldviews of their oppressors and begin to adopt the derogatory views imposed on other members of their group, but at the same time believe that "there are indeed other people to whom this negative stereotype applies, but it definitely does not apply to me" (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 425). For example, some welfare recipients may criticize other recipients by claiming that they themselves really worked hard, but still found it difficult to make ends meet, unlike "other recipients" who were lazy and exploited the system (Seccombe, 1998). Another example of defensive othering is that when a newly homeless person, who was once middle class, but just lost his housing, looks down on "other homeless persons" who have lived on the street longer than he has, saying that they are not the same because he expected that someday he would be able to return to live in a house again (Hodgetts et al., 2012).

Pyke and Dang (2003) coined the term "intraethnic othering" to illustrate a specific form of defensive othering that occurs among members of the same ethnic group. In her later work, Pyke (2010) elaborated that intraethnic othering is the result of "internalized racial oppression" in the way that members of a racial minority group internalize the negative stereotypes that the dominant group imposed on them as true, and then use certain strategies to dodge such stereotypes. Intraethnic othering is an adaptive response when people adopt racist

attitudes toward members of their own group. To use an analogy, racism is like a disease, while intraethnic othering is like a symptom in a racist society (Pyke, 2010: 558). For example, some Thai-Isan youth feel that they have to “pass” as Central Thai when talking with friends who are from other parts of Thailand because they are afraid to be seen as “*ban nok*” (rural and uncouth) by other people, and some are even reluctant to speak Isan dialects at home (McCargo and Hongladarom, 2004). These kinds of behavior are not only limited to individuals living in one country, but they also encompass transnational realms. For example, a study of second-generation Thai-Americans in the United States found that some Thai-American youths who were born in the United States reported avoiding hanging out with new Thai immigrants, or Thai international students – those who spoke English with strong accents and usually spoke Thai in public – because they felt embarrassed and were afraid to be seen as one of those who are “Fresh off the Boat” (Suppatkul, 2013). Intraethnic othering occurred when the United States-born Thai-Americans drew on the negative stereotypes about new immigrants as “dorky,” “shy,” and “awkward” and labelled those stereotypes of other coethnics as a way of saying that “those are people who fit the negative stereotypes, but some people do not (and especially me).” These examples illustrate the way in which intraethnic othering serves to divide members of the same subordinated group, leading them to resent and criticize each other. Pensri’s article, which I discussed earlier, was informed by internalized racial oppression, especially when she exemplified Kalaya Sophonpanich, a former Minister of Science and Technology, as an outstanding Isan woman who focused on her studies and career, and hence was different from “typical” Isan women. Pensri also suggested that Kalaya was a role model that Isan women should look up to (Phorn-in, 2019).

An Intersectionality Framework: When Ethnic Bias Combines with Classism and Gender

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework introduced in the late 1980s by American legal scholar, Kimberlé Crewshaw, to capture how the multidimensional nature of social inequalities mutually constitutes the

interlocking systems of oppression based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, and other social attributes (Crenshaw, 1991). She argues that racial/ethnic bias, which is conveyed through the intraethnic othering process, does not operate as a stand-alone effect. Rather, it operates in combination with other social dynamics (e.g., class, gender, etc.) to shape the ways in which people perceive other individuals, and how individuals define themselves. For instance, Thai people do not make negative assumptions about *mia farang* only because they are women who have a relationship with white Western man, but also because they are an ethnic minority in Thai society, perhaps have darker skin tones than “average” Thais, and come from underprivileged backgrounds. The intersectionality framework is a suitable method to examine the power structures that constitute these multidimensional inequalities because it does not focus solely on the identities or stereotypes per se; rather it focuses on the interwoven nature of structural domination that mutually governs them (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). The intersectionality framework poses the argument that all groups possess unequal proportions of disadvantages and advantages in one historically created society (Collins, 2005). For example, a rich *mia farang* may be privileged by her class but disadvantaged by her gender and race/ethnicity. *Mia farang* also vary in their socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Some are highly privileged. Still, they must also bear the negative stereotypes imposed on them, though at different levels. These examples illustrate the complexity of intersectionality through intraethnic and class-based othering. Social class can be an axis around which racial and gender inequalities revolve. Therefore, scholars must not focus only on one axis of oppression, but rather, we must recognize the mutually constitutive nature of domination to understand how the systems of oppression are maintained and reproduced through stereotypes.

Data and Method

This study consisted of in-depth interviews with 38 Thai wives of white American men who resided in the United States at the time of the

interview. The collected data was part of my Ph.D. dissertation research on cross-racial international heterosexual marriages between Thai women and white American men in the United States conducted between 2016 and 2018. The respondents lived across the United States with the majority in California (27 of 38). The interviews were conducted both in face-to-face settings (21 of 38) and by phone or video calling (17 of 38). I recruited respondents through convenient and snowball sampling methods. I approached all respondents as a research student. The interview questions were approved by the University of California, Riverside Institutional Review Board (IRB) on January 10, 2016. The serial number is HS16-010. All respondents were asked for their consent to voluntarily participate in the research.

To capture class differences among the respondents, I stratified them based on their family's economic backgrounds when they were growing up. The main reason that I used the respondents' family's economic backgrounds instead of their current occupation or income was that I found that several respondents had no income and relied on financial support from their parents when they got married (and for some, from their husbands). In addition, academic literature suggests that social class is better explained at the family level rather than at that of individual accomplishment or prestige (Gillies, 2005). Eight respondents whose parent(s) were in professional occupations and/or large industrial business owners were classified as upper-middle class; sixteen respondents whose parent(s) were small business owners, governmental and private sector employees, farmers who owned lands, and other service workers were classified as middle class; and fourteen respondents whose parent(s) were day laborers and contract agricultural laborers who had no possession of lands were classified as lower class. I also considered the hardships which the respondents described as children to determine their social class. However, the analysis in this paper focused primarily on class-privileged *mia farang*.

The sample of 38 respondents ranged in age from 28 to 50 years old, with the average being 38 years old. Respondents had resided in the United States between 3 and 24 years, with an average of 10 years. They had been married between 3 and 24 years, with an average of

8 years. I used pseudonyms for identifying information including personal names and places. Basic information of the 38 respondents included their ages, occupations, ethnicity, educational attainments, years residing in the United States, years of their current marriage, their husbands' ages and occupations, and previous marriage(s) or cohabitation(s). For ethnicity, I asked the respondents specifically how they identified themselves. Nine respondents identified as Isan-Thai, three identified as Chinese-Thai, and the remaining 26 identified as Thai.

The data analysis focused on how the respondents described stereotypes made about them as *mia farang*. I also asked them about their past experiences, day-to-day interactions with other people in the United States, such as husbands' family members, colleagues, friends, neighbors, and strangers. I paid attention to the ways that the respondents interpreted things people said to them or how they treated them in certain situations. I observed how they responded to people who made stereotypical assumptions about them. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. Most interviews lasted between one to two hours, and a small number lasted up to three hours. I employed codes to identify recurring themes in their responses regarding stereotypes or various treatment they received from other people in the United States and in Thailand when they were visiting home. I presented quotes from the interview data to illustrate coping strategies the respondents employed in such situations.

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. Each part illustrates a pattern of coping strategies observed in the interview data. I posed the following questions in my analysis: How did class-privileged *mia farang* cope with the existing stereotypes? What were the dynamics that the respondents employed in deflecting, or negotiating with the stereotypes about *mia farang*? How did they view themselves in relation to other *mia farang*? Drawing on intersectionality theory, I presented examples of how social structures such as class, ethnicity, and gender were linked to the ways these respondents thought, talked, and acted in response to

the prevalent stereotypes. My analysis considered these dynamics in the intraethnic othering process.

Socioeconomic-based Othering: “I Don’t Know about Others, But I Didn’t Marry a Farang for Money”

Most respondents were already aware of the negative stereotypes wherein people perceived them as “gold-diggers” who deceived white-Western men into marriage for money. Without leading them to discuss this topic, many of them (25 of 38) brought it up by themselves in our conversation. Surprisingly, they said that this stereotype was true; however, they contended that it was true of some Thai women who were economically poor, but it definitively was not true of them, thereby illustrating a class-based othering. Respondents who were class privileged, both in terms of their family’s economic backgrounds and educational credentials (middle and upper-middle class), often emphasized that they did not fit the stereotype of *mia farang*, who pursued marriage with a white American man for economic security. In response to this stereotype, respondents showed a similar pattern of saying that they did not deliberately plan to marry a white American man, nor had they married for money, but out of love. For example, Kai (pseudonym), a 42-year-old Thai wife who had earned an MBA from a prestigious American university in California and owned a catering service, stated:

The idea that I had to marry a white guy never crossed my mind. [I’m] not some woman who pursued only white boyfriends. I came to the United States to study. I am well educated and can stand on my own feet. I did not plan to marry a white guy so that my life would be better. Neither did I expect that white men must be wealthy, nor that I could send a lot of remittances to my family in Thailand. Those kinds of ideas never crossed my mind. I didn’t grow up with the idea that “I would get something out of marriage with a white guy.” I don’t know about others, but that was not me (Kai [Pseudonym], 2017).

Kai told me that she became less concerned about this negative stereotype of *mia farang* after she and her husband had a child. She said that until I asked her about this issue, she had ignored the stereotype of being *mia farang* because it is less pervasive in the American context, especially in California, which is very culturally diverse. Hence, the way in which my interview questions triggered her defensive responses might prove that the intersection of class, race, and gender is so powerful that it shapes Kai’s ideas about *mia farang*.

Similarly, Suda (Pseudonym), a 41-year-old with a Ph.D. in engineering, gave quite a direct response when I asked her about how other people in the United States perceived her. She jokingly rephrased my question before answering. She said:

So, are you asking if people see me like those military men’s wives? (laugh) No...never. I think it is because I am a scientist. My husband is also a scientist. We only meet people who are scientists or academics. They don’t think of me that way. His family doesn’t think of me like those kinds of women. [Interviewer: What do you mean by “those kinds of women”?] Women like those in television soap operas – low educated and poor, who were sex workers and wanted to marry a white man to get out of their difficult lives (Suda [Pseudonym], 2017).

Although many respondents emphasized that they married out of love, not money, the primary purpose of marriage throughout history has always been to accumulate economic resources, establish political power, and extend social contacts across generations (Coontz, 2004). It is too simplistic to assume that only affluent people marry for love, while poor people marry for money. The theory of spousal preferences dictates that people, regardless of class, engage in a marriage contract insofar as they can benefit from each other (Becker, 1973). In the past, nobility had always been concerned with material benefits when deciding whom to marry. Thus, there is nothing wrong with marrying for economic benefit. However, several respondents still stressed that economic benefits were not their concern because they were financially secure. The reason they brought up the economic class

aspect in the conversation was so that they could distance themselves from the stereotype of typical *mia farang* who were poor, illustrating a form of intraethnic othering in the process of self-presentation.

Several respondents from upper middle-class and middle-class family backgrounds emphasized their higher educational attainment and occupational status (either from their previous or current job) to distinguish themselves from their perceived *mia farang*. For example, Noi, a woman in her early 40s, recalled how she had been successful in her career before she quit her job, got married, and became a full-time housewife. Noi was a salesperson who earned about 50,000 baht (approximately \$1,500) a month, which is relatively high compared to the Thai national average income. This amount of income allowed her to afford to buy a hybrid car and a condominium unit in the center of Bangkok. She had dated and cohabitated with a Thai man for years but was not happy that she earned more money than he did. After breaking up with him, she met her current husband, a twice-divorced German-American in his late 50s, who is the president of the supplier company that she did business with. She was the one who brought up the idea about “*mia farang* marrying for money” in our conversation. She said:

Most people thought that I married him because of money. It’s true that he’s rich, but it’s not the biggest part of my decision. I was a successful working woman. I wasn’t like other women who marry just for money. I was not poor. I had a good salary, probably higher than a lot of Thai men who were the same age as I was, at least higher than my ex-boyfriend. I was also studying for a master’s degree. Money was not my concern (Noi [Pseudonym], 2017).

Most respondents, including Noi, commonly deflected the negative stereotype about poor women marrying wealthy white Western men. They asserted that they had married for “other reasons,” saying it was romantic love. This pattern confirmed the validity of the negative assumptions of “*mia farang* marrying for money” which remained strong in their minds and could be easily triggered when someone touched on

this subject. I feel the need to clarify that when the more privileged Thai women criticize less-privileged Thai women for the negative stereotypes, it should not be interpreted as causing classism or racism. Nor do I intend to engage in reproducing a dichotomy between love and money. Rather, my purpose is to illustrate that the interlocking system of domination in society (e.g., classism and racism) is so powerful and dangerous that it shapes their understandings of social life.

Some respondents who did not come from affluent family backgrounds, but struggled to earn university degrees also emphasized their educational credentials or their occupational status as a way to distance themselves from the stereotypical images of *mia farang* who were unemployed and depended on their husbands’ financial support. For example, Wassana (Pseudonym), a 31-year-old Thai wife who earned a master’s degree from an American university and was a project manager for a non-profit organization in the United States, said she never felt embarrassed to be a *mia farang* in the United States because American society (especially in metropolitan cities such as Los Angeles and New York) was very diverse and open to cross-racial international marriages. On the other hand, she felt angry every time when people from her hometown in Thailand assumed that she had married her husband because of money. This idea was often assumed because Wassana had grown up poor in rural Isan. As a high school student, she was sent to live under the guardianship of a respectable Buddhist monk at a local temple at the age of 14. She received financial support from the monk until she graduated from college. During her college years, she worked with international scholars and volunteers as an interpreter. She met her husband who was a volunteer student who came to teach English in rural Isan. Several years after she graduated, Wassana went to the United States through an *au pair* program to be with her boyfriend. She worked for two years before she was accepted into a master’s degree program with a full scholarship from a university, and got married after she graduated. When asked what kinds of ideas she had about *mia farang*, she recalled,

When I was a little girl, there was a woman in the village who worked as a bargirl in Pattaya and came back with a white

husband. She didn't do anything productive. She played cards with other women and drank alcohol every day. That was the stereotype of *mia farang* that Thai people had in their minds. I was angry every time when people assumed that my relationship [with a white American husband] would be like that because it was an insult. At the end of the day, it depends on the women themselves who must prove to other people that we are not like that [the stereotype]. I didn't marry for money. I have a good job and I can take care of my parents without asking money from my husband (Wassana [Pseudonym], 2017).

Wassana told me that she tried not to be judgmental about other *mia farang*, but she could not help seeing some of them as problematic. She blamed unemployed *mia farang* for tainting the images of Thai women who marry a white husband. Wassana lamented that highly educated and professional *mia farang* never escape unscathed from the negative stereotypes because there are still other *mia farang* who “drag them down.” This statement clearly illustrates how socioeconomic-based othering was at play when Wassana emphasized that it was not her fault that the images of *mia farang* were bad, but it was other women's. The multidimensional nature of social inequalities dictates that socioeconomic status (e.g., education and profession) might help some *mia farang* ward off negative stereotypes made about them in some situations, but other social attributes, such as gender and ethnicity (i.e., being a Thai woman), still dominate the ways that other people perceive them.

Cultural/Ethnic-based Othering: “Some Women Lacked Social Etiquette”

Historically, class distinction in Thai society has been constructed along the lines of rural-urban differences, where Bangkok, the capital city, is the most privileged, modern, and wealthiest center, while the rest of the country, especially the northeast or *Isan*, which is the most populous and poorest region of Thailand, remains outside on the periphery of power (Mills, 2012:89). The legacy of Thai rural-urban

dualism contributes to a racist worldview by some Thais that rural Lao-speaking people from Isan are stereotypically gullible, uncouth, and unsophisticated second-class citizens (Hesse-Swain, 2011). Arguably, this idea is still predominant in Thai society. Thus, it was not surprising why Pensri Phaoluangthong wrote her article in the way she did. I found that some respondents also drew on similar ideas about rural Isan women to distance themselves from the negative images of *mia farang*. When some respondents tried to describe how they differed from other *mia farang*, they not only talked about class as in economic distinctions, but they also linked ethnicity and cultural markers to their differences. Some respondents commented that they were upset when seeing “Isan *mia farang*” do awkward things in certain situations. Therefore, they relied on the ethnic difference in their critiques of such behaviors. For example, Joy, a 45-year-old and former high school teacher in Thailand, recalled when she was invited to a social gathering with several *mia farang*. She stated:

Some *mia farang* that I knew... lacked manners. *Most of them were Isan women. They had only four years of education in school, and the only thing they knew before they came to the United States was rice farming* [emphasis added]. I don't discriminate against people because of their class. I don't mind mingling with them, *but there are some women who look down on them* [emphasis added]. I was friends with *mia farang* who had a master's degree in architecture. She once asked me “How could you still socialize with these low-educated people?” There was a story before she said that. This woman has a rich architect husband, but they don't have kids. One day when we had a baby shower party at someone's house, an Isan girl, who was young and perhaps didn't receive proper discipline [...] said to that woman, “You should have sex with your husband more often [so that you could have a child].” And just like that, this architect woman walked away and never joined any of our social gatherings again (Joy [Pseudonym], 2017).

As the conceptualization of class is not limited only to economic but also related to social and cultural realms, Joy's statement revealed her internalized belief and perception that most *mia farang* who were ethnically Isan came from less-privileged backgrounds than she did, and hence lacked the ability to engage with others in urban, Westernized, middle-class contexts. Joy cited the lack of discipline and manners as examples of the negative traits of *mia farang* that she did not share. Hence, she addressed it to emphasize her perceived superiority over Isan *mia farang* without explicitly saying it.

Cultural and ethnic-based othering played an important role in shaping the way that non-Isan, middle-class women distance themselves from other *mia farangs*. As Sunanta (2009) stated in her work, images of *mia farang* are often conflated with stereotypically uncouth, loud, and overly sexualized bargirls. Rural Isan-ness was also linked to these characteristics rather than the urban middle-class women, even when they were not always true. From the interview accounts, I found that there were some respondents who blamed Isan *mia farang* for producing and maintaining the negative images of this group. Surprisingly, even respondents who identified themselves as Isan-Thai also blamed other Isan *mia farang* for their lack of manners. For example, Em, a 50-year-old and former high school teacher in Thailand, grew up in a wealthy family in Isan and was highly educated as she had earned a master's degree. Despite identifying herself as an Isan-Thai, her narrative accounts illustrated that she engaged in intraethnic othering when interacting with other *mia farang* as well. She recalled the time when she first moved to the United States and knew only a few Thai people, all of whom were *mia farang*. She said:

In the past, *mia farang* were Isan women who worked at bars or night club in the city, and they had mixed-race children with American military men. Therefore, most people tend to view *mia farang* that way. But it's not true because many Thai wives here had good family backgrounds. I am Isan too, but *I'm not like people who are loud and foul-mouthed* [emphasis added]... only few people are like that. When I first moved to the United States, *most Thai people I knew were ex-bargirls and*

originally from Isan [emphasis added]. And you know Isan people...these women like to get together and gossip. When these women invited me to a house party, I always politely declined. I just didn't like hearing them using bad language. *Some women lacked social etiquette* [emphasis added] (Em [Pseudonym], 2017).

Because Em grew up in an Isan city where an American military base was located during the Vietnam War, she was familiar with the clichéd stories of low-educated Isan bargirls who engaged in sexual services with American military personnel. Thus, she conflated stereotypical images of some Isan bargirls that she knew with Isan *mia farang*. By highlighting the differences within the group of *mia farang* and attributing the negative images of *mia farang* to merely low-educated Isan women, Em could assert her middle-class identity while invalidating Isan *mia farang* as representatives of her group because she did not behave like them. The stereotype of Isan *mia farang* as loud and uncouth is so powerful. It affected the perceptions of several respondents, including Em who is also Isan, to see other Isan women as the source of these negative traits. At the same time, she contended that this stereotype was true for other Isan women, but it did not apply to her. This is how the dynamics of intraethnic othering works.

Blaming other *mia farang* for the negative stereotypes did not make such stereotypes go away. Although several respondents claimed that they were not the persons to whom these stereotypes applied, the negative images of *mia farang* still exist and are reproduced in society through the ongoing discourse. Several respondents still encountered negative stereotypes of *mia farang* in the contexts where their socioeconomic statuses were not recognized. For example, many years ago when cross-racial marriages were not common, some respondents reported that they were mistaken as prostitutes by hotel staff when accompanying their husband to a hotel at a beach city in Thailand. The hotel employees were concerned that they would bother their hotel guests. Therefore, these strategies tend to reproduce the matrix of oppression for *mia farang* as the negative stereotypes took a toll on every *mia farang*, regardless of her socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

Again, I feel the need to clarify that when some respondents blame other women for causing negative stereotypes, it does not mean that their behaviors are essentially problematic. However, it is the construction of knowledge specified by a dominant class. The derogatory discourse of “Isan *mia farang*” that is used to denigrate members of the same nationality is not just an individual response to a negative stereotype, but an ongoing and inevitable structural force that shapes our commonsense understanding and practices in everyday life. In fact, all groups of *mia farang* – rich or poor, Isan or not, are all affected by this discourse. The negative stereotypes of *mia farang* apply to both class-privileged and impoverished Thai wives. Although some respondents believed that they could circumvent such stereotypes through blaming the others, they, in fact, could not. As my academic mentor often said, we cannot dodge the complexity of social structures in just one single jump; thus, I suggest that we should be more careful with the multidimensional nature of social inequalities that govern our social life.

Conclusion

In this study, when respondents were aware of the negative stereotypes of *mia farang* which were produced by an oppressive society, some of them chose to go along and to deflect the stereotypes away from themselves rather than challenging them, hence allowing inequalities to continue. The findings in this article aligned with a study of Japanese wives of American men by Moriizumi (2011), in which one of the respondents answered the researcher’s question of whether she married her white American husband for a green card. The respondent said, “People from countries such as the Philippines and Thailand may be dying to get a green card [...] But Japan is not a country like that” (Moriizumi, 2011: 96). This statement shows that the Japanese wife also employed ethnic othering and the power of the nation-state to differentiate her identity from that of other Asian wives that she perceived as coming from countries less developed than Japan. In a similar fashion, some privileged Thai wives in this study drew on their

socioeconomic status (e.g., education and profession) and cultural capital (e.g., family background and hometown) to defend against the negative stereotypes about them. At the same time, they also internalized and engaged in the narratives that disparaged underprivileged *mia farang* (e.g., those who were poor, low educated, and from Isan) as a strategy to affirm their identities.

This study reveals the recurring themes in which some class-privileged *mia farang* deflected and disparaged underprivileged *mia farang* in justifying their marital relationships with their white American husbands. It is important to note that most respondents did *not* blame underprivileged or Isan *mia farang*, and that I only focused on the cases of those who did per the research objective of this study. Impoverished and Isan *mia farang* also employed different strategies to cope with the negative stereotypes made about them, which I would rather discuss elsewhere. Therefore, this study should not mistakenly assume that I suggest that impoverished and Isan *mia farang* were the source of negative stereotypes about *mia farang* because the narrative accounts observed in this study did not come from most respondents and should not be generalized. Future research should consider strategies employed by less privileged *mia farang* in dealing with such stereotypes. Also, future research should examine the dynamic in which the negative stereotypes may be lessened or challenged over time, depending on the duration of migration and/or marital relationship between a *mia farang* and her white American husband.

Acknowledgments

I thank Karen Pyke for her guidance on the theoretical concepts used in this work and Patcharin Lapanun for reading and giving useful feedback on the earlier version of the manuscript. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers and editorial team at JMS for their constructive comments and suggestions.

References

- Becker, G. S. (1973). A theory of marriage: Part I. *Journal of Political Economy*, **81**(4), 813-846.

- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K.W., and McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, **38**(4), 785-810.
- Cohen, E. (2003). Transnational marriage in Thailand: The dynamics of extreme heterogamy. In T. G. Bauer and B. McKercher (Eds.). *Sex and tourism: Journeys of romance, love, and lust*. (pp. 57-81). New York: Haworth Hospitality Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- _____. (2005). *Black sexual politics: African-Americans, gender, and new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Coontz, S. (2004). The World Historical Transformation of Marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, **66**(4), 974-979.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, **43**(6), 1241-1299.
- Gillies, V. (2005). Raising the “meritocracy”: Parenting and the individualization of social class. *Sociology*, **39**(5), 835-853.
- Hesse-Swain, C. (2011). *Speaking Thai, dreaming in Isan: Popular Thai television and emerging identities of Lao Isan youth living in northeast Thailand*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Edith Cowan University.
- Hodgetts, D., Stolte, O., Nikora, L.W., and Groot, S. (2012). Drifting along or dropping into homelessness: A class analysis of responses to homelessness. *Antipode*, **44**(4), 1209-1226.
- McCargo, D. and Hongladarom, K. (2004). Contesting Isan-ness: Discourse of politics and identity in northeast Thailand. *Asian Ethnicity*, **5**(2), 219-234.
- Malam, L. (2004). Performing masculinity on the Thai beach scene. *Tourism Geographies*, **6**(4), 455-471.
- Mills, A. J., Gabrielle D., and Wiebe E. (2010). *Encyclopedia of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mills, M. B. (2012). Thai mobilities and cultural citizenship. *Critical Asian Studies*, **44**(1), 85-112.
- Moriizumi, S. (2011). Exploring identity negotiations: An analysis of intercultural Japanese-United States American families living in the United States. *Journal of Family Communication*, **11**(2), 85-104.
- Pyke, K. D. (2010). What is internalized racial oppression and why don't we study it? Acknowledging racism's hidden injuries. *Sociological Perspectives*, **53**(4), 551-572.
- Pyke, K. D. and Dang, T. (2003). 'FOB' and 'whitewashed': Identity and racism among second generation Asian Americans. *Qualitative Sociology*, **26**(2), 147-172.
- Schwalbe, M., Godwin, S., Holden, D., Schrock, D., Thompson, S., and Wolkomir, M. (2000). Generic processes in the reproduction of inequality: An interactionist analysis. *Social Forces*, **79**(2), 419-452.
- Secombe, K. (1998). *So you think I drive a Cadillac?: Welfare recipients' perspectives on the system and its reform*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Sinsuwan, W. (2018). *Thai marriage migrants in Germany and their employment dilemma after the Residence Act of 2005*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany.
- So, C. (2006). Asian mail-order brides, the threat of global capitalism, and the rescue of the United States nation-state. *Feminist Studies*, **32**(2), 395-419.
- Sunanta, S. (2009). *Global wife, local daughter: Gender, family, and nation in transnational marriages in northeast Thailand*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of British Columbia (Vancouver).
- Supattkul, P. (2013). Thai-American identity: Second-generation, 1.5-generation, and parachute children in the United States. *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, **31**(2), 79-108.
- _____. (2018). *Ethnicity, class, race, and gender: Exploring intersectionality in the narratives of Thai wives of white United States men*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, United States.

Websites

- Phorn-in, M. (2019). *Bo man uppanisai chi chatakam tae pen khwam luemlam thang phet lae chatihpan*. (In Thai) [Characteristics do not determine fate, but gender and ethnic inequalities do]. Retrieved May 1, 2020. from <https://isaanrecord.com/2019/12/22/isaan-marriage-migration/>.
- Rojanaphruk, P. (2019). *Opinion: When society curbs its own freedom of expression*. Khaosod English Online Newspaper. Retrieved April 15, 2020, from <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/opinion/2019/12/30/opinion-when-society-curbs-its-own-freedom-of-expression>.

Interviews

- Em. (Pseudonym). (2017, April 28) *Interview*. San Diego, CA.
- Joy. (Pseudonym). (2017, April 1). *Phone-Interview*. Riverside, CA.
- Kai. (Pseudonym). (2017, May 28). *Interview*. San Diego, CA.
- Noi. (Pseudonym). (2017, May 28). *Interview*. San Diego, CA.
- Suda. (Pseudonym). (2017, April 23). *Interview*. Santa Monica, CA.
- Wassana. (Pseudonym). (2017, April 13). *Phone-Interview*. Riverside, CA.