

[The Good Daughters of Isaan \(1\) - Introduction to the series](#)

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Our series examines the lives of Isaan women who have married a Westerner man. How has what academics call the “mia farang phenomenon” affected the life trajectory of these women, women who often had few life choices? How have these “good daughters of Isaan” fulfilled their filial duty and changed the lives of their families? How has it challenged traditional gender roles in Isaan society and altered the economy and culture?

The mia farang phenomenon is recent. It is not mentioned in early studies on commercial sex workers in the 1980s done by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Charles F. Keyes. At the time, “prostitution” was the second largest sector of employment of Thai women behind agriculture. It was seen as a temporary status before these women could save enough money to “return to their home communities where they most likely marry and assume the role of village mother.”

Marriage to Westerners was restricted largely to the upper class prior 1950. It became stigmatized when some, mostly rural Isaan women were branded as mia chao (rented wives) to American GIs. Move forty years forward and we now see that marriage between Thai women and Western men has become a phenomenon so widespread that it has attracted a considerable body of scholarly literature along with government concern and frequent condemnation by privileged classes.

Many attacks have been on Isaan women in particular, and one such recent attack prompted The Isaan Record to look into the issue more deeply. Our series, “The Good Daughters of Isaan,” sets out to inform our readers and challenge assumptions underlying this increasingly important phenomenon in Isaan.

Note to Readers: *We invite our readers to contact us either through comments on our posts or through a Facebook message to tell us about your relationship to the issue and let us know other circumstances and we might do another series that includes these other perspectives and experiences.*

Introduction to the series, “The Good Daughters of Isaan”

By David Streckfuss

A column in *Matichon Weekly* in last December caused a stir in the Northeast. The writer, Phensri Phaoluangthong, questioned the “character” of those Isaan women who choose “salvation before dignity” and take a short cut to middle class status by marrying Western men.

The problem, Phensri wrote, is that “Isan women study aimlessly.” She reminds Isaan women that although “All Thai people have equal educational opportunities,” Isaan women lack the “diligence, patience, and perseverance” to realize these opportunities.

The only role model these women embrace is that of seeing other Isaan women seeking Western husbands. “Isaan girls are happy to live a simple life,” Phensri wrote, where they “don’t have to think much.” They don’t apply themselves to their studies and instead get low-paying jobs and eventually end up on government welfare, the author claimed.

As proof of the sluggish intellectual acumen of “Isaan girls,” the author cites her Isaan maid who’s unable to recite her multiplication tables.

As a result, Isaan women don’t become self-reliant. They take the “easy” course and become dependent on a Western husband. Dependency, she concludes, has become “the DNA of Isaan girls.”

The column smacked of sexism and racism, provoking an outcry from many in the Northeast, especially women. The dean of the College of Local Administration at Khon Kaen University [wondered how *Matichon Weekly*](#) could publish such a piece that reflected such a unforgivably patronizing and retrograde attitude. An Isaan women’s rights activist, Pintong Lekan, wanted to sue Phensri for defaming Isaan women.

The response from Isaan readers was so sharp and immediate that *Matichon* promptly retreated. The online version of the column was published on December 22; two days later *Matichon* [posted an apology](#). In its statement, *Matichon Weekly* said that it had become aware of “the dissatisfaction and displeasure” with the content of the column which “caused damage to Isaan women, Isaan people, and Isaan society.” The publication apologized, saying that it “had not intended to create damage to Isaan women or Isaan people,” took the article down from its website, and discontinued Phensri’s column.

Matichon Weekly told *The Isaan Record* that it had no comment on the matter.

In response to Phensri’s article and the response it provoked, *The Isaan Record* decided to publish this series on the phenomenon of “*mia farang*,” the-sometimes derogatory term used to refer to the transnational marriages between Thai women and Western men.

Previously, the *Isaan Record* sponsored discussions on this topic along with local showings of the documentary, *Heartbound – A Different kind of Love Story* which looks at the journeys of women who married Western men and moved to Europe.

In this series, we focus on the Isaan women who’ve ended up back in their home region, along with their Western partners. How has becoming *mia farang* changed the lives of the women who decide to return home with their Western husbands? Where do these Western men come from and why do they decide to settle down in Isaan? Has this phenomenon become so pervasive that it’s created a subculture in Isaan?

The *mia farang* phenomenon in Isaan

The rise of the *mia farang* phenomenon in Isaan are due to a set of factors that when put together, have created a rather unique situation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Friendship Highway delivered thousands upon thousands of American GIs to Isaan. Into the areas near the US air bases were drawn women from poverty-stricken communities. In some cases, GIs married these women and returned to the US. But in many cases women were left behind, often with their half-American, half-Isaan children. These women and their children suffered from social stigmatization.

The period from 1980 to 2000 or so is characterized by migration: migration of Isaan men to the Middle East or Taiwan, migration of Isaan women to urban centers and tourist sites, migration of some Isaan women to Western countries as brides who then sent remittances back to their families. The Western men, even from a lower middle class background, were economically dominant and often quite older. In the period, large, western-style homes, funded by this international migration, became more common in even the most remote Isaan villages. But the Isaan wife in the West was often at a severe disadvantage: unable to communicate, sometimes restricted to home, and disconnected from any larger community of women in similar situations.

Still, the number of Isaan women married to Westerners by 2000 was not negligible: [government research showed](#) that more than 17,000 Isaan women were in such marriages.

While the trend of Isaan wives moving to Europe with their husbands continued, a new type of relationship between Isaan women and Western men emerged since the early 2000s. Increasingly, younger, professional women in Isaan were choosing to seek marriages with Westerners who were likewise professional and nearer in age.

The trend of Western men moving to live in Isaan is shown in census data. In 1960, Westerners [represented 0.2 percent](#) of the entire population, and 0.3 percent in 1970. That percentage did not change even up to 2000 [according to census data](#), a year when 445,000 foreigners lived in Thailand as a whole, or a mere 0.73 of the entire population. Westerners living in Isaan at the time were a relative rarity. Census data shows that there might have been only a little over 1,000 Western men who called the region home.

From 2000 onward, the situation changed dramatically. Thailand became a more attractive destination for retirement and new immigration laws made it easier for sufficiently well-off foreigners to get a visa. According to Patcharin and Thompson, a 2004 government survey showed that more than 17,000 Isaan women were married to Westerners. By 2010, the number of Westerners residing in Thailand increased thirteen fold and made up 0.41 percent of the entire population, from a little less than 20,000 in 2000 to about 271,000. Foreigners as a whole, in fact, came to represent 4.49 percent of those living in Thailand.

Stated in another way, between 2000 and 2010, the population of Thai citizens increased by about five percent while the number of resident foreigners increased by 670% and the number of Westerners by a remarkable 1,300%.

The ratio between male and female shifted dramatically. In 1970, 55 percent of Westerners residing in Thailand were male. By 2010, [census data](#) shows that males made up 74 percent. Showing perhaps a greater likelihood of married couples coming to Thailand, the ratio between male and female residents among foreign Asians was roughly equal in Bangkok and the North.

In Isaan, Asian female foreign residents outnumber males, 57 to 43 percent. But while males represented 62 percent of the Westerners in Bangkok and 80 percent in the North, remarkably Western males in the Northeast represent 90 percent of all Westerners in the region. A [recent article in Khao Sod English](#) implied that nearly all Western males residing in Isaan are married to women here.

There is every reason that in the past decade the number of Westerners in the Northeast has continued to rise. In 2010 in Khon Kaen province, for instance, there were 3,470 Westerners residing in the province. Ten years later, that number might have nearly doubled. The Love Clinic, a government body recently set up to provide help to those in transnational relationships, told *The Isaan Record* that in Khon Kaen alone there are currently 7,447 marriages registered between Thais and Westerners.

It is likely that the number of Isaan-Western relationships in the region is much higher than this. [One piece of research indicated](#) that as many as 44 percent these relationships are not registered. That would mean in Khon Kaen, for instance, there might be more than 10,000 Isaan-Western relationships.

Many scholars in past decades have attributed the high number of relationships between Isaan women and Westerners to the presence of US troops and Thailand as a leading destination of sex tourism, a history shared with the Philippines.

But compared to Thailand, the Philippines does not have near the number of Westerners settling down there. According to [2010 census](#) data, the Philippines, despite its total 92 million residents, has many fewer Westerners settling in that country. While Westerners made up 71 percent of all foreign residents in the Philippines, the country still had 53 percent fewer Western residents than Thailand, and Westerners made up only 0.14 percent of the total population. The 270,731 Westerners who lived in Thailand in [2010](#) made up 0.41 percent of the country's entire population. As [one research team concluded](#), "few if any" countries with a history of foreign GIs and a thriving sex tourism industry have seen "the permanent settling of such tourists on the scale seen in Isan and Thailand more generally."

Demographics of Western men with mia farang in Isaan

The following profiles are drawn from a [2018 study](#) and the most recent and substantial work on the phenomena of mia farang, *Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village* by Patcharin Lapanun, a lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Khon Kaen University. The research for these two studies was done more than a decade ago.

Profile of mia farang in Isaan:

- With children from previous relationships with Isaan or Thai men: 80%
- Range of ages: 20 to 70
- Median age: 39.5
- Percent with 6th Grade education or less: 66%
- With a 9th Grade education: 20%
- With high school or 2-year college degree: 6%
- With Bachelor's degree or higher: 3%

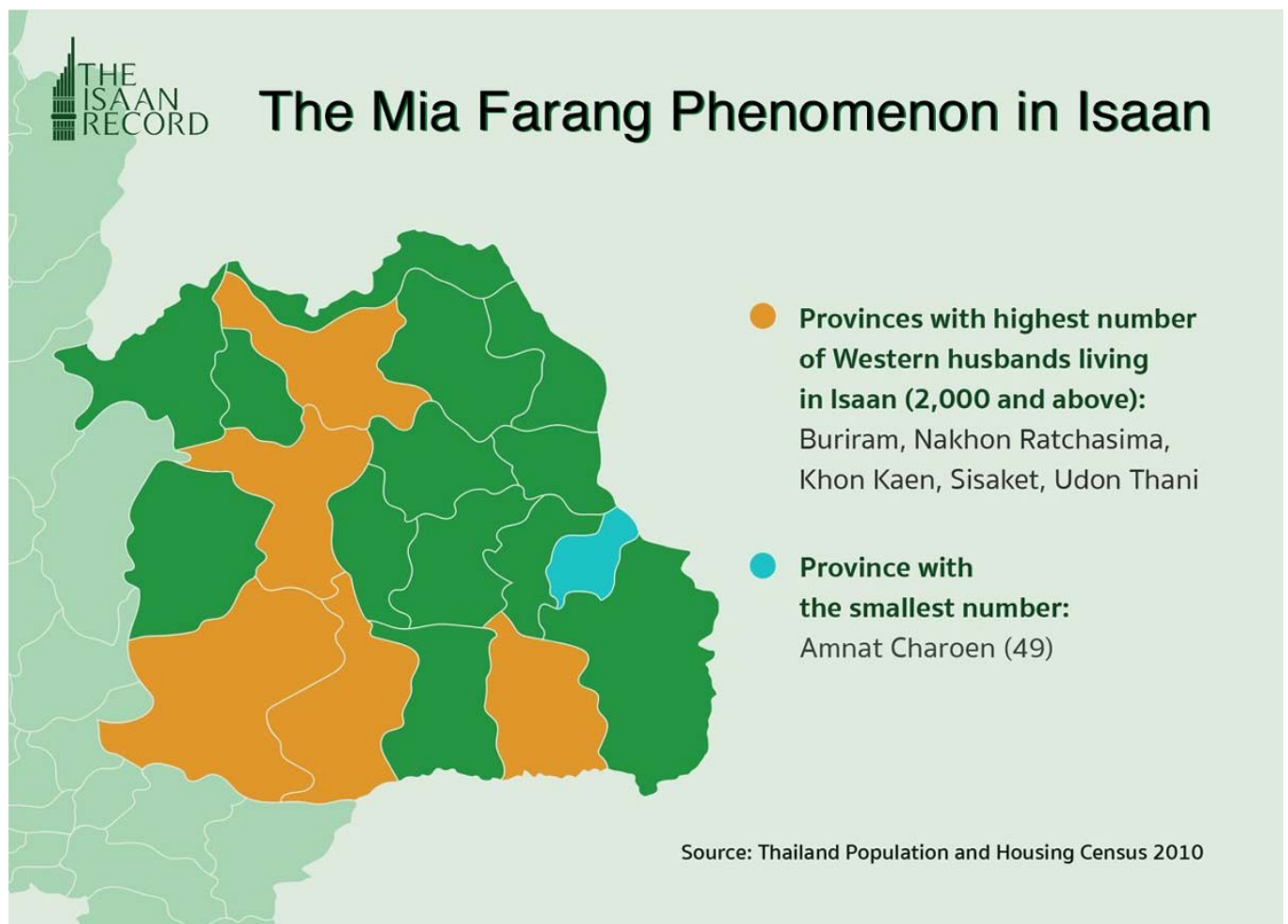
Profile of the men marrying Isaan women and sometimes settling in Isaan:

- Percent employed as "blue collar" workers: 40%
- Percent with backgrounds as professionals, students, or self-employed: 25%
- Pensioners: 13%
- Number previously married: 3 out of 4
- Percent with children from previous marriage: Nearly all
- Range of ages: 28 to 80
- Median age: 60

- Over 50 years of age: 75%
- Number having children with their Isaan wife: 1 out of 3
- Percent with income coming from running a business: 50%
- Percent with income coming from retirement or disability benefits: 50%

Profile of the distribution of the mia farang phenomenon:

- Provinces with highest number of Western husbands living in Isaan (2,000 and above): Buriram, Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen, Sisaket, Udon Thani
- Province with the smallest number: Amnat Charoen (49)
- Provinces with the highest density of Western husbands living in Isaan (154 per 100,000 inhabitants and above): Buriram, Sisaket, Khon Kaen, Maha Sarakham, Udon Thani, Surin
- Province with the lowest density: Bueng Kan (17 per 100,000 inhabitants)
- Provinces with the highest ratio of male Westerns to female (93% and above): Maha Sarakham, Udon Thani, Nakhon Phanom, Yasothon, Buriram
- Province with the lowest ratio of Western males to females: Chaiyaphum (78%)
- Percent of Western husbands living in rural areas in Isaan: 54%
- Provinces with highest percent of Western husbands living in rural areas (70% and above): Maha Sarakham, Sakon Nakhon, Surin, Yasothon, Loei
- Highest percentage of nationalities living in rural areas (65% and above): Russian, Mexican, Norwegian, Italian, and Swiss



From the 1960s to present, many Isaan women were part of a larger migratory that took them to central Thailand and quite often abroad. While this out-migration has continued, a new in-migration trend has been occurring as thousands of Western men (and a few women) have chosen to settle

down in the Northeast.

Our series on *mia farang* examines how the spread of this phenomenon in Isaan is challenging stereotypes about the character of Isaan women who marry Westerners. More importantly, the phenomenon is changing the status of these “good daughters” of Isaan and indeed is creating a new subculture within the region.

We present a series of features, opinion pieces, and videos that lays out a wide variety of issues touching on the issue of *mia farang* in the Northeast: historical perspectives of the phenomenon and the how attitudes have shifted, the cultural and sociological meaning of “the good daughter,” the factors feeding the phenomenon and why the option of marrying a Western continues to be an attractive option for some Isaan women, some reasons why Western men (and a few women) choose to settle down in Isaan, as well as how bullying of Isaan-Western children remains a concern, and how the Thai government’s efforts to “help” these Isaan women who marry Westerners is a product of misperception.

There are a number of issues that we did not look at in depth. We did not look very deeply into the lives of Isaan *mia farang* or the Western men living in Isaan. Neither did we delve into the relationships of Western members of the LGBTQ and Isaan men, women, or other sexual orientations, nor those of Isaan men living with their Western women partners.

Nonetheless, we hope that this series on the *mia farang* of Isaan will give our readers a chance to reflect on and understand better what the *mia farang* has meant and will continue to mean in Isaan.

[*In tomorrow's segment of our series, "Challenging the 'victim' narrative of mia farang," explores how the status of mia farang has warranted the state's attention, question whether Isaan women married to Westerners are victims or an active player in constructing their own future, and how the matrilineal position of Isaan women, when connected to a Western husband, is strengthened.*](#)

Correction August 24, 2020: An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the person who wanted to sue Matichon Weekly columnist Phensri Phaoluangthong for defamation. The article was corrected and updated accordingly.

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