

Farang Noi: Life as a foreigner home and abroad

written by Natticha Nasee | July 12, 2023

Natticha Nasee shares her journey of reclaiming her identity in Thailand after growing up in Nepal, where she was labeled a foreigner. A growing disconnect from her Thai heritage and loss of cultural ties compel her to return to Thailand and enroll at Khon Kaen University. There, Natticha finds reintegrating into Thai society doesn't go as hoped, and she is soon labeled foreigner again due to her unfamiliarity with the language as well as simple cultural norms, like how to eat *mu kata*. Frustrated by again being treated as an outsider, Natticha eventually navigates the blurred lines between being both *farang noi* and Thai to make peace with her complex identity through the connections she forms and the enduring bonds of family.

Have you ever realized that your vision was blurry, but you didn't bother to get glasses until it became necessary? That was similar to my situation when I started losing touch with my Thai heritage. It wasn't until I made the life-changing decision to move back to Thailand, specifically to the vibrant city of Khon Kaen, that I finally saw the world with clarity, like wearing the right pair of glasses.



When I was just three, my mom's work led us to move to Nepal. Everything fascinated me, including trying to make friends with the local kids, even though I couldn't understand their language. At first,

they thought of me as just another tourist on vacation, and so did I. However, things changed when we all realized I was to stay for the next 16 years.

During my early childhood, my mother had to relocate from Khon Kaen to Bangkok in search of employment. I was raised by my grandmother.

However, a remarkable opportunity presented itself when my mother's American boss offered her a job in Nepal. Recognizing my need for a father figure, he accepted me as his own, and his family became mine. They provided me with the love and support of grandparents, while their daughters became my cherished sisters.

At home, we mainly spoke English or Nepali. Since none of my siblings or friends could understand Thai, I had to adapt to fit in with them. Thai became a secret language shared only between my mom and me, creating a special bond.



The author (right) sits next to her adoptive grandfather (left) in her childhood home in Kathmandu, Nepal.

While my mother and I cherished our new home and the warmth of our adoptive family, she was mindful not to neglect our family back in Thailand.

Visiting my relatives in Khon Kaen each year had its challenges, as some of them spoke a different regional dialect called Isaan instead of central Thai. It was common in northeastern Thailand, and I struggled to fully understand them, even to this day. Sometimes, I couldn't help but think, "Here I am again, in another country where I don't quite fit in."

As I became preoccupied with my studies and life in Nepal, my visits to Thailand gradually decreased. Instead of going with my mother to visit relatives, I started making excuses and chose to travel to America with my adoptive grandparents. Over time, my connection to my Thai heritage faded away. At times, I even forgot I was Thai.

I tried to fit in with the Nepali community, and while they accepted me to some extent, there was always a reminder that I wasn't a "real" Nepali. To them, I was still another *bedesshi* - a foreigner, an outsider.

Sadly, as the years went by, my proficiency in the Thai language, knowledge of cultural practices, and familiarity with my extended family diminished. This gradually cost my ties to my Thai heritage.

It became clear that in my pursuit of education and new experiences abroad, a part of my identity slipped away, leaving me with a sense of longing and a deep desire to revive my connection to my roots.



The author playing with her two adoptive sisters in Nepal. Photo by the author's mother.

Then one day I met a friend who was half Thai and half Nepali. Finally, I thought, someone who

understands me. However, her clarity about her cultural identity surpassed my own. My friend could speak both Thai and Nepali fluently, and people didn't have a hard time accepting her. Through her, I discovered a community of *luk kreung*, individuals with mixed Thai heritage.

Being *luk kreung*, or half Thai, is often used to explain why someone may look Thai yet still speak English fluently. In many conversations, I struggled to speak Thai with the proper accent, which only reinforced the *luk kreung* label. However, what sets my situation apart is that I am not a *luk kreung* but fully Thai by ethnicity.

There were instances when my *luk kreung* friends understood me, but there were also times when I felt like I didn't quite belong. I cherish my Nepali background, but I reached a point where I realized it was time to reconnect with my Thai roots.

Simply hearing about my mom's incredible experiences growing up in Khon Kaen wasn't enough anymore — I longed to experience a new life in Thailand for myself. That's when I made the decision to attend Khon Kaen University, located in the very province where my mom grew up.

Upon arriving in Khon Kaen, it felt like the beginning of an exciting new adventure, but with the added challenge of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Farang Noi!”

The first year of college didn't go as planned, with quarantine measures and online classes disrupting the usual routine. However, this unexpected situation brought me closer to my relatives in my hometown, in Nam Phong district. Every night, my aunts would prepare the most delicious Isaan dishes like *som tum*, Isaan sausage, and *lap* [minced mint pork], always served with fragrant sticky rice.

I rebuilt my relationship with my Thai family through the shared memories and time spent together, especially during our meals. Eating together became a special way for us to bond and grow closer. It taught me that communication goes beyond words and that the experiences we share can create strong connections.

As I walked back home from my aunt's farm, it became my new favorite routine. But one day, I heard someone call out, “Farang Noi!” I stopped and looked around to see if the neighbor lady was talking to me. She asked, “Farang Noi, how are your studies going?” I replied politely and quickly ran back home, wondering why she called me a little foreigner [“Farang” is typically thought of as “Westerner” or “foreigner”].

I thought that would be the end of it, but I was wrong. Soon, everyone in the neighborhood realized that the new girl who had moved back couldn't speak or understand Thai very well. They assumed my mom was a *mia farang*, or wife of a foreign national, unaware that I had been born there to Thai parents who later divorced. I couldn't understand how this new nickname would affect my search for my cultural identity.

Fortunately, I soon moved away from my hometown and settled into my new dorm close to the university. The COVID restrictions were easing up, allowing me to start a new college semester and finally meet my friends in person.

To start our new journey together, my classmates and I decided to meet at a cafe near the university's library. Little did I know, this day would be filled with unexpected challenges, thanks to my “blurry vision” when it came to my knowledge of Thai culture.

As I tried having conversations with my classmates in Thai, they immediately noticed something strange about my speech—I was overly formal. It hit me that I was used to using Thai only when speaking to my mom or older relatives and not with people my age. My sentences always ended with a polite *kha*, which is a formal way to finish statements in Thai.

The next challenge took an unexpected turn during dinner at my first Thai barbecue experience. As soon as we settled down at the table, my confusion started when everyone suddenly stood up. I couldn't follow what was happening until they headed to the buffet counter to gather slices of meat and fresh vegetables.

The concept of preparing your own food at a restaurant was entirely foreign to me.

I felt like a baby bird in a nest, watching my friends effortlessly soar through the sky while I struggled to grasp the basics. The pace of everything was overwhelming, and I couldn't keep up. Some of my friends noticed my struggle and couldn't resist asking, "Is this your first time eating barbecue or something?" Before I could respond, another classmate chimed in, "She's a luk krueng, right?"

"No, I'm Thai," I replied softly, feeling the need to defend my heritage. "I just didn't grow up here."

"Oh, so you're like a farang?" someone exclaimed reassuringly. "Don't worry, we'll help you out." Once again, those terms echoed in my ears — the only labels people could assign me. I was either a luk krueng or farang, and it felt limiting to have such narrow options.

Labels of convenience

I tried to push aside the words of my classmates, but they kept bothering me. To distract myself, I joined some campus activities. One was a welcome party for international first-year students, suggested by my professor who also assumed I was either a foreigner or luk kreung. Despite my hesitation, I hoped to find someone who could relate to my situation.

On the day of the party, I stood near the entrance, contemplating what country to write on my name card as the hosts wanted us to name what country we were from.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the staff whispering, wondering if they should help me. Before they could approach, I quickly wrote "Nepal" under my name, thinking I had avoided an awkward situation.

However, during the introductions, it didn't take long for some of the staff to notice that my name was Thai. During the lunch break, two student staff members came up to me, questioning my name tag. One of them asked in English, "Hi, where are you from?" I calmly replied, "I'm from Nepal."

"Nice. Your name sounds very Thai though. Is it your real name?" the student staff asked, glancing at my name tag.

"Oh, this is just my nickname. My mom is Thai," I said, feeling the need to mention my Thai background. "I grew up in Nepal."

I wasn't sure why I felt the need to emphasize my Thai background at that moment, but I felt myself giving in to their questions.

"I think she's luk kreung," one student whispered to the other in Thai.

Turning back to me, the student said, “This party is only for foreign students, so we wanted to make sure you weren’t Thai. But if you’re half-Thai, that’s okay too.”

Suddenly, I had to choose between lying and pretending to be luk kreung or telling the truth that I was fully Thai and possibly being excluded from the party.

So, I chose to lie. The party eventually ended, and sadly, I couldn’t find any students who shared my background.

The following months didn’t bring much solace in my search for cultural identity. I joined my college’s basketball team during that time, but it was clear I was treated differently from my teammates, despite my improving Thai skills. To them, I was the youngest member who always needed help with translation.

In an attempt to lighten the mood with my teammates, I shared stories of the challenges I faced, being called luk krueng or farang. Using humor, I mentioned how people back in Nam Phong had called me “farang noi,” but some of my teammates seized the opportunity to turn it into my new nickname.

“Oi farang noi!” one teammate shouted, signaling for me to pass the ball. Gradually, I found myself being referred to as farang noi more and more. It became a spiral that echoed in my mind every time I felt like I did something that didn’t align with Thai customs or when I struggled to write my name in Thai.

Roots reach up

As the next semester passed, I was determined to start fresh, with newfound confidence in myself and without the basketball club. I made new friends who didn’t discriminate against me, and people in my hometown slowly stopped calling me farang noi. I learned that some of my relatives had spoken to the townspeople, emphasizing that I was part of their family, affirming my Thai identity, and urging them to stop making me feel different.

Looking back, my decision to return to Thailand has been a life-changing experience filled with valuable lessons. While I initially wanted to reconnect with my cultural identity, I discovered something even more profound along the way - true friendships and unwavering support from my loving family.

As my final year of college unfolds, I find myself eagerly anticipating the opportunities for new connections to blossom and existing relationships to deepen.

With my eyes focused and my mind opened, I no longer feel the pressure to fit into a specific group. I’ve discovered the joy of embracing the complexities found within many different social circles.

Throughout my journey, I learned that our cultural identity is not just about how others see us. It’s a personal and complex part of who we are that grows and changes as we experience life.

I now understand that true belonging goes beyond simple labels. It’s about the connections we make and the shared experiences we treasure. Although I still hear the nickname farang noi at times, I’ve learned to laugh it off and not let it define me. My identity is shaped by my sense of self, my roots, and the bonds I’ve formed.

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