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Transgender *Kathoey* Socially Imagining Relationships with Western Men in Thailand: Aspirations for Gender Affirmation, Upward Social Mobility, and Family Acceptance

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This article studies the aspirations and experiences of *kathoey* (Thai male-to-female trans* people) from poor rural Isan in enduring cross-border relationships with Western men. Drawing from biographical life stories, we try to unpack the *cultural script* through which partnering a Western man is seen as a plausible pathway for a better *kathoey* life in Thailand. We study the opportunities such partnering presents for achieving goals of gender affirmation, social advancement, and re-gaining merit within family relations. In the face of significant discriminatory barriers, *kathoey* in our study managed to build lives that they saw as self-validating, materially successful, and significantly conferring gender recognition. They understood their relationships as socially and personally much more than access to financial resources and drew important sources of emotional support, especially for gender validation from them. Western men were seen as more dedicated to partnering, caring, and being publicly seen in social settings (including family), compared to Thai.

Keywords: Cross-Border Relationships; Gender Affirmation; *Kathoey*; Thailand; Transgender



INTRODUCTION

A significant research field on Thai-foreigner partnerships studies how and why Thai women (*mia farang*) are motivated to search for wealthier foreign men, often initially (sex) tourists, as a route out of poverty and their subsequent transformative life experiences (e.g., Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013; Lapanun, 2019; Statham, 2020, 2021; Statham et al., 2020). Although nonheteronormative Thai-foreigner relationships are commonplace and Thailand is marketed as a tourists' "gay paradise" (Sanders, 2002), there is surprisingly little discussion of LGBTQ+ relationships within cross-border

relationships research. Instead, the topic is mostly addressed through the valuable queer studies lens (Jackson, 2011), or as sex-tourism (Ocha, 2020).

Here we study Thai male-to-female trans* *kathoey* who have enduring relationships with Western¹ men in Thailand, examining their aspirations and experiences that carried them on this life-trajectory. We use the term *kathoey* as a Thai-specific category for people born with a male sexual physiology, and a feminine gender identity. Historically, Thai society has a tripartite gender/sex system: masculine men, feminine women, and *kathoey* (Morris, 1994). *Kathoey* does not equate directly with the Western “trans-”. It is broader, including a range of male-to-female gender identifications: some take hormones or undergo sex reassignment and cosmetic surgery to live fully as women; some dress in feminine styles, but only in specific settings/times; while others live as visibly effeminate men. Participants often used “*kathoey*” self-referentially. This is partly problematic, because *kathoey* is used socially with stigmatizing meaning. Still, we use *kathoey* as an analytic category that is *in* and *of* Thai society, while acknowledging the terminological challenges.

We see potential added-value in drawing insights from the cross-border marriage field (Constable, 2005) to study *kathoey*, because our focus is on their aspirations, some of which have parallels to the experiences of *mia farang*, for whom the “cultural script” (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013) to partner a wealthy foreigner motivates many women to migrate to tourist zones in search of a better life (Lapanun, 2019). Today, many women seeking foreign partners come from a range of social classes and backgrounds, and the same is true for *kathoey*; however, rural poverty has traditionally been and still remains a core driver of this phenomenon. Most research covers women from the poor, rural Northeastern region of Isan. Similarly, five of the six *kathoey* in our study were born in Isan, aged between 30-40 years. They are a generation, who as in classic *mia farang* narratives, migrated within Thailand leaving poor rural households in Isan to find work, often in (sex) tourist cities. However, we know little of their specific aspirations and life-journeys to achieve social advancement and gender affirmation while facing transphobic discrimination from heteronormative Thai society. What does the cultural script for a *kathoey* Isan person to partner a Western man look like? And how do those who made this life-journey view their efforts to realize goals for gender affirmation, upward social mobility, and family acceptance through this lens?

Our study does not claim representativeness. It is explorative, aiming to provide insight into the relatively undiscussed topic of nonheteronormative relationships between *kathoey* from poor, rural backgrounds and Western men. Of course, there are limits to the parallel with *mia farang*. *Kathoey* have their own specific experiences of discrimination in trying to find a social space for gender recognition within the dominant sexual mores, values, and family and social relations within Thai society. Also, Thai law requires *kathoey* to keep the male gender on their official documentation, while same-sex marriage is not permitted. This means *kathoey* are not able to gain access to property rights and social welfare from their partner through legal marriage, an important resource for *mia farang* empowerment (see Statham, 2020). Likewise, this documentation problem makes it difficult for *kathoey* to move abroad

1 Western covers people from Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

with their partners, so that most *kathoey*-Westerner relations remain located in Thailand, with the Western partner often visiting for months at a time.

By unpacking some *kathoey*s' aspirations and understandings of their cross-border partnerships, we hope to allow space for their voices, and move beyond limiting stereotypes that depict these relationships as sex work or paid companionship (Pravattiyagul, 2021). We aim to establish that emotions, (non-sexual) intimacy, and aspirations to overcome stigma and rejection from Thai society are important factors, and crucial for sustaining relationships over the long-term, even if they stand alongside financial motivations.

KATHOEY IN THE 'GAY PARADISE'

Thailand is tolerant towards sexual minorities compared to other Asian societies: the state decriminalized homosexuality in 1956, Buddhist teachings do not declare homosexuality immoral, and homophobic violence is low (Jackson, 1999). In the 1960s, Thailand was a pioneer for gay tourism and today neighborhoods of Bangkok and tourist cities are significant global venues (Jackson, 2011), purpose-built for foreign tastes. Like their heterosexual counterparts, these venues are premised on the availability of sexual encounters, provided by low-income Thais, and questionable, but state-sponsored, stereotypes of 'exotic' Thai people as sensual, caring, and sexually open (Sunanta, 2020). *Kathoey* are core to this fetishized exotic commodification of Thai-ness marketed to wealthy male tourists. As Jackson argues, "*kathoey* is the iconic face of queer Thailand" (2011, p. 35). A distinctively Thai phenomenon, which the state tourist board markets to attract tourists to ladyboy cabarets and bars, *kathoey* are celebrated as a spectacle: e.g., their beauty pageants feature on national television, but they also face ridicule, prejudice, and significant transphobic discrimination.

The state enacted basic rights for LGBTQ+ communities against discrimination and hate speech only in 2015. People who have undergone sex-change surgery cannot apply for legal recognition of their gender change. This importantly restricts their chances in all domains of social life where documentation is required, including employment, contractual transactions, and international travel. This prevents *kathoey* from marrying partners, and potentially gaining access to rights (e.g., property, inheritance) available to women in heterosexual cross-border marriages. Transphobic prejudice and discrimination are well documented in education, the workplace, and by families (USAID, 2014). Although LGBTQ+ activism has mobilized over the last decades, *kathoey* still often live on the margins, unable to fully express their gender identity without repercussions.

Marginalization is especially acute for *kathoey* from poor, rural backgrounds in Isan. Within the rigid class and status hierarchies of Thai society, Isan people are looked down upon socially by urban middle classes and considered backward, darker-skinned peasants who speak a Lao dialect (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Keyes, 2014). *Kathoey* from Isan face high barriers of double discrimination from gender and class/status to build a life. This is why many move to tourist zones with ladyboy scenes. Such neighborhoods are highly limited geographical spaces that transgress mainstream Thai norms because they are explicitly constructed to cater for foreign tourists' (sexual) fantasies and tastes. But from a *kathoey* perspective, tourist zones

can provide new opportunities for work (albeit often sex work), affirming gender identities, and experimenting in ways of being *kathoey* and being part of a *kathoey* peer community, and as a potential route out of poverty by partnering wealthy foreigners (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021).

A CULTURAL SCRIPT FOR A BETTER *KATHOEY* LIFE: PARTNERING WESTERN MEN

Notwithstanding clear differences that *kathoey*s' specific forms of gender identification bring, relevant insights can still be drawn from Thai women's experiences documented in heterosexual marriage migration research (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Lapanun, 2019; Statham, 2020; 2021). Cross-border relationship studies have importantly shifted from explanations of economic motivations, to emphasize intimacy, emotions, and culture, as reasons why women might seek and engage in relationships with foreign men (Constable, 2005; Yang & Lu, 2010). Typically, these examinations of "global marriage-scapes" (Constable, 2005) study first the gendered power, material, emotional, intimate, and care exchanges between individual women and men in a partnership, relative to the intersecting inequalities in which each is socially embedded; and, second, the lived experiences, wellbeing, and socio-economic outcomes for the partner from the economically poorer background, usually in the Global South.

Jongwilaiwan & Thompson's (2013) study discusses relationships between *mia farang* and Singaporean men as *negotiated exchanges*, emphasizing that partners make an implicit bargain, whereby the underlying asymmetric power structure is an exchange of material and financial support (by men) for emotional, intimacy and care support (by women). However, within this overall complex package, emotional care and material support can flow in both directions, and the balance can shift over time (see also Statham, 2020). This highlights the blurred lines between the emotional/intimacy and material/financial dimensions of everyday negotiations within cross-border partnerships, and that we should be cautious about pre-defining a partner's role within a rigid single framework of sex work, domestic work, care-giving, or love.

Jongwilaiwan & Thompson (2013) also argue that these negotiated relationships between partners are the cutting edge where agency transforms transnational patriarchal relations. Similarly, we think *kathoey*-Westerner relationships are an important field where agency can socially redefine what it is to be *kathoey*, and transform social understandings of being *kathoey*, relative to dominant gender, heterosexual, and family relations norms, both in Thailand and the West. Important in this respect are the resonant cultural scripts (Jongwilaiwan & Thompson, 2013, p. 370), i.e., socially constructed *kathoey* narratives that generate aspirations for individuals to follow this specific transformative life-trajectory. Our subjects are embedded in a globalized social world that makes relationships with Western men seem possible and plausible ways to gain access to resources that are 'blocked' to them due to discrimination, a lack of enforceable rights, and financial and family pressures. At the same time, the emotional, caring, and intimate components of Thai-Western relationships can provide warmth, security and sometimes a sense of family for *kathoey*, and an opportunity to strive for self-validation, social self-realization, and recognition of gender identity.

Here we aim to explore this cultural script through which a generation of *kathoey* from poor rural Isan understand their aspirations (past and present) and life-stories as socially embedded in relationships with Western men. We present a snapshot of subjects' understandings of their agency, lived experiences, and outcomes, across four intersecting dimensions of their shared cultural script: social imaginaries of Western men; needs for gender affirmation; goals for upwards social mobility; and desires for family acceptance. Taken together, these dimensions give insight to the perceived narrative, i.e., cultural script, real or imagined, through which *kathoey* aspire and act to partner Western men in their search for a better life. Whether fantasy or factually-based, a cultural script makes this social pathway seem the most realizable way to achieve gender recognition and a route out of poverty. The power of a cultural script is that it carries a social force as a self-fulfilling prophecy, generating more aspirations and agency among other *kathoey* looking for a way out of transphobia and discrimination. It shapes the way *kathoey* see their negotiated relationships with their Western partners.

Social imaginaries of Western men

The way *kathoey* perceive and socially imagine a future life with Western men through ideas of gender, sexuality, and modernity shapes their agency towards that goal. *Kathoey* can be likely to see Western men through rose-tinted glasses as modern, good family men, and reliable providers (ten Brummelhuis, 1999; Winter, 2011), given harsh experiences of discrimination, family rejection, and bad treatment by Thai men. They see Western men as more likely to accept and be sexually attracted to their female gender identification compared to Thai men, who are less willing to be in open relationships, or use intimate relationships with *kathoey* for financial gain through 'pimping'. There are parallels to aspirant female marriage migrants, who see opportunities to achieve wealth, move abroad, and gain greater personal freedoms away from rigid gender roles and social constrictions of mundane village life (Lapanun, 2019). Generally, relationships with foreigners confer status and economic benefits for poor rural people (Lapanun, 2012). Imaginaries do not transfer easily into realities, however, and can be based on misperceptions.

Gender affirmation

Affirmation of *kathoey*'s felt and expressed gender is pivotal for their wellbeing and ability to have a satisfactory life (see also Sevelius, 2013). Research underlines their strong desire to be accepted physically and socially as female (ten Brummelhuis, 1999; Thongkrajai, this issue). To bridge the discrepancy between their physiognomy and their identity, some *kathoey* develop strategies to perform the 'perfect' woman – from controlling their voice to changing their body language. Attempts to conceal masculine sexual attributes in public can be very stressful for *kathoey*, as ten Brummelhuis' interviewee stated, "We are *phu-ying* (female), but since we are not real, we have to do everything better" (1999, p. 127). Faced by harassment and pervasive stigma, gender affirmation is vital for *kathoey* self-validation, to be seen for who they are and treated accordingly. Tourist zones can be places where dominant Thai heteronormative

social norms are transgressed in a way that supports spaces for living as *kathoey*, albeit sometimes through sex work (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021). Some *kathoey* “choose to pay the price of being stigmatized by engaging in sex work to be able to live some form of the idealized Thai gay/*kathoey* lifestyle” (Jackson, 2011, p. 202). Possibilities for relationships with Westerners can be seen as a chance to be a “treated like ‘real’ women” in a heterosexual family (Pravattiyagul, 2021, p. 92).

Upward social mobility

Kathoey from poor peasant backgrounds face high class/status barriers on top of transphobic prejudice. These can be formidable barriers to upward social mobility. LGBTQ+ workers face significant institutional discrimination throughout the employment cycle (ILO/Suriyasarn, 2014, pp. 51-64). For example, *kathoey* applicants are often given psychological tests, asked about sexuality in interviews, and unfairly denied positions. Their chances to earn a living commensurate with education and abilities are highly restricted. This work discrimination makes it hard to be part of society: “long-term unemployment reduces self-reliance and any capacity to contribute to the welfare of parents, grandparents, or younger siblings. It drags down self-esteem and drives many into sex work, including in specialized ‘ladyboy’ bars” (Winter, 2011, p. 261). Confronted by blocked opportunities for social advancement, *kathoey*s’ aspirations for upwards social mobility become channeled into a narrow set of available pathways located in tourist zones where they can exert agency (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2021). In this context, aspirations for upwards social mobility become strongly tied to aspirations for establishing a long-term relationship with a wealthy Westerner.

Family acceptance

Family is the definitive social and economic unit in Thailand. Filial piety norms strongly shape family relationships, whereby children face significant expectations to provide financial and emotional care for ageing parents. This includes trying to be a ‘good child’ and preserve the family’s social face publicly (Morris, 1994), given that having a *kathoey* child can generate social rejection. For *kathoey*, acceptance or rejection by family members significantly influences how they fare over the life-course. Jackson (2011, p. 31) follows Israporn (2009), arguing that family is essential to understanding Thai gay identities as “formed through a negotiation of familial expectations in which the autonomy to live a non-heteronormative life is legitimated by a demonstrated capacity to care for one’s parents (which) may not necessarily be felt as a burden.” This explains why *kathoey* exert agency to be included and recognized within their family, and why family shapes their aspirations, including the goal of a Western benefactor. Notwithstanding childhood experiences of rejection, *kathoey* seldom break with family. Remittances to family can be an important source of self-esteem and lead to family recognition: “personal wealth can be used to ‘buy’ a space for queer sexual autonomy within a heteronormative culture wherein family ties remain central to queer identity and a sense of self-worth” (Jackson, 2011, p. 202).

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on biographical interviews with *kathoey* in enduring relationships with Western men. Interviews were conducted in Thai, by Thai researchers, between August 2016 and November 2017. The interviews lasted at least one hour, were recorded, transcribed, and professionally translated to English. Participants were recruited using researchers' contacts and links via LGBTQ+ NGOs. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to recount their life-stories, discussing their aspirations, experiences and outcomes regarding gender identity, sexuality, partnering, work, and family relations. To analyze the interview material, first we read the full transcripts several times. We then applied a narrative frame analysis approach: a frame is a "schemata of interpretation" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21) that guides cognitive perceptions of reality. We interpreted how interviewees framed the four analytic dimensions (social imaginaries; gender affirmation; social mobility aspirations; family acceptance) of the cultural script in their respective life-stories.

Kathoey come from different classes, generations, places, and backgrounds that importantly shape their specific life experiences. Our sample is small (n6) and not representative. We do not aim to speak of a general *kathoey* perspective. Instead, our focus is primarily on the cultural script of a specific cohort of *kathoey*, now aged between 30 and 40, who grew up in poverty in rural Isan. Isan people migrated *en masse* to cities and abroad as an important driving force of Thailand's rapid social and

Subject Interviewee	Age at Interview	Place of origin	Current location	Time in relationship with Westerner	Westerner partner age	Years younger than Western partner	Receives financial income from Westerner	Employment (outside care-work for partner)	Home ownership in hometown	Financial remittances to family
A	30	Loei (Isan)	Pattaya	7 years	64	34	yes, on request	None	Yes	Yes, occasionally
B	40	Khorat (Isan)	Phuket	6-7 years	70	30	THB 27K per month	Owens a health business	No	THB 15K per month
C	33	Surin (Isan)	Pattaya	2 years	65	32	THB 40K per month	Owens a bar with Western partner	No	THB 15K per month
D	32	Sisaket (Isan)	Pattaya	6 years	81	49	THB 20K per month	Works at bar on "scene"	No	THB 3-5K per month
E	35	Khon Kaen (Isan)	Pattaya	7-8 years	78	43	THB 10K per month	Works at NGO (LGBT+ rights)	Yes	THB 4K per month
F	22	Samut Prakan (Central)	Bangkok	10 months	47	25	Occasional gifts	University student. Freelance modelling & design	No	No

Table 1. Interviewee Sample

economic transformation over the last decades but continue to face stigmatization and limited opportunities (Keyes, 2014). Primarily, we look at *kathoey* who established relationships with Western men, starting out from an unpromising background of class/status disadvantage, to see how their aspirations and experiences were shaped. Five of our six interviewees fit this profile, the other is a younger generation *kathoey*, a student from the outskirts of Bangkok, whose relationship is less established, and who is not a migrant. This contrasting case helped to define the distinctiveness of the others' cultural script and is cited once only in relation to imaginaries of Western men.

Table 1 documents some basic sample characteristics regarding background, location, age, education, relationship, and family remittances. It also provides letters (e.g., A) that link quotes to interviewees. For the five Isan interviewees, it is notable that they are significantly younger than their Western partners (37.6 years mean), who are elders (71.6 years mean), and receive/have received substantial financial support, and provide some support to families.

SOCIALLY IMAGINING WESTERN MEN

Participants recall 'success stories' of *mia farang*, who gained status and relative wealth through their relationships with Western men. These resonant success stories were a stimulus for participants to seek out Western men to achieve their goals:

I wanted to have a *farang*² husband. The inspiration came from my friend [...] she said a foreign husband takes good care and gives her a lot of money - thousands a day. [...] I just wanted to have a foreign husband to take care of me, I wanted to have a house like the others [...] I wanted to have what others had [...] to have a comfortable life, a house, a car, golden jewelry, and everything that others don't [have]. I just wished I had everything as from [the perspective of] the person who had nothing before, looking at others who were wealthy so that they won't be able to look down on me. (E)

[I wanted to have a foreign boyfriend] since I was a child as I found other older people having foreign boyfriends [...] they were both *kathoey* and women who were observably wealthy. (C)

Mobility to find employment and then on to possibly meet a foreign partner was a common pathway through which participants ended up in tourist cities. One participant's experience is illustrative:

When I finished school, I came to work in Bangkok [...] I worked in a cosmetic manufacturing factory [...] after [breaking up with her boyfriend] I went to Pattaya. [...] in the second year of vocational school I trained at FamilyMart [supermarket] in Na Kluea [area of Pattaya]. I thought of working in FamilyMart, but once I was there, it didn't work out, it's not me. Before starting work, I took a ride around town, looking around. [...] I saw some people who were uglier than me and they had a foreign boyfriend. Then why can't I also have a foreign

2 *Farang* is a Thai colloquial word for Westerners.

boyfriend? My friend at the old bar told me about going out with customers and getting 5,000 Baht, 6,000 Baht. Why is it so easy? I wanted to have money like them. If I was lucky, I would have money like them. (A)

A person who felt she was “a girl born in the wrong body” since childhood, the participant underlines the importance of striving for potential material improvement as a key motivation in her desire to meet a foreign man.

However, the social imaginaries about Western men that prompt *kathoeys* to take this path are not just economic motivations. First, participants express imaginings about Western male values and modernity that they believe would make it more likely to find acceptance for their gender identity with a foreign man. They describe Western men as more tolerant because they are “taught to love each other with respect, regardless of sexuality” (B). Thai men instead are described as financially irresponsible, exploitative (“just looking for someone who can support him” [D]), treating *kathoeys* as a “minor wife” (C), and prejudiced believing that *kathoeys* are “not normal” (B). Relationships between Thai men and *kathoeys* are not easily accepted within heteronormative social circles, a point made by the youngest 22-year-old participant: “We’re a lady boy, so we must have a foreign boyfriend” (F). Older ones recounted how, when younger, they were forced to break up with their Thai boyfriends to not bring shame on the families. The strong social exclusionary pressures of society push *kathoeys* towards investing belief in assumed tolerant characteristics of a Western partner. For example, a 40-year-old person who had full gender reassignment surgery at 23, claims that Western men see a *kathoeys* as an individual in her own rights, a ‘lover’, not defined by a stigmatizing idea of her gender identity: “In Thai culture, transsexuality is clearly stigmatized [...] we are not viewed as *kathoeys* by foreigners. They see us as their lovers” (B). The quotation reflects the participant’s romanticized view of Western men, which nevertheless is part of the cultural script that stimulates fantasies of possibilities for a different type of life being *kathoeys*.

SEEKING GENDER AFFIRMATION

Participants see relationships with Western men as an important potential vehicle to affirm their gender. They talk about how their partners, who identify as heterosexuals, are attracted by their femininity and that they can affirm their gender through this relationship without being questioned: “He liked me as a lady. He liked that I dressed up beautifully and that I was looking cute. He knew I’m a ladyboy, but he was able to accept it and always complimented me that I looked beautiful” (E).

Some recount how their Western partner encouraged them to explicitly express their femininity as a core element of their relationship. For example, one person’s Austrian partner paid for her breast implants and she is encouraged to spend time on her looks when he is in Pattaya: “If I have an appointment with [partner] at 8 pm, at 5 pm I’ll start to shower and wash my hair. I have to spend time with makeup and trying on clothes and drying my hair” (A).

A relationship with a Western man can create a space for gender affirmation and this emotional and psychological support can have positive effects on a *kathoeys*’ self-identity and wellbeing. It can allow *kathoeys* to “live like a common couple” (D). It

is interesting to note that a number of the relationships in our sample were monogamous and without sexual activity. This can be attributed partly to Western men being much older, but also indicates that the relationship is built emotionally on more than sex, despite being largely viewed as sex work by the outside world.

In some cases, relationships with Westerners can also serve as cover for long-term intimate relationships with a Thai man, relatively concealed from the scrutiny of mainstream society. This is possible logistically because Western partners are often away for long periods. One participant (C), a 33-year-old *kathoey*, has been in an intimate relationship with a Thai man for 11 years. They live together in Pattaya when the participant's Western partner is in New Zealand. The participant actively negotiates multiple relations to sustain this arrangement that allows for a double gender affirmation. The New Zealander believes that the Thais are friends living as "brothers" (C), who work together to launch a bar he bought in Pattaya. The participant organized a traditional wedding with the New Zealander back in the home village of Surin and plans to "take care of him" (C) when he retires permanently to Thailand. The participant has also married the Thai partner in a traditional wedding ceremony, but he has to "accept and go along with" (C) the arrangements in exchange for security and the prospect of a future together:

Q: How does your Thai boyfriend feel about you having a foreign boyfriend?

A: He's OK with it. We have agreed that we will not leave each other behind. We will stay together and improve our lives (C).

ASPIRING TO UPWARDS SOCIAL MOBILITY

Aspirations for long-term security and climbing the social ladder is a core driver underpinning participants' relationships with Westerners. Four participants receive a monthly allowance ranging between THB 10,000-40,000 (ca. € 250-1,000). At the higher end, this is just less than one-and-a-half times the national average monthly income per household (THB 26,900 as of 2016) (National Statistics Office, no date). In addition, two participants have their rent and bills paid for, and the participants recount receiving gifts, money, and even support to set up their own businesses. All report having a better quality of life since being with their Western partner:

I now have my own house to live in when I go back home, unlike before when I used to live in a small hut with my aunt in the farm or at the small hut with my mother [...] now I have a proper house to live, a private bedroom, a kitchen and I don't have to depend on my relatives. (E)

Participants are clear that such life-chances would be impossible with a Thai man, for whom they would be a source of money: "money is an important factor for a Thai man to be with a *kathoey*" (B). However, allowances and gifts from Westerners also come with strings attached and elements of social control when their spending is checked. One person recalls having to prove money was spent as agreed: "He got me the first gold chain that weighed one ounce, then I took a picture of it and sent it

to him as a proof” (E). *Kathoey* seem largely willing to put up with these controlling practices for the bigger good of a better life. This is made easier because the Western men are away much of the time.

Kathoey seek not only immediate material gains but also future financial security from a relationship. As legal same-sex marriage is impossible in Thailand, some push to become beneficiaries of their partner’s will, to have legal rights to their partner’s assets, and secure a future after his death. Subjects have relatively little agency in this decision because it depends on their partner’s wealth, own family, and commitment to the relationship. While one participant was included in the Westerner’s will, others mobilized alternative strategies to gain long-term access to his wealth, for example, by having property or a business legally in their name.

Some partners had only limited means, however, and could provide only immediate financial support, meaning that some participants developed other ways to save up for the future: “I should do lots of savings to take care of myself when I get older because I will not have my own children to take care of myself as others” (D). D, a 32-year-old *kathoey* who had feminine appearances until 26 years old, describes managing such a relationship in her relationship with an 81-year-old Australian. They are “living happily together” (D) when he is in Thailand three times a year. This person (D) receives a monthly allowance that is enough to pay for living expenses and to support parents, but cannot save enough to set up a small business that is a dream, and still occasionally prostitutes to supplement income and aspirations.

Beyond the material trappings and wealth, it is clear that having a Western partner adds value and some degree of social acceptance to being *kathoey*, according to the participants. Some report being looked up to by others because of their relationship to a Western man: “One of the pros is that when I go out, I feel proud that I have a foreign boyfriend. It looks good in society. It’s accepted” (A). “It’s about the social factor. It looks better when you have a foreign husband” (E). They also report becoming role models for younger *kathoey*:

The young *kathoey* in my hometown, they ask me “Ma’m’ how do we get a foreign husband? I want to have a foreign husband like you” [...] Most of the younger *kathoey* in Pattaya call me ‘Ma’m’, they call me ‘Madam’ because I have [partner] who supports me. I have a car and things. (A)

While Western partners raise status among peers in the tourist zone, it is harder to transfer this status to mainstream society, which stigmatizes these types of relationships. Also, new-found wealth can be a source of envy and exploitation, because it transforms relations with friends. One person, a 30-year-old *kathoey* living in Pattaya, has experienced increased pressure to provide for her friends, something that she had to learn how to manage:

Before, I used to party. I thought about it. If I party a lot with my friends, friends will think of me as “Madam”. “Madam, buy us beer.” Everywhere I go, I have to pay every day. It’s not right. If I go out, I just lose – lose my health, lose my money. If I don’t treat my friends, I also lose my friends. (A)

Her natal family also expects to benefit financially from the relationship, which is why she negotiates a balancing act between her sister's requests for money and worries that her Western partner will see her as a money-grabber. She loves her Austrian partner and does not want to come across as if she is only after his money:

If she [sister] has a problem, she calls me. I told her that if she wants to talk about money, she has to tell me in advance. Not call me today and want the money right away. I told her that if she has financial problems, she has to call me a week in advance because I need time to talk to [partner]. I have to explain the reason to [partner]. When she calls, I can't explain to [partner] right way and get the money right away. It doesn't work like that... The money is not with me. I have to explain to [partner] for him to agree. I can't tell him that I want the money now. Give it to me. Give it to me. Then he will think that I only want his money. I don't want foreigners to think that I only want their money. I also have good feelings and love for him. We take care of each other. (A)

Respondents are aware that their acceptance from Thai society is limited to specific social spaces and places, the nonheteronormative enclaves or 'scenes' in tourist-zones. Such places become a "second home" (D), with networks and communities of people like them. Yet, even in these places, they sometimes face stigmatization from Thais, which again underpins the strong heteronormative constraints of Thai society. One person in a relationship with a 70-year-old Swiss medical doctor, recounts her experience of going out in Phuket with her partner:

If we want to eat out [in Phuket], we will go to good restaurant with qualified waiters. They may look at us but they will not talk or behave negatively about us, at least while we are there. Differently to some places, we can be looked down and I can see lots of questions into their eyes such as what career I do and how we met. [...] It is difficult for people in other cities to accept who we are. Even in Phuket, we still need to go to good places in order to avoid being judged about our relationship by people around there. Let's say, if we go together at Bangla³, I will be looked down as they thought I got the big fish as referred to my boyfriend. This is how most of Thai people view us. (B)

She feels that "most Thai people" look down on her and assume she is a prostitute out with a client. Her story illustrates the participants' persistently liminal position and precarious conditional status in Thai society, even after attaining material goals.

SEEKING FAMILY RECOGNITION AND ACCEPTANCE

Participants express a genuine desire to find acceptance and recognition for their gender identity within their family. To this end, some have developed strategies to buy back materially and morally into the family, a core motivation for partnering a Western man in the first place. Monthly remittances are important in this respect and those who received regular support from their partners made significant remittances

3 Bangla Road, known as Patong Walking Street, is the centre of Phuket's nightlife scene catering for foreigners.

(see Table 1), ranging from THB 3,000 to 15,000 per month (ca €77-390). At the higher end, this is close to the average monthly household income for the Northeastern Region (ca THB 21,000 as of 2016) (National Statistics Office, no date). They enable their natal family to have “a fair life” (D) while demonstrating filial piety, and gaining status as dutiful children:

If I have a comfortable life, my parents should also have a comfortable life. I don't want to be the wife of a foreigner and forget my roots. Don't let other people put a mask on you. You have to be yourself. You should make your family comfortable. (A)

If a Western partner is willing to recognize a *kathoey*'s obligations to natal family and support them, this can importantly impact on acceptance by the family and home village. A person in a relationship for seven years with her Austrian partner describes how they are now accepted as a genuine couple in her hometown:

He's an easy-going person. He can eat Northeastern food. [...] When he goes to my hometown, I cook for him and take him out to different places in our province. I show him around. In the morning, we drink coffee at my friend's shop. I invite my mom to walk along the Mekong River. In the evening, I buy groceries to cook at home. (A)

Her partner's regular support to her family has meant that he is fully accepted by them:

Yes, they accept him. When we go back home, my parents tie holy thread on our wrists. It's Thai tradition. He is deeply impressed and touched. When my grandfather was still alive, we were about to drive back, my grandfather found holy thread in the house and ran out to knock on the car window. He told us to extend our arms out and he tied our wrists with holy thread. Five minutes after we drove out, [partner] cried. He was deeply touched. He said that when he was married to his Thai wife, her family never did this for him. They only asked for money. They only talked about money. He said that my family never talked about money with him. He felt overwhelmed. (A)

A traditional marriage ceremony can be symbolically important in this respect. Another person's family blessed the union with the Western partner after he agreed to pay “THB 50,000 in cash and two Bhat gold⁴” (C) to the parents in a dowry. The traditional wedding publicly validated the relationship and importantly the participant's gender identity in the village: “At the beginning I was not accepted by the neighbors. Yet, after my relatives participated in the wedding ceremony and understood our relationship, they are happy to see us happy” (C).

Participants are sometimes not able to live up to local people's high financial expectations about having a Western partner. When their allowance is modest and they can only remit amounts that cover basic expenses, they receive less acceptance

4 One Bhat gold weighs ca 15g.

and can be seen in a bad light by people in the village. For example, one person in this situation recounts how the family's neighbors have been gossiping negatively: "Some people didn't understand why I am still not having a luxurious life even though I have a foreign boyfriend. They see my mother still living in the same house" (D).

Westerners do not always accept the Thai notion of filial duty, applying instead Western individualist values and norms. This can create tensions. One participant, who lives mostly as an effeminate man, says that the 78-year-old British partner "loves me but doesn't take my family well" (E). Nonetheless, this person still makes remittances to family every month, concealed from the partner, which demonstrates the strength of the internalized social pressures to meet expectations of filial piety that have been raised by knowledge of the relationship:

I already told my family that I had a boyfriend, but you know how the villagers are, right? So when they saw him, they got excited. I had already thought that I would not allow myself to feel embarrassed so when I went home, I got my relatives some money from the little savings that I had. The little savings were from the small change he used to give me to buy some stuff. But I can't let him know when I give money to my relatives as he doesn't take things well and wouldn't be happy about it otherwise. It's hard for me to send back home as well with my mom alone is also very difficult. He only takes good care of me for everything I want to have, I want to eat etc. So when I go home, I give money to my mother and to my relatives without him knowing about it. Even after we had a party at home, when I buy snacks for the kids, he would say something that the money he gave me is for myself and not for my family. He is very difficult with my family and doesn't take anyone except me. (E)

This indicates the degree to which recognition within the family and social acceptance from the village is conditional, and dependent on expectations for provision, that are driven and significantly raised by being in relationship with a foreigner.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Here we have tried to present a snapshot of the cultural script through which a generation of *kathoey* from poor rural backgrounds in Isan aspired to make a social space for living a *kathoey* life by establishing an enduring relationship with a significantly older Western man. On one side, relationships with Western men (in contrast to Thai men) were seen as opening up chances for gender affirmation and love, and thereby legitimated and made possible a nonheteronormative lifestyle, albeit one sometimes confined to tourist-zone scenes. On the other, relationships with Western men stigmatized *kathoey* as prostitutes (notwithstanding sex often not being a component of the emotional bond), thereby creating barriers to social acceptance within Thai society, not least in the home-town village where acceptance was strongly dependent on familial provision.

Facing a hostile, discriminatory environment from mainstream heteronormative society, people in our sample were able to achieve an important degree of gender recognition and social advancement, according to their own evaluations. Of course, they were selected as people in established relationships, so we should not raise their

experiences to a general level. There are most likely *kathoey* from the same origin and cohort who were unable to achieve similar goals, although they most likely aspired to the same cultural script. Indeed, the resonance of this cultural script can in part be attributed to the highly limited opportunities for *kathoey* from this cohort to achieve aspirations by other means, due to the high levels of transphobic and class/status discrimination. Even among a sample of success stories, the high challenges of balancing acts at the interface between the partnership with a foreign man, peers in the tourist zone, and family back in the village, demanded resourceful and continued hard work by *kathoey* to keep their ambitions afloat.

Although their relationships with Western men are structurally underpinned by economic support, it is clear they stand socially for much more. Subjects viewed their negotiated exchanges with their Western partners through a lens of opportunities, but their aspirations within the relationship strongly included needs for intimacy and emotional support from a caring and loving bond. This desire for affection and well-being was mostly achieved and not based on sexual relations, which in most cases had ceased. Also, the public visibility of being *kathoey* in an enduring relationship with a Western man provided a degree of gender validation in the face of mainstream heteronormative society that was seen as unrealizable from relationships with Thai men in Thai society. Even the opportunity to gain merit by ‘buying back’ into the family by financial remittances has a strong emotional component in that it required family recognition and acceptance of a *kathoey*-foreigner relationship, something parents were in some cases willing to embrace and ratify in the local community through wedding rituals. This is transformative of local understandings and norms for socially acceptable relationships, even if one takes the cynical view that acceptance is based on financial contributions. We think there is a more subtle process of social change taking place, whereby *kathoey* agency, empowered through their relationships, challenges and transforms established norms and values.

Ultimately though, even materially successful *kathoey* remain in a liminal, precarious position within Thai society. Especially at the beginning of a relationship, the asymmetric power balance leaves *kathoey* in a position of dependency on their partners, who could leave them at any moment, with few strings attached. They remain in a weaker position than *mia farang*, because of their relative lack of access to rights through legal marriage in Thailand: same-sex marriage is barred and so is changing gender from that attributed at birth. This is perhaps why *kathoey* invest so deeply emotionally into Westerner relationships to build lasting bonds while also trying to materialize tangible assets through gifts and property ownership. In some cases, this high emotional investment can be a self-fulfilling prophecy that constitutes a caring and loving partnership. But it can also explain why some *kathoey* accept social controlling behavior by their Western partners, while keeping alive their aspirations for gender realization and buying back morally and financially into their families.

It needs noting that the ‘cultural script’ we have unpacked is specific to the class/status background of a generation of *kathoey* from Isan. The exception in our sample, a younger student from a middle-class background on the Bangkok periphery, aspired to different social and gender affirmation goals: to migrate and marry her Canadian partner in Canada, where civil partnerships are legally binding, which would provide significant access to individual rights and resources through the partnership. While

the cultural script we discuss holds for the sizeable generation of Isan *kathoey* who moved to tourist cities in search of Western men, clearly younger generations from wealthier backgrounds aspire to cultural scripts that are beyond what the people central to our research considered realizable.

Overall, our research on enduring relationships shows that, despite power asymmetries within couples and a structural underpinning of economic motives in seeking a relationship with a foreigner, aspirations for a life with affection, (non-sexual) intimacy, and gender affirmation matter a great deal in shaping these *kathoey* lives. We think that depictions of *kathoey*-foreigner relationships as sex-work or ‘sugar-daddying’ – stereotypes that resonate in the social world, but that have also informed sociological approaches – fail to do justice to the subject matter and lives they represent. Here we have tried modestly to provide some sociological insight into the way some *kathoey* view the social world of which they are part. By basing our study on an interpretation of their expressed aspirations and views of their negotiated exchanges with their partners, we hope to have demonstrated that emotions are a central component of this *kathoey* cultural script. We think that it is important, if challenging, to try and find ways to study these special types of cross-border relationships produced by globalization and increasing mobility within structured North/South inequalities within their own terms rather than through a reductive lens of economic determinism.



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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.