



Luuk khreung: The Forgotten Legacy of the Cold War in Thailand

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Abstract

On September 8, 1954, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) or the Manila Treaty was established. Thailand joined the other eight nations including the United States in its fight against communism. At the end of the war in 1976, the Thai kept the infrastructures and the weapons left by the US forces. Within the Thai society, it has been keeping a secret that has long been wanting to be revealed – the presence of the *luuk khreung* or the Thai-Amerasians. Fifty-seven years later, this secret is also coming out to seek their roots, asking to be recognized as Thais as much as Americans. They are the ‘forgotten’ legacy of the Cold War. Why were they given up for adoption?; what are the challenges faced by the *luuk khreung* in their families and the society?; does finding an American father mean US citizenship?; and, how does culture maintain the ‘invisibility’ of the *luuk kreung*? A life-story and a historical research, this paper also analysed the unclassified documents of the CIA regarding the role of Thailand in the Cold War, government documents, newspaper articles which are available in the internet. Despite their presence, the *luuk kreung* are still invisible, reducing them as the ‘other’ in an otherwise pure Thai society neglected and forgotten by both governments (Thai and America) that are supposed to acknowledge them. They are not seeking for a new citizenship, instead they want closure to find their identities as Thai and American.

Keywords: Amerasian Act of 1982, Cold War, *luuk khreung*, SEATO, Thai-Amerasians, Vietnam War



1. Introduction

They look every inch Americans, except that their names are in Thai and they could barely speak English. They were outcasts, orphaned, and to be able to assimilate in the Thai society, they have Thai names and their fathers names are not listed. Instead, their Thai *fathers* were either a grandfather, an uncle or a foster father. They are termed as *luuk khreung* or Vietnam War-era Thai Amerasians by the Thai press and the people in general.

The *luuk khreung* generation is a product of the American (and allied) military presence in Thailand during the Cold War. Their presence in Thailand was not an accidental creation of another race, but as a result of the Cold War. Amerasians are mixed-race children born out of the US military presence in Asian nations. However, the term Amerasian is largely attributed to Pearl S. Buck, an American activist and author who was involved in humanitarian activities which started after the Second World War. (Cheng, 2014).

The Cold War started after World War 2 in 1945. It was an arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). From 1950 until 1991 the world was at the brink of nuclear war. Southeast Asia, specifically Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were waging war against their Western colonizers.

During the Vietnam War the USAF/RTAFJ Joint Use and Integrated Air Defense Operations Agreement, both armed forces had a technical agreement with Thailand governing detection of and protection against hostile aircraft. The agreement also stated that the Thai Air Defense/Tactical Air Control System “has been integrated and incorporated into” the US Air Force's Pacific Air Defense Network. It provides for the assignment of USAF personnel to units of the Thai system (Department of State Publication, 2006).

In a Washington Post report in 1977, there were around 4,000 Amerasian children with GI fathers and Thai mothers who were in danger of being made stateless by a local law imposed in 1972 that intended to prevent Vietnamese refugees from becoming Thai citizens. However, it was reinterpreted to include those children whose GI fathers abandoned them and their mothers.

In 2004, there were an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 Amerasians in Thailand according to the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. Some Thai-Amerasians were able to immigrate to the United States due to the 1982 Amerasian Immigration Act, but an undetermined number are still left in Thailand. They are able to live in Thai society but remain invisible and discriminated (Goniwiecha, 2004 cited in Kutchera, 2013a p.38).

Review of Related Literature

Thailand in American narratives

Prior to the establishment of the US Bases in Thailand, the country was already projected by the Americans with the help of the American Media as a safe and hospitable location, the establishment of a ‘free world’ ideology despite having been in the center of the warring factions in the neighboring countries.

Since Thailand was never colonized by Europeans, it has never gone to the process of decolonizing. Unlike other nations in Asia who were under the European colonizers for centuries,



Thailand's exceptional situation was seen by the Americans as an opportunity to show that an alliance could be possible without compromising its sovereignty. Phillips (2012,p.87) narrated how American media like the Voice of America, Life and March of Time depicted Thailand as idyllic, safe, people always laugh and live alongside nature.

Phillips said:

Americans came to construct Thailand as a unique location where they could escape the complex identity concerns they faced elsewhere in the region. In many ways, this allowed for something of a 're-orientalization' of Thai culture, allowing Americans, as a new economic and political elite class, to indulge in enjoying their position at the top of the global hierarchy through constructing difference. It was imagined as a stable example of how modern consumption practices and social relations could work alongside, and even be the product of, a timeless tradition that had been shaped by a relationship to nature.

Zinsser (1957) in his visit to Thailand emphasized the 'friendly' nature of the Thai people that the Americans could do business as long as they understand the Thai behavior and social etiquette. Despite the growing communist 'brutality', Thailand was a free-world, thus must be protected at all cost.

Engaging in the Cold War

On September 8, 1954, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) or the Manila Treaty was established. Thailand became a member of SEATO that formally joined the other eight nations including the United States in its fight against the communism. Following the principle of the Domino Effect, wherein if one country falls under communism, the rest will follow, SEATO was primarily created to block the communist spread in Southeast Asia. The nine member countries were Thailand, Philippines, South Vietnam, East Pakistan, Australia, France, New Zealand, UK and the US. The headquarters was in Bangkok.

A country against colonialism, like Laos and Vietnam were identified as pro-communist, or backed by the Soviet and China. In Laos, the neutralists and the royalists who were once in connivance with the colonizers were US-backed and were called pro-democracy. With North Vietnam under communism and the Royal Laos government apparently losing to Pathet Lao, Thailand was caught in the middle. The 'Domino Effect' theory seemed possible, specifically in the Northeast (Isaan) region. Notably, Ho Chi Minh had lived in Udonthani and Nakhom Phanom in 1929. In the mid 60s there were around 50 thousand ethnic Vietnamese in the region. At the beginning of the conflict, there were an estimated 3,000 guerillas made up of Chinese and Vietnamese-Thai ethnicity operating in region (Kent, 1964; Kilensko, 2004).

In a memorandum of the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger to President Richard Nixon on August 26, 1969 stated that:

"SEATO obligates "each party" to the Treaty to "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes" in the event of an armed attack. We are obligated only to consult in the case of subversion, or of armed attack by others than Communists."

But it was under the Rusk-Thanat Communique of March 1962 that the affirmed the SEATO obligation was 'individual as well as collective'. In March 1962, Foreign Prime Minister



Thanat Khoman and U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk signed a bilateral communiqué in which Washington promised to come to Thailand's aid if it faced aggression by neighboring nations. This signaled the military alliance of the United States Armed Forces and the Thai government and the installation of the military bases notably in the Northeast region. The Northeast region shares borders with Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

US Bases in Thailand

Although the bases were considered Royal Thai Air Force bases and were commanded by Thai officers, these were manned by the US bases were also established to serve as a buffer in case the war spread in Thailand.

Under the USAF/RTAF Joint Use and Integrated Air Defense Operations Agreement, both armed forces had a technical agreement with Thailand governing detection of and protection against hostile aircraft. The agreement also stated that the Thai Air Defense/Tactical Air Control System "has been integrated and incorporated into" the US Air Force's Pacific Air Defense Network. It provides for the assignment of USAF personnel to units of the Thai system (Department of State Publication, 2006).

U. S. Air Force personnel began their operations in Thailand by establishing an aircraft control and warning system at Don Muang airport, seventeen miles north of Bangkok on April 20, 1961. Four F-102As were deployed in Don Muang as a part of the Operation Bell Tone which reinforced Thailand's air defense from the invasion of North Vietnamese aircraft.

Shortly, on May 17, 1962 a U. S. Marine task force of 1,800 men landed at Bangkok and proceeded from there to Udonthani, located in Northeastern Thailand, twenty-five miles from the Laotian border; in addition to a 1,000-man U.S. Army battle group that had participated in SEATO maneuvers in April but had remained at the Northeastern city of Korat because of the critical Laotian situation.

The US installations were scattered in seven areas in Thailand namely: Don Muang Royal Thai Air Force Base, (631st Combat Support Group, 1962–1970, Bangkok); Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base (388th Tactical Fighter Wing), 1965–1975;

53rd Reconnaissance Wing, 1967-1971, Nakhon Ratchasima); Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Navy (56th Special Operations Wing), 1967–1975); Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base (355th Tactical Fighter Wing, 1965–1971; Rotational units, 1972–1974); U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield (4258th Strategic Wing, 1966–1970; 307th Strategic Wing, 1970–1975); Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, 1965–1974, Ubonratchatani) and at the Udon Royal Thai Air Force Base (42nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing), 1966–1975, Udonthani). Except for Takhli, U-Tapao, and Don Muang, all the other military installations are in the Northeast Region (Isaan).

The U. S. military contingents had reached 10,000 men. There were also additional small troop contingents from Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain. The contingents were engineer and Air Force units (Randolph, 1986). The American military personnel stationed in Thailand had reached fifty thousand (Ruth, 2017).

As many as 50,000 US servicemen were stationed there beginning in 1967 with the construction of six major air force installations and as many as 10 separate military installations;



GIs on R&R leave from Vietnam also traveled in and out of three primary recreation areas: Bangkok, Chiangmai and Pattaya City (Kutchera, 2013b p.38).

With the influx of thousands of American and other allied forces, Bangkok enjoyed a hotel boom in the mid-1960s. During the war enlisted men were entitled to rest and recreation tours, usually in the capitals of neighboring Southeast Asian countries. (Janssen, 2016). According to Ruth (2017b) the G.I.s or the American soldiers added \$111 million to the Thai economy during that period.

As early as March 3, the Royal Thai Government had issued a policy statement concerning the withdrawal of the US Troops within 18 months (Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review, 2006).

At the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975, the Thai government ordered all US military installations out of Thailand no later than 1976. The last military installation was taken down in June 1976 while on July 20, 1976 all US forces except the 270 officers and advisors left, leaving behind Thai women who acted as their companions and wives during their stay.

The *luuk khreung*

In the 1960s and 1970s, the term *luuk khreung* came to be associated specifically with the Amerasian children of Thai women and American GI according to Weisman (2000a). In between 1962-1974, an estimated 7,000 Amerasian children were born to Thai women and American military men (Thongsaeng, 1994). But in an interview with Gene Ponce a retired USAF formerly stationed in Nakhon Ratchasima in 1970-1971, he claimed that hospitals around Bangkok and near the former US bases ‘destroyed’ records every 15 years, hence there is no way to find out how many babies born to GI fathers during the period 1962-1976 (Novio, 2019).

Prior to the Vietnam war era, *Luuk khreung* was a neutral social category. It only meant children with Thai elite lineage usually a paternal connection. But the involvement of Thailand in the Cold War gave birth to a negative connotation of *luuk khreung*. With the births of large numbers of Amerasian children to non-elite Thai women and American GIs, the term came to be seen as a marker of lower class origins in general, and unbridled, illegitimate, Thai female sexuality in particular. So strong were the negative connotations attached to *luuk khreung*-ness during and immediately after the Vietnam War era that some Vietnam War-era *luuk khreung* whose appearance facilitated such a move sought to “pass” as Thai *tue* or “true Thai.” At the same time, *luuk khreung* of non-military paternity, on meeting new acquaintances, hastened to clarify the fact that their mothers were not bar girls, nor their fathers GIs (Klausner 1993 in Weisman, 2000).

Even the press used the term in describing the Amerasian situation. According to Weisman (2000), headlines used *Luuk Khreung* in the 1970s. She mentioned a 1970 article headlined, “Ook Samruad 'Dek Luuk Khreung' Hok Changwat” (A Survey of ‘*Luuk khreung* Children’ in Six Provinces) which described the work of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. A 1971 article in Thai Rath entitled, “The Products of Rented Wives” (Phon PhlidJaak Mia Chao) stated that, in the past, there had been very little “*luuk khreung* problem” \panhaa *luuk khreung*\ due to the small numbers of *farang* in Thailand, but that the American military presence had changed that situation. Another 1972 article in an unidentified Thai language newspaper proclaimed, “Thailand is not prejudiced toward skin |color| or *luuk khreung* like Japan and Korea”. Weisman elaborated that the article described a National Children’s Day program organized for Amerasians by the Pearl S. Buck Foundation. She noted that in its first sentence *luuk khreung* referred to were the children of *farang* fathers and Thai mothers.



Thai woman identity

In the Cold War era, Sayan Sanya(Thai:สายัณห์ สัญญา) was a famous Thai country music singer. In a now deleted Youtube video, Sayan Sanya's song Mae Pla Ra (Pickled Fish girl) was a popular song in the 70s deriding an Isan (Northeast) woman who wants to have a GI boyfriend. The Thai man who loves her, warns that the GI will eventually dump her. In the end, the Isan woman was left by the GI.

Phla ra" is a fermented fish sauce that is associated with the northeastern food-culture. Almost everything is seasoned with phla ra. Dr. Saowanee Alexander (interview, 2019), a Thai professor of Sociolinguistics at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchatani University claimed that the song reinforces the negative stereotype of Isan women during the Cold War.

Statement of the Problem

At the end of the war, the Thai kept the infrastructures and the weapons left by the US forces. But within the Thai society, especially those places where the Americans were stationed, they have been keeping a secret that has long been wanting to be revealed – the presence of the *luuk khreung* or the Thai-Amerasians.

Fifty-seven years after the Cold War, this secret is also coming out, asking to be recognized as Thais as much as Americans. They are the Thai-Amerasians. They are the 'forgotten' legacy of the Cold War in Southeast Asia and thus remains invisible. This paper examined the experiences of the Thai-Amerasians left in Thailand and the Thai-Amerasians who were given up for adoption. The research was able to answer the following questions: a. Why were they given up for adoption?; b. What are the challenges faced by the *luuk khreung* in their families and the society?; c. Does finding an American father mean US citizenship?; and d. How does culture maintain the 'invisibility' of the *luuk kreung*? This paper sought to elucidate the experiences of the Thai-Amerasians in the familial and societal spheres. Moreover, this paper amplifies Thailand's participation to the Cold War that resulted to the births of the Amerasians.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Biracial persons have different experiences which shaped their self-concept which is divided into social identity and personal identity. Their ability to fit in or to be excluded depends on the category that the society prepares for them.

Social identity theory is defined as knowledge of belonging to specific social groups and the emotional significance attached to that group membership (Tajfel, 1981 in Jackson & Elliot, 1999). It is based on the assumption that society is composed of "social categories that stand in power and status relations to one another and often compete for resources. Hence, individuals are connected to this social structure through their self-definitions as members of various categories which include nationality, political affiliation, race, socioeconomic class, gender, and occupation. (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, 1990 p. 14 in Ramirez, 1999).

In constituting identity, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that language plays a central role as well as gained under the powerful (Jensen, S.Q.,2011).

Othering is a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'. According to Weis (1995, in Barter-Godfrey et.al 2009), it creates social distance, marginalises, disempowers, and excludes because it threatens the normality. Othering creates stigma or a 'mark' alienating someone from the 'unmarked society'. Thus, losing social status and possible assistance from the society. On the other hand, despite being accepted in the community, Amerasians in Thailand may feel inferior due to their appearance and the surrounding circumstances of their births, primarily, associated



with the jobs of their mothers and GI fathers, hence, the concept of ‘othering’ is evident among the Amerasians. To counter ‘othering’ the guardians or parents of the Amerasians in Thailand lost their ‘American’ identity to be able to fit into Thai society.

Respondents

Six persons were involved in the study. Two Amerasians shared their struggles in finding their fathers and identities. The primary respondents were: two Thai-Amerasians, Kalwin Lipford and Tanong Pirunproi, and two Thai- African/American, Thappani Singkhamol and Meghan Leshana who was given up for adoption to Australian couple. Gene Ponce is a former US Serviceman stationed in Nakhon Ratchasima from 1970-1971. He has been helping the Amerasians community in the past decade, while Saowanee Alexander is a professor at Ubon Ratchatani University with specialization in geo-politics, were the secondary respondents.

2. Method

Life history method is also used because it captured the experiences as well as the perspectives of the key persons involved in the research. Their narratives connect them to the social, political, and economic setting of a given time (Payne and Payne, 2004).

A historical research, this paper also analyzed the unclassified documents of the CIA regarding the role of Thailand in the Cold War, government documents, newspaper articles which are available in the internet.

3. Results

The Amerasians’ experiences in Thailand follow the same pattern – full integration in the Thai society or put them up for adoption. Either way, they experienced discrimination and the ‘othering’ which lead to the feeling of inadequacy.

Kalwin Anne Pungprasert may have been Thai all her life, but not her features. She is a redhead but colors her hair black. She has fair skin and an aquiline nose – an all-American white girl. She would have been registered as Kalwin Anne P. Lipford, daughter of Staff Sergeant Wayne E. Lipford of Company L Rangers 75TH Infantry 101st Airborne Division stationed in Vietnam, and Kamnuan Pungprasert of Thailand, a maid at U-tapao Air Force Base, Rayong Province. Born in Sattahip, Chonburi, her Thai identity card shows her birth date as May 21, 1971. Based on the exchange of letters between her parents and a photo, she could have been born in late 1969 or early 1970.

Tanong Pirunproi, a hairstylist, was not interested to know who his father was. He has all the features of a Caucasian. After all, he was abandoned and raised by his mother’s boyfriend. He was born in November 27, 1962, a year after the first U. S. Air Force arrived at Don Mueang Airbase. His father was probably among the first batch of American Forces sent from Clark Airfield in the Philippines on April 20, 1961 as part of Operation Bell Tone, a code name for the first F-100 deployment to Thailand (Becker, 2012). Tanong’s mother didn’t tell him anything about his father, except that they met in Sattahip, Chonburi., where a naval base is also located.



“At this point in life, meeting my father or becoming a US Citizen does not make a difference. If I would meet him, I would ask, “How are you? Where have you been all this time?” Tanong said.

Thappani Singkhamol was born on September 9, 1970 to an African-American father and a Thai mother. From Chiangmai, her mother went to Nakhon Ratchasima to look for work where the Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base was located. She has two younger brothers who are also African-American from different fathers. Their mother never remarried and raised them until they finished their college education.

Thappani's mother claimed that when she was born, her father visited her but seeing a daughter instead of a son, he left. When she was young, her mother used to call her Andy and mentioned a surname *Whait*. The father could be a pilot or an engineer called Andrew Whait.

Born on October 28, 1975, in Ubon Ratchatani Meaghan Ura Butsringh Leshana was adopted by Juianne Le Shana, an Australian stationed at the airbase and her Canadian husband Keith. Her parents retained the Thai name, thus her biological mother, Janta Butsing, 70 years old now, was located after 43 years.

Meaghan was given up for adoption by her uncle. She doesn't know whether her mom agreed or not. Janta mentioned Max(w)ell I. Jonson, an airman that could be Meaghan's father.

Discrimination

Despite having a fair skin, Kalwin claimed that her origin was the object of ridicule. Thus, often engaged into fight with her classmates. She was called the ‘violent-red-head girl.’ At school she felt alone. She was adopted by her grandparents. Her grandmother told her that her father died. But her grandmother saved all the letters and stubs of money orders Sgt. Lipford sent to Kamnuan.

Tanong’s childhood was also similar to Kalwin. His mother married a Swiss national. Instead of having him adopted by the new husband, Tanong was left to the care of his mother’s former boyfriend. The mother and the husband sent him financial support until he was able to finish his studies.

Thappani felt unaccepted by her peers because she looks different. Her mother did not have enough money to send all of them to university. She was given financial assistance by the Pearl S. Buck Foundation until she finished public health course at a local college.

In her words, Meaghan believes that she was given up for adoption because of ‘racial discrimination.’ She has a younger sister who was considered ‘non-existent’ in their village because she was black. The sister passed away due to an illness in 2017.

The 1982 Amerasian Act

The 1982 Amerasian Act “provides for the immigration to the United States of certain Amerasian children. In order to qualify for benefits under this law, an alien must have been born in Cambodia, Korea, Laos, Thailand, or Vietnam after December 31, 1950, and before October 22, 1982, and have been fathered by a U.S. citizen.”

Application under this Act undergoes process that takes decades. The paternity must be established first. In the absence of all evidence like birth certificates, letters, DNA testing is required by the United States Embassy.



In the case of Thappani and Tanong since they cannot provide any evidence of paternity except unclear names. They obliged to get a DNA tests through Gene Ponce, a retired USAF who served during the Vietnam War.

Ponce's advocacy is to reunite the *luuk-khreung* and their GI fathers has been instrumental in identifying fathers. A father of an Amerasian, Gene brought his 7-month-old daughter to the United States with help from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. The mother chose to stay. They lost communication. Eventually, he found out that the mother passed away five years ago.

In 1998, Gene's attention was caught by an Amerasian in Denmark looking for her father and realized the magnitude of the presence of the Amerasians. After his retirement in 2002, he settled in Thailand until 2017. And his life-long advocacy to reconnect GI fathers and their children began. To date, he is contacted by more than 400 GI fathers hoping to find their children in Thailand.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the 5,000-8,000 number of *luuk-khreung* provided by the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, locating them is challenging due to assimilation. Many children were given up for adoption while those who were given Thai names were registered after their grandfathers or uncles. Their birth dates were also changed for whatever purpose that only their mothers' relatives knew. Giving them Thai names would benefit them from having government services like education and most importantly citizenship. However, it also reduced them to being a second class citizen because of they are different from the rest of the people in their villages. They are still the 'other' because of their physical attributes, especially the Black-Americans as well as the perceived occupation of their mothers during the Cold War – bar girls.

Although the Thai society accepts foreign culture, only to some extent, of which does not compromise their culture and religion. Buddhism teaches people to do good deeds, observe the religious precepts, and achieve merit to improve one's current life. But it does not mean opening up oneself to a foreigner in the pretext of modernity, love, and a possible emigration to America.

Kalwin's relatives lied to her American father for fear of taking her away from them and never be seen again. To the Thai relatives, America is another world where culture including the language is beyond their grasp.

In Thai culture, a woman is defined as virtuous, graceful, and conservative in her sexuality and morality, and responsible for household duties (Klunklin & Greenwood, 2005). On the contrary, the mothers of the *luuk kreung* in this research were from different regions in Thailand who were looking for jobs to sustain their families back home. Thus, despite using their sexuality and lowering their morality, the women were duty-bound to provide for their families.

To be able to raise their children, some of the *luuk kreung's* mothers remarry. In some cases, like Thappani's mother chose to remain single. Tanong's mother married a Swiss national so she could leave Thailand to find a new life.

Thailand participated in the Cold War by hosting the US Bases to protect itself from communism which was holding its grip from neighboring countries – Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Despite the tension in the region, the Cold War also brought economic boom to the rest



and recreation (R&R) which included bars, motels and hotels to cater to the growing presence of the GIs. As a consequence, the *luuk kreung* became its unwanted product. There may be serious relationship or momentary interlude among the GIs and the women resulting to wanted or unwanted pregnancy. We may never know because this topic has not been discussed intensively.

Fifty-seven years have passed, yet despite their presence, the *luuk kreung* are still invisible, reducing them as the ‘other’ in an otherwise pure Thai society neglected and forgotten by both governments that are supposed to acknowledge them. They are not seeking for a new citizenship, instead they want closure to find their identities as Thai and American.

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