

Before I begin, two disclaimers:

The farang or Westerner-oriented sector of the Thai sex industry is tiny compared to the sector that serves Thai men, though it generates higher revenue and tends to be very visible whereas the Thai-oriented sector goes out of its way to be *invisible*. Furthermore, many Westerners seem to fail to realize that the sex industry in Thailand is but a miniscule part of the rich fabric that is Thai society and culture.

Just because I do not focus in this paper on the harsher realities of freelance sex workers' lives in Thailand doesn't mean I'm not aware of those realities, or that I think sex workers' lives are filled with fun and song. One should always keep in mind that the moments of freedom and pleasure identified here take place within a larger context of endangered health and the struggle for economic survival and providing for one's family. The decision-making process that leads one to choose sex work as a profession is a difficult and painful one.

## **Telling the Customer What to Do: A Thai Sex Worker Improvisational Folk Chant**

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From Fall 2003 through Fall 2004 I conducted informal, participant observation research among a group of freelance female Bangkok sex workers. This research consisted of regularly sitting at street side “restaurants” and “bars” (makeshift affairs consisting of portable carts and plastic tables and chairs) with groups of sex workers as they prepared for or “wound down” from working; chatting, drinking and eating and interacting in various ways with each other.

I call this *participant* observation because I also ate, drank beer and liquor with and participated in the sex workers’ conversations. I was taught and sang with them the folk song described here, even trying my hand at improvisation within the structure of the song. Over time I was accepted into and made a part of various before-work rituals aimed at ensuring good luck to the women. I also became *confidant* to all manner of anecdotes and stories told by the women relating to their work and various aspects of their personal lives.

I eventually developed very close friendships with a select few of the sex workers. I was invited to and attended social functions totally outside of their working environment, including parties at their homes. I met members of their families, including siblings, children and parents. The closest of my friends adopted a strict policy with me of taking turns to pay for food and drinks, and they would absolutely refuse to let me pay on nights when it was not my turn. This type of very close, very socially equal relationship allowed me access to information and insights into their in-group interactions at a level which I believe would be impossible for a formal, more distanced “researcher”.

I’m describing all of this in detail to paint a picture of just how a Western male was able to become a “participant” in various aspects of Bangkok sex worker culture. There are obviously issues related to the nature of the researcher/researched relationship which flow

from the types of interactions I had with these women, as well as cross-cultural, gender and class issues. Time won't permit me to discuss these here, but I'd be glad to answer questions anyone has related to this matter in the discussion section of this panel or privately.

### **The Setting: Sex-Worker Gathering Areas along Sukhumvit Road**

The interactions described here take place nightly along Sukhumvit Road, a major Bangkok thoroughfare. The gathering places described are situated in close proximity to-- and extending into in some cases--the lower numbered *sois* or side streets of Sukhumvit, roughly from Soi 3 to Soi 13. See your first handout for a rough map of how these gathering areas are distributed.

The permanent businesses adjacent to this area (and those which line Sukhumvit itself) are tourist-oriented hotels, restaurants, bars, souvenir vendors, tailors, cafes, bookstores, internet shops, travel agents and similar businesses.

Among the tourist-oriented bars in the area are several complexes of "*bar beers*." These are informal hostess bars where the servers are available for sexual services outside the bar. Also nearby is a large "entertainment complex" featuring three floors of go-go bars, and several dance clubs and "beer gardens." The latter two types of business are set up as meeting places for freelance sex workers and Western (and Middle Eastern) males. These initial meetings are a prelude to sexual assignments at nearby hotels. It is primarily in and around these dance clubs and beer gardens that the freelance sex workers profiled here find their customers. The most important of these are marked on your map.

Note that I will not go into detail about the sex workers' work or life histories. I will not discuss their reasons for pursuing sex work, their amount of earnings, interactions with customers, health issues, etc. These issues are all important, but as I found when I attempted a literature review in preparation for this paper, these topics have been covered extensively elsewhere. Sex workers' *work*, I would argue, has been focused on so much and so exclusively that virtually all *cultural* aspects of sex workers' lives worldwide have been

ignored. In the specific Bangkok environment, sex workers' existence as a unique social group or subculture in the larger Thai society, has likewise been passed over. My goal here is to bring attention to that very culture.

Suffice it to say that the women profiled and described here range in age from early twenties to late forties, and hail from provinces throughout Thailand (though most are from the central and northeast regions). The average age of these sex workers, however, falls in the mid to late twenties. All of the women described here are freelance sex workers, meaning they are not employed by any establishment nor do they answer to any pimps. Their earnings are entirely their own.

The informal “in-group” gathering places indicated on your map, which I'm about to describe, serve two functions for freelance sex workers. First of all, there is a small but adequate number of makeshift bars and restaurants which are open early in this area, off the actual street on *sois* and sub-*sois*. These serve as “staging areas” where the sex workers congregate in the beginning of the evening, roughly from 8:30 to 11:00 pm. Here the women socialize, fortify themselves with alcohol for the night of work ahead, eat, smoke and touch up their makeup. This socializing includes all the usual working class Thai conversational topics: family, children, shopping, the weather, national or city events, frustrations in dealing with the government or other institutions. Conversations of course also include tales of the previous night's work.

The work-related tales can be boastful and victorious, describing earnings gained from a particularly lucrative customer. They can also be mournful complaints of a frustrating night with no customer at all, or horror stories of a cheap or troublesome customer, or the story of a personal drunken mishap or argument.

The makeshift establishments greatly multiply after midnight and in some stretches of Sukhumvit completely cover the sidewalk. These street side bars and restaurants also serve as a “winding down” space later at night and into the early morning. In-group

socializing similar to that just described continues after the dance clubs and beer gardens close, which is anywhere from 1:00-2:00 am depending on the specific business.

Customers or potential customers of the women are rarely present at the pre-work gatherings, though they can be. This especially holds true for regular or repeat customers who might recognize one of the women as he walks by on the street and then sits down. When customers do sit down at the tables, it is usually only for a drink or two, as a prelude for then going off to a bar, dance club or back to a hotel with the woman he sat down to talk to. Customers are not technically excluded from the pre-work gatherings. Most customers do not understand Thai, or do not understand enough to cause any self-censoring among the conversants, so their presence is in one sense less of an intrusion than might be expected. Nevertheless, one can sometimes observe negative reactions among some women to the presence of foreign men. One could compare this, perhaps, to the reactions of employees to a customer walking into the back room of a restaurant, clothing or auto parts store. I should mention here that Thai working class men such as motorcycle taxi drivers or vendors at times join the women with no apparent disruption in the women's socializing.

After midnight and especially after 2:00 am when the bars and clubs have all closed, the street side gathering places overlap into the sex workers' "work space." These areas now serve as a location for meeting customers (new and old) in addition to in-group socializing. It should be noted, however, that according to my observations these late-night gathering areas are not particularly dependable or lucrative spots at which to meet customers.

After 2:00 am especially, business picks up noticeably at these establishments. Note that most of the street side gathering places serve until dawn. After 2:00, sex workers who are employed by go-go clubs and bar beers flock to the gathering areas as well. The mood in the a.m. hours at the street side gathering places is quite different than it is before midnight, for several reasons, not the least of which are the two added populations, Western men and sex workers employed by establishments.

First of all, by now everyone—sex workers and potential customers alike—has drunk quite a bit. Discussions become louder, more boisterous, more carefree, but often also more heated. Arguments and out-and-out fights sometimes break out. It is also at these late-night/early morning gatherings that the folk song I'm going to talk about is most often performed.

Despite the presence of some Western males, these late night gathering areas are populated by probably 80% sex worker-only groups. Showing up at one of these “sex worker-dominated” gathering places means one has not found a customer yet for the night, and has probably been drinking for a while now, on one's own financial resources.

### **Performance and Text of “The Song”**

The attitude and emotional state of sex workers as their late-night, in-group socializing turns to song performance, I believe, fits one of two profiles. The first possibility is that a given sex worker is hopeful for some “last minute” success with one of the Western males filing past—and sometimes sitting down to drink at—the gathering areas. In this frame of mind the song, I would argue, serves as a kind of boisterous, alcohol- and camaraderie-fueled “pep talk” or rallying cry to oneself and one's friends. **Incidentally, improvisations based on popular Western songs are also frequently sung by the sex workers, directed at passing Western males. The lyrics of these songs are specifically altered to try to humorously entice the males to sit down at the tables.** Note that the folk song described in this paper, however, differs from these improvisations on Western pop songs significantly in that it is *only* sung for the sex worker in-group, and not at all for a *farang* (Westerner) audience.

The other profile of a singer of the folk song described here is that of a sex worker throwing up her hands fatalistically and deciding her night at work has been unsuccessful. In this case, I believe, the woman is simply resigning herself to getting good and drunk and enjoying chatting and singing for the rest of the night with her friends. Either way, however,

I think the text of the song can be analyzed in roughly the same way, something I will attempt after playing you a recording of the song and looking at one version of its lyrics.

*(here the song is played and a handout with the lyrics in Thai and English passed out)*

The structure of the song is quite simple and similar to many traditional folk chant forms found throughout the world. This song is in fact based on a specific popular Thai folk song, the type sung by children in a schoolyard or by adult friends on a road trip. A basic call and response pattern is set up and then repeated for each numbered soi off Sukhumvit in the area frequented by the sex workers. The song starts its lyrical journey at Soi 1 (where, interestingly, a number of the group best known for singing it happen to live) and ends at Soi 13, where they are usually sitting when they sing it. The vowel of each verb inserted into the structure “I’m going to make the *farang* \_\_\_\_\_” must rhyme with the vowel present in the number of the soi referred to in that verse. Usually the tone of the verb chosen and the tone of the number match as well. There is no set “correct” rhyming verb for any given soi number, but some verbs obviously lend themselves to the structural as well as semantic criteria needed to maintain the spirit of the song. Nevertheless, the song is improvisatory, and I’ve heard several variations of the rhymes represented in the recorded version you’ve just heard and the transcript you’re looking at. Clever rhyming verb choices by one of the singers, especially previously untried ones, are rewarded with applause and laughter by the other singers. In the well-known children’s version of the song, the topical matter of the song is sometimes subjects studied at school; instead of numbered sois, kilometer markers or even the names of provinces can provide the material for rhyming with improvised verbs. In adult (but non-sex worker) versions of the song, kilometer markers may also be used, but often the verbs chosen for rhyming are bawdy and lewd, as they are in the sex worker version.

I’d now like to point out what I think are several interesting features of the song’s lyrics. First of all, there is the opening faux-innocent and sweetly inquisitive tone of the “call” in the song’s call-and-response format (“Where are you going dear miss, now that

night has fallen?”), and the repeated refrain of “why do you ask?” in the response and “why are you going [there]?” in the subsequent call. In the children’s version this same opening is innocent enough, to be sure. But here the opening promises a general atmosphere of playfulness and mischievousness, and of course the interlocutors know full well where the “dear miss” (นวลอนงค์) is going now that night has fallen, and what she will be up to there.

Secondly, the very fact that every rhyming verb which corresponds to a soi number has to do with what the sex workers claim they’re “going to make the *farang* do” is highly significant. Here, the faceless customer is clearly being belittled, if not out-and-out disrespected. In most sex worker performances of the song, this hypothetical customer is referred to by the pronoun **มัน**, which literally means “it” and is used to indicate, among other things, intimacy when used to refer to one’s family members and friends and disrespect when used to refer to those one doesn’t know or those to whom one is otherwise obviously *not* close. I should point out here that normally, customers are referred to in in-group conversation by the much more respectful pronoun **เขา** (and **เขา** is in fact used in most verses in the recorded version you’ve just heard) or the very familiar but still respectful **แก**.

In normal conversation, **มัน** is usually reserved for “problem” customers, especially customers who show a great deal of disrespect for the sex worker. We can sum up by saying that in this way, the customer’s usual importance and status as rich foreigner (or even potential boyfriend and sponsor) to be pleased for a cash payoff is temporarily degraded, to that of simply an object to be manipulated.

In the Soi 1 rhyme, the customer is going to be enticed to “pull” (**ดึง**) the sex worker [along with him]; in the Soi 3 rhyme, he’s going to be enticed to stare at her (**มอง**), etc. Of course, these rhymes could also be analyzed as an instance of turning the tables of power on

the customer. Usually, it is assumed that the customer will tell the sex worker “what to do.” For the period she is with him, she is after all in his employ in a sense, and let us not forget the overall class power differential here. Here, however, in the world of the song, it is the sex worker who is pulling the strings and calling the shots.

In several of the rhymes, the *farang* becomes not simply a general object to be manipulated, but a specific tool for the sex worker’s own pleasure. Consider these rhymes: in the case of Soi 4, the customer is made to have [crude] intercourse (ไป) with the sex worker; in the Soi 7 rhyme, more crude intercourse (เย็ด), and in the Soi 8 rhyme, the customer is made to masturbate the sex worker: probably the most blatant reference here to the sex worker’s own pleasure being derived from the customer.

The performance of the song needs to be seen to be really appreciated, in order to witness the randy smiles, facial expressions and hand and body motions that often accompany these rhymes. This theme in the lyrics may surprise the casual observer, especially those of us indoctrinated by certain clichés concerning sex work in Thailand (“sex workers are sold into slavery and are thus performing the work against their will;” “customers of sex workers in Thailand are overweight old men who can’t get sex in their own country;” etc.). It is actually not that surprising to find such a theme in the song if we look deeper into Bangkok sex worker in-group culture.

I certainly do not want to suggest that all freelance sex workers enjoy all of the sex they have with all—or even most—of their customers. It is a fact, however, readily observable in any number of in-group conversations among sex workers as well as in performances like this one, that some, if not many of the women certainly enjoy some of the sex some of the time. This song is one interesting expression of this. There is also a significant subset of freelance sex workers who will only go with customers who are young, in good physical shape, and whom they feel are attractive and sexually desirable. And such

customers are indeed in ready supply in all of the sex-industry oriented sections of Bangkok, probably in just as great supply as the stereotypical “overweight old man.”

The unspoken principle here, I reason, is that if you have to have sex for a living, a decision all of these women have come to for a number of reasons, you might as well do it with someone you think is attractive. Of course, not all sex workers have such luxury of choice, especially if they want to be assured of income every night. But pleasure remains as a “cultural ideal” among many of the Sukhumvit freelance sex workers, regardless of how often it is actually realized. This ideal finds colorful expression in the text of this song, and especially in its performance.

It should also be remembered that avenues for frank expressions of sexuality among working class and peasant Thai women are virtually non-existent, even today. Whatever the unpleasant aspects of their work, and there are indeed many, these sex workers now have access to many things completely out of their reach in the "straight" world. They spend the night in fancy hotel rooms. They have dinner and drinks (and often presents such as gold necklaces) bought for them. They take plane rides to the islands of southern Thailand. They have the possibility of “sponsorship,” regular cash sent from abroad from one if not several customers at a time. These are all very tangible things, in addition to the “license” to behave as explicitly sexual beings. They are, depending of course on their individual looks and age, potentially heavily sought-after women. And they are completely self-employed. I think the voice of assertiveness in the text and performance of this song touches on that larger sense of social power and freedom as well, a freedom that goes well beyond the sexual freedom expressed in the song.

Attempts on my part to uncover the history of the site-specific version of this song in the Sukhumvit area have been unsuccessful. Even older food vendors, and a retired policeman who is always hanging around the Soi 13 gathering area, knew nothing of when sex workers first started singing it. As the ex-cop puts it, “Oh, that’s just that song that those

girls from Buriram sing”—referring to the provincial origin of actually only 4 members of a larger fairly tight-knit group of friends comprising ethnic Khmers, Laos and Thais from several Thai provinces. This group sings the song more often than any other group I’ve observed, and in fact it’s their interpretation of the song that you just listened to. The ex-cop adds that “somebody has been singing [that song] as far back as I can remember”. At this point it seems the song is simply a part of Sukhumvit area sex worker folk culture, much as a regional folk song in Appalachia or a children’s rhyme on the streets of Chicago might qualify as such.

## **Conclusions**

One might say there isn't anything remarkable about sex workers’ appropriation and adaptation of this Thai folk song. I agree, and in fact, this is my main point: **the freelance sex workers described here are in one way quite unremarkable, and in fact “normal”** in a social and cultural sense. They gather together to discuss their shared work, and have developed and practice various rituals and superstitions regarding “luck” and success relevant to that work. They are normal working class people, trying to eke out a living while coming to terms with what they need to come to terms with in order to carry out their work day after day.

**Sometimes their work and their overall social condition gets to them, and they wonder if it’s all worth it. This drives many—but my no means all of them—to drink.** Their work is also dangerous, to be sure. More dangerous than many professions, less so than others. But in their work they rely on the same common sense and “luck,” “good fortune,” “protection from above,” call it what you will, that we all ultimately rely on to make it through another week without falling off a building, being maimed in a motorcycle wreck, or collapsing from a heart attack. They also have a reasonable chance of survival to the end of the week, the year, their career. Is this so different from the lot of any of us?

At various times, sex workers share with each other what “fun” aspects of their work they can draw out of it. And to be sure, there are myriad aspects of their work that are very far from “fun.” To emphasize the “fun” parts to themselves and to each other, they have developed forms of artistic expression describing their work—a “work song,” if you will-- just like work songs in hundreds if not thousands of manual trades, office jobs, and university departments, have done before them. They have developed a specialized language with which to discuss their work, and a specific belief system in which to frame it, which only members of their in-group can completely understand. Most importantly, they have a life beyond their work, and if they’re lucky and careful, a future, for themselves, their children and their families.

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*Dear Miss, now that night has fallen, where are you going?*  
Why do you ask? I'm going to Soi 1  
*Why are you going there?*  
I'm going to make a *farang pull me* [along with him]  
Soi 1, Soi 1, it's a really good thing...

*Dear Miss, now that night has fallen, where are you going?*  
Why do you ask? I'm going to Soi 2  
*Why are you going there?*  
I'm going to make a *farang stare at me*  
Soi 2, Soi 2, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 3  
...I'm going to make a *farang follow me*  
Soi 3, Soi 3, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 4  
...I'm going to make a *farang fuck me\**  
Soi 4, Soi 4, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 5  
...I'm going to make a *farang swear at me*  
Soi 5, Soi 5, no good at all!

...I'm going to Soi 6  
...I'm going to make a *farang reach his hand down* [my pants, bra, etc.]  
Soi 6, Soi 6, no good at all!

...I'm going to Soi 7  
...I'm going to make a *farang screw me\**  
Soi 7, Soi 7, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 8  
...I'm going to make a *farang caress my clit*  
Soi 8, Soi 8, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 9  
...I'm going to make a *farang bone me\**  
Soi 9, Soi 9, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 10  
...I'm going to make a *farang give me a tip!*  
Soi 10, Soi 10, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 11  
...I'm going to make a *farang screw me\**  
Soi 11, Soi 11, it's a really good thing...

...I'm going to Soi 12  
...I'm going to make a *farang try me*  
Soi 12, Soi 12, it's a really good thing...

\* To translate each of the Thai slang terms for intercourse used in these three instances (the Thai term used for Soi 11 is a repeat of the term used for Soi 7), I've somewhat arbitrarily chosen three different American English slang terms.