

**THE MEANINGS OF SEX:
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTHEAST THAILAND**

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It is my hope that Thai researchers can learn, from both the strengths and weaknesses of this study, to ask the right questions and find effective approaches for studying one of the most important and pervasive parts of the lives of a group of people with whom we share much, and from whom we can learn much.

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the understanding of the concept of sex (*phêet*) among university students in Mahasarakham province in northeast Thailand. Specifically, it describes different categories of sex and related concepts, meanings associated with each, and how those are communicated through social action.

Northeast Thailand has shifted away from an agricultural-based society to a cash-based agro-industrial one. This, combined with the influence of a Bangkok-centered national elite and international globalization, has resulted in an influx of new cultural knowledge and shifting meanings related to sex, some reinforcing each other, others in conflict. Many of these conceptual conflicts are located in tensions between tradition and modernity, local culture and Bangkok culture, and Thai-ness and foreign-ness. At these points of tension, meanings are reinterpreted and recreated.

This study relies on a variety of research methods including participant-observation, interviews, and questionnaires, and thus is methodologically situated at a crossroads of qualitative and quantitative traditions. This mixed method approach facilitates a broad understanding of the concept of sex, including categories of sex, sex roles, and sex behavior.

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