Buying Innocence: child-sex tourists in Thailand

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ABSTRACT  Based on ethnographic work in a small community in Thailand, this article looks at different categories of sex tourists, analysing what particular qualities they find attractive in Thai children and women. It will argue that the boundaries between tourists who have sex with children, and those who have sex with adults, are extremely permeable and that there may not always be a distinct difference between the two categories of men. Child-sex tourism does not occur in a vacuum and cannot be separated from more general social, economic and cultural concerns, which are often overlooked in analyses. There is a premium on youth among many clients of Thai prostitutes and the actual age of the child is usually irrelevant to all but a small minority of abusers. Instead a situation has developed in which women are infantilised while children are seen as precociously adult, and the distinctions between child and adult and innocence and experience are deliberately blurred.

The discovery, in the 1990s, that Western men were travelling overseas in order to have sex with children had a major impact on the media, on the campaigns of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and on international legislators. Lurid stories appeared in national and international newspapers, with headlines such as ‘Disneyland for paedophiles’, ‘Paedophiles find paradise on a white beach in Thailand’ or ‘Voyage to a life of shattered dreams’.1 These articles would usually go on to tell the heart-rending story of a Southeast Asian girl who was either cruelly duped, or sold by her impoverished and greedy parents, into a life of prostitution. She would be taken to a brothel, forced to have sex with ‘up to 20 clients a night’, usually foreigners, and then be rescued by a kind-hearted charity worker, or journalist, only to discover she was HIV positive and had a limited time left to live. Campaigners devoted resources to raising awareness of the problem and organisations such as End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) came into being specifically to combat the problem. Thanks to their work legislation was passed in a variety of countries allowing for prison sentences of up to 17 years for men found guilty in their home states of sexual crimes against children abroad.2
Some of the cases uncovered by these campaigns were indeed horrific and involved men who had sex with very young children, some who filmed this abuse and, in at least one case, a man who assaulted a child so badly that she died. That this was happening under the guise of tourism was particularly objectionable and the idea that Western men were travelling the world, abusing their financial, social, gender and ethnic privileges by buying sex from children was rightly condemned. While the morality of adult prostitution might remain open to debate and discussions were able to take place about choice and force, voluntary or involuntary entry into prostitution, and indeed over who was exploiting whom, there could be no such deliberations for children. Definitions of 'child sex tourist' or 'child prostitute' were less necessary than immediate protection and even those who supported adult sex-workers' rights, and who rejected an abolitionist agenda, drew a line at admitting any nuances when analysing child prostitutes and their clients.

Behind the headlines, and the understandable moral outrage, however, the reality of child prostitution is somewhat different. How to define child prostitution is not simply an academic question but one that has important implications for analysing and preventing the phenomenon. More generally the question of who is a sex tourist is extremely problematic; does it apply only to men who travel with the express purpose of buying sex or who buy sex as part of an all-inclusive package? Does it refer to men who travel for business but might buy sex if available? What about long-term foreign residents? Do military personnel count as sex tourists? Even more problematic are places such as Patpong in Bangkok, with its bars and sex shows a well known tourist attraction in themselves. Are people who wander down these streets soaking up the atmosphere or even watching a sex show also sex tourists? Further problems of definition become apparent when discussing distinctions between child and adult prostitutes. It is possible to define a child prostitute as anyone under the age of 18 who sells sex, but is there a difference between men who use pre-pubescent child prostitutes and those who pay for sex with teenagers? Are child-sex tourists only those men who travel specifically to have sex with children or is there an overlap more generally with sex tourism? Even if a man does travel to a country such as Thailand with the sole purpose of having sex, does he qualify as a child-sex tourist if the person he has sex with is 17? As Judith Ennew notes, 'One universal feature of prostitution is that it is a trade in which success is determined by youth above many other factors. What is being sold is not just sexuality, but youthful sexuality. An old prostitute is a redundant prostitute.' There are large numbers of young prostitutes in the sex industry who will be post-puberty but who are under 18, and whether or not their clients can be called child-sex tourists remains debatable.

In order to overcome these definitional difficulties, some academics refer to two types of child-sex tourist, the preferential user of child prostitutes and the situational user. Men described as preferential abusers are those who fit more closely with popular understandings of 'the paedophile' and are those who actively seek out sex with children of a particular age and gender.
Situational users are those men who might have sex with a child if on offer, especially if the term ‘child’ includes anyone under the age of 18, but whose sexual preferences are not necessarily for children. In this article I will discuss examples of these two types of child sex tourist in a resort in Thailand where I conducted research among both adult and child prostitutes. I will argue that, while placing these two types of men in different categories of client can be conceptually useful, there is also an overlap between them. The construction of childlike innocence is a feature of prostitution in Thailand and the line between men who have sex with children and those who have sex with adults can become very blurred. My sample is a small one that I do not claim as typical of all child prostitutes in Thailand, but by presenting some empirical evidence about these children and their Western clients in one particular community, I will show how constructions of innocence and childishness are central to commercial sexual exchanges in this context.

The nature of the problem

There has been criticism that groups who campaign against tourists coming to Thailand to buy sex from children ignore the role of the indigenous market for child sex and the fact that the majority of child prostitutes are not found in tourist bars but in backstreet brothels catering for local men. This is indeed a seriously overlooked and under-researched aspect of Thailand’s sex industry and children working in this sector may be more vulnerable than those working with Western clients, who often have better working conditions and earn considerably more money. Nevertheless, Western men buying sex from Thai children have been the most visible aspect of the problem of child prostitution in Thailand, and the part that governments and NGOs have done most to control; while there may be no definitive split between children with foreign and local clients, it is children who sell sex to foreigners that have generated most controversy.

Despite the concern the issue raises, there is very little documented evidence about the nature or extent of the problem and a large amount of supposition, speculation and sensationalism, based on very few, often extreme, cases where individual men have been caught and prosecuted. There are no definitive figures, or even good guesswork, on how many children sell sex to tourists, or Westerners more generally; neither is there reliable information on who their clients are, their motivations for buying sex with children, nor whether they have been deterred by the new legislation. There are claims that men are turning to younger women and girls because they believe them to be free of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, and that this has led to an increase in demand for children. It is also claimed that some Asian men believe that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS and other venereal diseases and that tourists from China or Taiwan actively seek out young children.

None of these claims has been fully verified, however, and the small amount of evidence that does exist is patchy and based on small-scale studies. Although one million child prostitutes in Asia is now an accepted figure used.
by NGOs worldwide, it has little factual basis. Indeed, this figure has been used in a number of ways, including in one ECPAT brochure, which claimed, ‘tourists create a demand for more than one million “fresh” child prostitutes every year—a very different interpretation of the number. The question of virginity and the price paid for virgins is also problematic. There is no ethnographic evidence (as opposed to much repeated and back-referenced statements on the subject) to suggest that Chinese men do believe that sex with a virgin cures AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases, and similar comments have also been made about black South African men, and indeed about the clients of child prostitutes in Victorian London, which suggests that concerns about virginity are as much part of campaigners’ mythologies as they are about the actual behaviour of child-sex tourists. The spoiling of a virgin child and the irrevocable loss of sexual innocence is a particularly potent symbol of the horrors of child prostitution, so it is not surprising that it provokes such outrage, but whether it is such a concern for clients is less easy to find out. It is a reasonable suspicion that fears of infection have increased the demand for children and, in some interviews, clients have admitted to evaluating women upon their cleanliness and vitality. It may therefore be the case that younger women are seen as less risky than older ones, but there is no firm evidence.

It is tempting to separate child prostitution from adult prostitution, Western clients from local ones, and sex work from other forms of labour but, in reality, the lines are more blurred. While sex tourism in Thailand is often presented as a recent phenomenon, caused almost entirely by foreigners, there is evidence of a longer history. Before the 1960s, however, the number of foreign men using local prostitutes was extremely small and it was not until the influx of US servicemen on Rest and Recreation breaks from the Vietnam war that prostitution for foreigners became an organised business with bars and brothels set up explicitly catering to them. How many children worked in these places is unknown, and whether these men count as sex tourists is also debatable, but during this period Thailand gained a reputation as a sexual paradise and became a byword for cheap, blatant, commercially available sex. By 1975 most troops had gone, leaving behind the infrastructure of the sex industry and a stereotype of beautiful, pliant and docile Thai women, who offered much more than paid sex. Thailand became renowned as a sexual playground where anything went, an impression fostered in an extraordinary statement by the Thai Deputy Prime Minister in November 1980 in which he said:

I ask all governors to consider the natural scenery in your provinces, together with some forms of entertainment that some of you might consider disgusting and shameful because they are forms of sexual entertainment that attract tourists…we must do this because we have to consider the jobs that will be created for the people.

Although there was no suggestion that child prostitution should be promoted or tolerated, this statement implicitly acknowledges that tourist revenues
were more important than child protection or ensuring that children did not become part of the industry.

This promotion of Thailand as a place of sexual fantasy did not go unchallenged and by the late 1980s women’s groups were protesting against the image of brothel Thailand by picketing Bangkok airport and targeting flights from Taiwan and Japan with placards such as ‘Thailand not Sexland’ or ‘Gonorrhoea Express’. At the same time the issue of child prostitution began to be a specific concern among campaigning groups objecting to the ways in which Thai children were depicted as sexually available and part of the adult sex industry. One of their first victories was over Lauda Air’s ‘Baby Club’ advertising campaign. In 1992 an edition of Lauda Air’s in-flight magazine featured a series of fictitious postcards from a number of the airline’s destinations. The one from Australia showed a kangaroo, while the postcard from Thailand showed a naked, pubescent girl, surrounded by a heart inscribed with the words ‘from Thailand with love’. The text on the back was signed off by ‘Werner, Gunter, Fritzl, Morsel and Joe’, with the words, ‘Got to close now. The tarts in the Bangkok Baby Club are waiting for us.’ Lauda Air claimed that the cartoon was a joke which had been misinterpreted but did withdraw it from circulation after protests.

While sex tourism was disliked and campaigned against, there was also an understanding that it was impossible to combat, given the support it enjoyed from the government and other vested interests. Focusing on child-sex tourism as something uniquely wicked allowed campaigning groups to find common ground with governments who might tacitly support sex tourism, but who could not be seen to condone child prostitution. It also enabled alliances to be made with those who supported sex workers’ rights and were campaigning for better regulation of the sex industry, rather than abolition. Child-sex tourism was presented as an uncontroversial issue, above politics, economics or vested interests, which could be understood within a straightforward moral framework of evil perpetrators and innocent child victims and which did not require anyone to ask awkward questions about tourism as an economic development strategy, the position of women more generally in Thailand, and the widespread use of child prostitutes by local men. As Marjorie Muecke writes about the campaigns led by Thai women’s groups against child prostitution:

[These groups] interpret prostitution as a function of both the low education and poverty in Thailand as a Third World country, and as a function of the greed of the individuals who sell, procure or buy girls for labor in the prostitution industry. These views implicitly discount class responsibility for prostitution by globalizing it to the scale of the Third World, and by individualizing it to detestable characters. This stance also safeguards the women’s group’s members’ relationships to their male partners and peers. By championing the cause of child victims of prostitution, the elite activists protect the disadvantaged children of the nation and protect the ideology of women—and themselves—as nurturing mothers. And by restricting their activism to child prostitution, they avoid impugning male friends and relatives, that is those
of their own class, and elitist systems (such as police, government officials surreptitiously involved in the sex entertainment trade) for supporting adult prostitution.22

Ethnographic evidence

The complexities of these issues were apparent when I undertook ethnographic fieldwork in a small slum community, which I have called Baan Nua, situated on the edge of a larger tourist resort in Thailand. It was a poor community that survived through the prostitution of some of its children. The children’s clients were exclusively Western and their parents were well aware of, and even encouraged, what they did. There were 65 children in Baan Nua, around 35 of whom worked regularly or occasionally as prostitutes; this number included both boys and girls aged between six and 14. I spent 15 months doing this research, interviewing the children, gathering life histories and acting as a participant observer in their lives.23 While I built up good relationships with the children, and could talk to them at length about their life, the role of prostitution in it, and their understandings of what they were doing, their clients were more problematic. None of them would agree to talk to me and my knowledge of them comes only through the children. Nevertheless, these children’s attitudes to their clients, and their descriptions of them, do give important insights into child-sex tourists in Thailand and the difficulties of identifying and stopping these men.

As I have argued elsewhere,24 children in Baan Nua turned to prostitution only after they had tried a variety of other jobs such as scavenging, working in sweatshops or begging. Prostitution paid them considerably more than these jobs and they perceived it as less physically demanding. More importantly, however, they used prostitution as a way of fulfilling what they understood to be their filial duties. The children felt that, by earning money for their parents and keeping the family together, they were acting in socially sanctioned roles as dutiful daughters and sons and that prostituting themselves with the ‘right’ intentions meant that there was no moral opprobrium attached to what they did. While they never claimed to like prostitution, they often described it to me as better and easier than other jobs they had tried and, although they seemed wilfully ignorant of the threat of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, they argued that prostitution gave them access to benefits such as staying in good hotels or apartments, eating well and being given large occasional payments. Prostitution with foreign clients was not entirely about poverty, although that played a part, nor was it about abuse, although again that was also evident. In the children’s own analysis of what they did, however, and why they did it, selling sex was about social relationships and fulfilling their filial obligations to their families.25

This is, of course, a difficult argument to make and I am not suggesting that Thai culture demands that children prostitute themselves, or even that, because the children did not see what was happening to them as abusive, then it was not. What was clear, however, was that the children had very different
attitudes to selling sex, to family relationships and to their clients than I did and that the media stories of debt bondage and brothels did not apply to all children who worked as prostitutes. It was also clear that clients themselves did not fit into easy categories and stereotypes of sex tourists and that, even though they were buying sex from children, they were not necessarily part of paedophile rings or organised sex tourism.

I will illustrate this point by discussing the case of Lek, the young woman I got to know best in Baan Nua, and her client James. Lek was introduced to commercial sex at the age of six by one of her neighbours, an eight-year-old called Noy, who was regularly having sex with a businessman called James. Noy introduced Lek to James and showed her how to masturbate him. For several years she continued to do this until, at the age of eight, he began to have full intercourse with her. James had other sexual partners, including a Filipino woman with whom he lived in the tourist resort, but appeared to have a preference for young girls. He gave money to Lek’s family and also sent Lek to school, which she attended only sporadically. As Lek grew up, she continued to sell sex to foreigners until she became pregnant at the age of 12. She tried to induce an abortion but her mother, a devout Buddhist, believed this was a sin and made her keep the child. She worked throughout her pregnancy as a prostitute and as a pimp for the other children in the slum. In return for James’s continued protection and financial support, she had sex with him herself and found him other girls, including her six-year-old cousin, and her nine-year-old neighbour. Six weeks after giving birth she was back to work both as a prostitute and a pimp. During the course of many conversations I asked her about her feelings towards James and what he asked her to do and she consistently refused to characterise this relationship as abusive or exploitative. By the time I met her she had known James for over eight years, he always gave her money when she needed it and she claimed him as a friend. In one conversation she told me, ‘he is so good to me, he gives me and my family money whenever we need it, how can he be bad?’.

Other children showed the same loyalty to their clients and their relationships with them became more complicated than simply exchanging money for sex. Children strove to put these relationships on a more reciprocal basis and were continually struggling to include their clients in aspects of their lives outside the sexual/financial transaction. Appeals would be made for loans or money to rebuild houses and when clients responded favourably, children saw the relationship as one of friendship rather than one of unequal exchange. Some children described their male clients as friends who helped out when they needed it and claimed that sex was only incidental to the relationship. They never set a price for sex or demanded money afterwards and instead accepted ‘gifts’. The children refused to use the word prostitution and constructed a view of the world where their customers were guests, boyfriends or simply friends. They denied absolutely that they were ‘really’ prostitutes or that these men were ‘truly’ clients. James was uniformly seen in positive terms in Baan Nua: both adults and children claimed him as a friend and a good man. Similarly Julio, a European in his
mid-thirties, who paid several children for sex and sometimes arranged for his friends to meet the children, was a popular and welcome visitor to the slum. He was willing to help families out financially and, during the course of the time I was working in Baan Nua, sent regular sums of money to various families as well as one-off amounts for the rebuilding of one house and the re-roofing of another. One child’s mother frequently sent requests to Julio for money and, because he always responded, she claimed him as a friend with a social role in her family’s life. At Christmas several of the children asked me to write cards for them, saying ‘Thank-you Julio’ and ‘We love you, Julio’ in English.

It is very easy to analyse these two cases as examples of self-serving men using their money in a cynical and manipulative way to get vulnerable children to do what they wanted. Certainly the fact that neither they, nor any of the other men who came into Baan Nua to buy sex, would talk to me did suggest that they were fully aware of the immorality of what they were doing and its possible consequences. However, the children themselves never identified them as abusers and were always at pains to tell me that these were their friends, and sometimes even their boyfriends. Again, simply because the children did not claim to feel abused did not mean that they were not, and I am not offering any sort of justification for these men. Yet, looking at things from a child’s point of view, and getting to know the children, did illuminate certain aspects of child-sex tourism that are potentially more uncomfortable and which suggest that campaigns for changes in legislation will only ever have limited effects on stopping the problem.

For a start, neither of the two men discussed above, nor any of the others I knew about, came to Thailand as part of a ‘child-sex-tour’ package. While Julio exchanged information with others, and even put them in touch with some of the children, there was no large-scale paedophile organisation passing children between its members. Second, while both men may have had a particular interest in children of certain ages, they were willing to have sex with whatever children were available, as well as with adult women. The children told me that James, and several of the other men I saw coming to the slum, also used adult prostitutes; thus the distinction between preferential and situational abusers is not always as complete as is sometimes assumed. Third, the children were not passive victims and tried, as hard as they could, to make limited choices in difficult circumstances and were proud of these choices; dismissing this as ignorance or false consciousness of the part of the children seriously diminishes and belittles the very real resilience they showed.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the stereotype of an innocent virgin being used repeatedly by foreigners in a brothel gives an extremely distorted picture of child prostitution, which fetishises virginity and sexual innocence. Newspapers and campaigning accounts of child prostitutes’ lives (and particularly their deaths) are liable to be unnecessarily prurient, focusing on the pain and degradation of sex, and the outrage committed on the unsullied body of a child. For many children, however, selling sex is not...
about kidnapping, or virginity being bought for high sums, but is about the scarcity of choice and opportunity for those who are poor and vulnerable. For their clients buying sex is not necessarily about paying for the unpolluted body of a child, and the real child prostitutes of Baan Nua, especially the very young, were not untouched or virginal in the way that child prostitutes are imagined to be. They were dirty, ridden with lice and often had ugly, open sores on their arms and legs caused by their bad diet and the bad sanitation of their slum. It is hard to know what their attraction was except for their smallness and their willingness to have sex for money. The real child prostitutes did not project an air of virginal innocence, or even of adolescent sexuality. These were artificial qualities that, as I will go on to discuss, had to be purchased from adults passing as children. The men who wanted a genuinely young girl or boy not only had to be prepared to pay a high price for her or him, but also had to confront the reality of poverty and disease.

Creating innocence

There is a well documented link between sex, travel and the eroticisation of the ethnic other. In Thailand this is also mapped onto the borderline between adulthood and childhood, where categories of sex work, youth, childishness, beauty and ethnicity have been intentionally collapsed into each other and ideas of innocence have been deliberately manipulated and commoditised. Bars that cater to sex tourists play on this and are called names like ‘The Classroom’ or ‘Baby-A-Go-Go’ and feature young women dressed as uniformed schoolgirls. Adverts for such places make a point of emphasising that the girls are ‘very young’ and some bars advertise that they have virgins for sale; one researcher noted that a Bangkok bar had a sign outside reading, ‘5 fresh virgins, 4 down, one to go’. Whether or not this is true is impossible to verify: there is always an element of macho bravado and a desire to shock at these bars, but such places are deliberately obscuring the boundaries between sexual innocence and sexual experience and between child and adult.

Promises of youth, virginity and innocence have become commercialised and men are sold the image of the child-like prostitute who is unsophisticated, undemanding, submissive and pliable. Researchers who have interviewed sex tourists in Thailand have found that men list similar characteristics that they find attractive in Thai women: simplicity, loyalty, affection and innocence. The women are also, in their eyes, small, without body hair and, most importantly of all, childish. A 50-year-old Australian once said to me:

Dealing with Thai women is like dealing with 13-year-old school kids. You treat them just the same and they are quite happy. The mentality is just the same. Still they’re better than Australian women, who go on about being liberated the whole time and then just walk round the house in a track suit getting fat. I mean who wants one of them?
Other researchers have heard similar comments, in which Thai women are constructed in opposition to both adults in general and to Western women in particular.

Tom [a bar owner] criticised farang [Western] women as snotty... They wanted to attract you and then cut you down when they did. Tom sexually preferred Thai women because they didn’t have body hair... He also complained that farang women were too big.32

Since I got back to New Zealand I have gone out with several English, German and local women but find they’re extremely finance oriented, selfish, untrustworthy and basically not what I’ve been looking for. I was in Thailand with the army until recently and found the women most appealing, beautiful and faithful, just what I’m looking for...33

They’re [Thai women] all like film stars or models, aren’t they? It’s the hair and the skin and they’re almost always petite, you know, slim and small.34

What is striking about these comments is how similar the qualities these men are looking for in Thai women are to those that paedophiles find sexually attractive in children. Glenn Wilson and David Cox’s study of 77 paedophiles found that the physical traits that they listed as attractive included good looks, smooth skin (hairlessness) and smallness, while the personality traits included innocence, openness and curiosity.35 For these sex tourists the ideal woman is the childish one from whom one can buy sex without the difficulty of relating to an adult woman, or without the stigma of sexually abusing a child. Many of these men are very hostile to those they consider paedophiles; nevertheless, their own interest in women seems to focus on the latter’s non-adult qualities.

Julia O’Connell-Davidson has shown how sex tourists themselves continually try to negotiate ideas of normality and naturalness. They are very hostile to Arab and non-white men, claiming that Thai women prefer, and are attracted to, their own white skin. Heterosexual men express disgust and distaste for homosexuals (whom they often describe, without irony, as paedophiles).

It is acceptable for them, as heterosexual men, to exploit the economic misfortunes of Thai women, but homosexual men who do the same thing to Thai men are ‘sick’. It is acceptable for them to pay a bar fine and take a 16-year-old girl back to their hotel for the night, but they expressed a desire to do physical violence to men who pay pimps to take 14- or 15-year-old boys back to their rooms. Their own observations of paedophiles, ‘gays’ and ‘perverts’ form an endlessly diverting topic for conversation between themselves and serve as a platform from which to assert their own moral superiority.37

Distancing themselves from the abnormal or immoral sexual practices of others bolsters their masculine, heterosexual identity and also protects them from the sexual rebuff they fear in their home countries. The subservient, child-like Thai woman becomes the antithesis of the demanding and rejecting adult Western woman. The very qualities that most appeal to these men are

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Thai women’s supposed childishness: women who look like pubescent girls are admired and paid for, even by men who claim to despise the clients of child prostitutes. Such men might not actively seek out sex with children but would not see a Thai 16-year-old, or even possibly a 15-, 14- or 13-year-old as a child. What is prized is their youth, their littleness and their innocence; Thai women are usually much younger than their clients, and they are inevitably much smaller. As O’Connell-Davidson notes, ‘In the mirror of the “beautiful Oriental girl” [the sex tourist] sees himself reflected back not twice as large, as Virginia Woolf had it, but half his size and half his age’.

Such an attitude creates a situation where men are willing to have sex with a child in a foreign context and see no difference between a child and an adult. Indeed, the clients themselves deny and obscure any boundary or, as O’Connell-Davidson points out, in many cases, simply do not care about the difference between a 14-year-old and a 24-year-old as long as ‘they “fancy” the look of her’. Others will claim an intrinsic difference between Western and Thai children, either physically or in sexual behaviour. The 50-year-old Australian man quoted earlier, for example, went on to say:

All this child prostitution stuff is the invention of the media. They come out here not knowing anything about Thai culture. They look at the women and think that they are very young whereas they are 20 or so. Take my mate. He owns a bar here and has a Thai wife. The first time I met her, I said to myself, what’s that 10-year-old schoolgirl doing here? Only when I was introduced to her as Brian’s wife, did I realise that she’s had many birthdays since her tenth. But you really can’t tell with these girls, you know. That’s where the media makes its mistakes.

Men such as this deny the child status to all children because they convince themselves that all Thais are older than they look and that therefore categories of child and adult are meaningless. The preference is for the childlike and youthful sexuality commands a price in which age, except to a small group of preferential abusers, is not the main issue. Women who appear very young may well be as sought-after as those who really are young, but to a foreigner who is unable or does not want to guess ages, any distinction becomes meaningless. Others draw on racist understandings of ‘other’ cultures, claiming that early or incestuous sexual behaviour is the norm, so that Western notions of childhood or sexuality have no meaning in these contexts. I was often told by men in the tourist bars that ‘girls are taught how to fuck by their mothers’ and that ‘the first men they ever fuck are their fathers’. These men often told me that I did not understand Thai culture and its uninhibited attitudes to sexuality, that sex in Thailand was different, more natural, and that making comparisons with other places was therefore untenable.

The paradox is that the childlike innocence being sold is false; it is a commodity for sale, much like any other. The vast majority of women working in Thailand’s foreign red light districts are over 18 and many already have children. The crackdown on child prostitution that occurred during the
1990s targeted these bars and it became rare for any bar owner to risk having under-age girls on the premises. However, the illusion of innocence and inexperience is still desired. Many bar girls, when telling their stories, emphasise that they are new recruits, forced into the professions by poverty and not ‘really’ prostitutes, knowing that this is what their clients want to hear. What many sex tourists fail to realise is that the artlessness, ‘freshness’ and childlike innocence that they most admire in Thai prostitutes are entirely commercialised. These women are fulfilling a fantasy and doing what is expected of them, and it is for that, as much as for sex, that they get paid.

Conclusion

Child-sex tourism is always going to be a controversial and emotive issue. It is hard to look at it objectively, or to argue that children do make choices, and show great resilience, without occasioning accusations of condoning child abuse and encouraging dangerous and immoral men. This has not been my intention and, while I do admire the fortitude of the children that I knew in Baan Nua, I also believe them to have been badly abused by men such as James or Julio. Despite striving towards objectivity, I found that ultimately I could not step outside my Western-based belief systems, which told me that, whatever the children say, and no matter how much they resist the view, adult sexual activity with children that involves secrets, possible threats, and a level of coercion must be traumatising and may result in significant emotional damage. There may be no evidence of this for many years, and I hope to be proved wrong, but I do believe that the children suffered, whatever they said. However, I do not believe that this abuse happened in a vacuum or that it can be separated from wider issues. These children turned to prostitution because of the scarcity of choices available to them as poorly educated, socially marginalised individuals. They came to the tourist resort to earn money and found that prostitution paid better than other work and that it was a sensible economic choice for them to make. They catered for a section of the market that placed a premium on pre-pubescent sex but this market flourished as part of a much wider one.

A description of Baan Nua shows that there are indeed a number of cases of preferential paedophiles who will target children of a particular age, but this number is relatively small compared with the overall number of men who have sex with prostitutes under the age of 18. Much of the Thai sex tourism industry is concerned with selling juvenility, encouraging men to think that their sexual partners are young, innocent and childlike. Child-sex tourism and adult-sex tourism, whatever the problems of definition, are part of the same continuum and there is a very thin line between those men who hate paedophiles and those who are prepared to have sex with children. Claiming a difference may well have bolstered the latter’s sense of normality and decency but, for a complete analysis of the phenomenon, both must be looked at in conjunction and the interplay between them acknowledged.
CHILD-SEX TOURISTS IN THAILAND

Notes
3. Rosario Buluyot was an 11- or 12-year-old girl living on the streets of Olangapo in the Philippines. She sold sex to a variety of men including an Austrian doctor, Heinrich Ritter, who in 1986 took her to a hotel room and abused her with a vibrator. He did not remove it and it became infected, causing septicaemia. This, in conjunction with liver failure caused by glue sniffing, led to Rosario’s death in 1987. Ritter was charged with her rape and murder and sentenced in 1989, the first foreigner to be convicted of child sexual abuse in the Philippines. Rosario’s story has since been retold a number of times, often as an example of the typical fate of a child prostitute with foreign clients by, for example, R O’Grady, The Child and the Tourist, Bangkok: ECPAT, 1992; M Axelsson, Rosario is Dead, Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1997; and J Kane, Sold for Sex, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998.
6. Ibid.
7. Most international legislation and NGOs define a child prostitute as anyone under the age of 18 who sells sex. See, for instance, K Ireland, Wish You Weren't Here: The Sexual Exploitation of Children and the Connection with Tourism and International Travel, London: Save the Children Fund, 1993.
10. I discuss here men who travel abroad for the purposes of having sex with children. Although there have been some suggestions that female sex tourists will also buy young boys, for instance in O’Grady, The Child and the Tourist, the proof of this is shaky. There is some evidence of women travellers in the Caribbean and West Africa buying sex from younger men, who may or may not be over 18. See J Phillips, ‘Tourist-oriented prostitution in Barbados: the case of the beach boy and the white female tourist’, in K Kempadoo (ed), Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex work in the Caribbean, Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999, pp 183–200. In Thailand, however, I never came across such women.
12. Ibid.
15. This figure is based on a statement made by the Norwegian government to the Council of Europe that read: ‘Every year, one million children are kidnapped, bought, or in other ways forced to enter the sex market’. M Black, ‘Home truths’, New Internationalist, February 1994, p 12. No source was given for this figure, nor was there any indication of how it was calculated and other research coming out of
Norway suggested the unreliability of such figures. See, for example, O Narvesen, *The Sexual Exploitation of Children in Developing Countries*, Oslo: Redd Barna, 1989.


18 One historical study of sex tourism in Thailand stated: ‘Although prostitution as an organised business in Thailand only started in the 1930s with the import of Chinese prostitutes into the country to cater for Chinese immigrants, prostitution became a big problem in the 1960s with the presence of the United States military bases during the Vietnam war. It was taken over by local demand, and spurred on by the promotion of tourism’. United Nations, *Promotion of Community Awareness of the Prevention of Prostitution*, Bangkok: United Nations, 1991, p 45. Other commentators, however, have pointed out a longer history of prostitution in Thailand. See, for example, W Boonchalaksiri & P Guest, *Prostitution in Thailand*, Bangkok: Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, 1994. The League of Nations was so concerned about the presence of organised brothels catering for both foreign and local men in the 1920s that it commissioned a report called *The Traffic in Women and Children in the East* (1933). By 1949 a book called *Dream Lover*, written by the pseudonymous Black Shadow, described to the foreigner where and how he could obtain the sexual services of Thai and Chinese women, including ‘the Chinese of today and tomorrow indeed, very fresh, young and gay’. Black Shadow, *Dream Lover—The Book for Men Only*, Bangkok: Vitayakorn, 1949, p 26.


22 M Muecke, ‘Mother sold food, daughter sells her body: the cultural continuity of prostitution’, *Social Science and Medicine*, 35 (7), pp 891–901, emphasis in the original.

23 I carried out research between 1993 and 1994 by going daily into this community and conducting ethnographic, participant-observer-style fieldwork with the children. At night I returned to the local NGO, which had established links with this community over the previous five years, and whose members had introduced me to the people there. Such research clearly raises very important ethical and methodological issues which I have addressed elsewhere. See H Montgomery, ‘Working with child prostitutes in Thailand: problems of practice and interpretation’, *Childhood*, 14 (4), 2007, pp 415–430. It is important to emphasise that all names used in this article are pseudonyms and I have deliberately not named, or given clues as to the identity of, the larger resort town, the NGO I worked with, or the region in which it is situated.


25 Ibid.

26 There have been claims that some Western paedophiles have access to well organised networks which arrange package holidays, complete with the sexual services of children. O’Grady, *The Child and the Tourist*. The evidence for this latter is very weak, however, and there have been no documented cases of child-sex tourist bureaux. See O’Connell-Davidson, *Children in the Global Sex Trade*, for an evaluation of this evidence.

27 It is of course possible that their clients made them wash before they had sex with them but I often saw the children return from clients’ apartments looking unkempt and quite dirty. Likewise the men may have given them money and asked them to spend it on medical treatment, although, given the distrust of authority, and the fear of drawing attention to themselves, I never saw any children spending their money on doctors or medical help.


34 O’Connell-Davidson, ‘British sex tourists in Thailand’, p 55.
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36 O’Connell-Davidson, ‘British sex tourists in Thailand’.
41 Similar comments were also made to Julia O’Connell-Davidson when she interviewed sex tourists in the Dominican Republic. One of these men told her: ‘Everyone’s at it, fathers do it with their daughters, brothers do it with their sisters, they don’t care. They’ll do it with anyone, they do it with everyone, they don’t care who it is or how old they are. They’re like animals … By the time a girl is 10 years old, she’s had more experience than … well, an American woman or an Irish woman won’t never have that much experience in her whole life. Girls learn it’s the way to keep a man happy. It’s natural to them, it’s a natural way to please men.’ O’Connell-Davidson, ‘Sex tourism and child prostitution’, p 64.
42 See, for example, the stories in Walker & Ehrlich, *Hello My Big, Big Honey*. 