

Traditional Thai Wedding Ceremony

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Speaking of marriage, there are two marriage ways taken place in Thailand. One is done as a Buddhist religious ceremony of traditional Thai marriage, the other is a legal process of marriage registration.

Thai women take their husband's last name, but ethnic Chinese women may not. In Thailand, last names are unique to each family. The ethnic Chinese also creates their Thai last name that is unique to their family. The children of some families have taken their mother maiden following their father last name to reflect their Thai heritage.

At Thai wedding names are never written in red ink as this symbolizes death and red ink is only ever used to write the name of the deceased persons next to a coffin in a temple.

The Thai wedding ceremony is held during the day at the bride's home. It they did not perform an engagement prior that day; the engagement will be done that day. It is usually followed by a large evening reception at a hotel or party room, complete with food, music and entertainment. The groom's family is responsible for the bride's dowry, a sum that is often negotiated between the two families. The dowry may be displayed, before the ceremony, as a pile of cash to indicate that the groom is a good catch. After the ceremony, the money is generally given to the new couple to help them start their lives together.

According to Thai customs, a couple traditionally becomes engaged during a ceremony known as 'Thong Mun'. This is literally the giving of gold by the prospective groom to his fiancé parents; friends and relatives will attend this ceremony. In place of a diamond ring as common in the West, Thais opt for the gold, normally in the form of jeweler. Actually, it is almost 99% pure gold made in Thailand. When traded locally, its weight is measured in 'Baht'. One Baht of gold is equals to 1/2 a troy ounce or 15.2 grams. In practice, an odd number is never given (as it were for a couple), so the minimum should be two Baht of gold.

Whether it is traditional or official, the Thai marriage involves an ancient tradition called 'Sinsod', a custom of paying a dowry to compensate a family of bride "for the mother's milk". There is no set amount, the sum is typically determined on the one hand by the suitor's wealth and on the other hand by the "value" of the future wife. Her beauty, personality, background, education and other qualifications, if she is a virgin, or has got a child and so forth. Some wealthy family gives land, property, business and houses to the couple in addition to money and gold. In the old time, the groom family gave cows, water buffaloes, farm land, chickens, ducks and pigs to the bride to make sure that they will have good living after their marriage. As an aside yet practical for some people comment, a dowry is normally waived in case of re-marriages.

The traditional Thai weddings differ in terms of rituals and beliefs according to each locality and especially according to each geographical region. This story is based on the Central Thai-style wedding and incorporates the folklore, customs, beliefs and practices passed down from one generation to another. The process can be summarized as follows:

- The groom's (khan mark) procession
- The entrance to the bridal (restraining the groom from approaching the bride)
- Washing the groom's feet
- Paying respect to the ancestors of the bride and the spirit of the bride's family house
- Counting the dowry (sinsod)
- The engagement
- Paying respects to the parents and elders
- Religious ceremony
- The holy water-pouring ceremony (Rod-Nam-Sung ceremony)
- Phoog Khor Mue (tie the sacred thread to the couple wrists)
- The Dinner ceremony
- The making of the marriage bed and blessings for the married couple

Preparations

In the past the custom was for the parents of the bride and groom to matchmaking. It was possible the couple did not even know each other.

Elders from both families would meet and agree on the engagement, date of the wedding and the dowry to be paid to the parents of the bride.

Often in traditional Thai marriage, a close friend of the groom requests the bride to initiate the talk to her father. Then talks begin. These are about money, about gifts to be given to the family. These traditions are different from westerner countries. There is often a difficult bargain about the amount of money to be given to the bride's family. It depends on qualifications of the future wife such as her education background, her family, and her career and so on. The family is thanked for the education of the girl. Sometimes problems happen due to the cultural differences between Thai and foreigner way of thinking. Sometimes the Thai family thinks that all foreigners are rich and ask for a huge money amount.

Nowadays, many families hand the dowry back to the couple as a wedding gift, some families do not require a dowry, and some need to keep the money. Dowries range from THB 50,000 up to 250,000, although this last figure is rarely asked for, apart the marriages amongst celebrities being motivated by extraordinary figures to create sensation.

The number of guests in a Thai wedding is always a weird mystery. The guests who are invited might not come and uninvited persons might come. In Thai custom, it is difficult to know the number of guests as Thai invitation cards is different from invitation cards in

foreigners' norm. In western country, you can see RSVP or regrets only with telephone number on the bottom left of cards, so the guesses can reply whether they can come or not. Thai people don't answer and so the number of guests is not known exactly. Guests might come with or without their children, with or without friends. When many people show up at the wedding, both sides of family are very happy because they believe that the people bring them good luck, love and respect their families. Once one person knows about the wedding, he/she will spread out words to friends and neighbors. Those people may come to the wedding. The groom and the bride may not know many of those guests. The host always prepares a lot of food and drink to make sure that they can feed many people.

The name of food, dessert, and fruit to serve at the wedding is important. The names that means long live, sweet, happy, lovely, valuable and lucky will be used for the wedding. The example of food is khanam jeen (noodle). Khanom jeen is long and meaned long lasting for their love. Foy thong is a long thread and sweet which is made of egg. Fruits are banana and banana tree and sugar cane tree. Banana tree is very fruitful. If the couple has many children like the banana tree has a lot of fruit, the couple will have enough workers to work for the family. The sugar cane is sweet. Their love life will be sweet forever.

The food that named bad behavior or bad luck will not be used. The example of food is tom yum (hot & spicy soup). Tom yum means lying and cheating.

To choose the date of the wedding, a couple will usually go to the temple where they worship and consult with a monk, who will determine a lucky day for the marriage. The date is usually chosen by considering the birth dates of the bride and groom and by factoring in lucky days and the phases of the moon.

Thai brides don't have a standard wedding dress but tend to wear a traditional, close-fitting, brightly colored Thai silk ensemble during the wedding ceremony. It is often adorned with gold jewelry encrusted with semiprecious stones. White is growing in popularity, and some brides choose a Western-style wedding gown at the evening reception. Some brides choose Thai Jakgree or Thai Borompimarn at the evening. These dresses were designed by Her Majesty Queen of Thailand. A Black is never worn — and should not be worn by guests — as it is considered to be bad luck and the color of mourning.

Signaling Khan Mhark

When the bride side is ready, a woman will go to the groom home or where the groom procession waits for. The woman will bring food to let the groom side know that the bride side is ready and the groom procession can start moving toward the bride's home. The procession will then start with the Ho Khan mhark song. The music and dance are performed while walking to the destination. In Thailand especially in the country side, the gun was shot to signal the bride party that the groom is now close to their home. They must be prepared to receive the groom's khan mhark..

The Groom's (khan mark) Procession

In Thailand, the pageantry of a wedding focuses primarily on the groom, who makes his way to the bride in a procession that is often accompanied by music. Music is played during the whole procession ceremony. The procession song is called "RAM WONG KLONG YAO". If the groom's house is too far from the bride's house, a place like a bus stop can symbolize the groom's house. The groom walks followed by his parents, family and friends. A procession is led by the groom's representative called "Thao Gae", the parents walk together with the groom. The groom carries flowers, incenses, candles and gift with his friends and relatives carrying food and gifts such as silver, gold, jewelry and cash to the bride's home. The flowers, incenses, candles and gift are for paying respect to the bride's parent and relatives. Silk is usually used as a wedding gift from the groom and bride to parents and elder people. This procession called "Hae Khan Mhark". The groom family brings Khan Mhark and the bride family signals and receives Khan Mhark.

There are two sets of Khan Mhark arrangement, primary Khan Mhark and secondary Khan Mhark.

Primary Khan Mhark; This arrangement can be even or odd number depending on the community. Many people like to have even Khan Mhark for the best luck as a pair and the procession will be more beautiful. The following pairs are in order of procession.

1. The bowls of areca nuts (Mhark) and betel leaves (Plu) which are for chewing. The people in the past use areca nuts and betel leaves smeared with lime, chewed like chewing gum.
2. The bowl of silver, gold and cash (dowry)
3. The bowl of auspicious items, for examples, beans, sesame seeds, paddy, silver leaves and golden leaves.
4. & 5 are food and drink (alcohol) and napkins. Example of food; roast chicken, khanonjeen (rice noodle) with namya (red curry), hormok (steamed curry fish), young coconut, orange, banana; dessert: khanom kong, khanon chamod, etc.

The containers for the 4th and 5th pairs called "tieb". Tieb is made of bambbo. The shape is round and it has a lid cover. They prefer to use the women who come from good families. If they are married, they must be a happy couple. The rest of primary khan mhark uses the single young woman or the woman who is not widow, or divorce.

Secondary Khan Mhark; This arrangement must be at least 9 pairs. The following pairs are in the secondary khan mhark.

1. Sugar cane tree
2. Banana tree
3. Cooked chicken
4. Cook pork
5. Young coconut
6. Banana
7. Grape fruit

8. Whisky
9. Dessert (various kinds)

The people who will carry these trays must not be divorce or widow. The procession will move at the determined lucky time. The groom procession must pass three doors, victory, silver and golden doors. The groom and his representatives must prepare cash in the envelopes and gifts as the key to open the doors to reach the bride. During this time, the bride made will take the bride to hide in the room. The money in the envelops must always be an even number, for example, \$10, \$20, \$40, ..\$100. The golden gate envelop must be more than the previous gates.

The couple will plant banana and sugar tree from the khan mhark at their home. This is one way to make sure that they will have fruit to eat. In the old time every Thai baby eats banana. Many Thai cooking use banana leaves and banana.

Receiving Khan Mhark

When Khan mhark has arrived the bride home, the bride side will bring a tray containing areca nuts (Mhark) and betel leaves (Plu) for the groom's representatives (Thao-gae). The groom may have Khan Mhark leader (nai khan mhark) to perform Thao-gae's role. A girl in beautiful dress or adult may carry this tray to welcome the groom party. The bride representative will also go to welcome them. The groom's representatives (Thao-gae) will announce that "The Khan mhark procession now arrives at the bride's home". The bride's representatives will say prosperity words to welcome them. The groom's representative will pick up mhark-plu and chews it, then return the tray to the girl with money or gift on the tray. The girl will take the groom procession to inside the gate.

Everyone usually dresses with beautiful and colorful clothes for this occasion. In the country side, the people always bring out their gold and diamonds jewelry to wear as much as they have.

The entrance to the bridal (restraining the groom from approaching the bride)

The procession to the bride's house is the most exciting part of the wedding. On his way, the groom passes through the victory gate, silver gate and the golden gate. The light bright color fabric or ribbon is used for the victory gate. The chains of silver are used for the silver gate. The chains of gold are used for the golden gate. Each gate is held on each end by young children or adults. To open the gate, the groom must give a gift, i.e. some money to the children. The amount is bigger to open the golden gate than the silver gate. At each door the groom is asked if he is rich enough to take care about his wife and his family. He has to give an envelope to each girl in order that they remove the chain to let him pass. The envelope contains money. Each time a door is symbolically opened, people are shouting. The groom pays a token fee to the children and adults, who then "open" each gate so he can reach the bride.

Washing the groom's feet

When the groom has opened symbolically all the doors, the bride's sister is waiting for him at the house entry to wash his feet. In the old time, the groom walked on the dirt road with no shoes or with the slippers or shoes which was full of dust. Everyone must take off their shoes; wash their feet before walking up the stair to the house. It does not happen in all weddings. The young woman washed his feet and made a Thai greeting towards them ("WAI"). It is a symbol of respect to thank the groom for all he has done for the wedding (most expenses are paid by the groom family). Now as Thailand has entered a new era of equality between men and women, this tradition is not always respected.

After the groom took off his shoes, some people always took his shoes away and hid them. In order for the groom to get his shoes back, the groom must give money or alcohol to the person who held his shoes. This is a part of fun activities that always happens.

Arrival of the groom

When the girl is washing feet for the groom, a respectful senior rings the kong three times to let everyone know that the groom has arrived in the house. The senior announces that the groom has arrived and welcomes the groom and his party into the bride's home. The senior then walk them to the ceremony place.

The people believe that the sound of the kong will be loud up to the heaven and invite the goddess to come down and bless the groom and the bride. This sound will let everyone in the house to be ready for the ceremony. Kong is usually used at the auspicious (mongkol) event.

Paying respect to the ancestors of the bride and the spirit of the bride's family house

This custom is to let the spirit of the house and the ancestors know about their marriage. The people believe that they will help protect the couple from troubles and the couple will live together peacefully. This is called "Wai Phee".

When Khan mhark arrives in the house, the representatives of the bride and the groom will take the bride and the groom to "Wai Phee". Thao-gae of the bride will pull the bride's hand and Thao-gae of the groom will pull the groom's hand, then they sit together at the central pole of the house or in front of the picture of the ancestors.

The only one incense is used to "wai phee". There may be the fabric (pha-wai) in addition to food to give to the spirit of the house and the ancestors. The couple wills "garb" three times. Garb is to clasp their palms together, then open both hands and place their palms on the floor while bending down from waist to head.

Counting the dowry (sinsod)

The "sinsod" or dowry is supposed to be compensation to the family of the bride for the loss of a worker. The "Sinsod Tongman" ceremony is a very important part of the marriage. Gold, money or real estate is presented to literally, in Thai, "to pay for the mother's milk." After this ceremony an astrologer would be consulted to give advice on auspicious dates for the engagement if the engagement is done prior to the wedding ceremony day.

During the wedding ceremony, money is shown to the guests. Most of the time the money is only shown in order to save the face of the bride's family but after the marriage ceremony the money is given back to the couple. For foreigners the amount is often more than 100,000 Baht in cash and some gold jewels. Often a gold chain is offered. In Thailand gold is measured in "Baht", the Thai gold measure. Thai people like gold more than banknotes. Thai people think that if sudden problems happen, gold can be sold to get cash. The wedding day is not a random day. An astrologer has set the best day according to the stars.

After the khan mhark arrives at the bride's home, Thao-gae of the groom will hand the dowry container to Thao-gae of the bride. Thao-gae of the bride may count or hand it to two couples who are very successful and happy couples to count. When Thao-gae open the container, they will put scent powder or scent oil or perfume onto the items in the second pair of Khan mhark.

While preparing sinsod, Thao-gae of the groom tells the groom to put money in the container more than the amount that he agreed with the bride's parent. When the bride's Thao-gae opens the sinsod and found that the money is more than the agreement amount. They believe that is good luck. Thao-gae will tell every one that money has grown. Every will be happy. Thao-gae and parents of both sides will put bean, sesame seeds, paddy, scent powder and scent oil onto sinsod and mix them together. All the money is displayed to show that the bride has married a rich groom.

The Engagement

The groom places the ring onto the bride finger. If the groom brings other jewelries, he will also place them onto the bride necklace or the wrists.

Paying respects to the parents and elders

Paying respect to the parents and elders is usually done to the order of seniority, such as grandparent, uncle, aunt, and then parent. The host, the bride parent usually gives privilege to the groom parent to do first. The elders will sit on the chair or place that is prepared, and then the couple "garb" one time and give them the tray of flower, incense and candles. Then give the gift to the elder and parents. This gift is called "Pa wai" which is silk fabric. Garb is to clasp their palms together, then open both hands and place their palms on the floor while bending down from waist to head. The parents and elders bless to the couple and give them gift or money. They then tie the groom's and the bride's wrist with sai-sin (sacred thread).

Adding money to the couple's fund

After paying respect to the parents and elders, there may be adding money to the groom and the bride for their future. Thao-gae will put out tray (pan) containing silver and golden leaves for the people to put more money for them. Parents and relatives of both sides who want to give money to their children will put money into the tray. The amount is large or little depending on their preference.

Religious ceremonies

The people believe that number 9 is the lucky number. Nine in Thai read as “Gouw” which means progressive. Therefore, people always choose to have 9 monks for the religious ceremony. However, any odd number, 3, 5, 7 can be used if they cannot find 9 monks. The odd number will add 1 Buddha image and the number will become even. During this wedding ceremony nine Buddhist monks are invited to preside over. Monks sit on straw mattress on the left of the altar. The newly couple sit near an altar which the Buddha image is placed. A sacred thread joins the heads of both groom and bride and then unrolls into the monks hands. The monks recite various Pali chants to bless the couple.

Near the first monk there is a bowl with a candle and water inside. This is used as holy water for Rod Nam Sung. The first monk holds a special fan (Talapat) in one hand and a microphone in the other hand. The whole village can listen to the prayers. During the ceremony the audience crouches in front of the monks several times. Prayers are said again and the main monk throws holy water on the audience.

Nine trays are placed in front of the monks. Each tray contains several small dishes. After prayers are over, the newly weds present alms, food and an envelope to each monk. The monks cannot eat later than 12:00 noon. The envelopes contain money. As monks cannot touch money, Thai people give envelopes. Then monks eat and when meal is over they go back to the temple. Religious ceremonies are now over. The woman cannot touch monk directly. If she wants to hand things to the monks, she must place the items on the cloth or article and the monk will hold that article to receive the items.

The holy water-pouring ceremony – Rod-Nam-Sung ceremony

The bride and the groom kneel on a pedestal or sit on the chair with their hands clasped together. The old men or parents or respectful older people said auspicious sentences before performing each step below. Before beginning rod-nam-sung, three things are performed for blessing the bride and the groom.

- Anointing the bride and groom forehead (blessing by making three marks with sachet powder)
- Wearing lei of flowers (malai) on the bride and groom necks

- Wearing garland (sai mongkok) on the bride and groom heads; Garland is made of yarn, not flowers, made in pairs worn by the bride and the groom during a wedding. This symbolic is to show that they are tied together.
- Removing garland from the bride and groom heads.

The people who are chosen to perform these blessing are the older special people such as the respectful people of the parents, or the person with the successful marriage or family status or rich and famous.

The bride and groom kneel together or sit on the rod-nam chair, and a sacred thread is draped from one head to the other, forming a circle and connecting the couple. They each clasp their palms together in the traditional prayer-like gesture called *wai*.

Immediately after the garland is worn, guests then pour holy water from an ornately decorated conch (sung) shell over the hands of the bride and groom. All guests will then pour water over the couple's hands. The reason to use "sung shell" to put holy water because Thai people believe that sung shell is one of the fourteen sacred goddesses.

Every guest pours a shell filled with holy water ("NAM SANG") on the hands of the bride and groom. They say blessings for good luck to the couple. Then the guest puts an envelope (containing money) in a basket or gives a gift. Amount depends on status. Every time an envelope is given, a little gift commemorating the wedding is given to the guest. The ceremony continues with the photo taken with all guests.

After this ceremony is ended, a respectful person will take the garland off from the bride and the groom heads. Both of them get up and the garland will be given to the bride to keep for their luck.

Phoog Khor Mue (Tie the sacred thread to the couple wrists)

In a room, the couple sits close to each other. An old and wise man said auspicious sentences in order to bless the wedding and give hints to the bride. Then white threads (sai-sin) are tied to the wrists of the bride and the groom. Threads are soaked with holy water. The guests tie a white string around each one's wrist and bless the couple. If any relatives or guest wants to give them money, they will hand them the envelope of money or place it on the tray.

The Dinner ceremony

The dinner is held in the evening at the function hall, hotel or the bride's house. Although they do rod-nam-sung in the morning for parents and relatives, some family may choose to do rod-nam-sung before dinner for guests. The bride may dress in the western white gown or Thai jakgree or Thai borompimarn. The groom may wear suit or traditional Thai dress. There will be music, dance and wedding speech at this ceremony. It is mostly similar to the western wedding. The groom and the bride will walk around to talk to guests at each table, give them the wedding gift and have photo taken with them.

The making of the marriage bed and blessings for the married couple

The sacred date and time will be determined by the monk or a person having miraculous power. The time to put the couple to bed is usually on the same day in the evening, but some couple has to wait for the next day or few more days.

The parent of the bride invites a highly successful marriage couple to perform this stage. This couple has children with successful education and career. They also have a good career, rank and the family is wealthy.

The couple will do the bed and put stone for grinding medicine, green melon, while male cat which is powered and spayed perfume. In addition, golden bean, sesame seeds and un-husked rice are wrapped with clothes and placed in the tray. They sometimes tear off roses and throw them on the bed. Once the lucky time comes, the man who represents the groom will lay down on the right and the woman who represents the bride will lay down on the left. They both talk about auspicious conversations and then get up. This is just a sleep for a trick or a catch.

These things that are put on the bed have their own meaning. The stone is heavy. They wish the couple be patience and don't make quick decision without understanding the fact. Green melon is cool. The couple should be calm and cool for any situation. The cat is an animal that always stays home, not go to other places. They wish the couple stay home and spend time together instead of going out to spend time elsewhere.

After this couple get up, they pretend to just wake up. The woman will say that she has a good dream and the man will prophesy her dream to make her feel good. They then go out from the bedroom. Thao-gae of both sides takes the bride and the groom to their bed. The mother of the bride takes the bride to the groom and asks him to take good care of her. If she does any thing wrong, the mother asks if he kindly helps her to understand, but do not leave her. The parents of the groom and the bride will teach both of them to know their duties as the husband and wife. The parent then tells the groom to sleep on the right and the bride sleep on the left. They sometimes tell the bride to pay respect (grab) her husband before sleeping on the bed for her auspicious because they believe that the husband is the one who will take care of the wife.

The reason for the groom sleeping on the right is he will be close to the door. If there is any dangerous situation, the husband will be able to protect his wife safely because the man is stronger than the woman.

After the couple went to bed, their parents leave. The couple may sleep until the next morning or just for a trick, and then get up to do work.