Summary in English

Logics of Desire and Transnational Marriage Practices in a Northeastern Thai Village

This thesis explores transnational marriages of village women in Isan (the Northeastern region locally known as Isan), a growing and striking phenomenon in Thailand. It seeks to understand the ways in which people in an Isan village perceive and approach these marriages, the consequences of such marriages on village life and what this social phenomenon tells us about Isan (and Thai) society in the face of local-global articulations. Conceptually, the study is drawn on theories about gender, transnationalism and the contemporary debates on marriage, money and intimacy. A qualitative approach is adopted for the main body of the research. Data are primarily collected through an ethnographic study, using in-depth interviews, observation and participation. Supplementary data on background information about mia farang (a Thai wife of a Western man) and their marital information are gained through a preliminary survey. As transnational marriages are embedded in women’s natal villages while their routes to marriage involve different locations and people, the fieldwork approach focused on the village and followed the women engaging in and attempting to engage in transnational marriage; thus this research includes translocal and transnational sites.

In searching for insights in transnational marriages beyond the commonly held, a normative view based on a perspective highlighting financial motivations, this study reveals historical diversity and the current complexity of such marriages. While most of the studies on Thai woman-Western man marriages are marked by the presence of American troops in Thailand in the 1960s-1970s during the Vietnam War, my research shows that this interracial marriage was first documented in the early sixteenth century along with the arrival of Westerners in Siam. Such conjugal relations, from historical perspectives, were shaped by the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity; simultaneously their societal and individual significances presented an accepted utilitarian dimension which nevertheless did not exclude an emotional factor. Today’s transnational marriages are context-specific, showing different forms of conjugal unions as compared to those of the past. The regularity of contact between mia farang (and their husbands) and their families in rural communities is the most prevalent characteristic which has in turn shaped perceptions and expectations concerning mixed couples and complicate social relationships between these women, their husbands and local people in the women’s natal communities.
Motivations propelling local women (and Western men) to engage in transnational marriages are diverse and complex, transcending both economic reasons and intimate relationships. These motivations are informed by local and Western norms and practices regarding gender and marriage as well as images about Western societies and lifestyles on the one hand and ‘social locations’ of women in the global hierarchy on the other. My findings particularly underpin the idea of ‘irresponsible local men’ as a part of the logics of desire facilitating and legitimatizing women’s engagement in transnational marriage.

Similarly, the ‘negotiation processes’ to became a wife in which bar girls and freelancers working in Pattaya were involved present diverse strategies and tactics extending beyond a mere exchange of money for sex experiences. From women’s accounts, their desire for a long-term relationship always came into play. These women perceived their work as a vehicle to meet and make connections with Western men that would result in a serious relationship. This is a path that changes the lives of a number of women, keeping in mind that others working in Pattaya have not succeeded in this endeavor. Based on the findings, I propose a ‘more nuanced’ approach in analyzing sex work. By ‘more nuanced’ I suggest looking at the position of sex work in a transnational marriage trajectory rather than considering this profession exclusively from a pure sexual slavery-oriented or economic perspective. This approach might serve as a useful tool to capture the realities of women’s lives and to understand how they make sense of their own lives on their own terms.

The experiences and sentiments of women engaging in transnational marriage reveal that they continuously weigh up such factors as economic opportunities, local constraints, global possibilities/imaginations and individual desires. These factors mingle and shape their marriage decision and conjugal relationships. Fulfilling filial obligations determined by the Thai cultural norm of bun khun (debt of gratitude to the parent) and contributing to their natal village allow women to earn merit/social recognition. Simultaneously, such obligations and contributions become important tools in the mitigation of ambivalent attitudes toward mia farang associated with economic achievement and new roles as community benefactors on the one hand and social stigma produced through the discourse of mia chao (a ‘rented/hired wife’ – a woman who provides sexual service and do domestic work for her partner for a price) on the other.

On another score, contributions and close ties with women’s natal family and community reflect the importance given to economic resources with their meanings
extended beyond economic value to social and symbolic meanings including gratefulness as a dutiful daughter and belonging as a community member. Likewise, material support provided by a Western partner to his wife, her parents, children and relatives represents expressions of ‘love’, care and commitment. The insights into how economic opportunities, intimate relationships, and social and symbolic dimensions of economic resources combine and compel women to engage in transnational marriage, and complicate their relationships and practices, offer another way to conceptualize this type of marital relations. Thus far, most studies on inter- and transnational marriages both in Thai and Asian contexts are examined in relation to colonial culture, militarization, gendered imaginations and the discourses of modernity and tradition.

Another theme pertaining to transnational marriages is local dynamics and complexity. The findings reflect that women’s choice for a marital relationship outside of marrying locally challenges gendered power relations around the discourses of marriage and sexuality, thus placing local men in a vulnerable position. Drawn on the image of ‘irresponsible local men,’ the notion of desired marriage partners implies a dismissal of local men as unfit and thus legitimizing women’s engagement in transnational marriage. Additionally, a new social category – representing a new ‘class’ determined by consumptions and lifestyles – constituted by mia farang also challenges the existing village socio-economic hierarchy.

Furthermore, this research also demonstrates that transnational marriages represent more than women’s strategies in coping with asymmetrical gender relations, family crises or in fulfilling their personal desires. These marriages serve as a channel for women’s natal families and rural residents to interact with global processes. Intention, determination and support of women’s parents in making transnational connections/marriage possible for their daughters underpin their articulation with transnational processes. This highlights the active roles of the ‘left behind.’ In this respect, the findings throw light on the issue of agency in transnational studies which should take into account the various actors who support, initiate and control decisions and practices, rather than focus on those engaging in geographical mobility alone. On the whole, the current dynamics and subtle shifts in the village generated by transnational marriage are a part of social transformations and the (re)production of Isan communities in the face of local and global encounters.