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

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INTRODUCTION

In the late morning of Friday April 11, 2008, two days before the Songkran Festival, I was at Udon Thani airport to pick up my nephew from Bangkok, who was coming for the Songkran holiday. The arrival hall was crowded. Many of the people came in groups from distant villages to welcome their daughters or nieces together with their Western husbands returning for a visit. A woman who came to pick up her daughter and son-in-law from England told me that they returned for a home visit annually or every other year. They usually came either at this time of the year to celebrate the Songkran Festival or during the New Year holiday. Her husband, two grandchildren and a few neighbours joined her at the airport as well.

Arriving at the airport hall, some of the Western sons-in-law greeted those waiting for them with a handshake or a hug; others, more familiar with Thai custom, greeted them with the wai (the Thai way of greeting). Standing next to me was a middle-aged woman who came from a rural village an hour’s drive from the airport, to pick up her daughter and son-in-law from Germany. The woman responded uncomfortably but kept a smile on her face when the German son-in-law embraced her with a hug. The group left the airport hall for the parking lot. About ten people, including the mixed couple, packed into a pick-up truck and drove away.

Scenes like this may look familiar to anyone who travels to airports in the Northeastern region – locally known as Isan – not only in Udon Thani (or Udon), but also in Khon Kaen and other provinces. I had oftentimes observed this scene for some years before starting this research in 2007. Travelling by airplane from Bangkok to the Isan provinces, I often saw a considerable number of Isan woman-Western man couples, in some cases with children. The couples came from different parts of the world, and their destinations were various Isan villages, the original homes of the women. In the towns of Udon and Khon

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1 Songkran Festival is on April 13-15; April 13 is the traditional New Year's Day. As the traditional New Year, Songkran is a time for family members to get together. It is also a time to pay respects to elders and to visit friends and neighbors, although the most obvious activity of Songkran is the throwing of water – it is therefore known as water festival. In Thailand, April is normally the hottest month of the year. During the three days of the festival, people roam the streets with containers of water or water guns, or post themselves at the side of roads with a garden hose and soak each other and passersby.
Kaen, where I have lived and regularly visited since the late 1980s, the presence of local women with their Western partners has markedly increased in the first decade of the 21st century. It has become more common to find these mixed couples in such places as shopping malls, supermarkets, hotels, and restaurants, as well as entertainment and nightlife areas. These encounters, which have been occurring for years, were part of what inspired me to learn more about the particular types of and the motivations behind these marital relations.

My observation of an increasing number of local woman-Western man couples was substantiated by a survey conducted in 2004 by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB). The results showed that at the time of the study there were 19,594 women married to non-Thai nationals, of whom 87 percent were Western men from Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. These marriages were primarily concentrated in three major provinces: Udon Thani, Khon Kaen and Nakhon Ratchasima, from where almost half of the women originated (NESDB 2004). In addition, my curiosity about this social phenomenon was stimulated by the ways in which the marriages were talked about and represented in the media which, by and large, highlighted aspects of material gains – a shortcut to wealth. Frequently, the marriages were mentioned as being built on ‘nothing but money.’ Also women marrying Western men were often perceived as being associated with prostitution. These views were particularly prevalent when the women in question were from rural villages, who apparently made up the majority of Thai women married to foreigners. I was aware of a connection between prostitution and marrying a farang man (farang being a reference to a Caucasian or a white man/woman) developed during the Vietnam War – an issue I shall elaborate later in this dissertation. However, this did not mean that all women who had a Western partner, whether they had a rural or urban background, are involved in prostitution. Likewise, while not denying an association between marriage and material gains, I asked myself: Is this kind of marital relation involved solely with money? If not, what are the motivations and desires that encourage local women (and Western men) to opt for such a union? How are such motivations, as well as relationships, shaped by local and Western cultures/norms and imaginations about Western societies and lifestyles? Given that the Northeast region is not

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2 Although the NESDB survey was conducted in the rural Northeastern areas only, there are also women from other regions who have married foreign men. Transnational marriage has become increasingly popular among urban women with a good education and pursuing professional career as well (Supawatanakorn et al. 2005).
a popular tourist destination, how do these women meet up and develop intimate relations with their partners? And what does the popularity of transnational marriages\(^3\) in the Northeast tell us about present-day Thai society vis-a-vis local and global articulations? These are the central questions guiding this study.

Amidst these queries, marriage with *farang* men has a long history in Thailand, and this includes the Isan region. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Thailand served as a rest-and-recreation (R&R) site during the Vietnam War, many women from rural villages engaged in entertainment and service works married American servicemen. What is new, however, is the increased popularity and over-representation of Northeastern village women in the current transnational marriages. In addition, the regularity of contact with women’s families in rural communities – e.g. home visits, money transfer, communication via telephone and internet connections – is more noticeable than in the past. The present situation accentuates ties and relations between those who remain in the villages and women who engage in transnational mobility. In this sense local and global links are highlighted through these marriages. Such connections evoke questions about social transformation at the local end as a part and process of global dynamics (Appadurai 1996; Vertovec 2001, 2004; Abdelhady 2006).

As a point of departure for my anthropological inquiry, I situate the study within three theoretical debates; debates to which I wish to make my own contribution. Firstly, I situate my research on transnational perspectives, especially the relatively recent approach emphasizing those ‘staying behind’ in sending communities (Toyota et al. 2007). This perspective highlights involvement of people remaining at migrants’ homes in transnational processes, apart from connections and ties linking host and home societies as emphasized in earlier works (e.g. Basch et al. 1994; Kearney 1995). This study aims to explore interactions and social relations between the women marrying Western husbands, their relatives and local people left in the rural home, and the consequences of such interactive relationships on the on-going transformation of women’s natal villages. The second debate addresses the relations between marriage, money, and intimacy. The study problematizes the normative ways in which transnational marriages are perceived and portrayed in a dichotomous manner, between money and romantic love. Following recent scholarly works addressing the fuzzy lines between intimacy and economy, ‘love’ and money, romance and work (Cabezas 2009; Constable 2003; Zelizer 2005), this study seeks

\(^3\)In this study the term ‘transnational marriage’ is used with connotations which will be elaborated in the following section.
to reveal diverse motivations influencing this type of marital relation and how the motivations, as well as social relations developed through the marriages, are shaped by the encounters between economic incentives, ‘love,’ social and cultural factors concerning marriage and gender, as well as ideas about ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition.’ Thirdly, this research is situated in the context of the earlier scholarly works on gender studies, in Thai society in particular (e.g. Jackson and Cook 1999; Kirsch 1982; Keyes 1984; Lyttleton 2000; Mills 1999; Muecke 1992; Pasuk 1982; Potter 1977; Thitsa 1980; Truong 1990; Van Esterik 2000). It seeks to capture gender dynamics in the context of local and transnational articulations generated by marriages between village women and Western men.

In the second part of this introduction I will situate transnational marriages in the framework of these debates and discuss the research approach. To begin with, it is important to clarify two key terms that will be used throughout this dissertation. Then, I will locate transnational marriages in the Thai context and in connection with current global mobility. This is important as it reflects how the marriages have been represented thus far.

‘Transnational marriage’ and ‘mia farang’: definitions and connotations

The term ‘transnational marriage’ is used in this study to signify the nature of current marriages taking place in Isan in which women and their Western partners have moved between their residence and women’s home countries regularly. These couples also maintained their relationships and networks at both ends. Ties and regularity of contacts, either face-to-face or through such modern technologies as the telephone and internet, represent one of the major differences between the current Thai woman-Western man marriages and those of the past. Scholars point out that the intensity and regularity of movement between specific sites, as well as concurrent communication and long-term social contact across territories of nation-states, is the nature of contemporary transnational practices (Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Portes 1997; Portes et al. 1999 Vertovec 2004).4

4It is noted that the terms ‘transnational’ and ‘transnationalism’ have been used in such a wide variety of ways that the danger exists of becoming an “empty conceptual vessel” (Guarnizo and Smith 1998: 3). Scholars have proposed various ways in which the concepts can be refined and developed. In addition to regularity and long-term social contact, the suggestions include the consideration of types and levels of transnational activities – ‘transnational from above’ and ‘transnational from below’ (Guarnizo and Smith 1998); ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ transnationalism (Itzigsohn et al. 1999); ‘transnational circuits’ and ‘transnational communities’ (Portes 1997). Another aspect involves the categories of migrants – skilled/unskilled migrants; undocumented migrants; forced migrants, return migrants, etc. (Vertovec 2004).
Unlike women married to American servicemen in the 1960s and 1970s, most of whom rarely returned to their village after leaving for the US, women engaged in current transnational marriage regularly visit home and stay in the villages for a certain period of time while also traveling to various tourist destinations in Thailand. In the contemporary situation, the couples are not only more mobile than they were in the past, but they also associate more with the local people in the women’s home villages while still maintaining their lives in the husbands’ countries. This dualistic frame of practice, according to Sarah Mahler (1998:79), is the nature of a ‘lived reality’ relating to and relevant for the processes of globalization and transnationalism.

Considering the connotations, the term transnational marriage is different from the meanings of such terms as mixed marriage, intermarriage, and cross-cultural marriage which are normally used in a rather general sense. These terms refer to marriages between people of different ethnicities or cultures with little consideration of whether the couples are from the same or different countries. To connote that a bride and groom are from different countries, Nicole Constable (2005) used the term ‘cross-border marriage.’ However, all of these terms place less emphasis on whether the couples maintain ties in their origin and destination countries and how often they move between the settlement and home societies. Thus, their use will be kept to a minimum with reference to specific contexts. The term transnational marriage will be used to refer to Thai-Westerner marriage in the present period.

Another term is ‘mia farang.’ The Thai term mia farang literally means a Thai wife of a Western man. To villagers in Nadokmai5, the village chosen as the research site, women living together with and receiving financial support from their Western partners, regardless of whether they officially registered their marriage or not, are referred to as mia farang. Mia farang denotes a serious and long-term relationship between a woman and her partner. In this case, a Western partner/husband is referred to as phua farang. If a relationship is casual or just initiated, a woman is not called mia farang and her partner is often referred to as faen farang, meaning a Western boyfriend – the Thai term faen means either boyfriend or girlfriend. In this sense, the terms husband and partner are alternately used to signify a serious and long-term relationship while the term boyfriend (and girlfriend) implies that a relationship may or may not lead to an ‘official’ marriage.

5The village’s name and all person names quoted are pseudonyms. The term ‘village’ used in this study to refer to Nadokmai does not follow the definition of a village as applied for administration purposes in Thailand. I rather go along with local people’s sense of belonging to the same community (see Chapter Two for further discussion in this matter).
The category of *mia farang*, as referred to by villagers, is rather fluid and sometimes problematic. Normally, a woman is considered *mia farang* as long as her relationship with a Western partner is maintained. When the relationship ends the woman is not called *mia farang* anymore. Later, if she engages in a serious relation with another Western man, she is again referred to as *mia farang*. However, there were some women in my study whose relationships ended and yet were continually referred to as *mia farang*. These were exceptional cases because these women had become influential figures in the village.

There is another Thai term, *phanraya farang*, which also refers to Westerner’s wives and denotes a better sense of respect as compared to *mia farang* – the terms *phanraya* and *mia* meaning wives, and *sami* and *phua* meaning husbands. *Phanraya* and *sami* are generally used on formal occasions. At first, I considered using the term *phanraya farang* as I was concerned about the connotation of *mia farang*. In addition, I was aware of the association of the term *mia farang* with the term *mia chao* (hired wife) connected with American servicemen during the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, when I started my fieldwork in the village, villagers rarely used the term *phanraya farang*. Therefore, I changed to *mia farang* following the villagers’ usage.

**Locating transnational marriage in the Thai context and current global mobility**

Studying intermarriage from a transnational perspective is a recent phenomenon. Before the late twentieth century, studies addressing intermarriages in Thai society – done by both historians and anthropologists – were influenced by assimilation theory (De Young 1958; Skinner 1957; Wyatt 1984). This concept was quite influential in studying immigrants in American society in the early twentieth century. The metaphor of a ‘melting pot’ was used to demonstrate newcomers from all backgrounds putting their efforts into adapting to the new environment and eventually blending into American culture. This approach overlooked self-awareness of immigrants and the possibility of maintaining relationships and connections with their homeland (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Park 1928;). Drawing on assimilation theory, intermarriages in Thailand were viewed as a means to integrate people from other ethnic backgrounds into Thai society/culture. William Skinner’s classic

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6The context in which this term emerged, which denotes its connotation, will be further discussed in Chapter One.
work (1957) on Chinese in Thai society, for instance, notes that intermarriages between Chinese male immigrants and local women were promoted, particularly during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910). The assimilation policy was intended to capitalize on Chinese expertise in trading, taxing, and shipping which was important to the country’s development, especially after Siam7 signed the Bowring Treaty in 1855. Through intermarriages Chinese were assimilated into Thai ways of life. Skinner (1957: 134) points out that the third-generation descendants were generally Thai in culture and identification.8

In the later period, there were two different ways intermarriages in Thai society were studied. The first perspective involved hosting the American bases in the 1960s-1970s and promoting tourism in the 1980s. Such contexts created favorable circumstances for marriages between local women, particularly those working in the service, entertainment, and sex industries, and foreign men. Since then, expansion of tourism encounters between Thai women and foreign men have shifted from Thai women and American servicemen to Thai women and foreign male tourists from Europe and Japan, in particular (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Cohen 2003, 1996; Truong 1990). I will discuss the history of Thai woman-Western marriage in Chapter One. The second approach was to study intermarriages within the framework of international labor migration, specifically transnational prostitution. Some studies point out that marrying a Western partner was used as a means for women to engage in the sex industry in Western countries (Pataya 1999, 2002; Supang et al. 1999).

Contemporary works present diverse perspectives; yet there are gaps in which this study aims to fill. Taking women’s agency seriously, Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya (2005) argues that village women who married farang men actively negotiated the existing limitations at home while engaged in opportunities created through transnational connections. She views such marriages as a form of empowerment of women and men who are disempowered in their own societies. Looking at the men’s perspective, Suriya Smutkupt and Pattana Kitiarsa (2007) perceive Isan woman-farang man marriages as a ‘gendered orientalizing project’ of the men who wish to have oriental wives and to develop

7Siam was the commonly known name of Thailand before 1939. However, Siam did not encompass the total area of Thailand as it is presently known. Chiang Mai – known as the Kingdom of Lan Na, for example, was never included. The name of Siam was changed to Thailand in 1939 by Luang Phibunsongkhram, the prime minister (1938-1944), who claimed this change as a part in the processes of building a new nation (Wyatt 1984: 61, 253).

8Skinner (1957) points out that assimilating into Thai society did not mean that Chinese immigrants and their descendants had disregarded their culture entirely. Rather, Thai elements were incorporated into Chinese traditions, which made them different from conventional Chinese culture.
their post-retirement life and family away from home-country. Focusing on Thai woman-Dutch man couples living in the Netherlands, Panitee Suksomboon (2009) investigates such marital relations in relation to cultural meanings, perceptions, and practices regarding marriage and family in Thai and Dutch societies, as well as gender imaginations and the life-course of Thai-Dutch couples. The other type of studies focuses on women’s natal society. Sirijit Sunanta (2009) sees the current transnational marriages in Isan as an alternative for rural women in the context of local and transnational connections. She also relates these marriages to the national discourses of gender and class morality that is imposed upon rural Isan women. Drawing on the household strategy approach, Buapan Promphakping et al. (2005) relates transnational marriages of Isan women to household resources. This work focuses on material, human and socio-cultural resource and points out that material assets are the dominant factor facilitating the marriages and influencing an improvement of other household resource.

The existing works demonstrate various ways in which inter- and transnational marriages have been conceptualized. However, the studies focus mainly on women and men involved in these marital relations, either at the site of origin or settlement society, while interactive relations between mia farang and those staying in their rural homes are largely overlooked. In addition, the literature, thus far, sheds less light on how material incentives and romantic love complicate the marriages, especially in the face of local and global encounters. Apart from this, consequences of transnational marriages on the ongoing transition of norms and practices, especially with regard to gender and marriage, as well as the dynamics of the existing hierarchical structure in women’s natal community are, for the most part, under-researched. By addressing these issues, this thesis aims to fill such gaps in the literature and to contribute to a deeper understanding of this social phenomenon in contemporary Thai society.

Rooted in Thai society, especially in Isan, transnational marriages are part of global processes – the massive mobility of people, goods, capital, and ideas across states. These global dynamics are facilitated by an advancement of communication and transportation technology as well as an emergence of unbounded and fluid perceptions of different possibilities for a better life on a global scale (Appadurai 1996; Schiller et al.1992). An increasing global mobility – in the forms of tourism, labor migration, business travel, and study – has created favorable circumstances for women and men from different parts of the world to opt for marriage (Jones and Shen 2008). In this context, various countries in Asia have become popular places of origin for marriage migrants, as well as for labor migrants.

While the chances to meet and develop intimate relationships have increased, Constable (2005) points out that they do not represent a ‘global free-for-all’ phenomenon. Rather, marriage opportunities are shaped by gender, ethnicity, class, as well as socio-economic, historical, and political factors. Typically, such marriages present a common pattern of brides from poorer countries and grooms from wealthier locations in the global economic hierarchy; a pattern which Constable calls ‘global marriage-scapes’ (2005a: 3-7). The suffix ‘scapes’ is used to designate the boundary and fluidity of the term. This usage is in accordance with Arjun Appadurai’s framework of five scapes in conceptualizing social life in the contemporary globalized world. Appadurai’s five scapes include ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, and finanscapes. According to Appadurai (1996:33), these ‘scapes’ have their own constraints and incentives and they are unpredictable in nature. Lives today, both practical and imagined, are informed and influenced by these ‘scapes’.

Along the same line with Constable’s marriage-scapes, Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly (1997) point out that ‘sites of desire’ in Asia and the Pacific where cross-cultural exchanges (of meanings, fantasies, and erotic liaisons) in sexualities between the local people and Europeans took place were shaped by confluences of cultures, erotic imaginings, border crossings, and fluid terrain apart from economic incentives. Similarly, Denise Brennan (2004) uses the term ‘sexscapes’ to explain Sosua, a transnational sex tourist town in the Northern coast of the Dominican Republic, where relations between local people, especially women in the sex industry, and Western (male) tourists are shaped by combinations of racialized fantasies (about sexualities), women’s desire to escape from limited opportunities, and migration circuits of foreign tourists. In line with this argumentation, this thesis seeks to convey the variety of motivations and factors propelling local women and Western men to opt for marriage, beyond economic reasons and romantic love as normally imagined.

It is noted that the gendered pattern presented in global marriage-scapes is common for labor migration as well. Currently, transnational labor migration has involved women from Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe who leave their homeland to find employment in North America, Western Europe, Australia, as well as wealthier countries in Asia. In many cases, the female migrants eventually married men in the host countries (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Piper and Roces 2003). In this
sense, labor migration and marriage migration are a part of the same global processes and overlap to an extent. However, routes and processes of migration as well as the social relations that women as (migrant) wives encounter are certainly different from those of workers, as this study aims to illustrate.

By contextualizing this study in Thai society and global mobility, I will contribute to the understanding of transnational marriage in both contexts. At the same time, it is also apparent how the phenomenon in a particular locality constitutes a part of global processes. To be able to further address the local-global links and their consequences on a local community in an insightful way, the following section discusses the debates that frame this study.

**Transnational marriage: A holistic approach**

As mentioned, this research draws on three theoretical debates. The conceptual framework developed on the basis of these debates allows me to approach the phenomenon from a holistic perspective. It focuses not solely on women and men engaged in the marriages, but also the communities where transnational marriages are initiated and embedded, as well as relationships created through this type of transnational encounter. Placing emphasis on the multiplicity of this conjugal relation, rather than focusing exclusively on the normative perspective of viewing the marriage in relation to economic resources and romantic love, this framework allows me to gain meaningful insights into these marriages. In addition, a gender perspective is also crucial for an understanding of the phenomenon. In what follows I shall elaborate the approach by discussing the theoretical debates surrounding it.

**Transnationalism: Transnational marriage and local people who stay behind**

The concept of transnationalism, which has grown out of migration scholarship, has been widely taken on by social science scholars in various fields over the past few decades. In general, transnationalism is defined as the processes by which immigrants “build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders...[and] maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders” (Basch et al. 1994: 7). Apart from this definition, the complexity inherent in the concept is also spelled out. Such considerations include the possibility of multi-ethnicities, multiple or hybridized identities, diversity of attachments and belongings, and

Despite its inconclusiveness and ambiguity, transnationalism offers a way out of the analogy of migration as a one-way process of incorporation and acculturation of migrants into the host societies (Vertovec 2004). This approach allows us to conceive of interactions and social relations in both the origin and settlement societies rather than emphasizing exclusively on the receiving ends and those engaging in mobility as key agents. In this sense, the scope of analysis is expanded to include the people living in sending communities who do not actually move and who may be influenced by or associated with transnational activities in one way or another, either materially or ideally.

Transnational connections between migrants and their families in the home community take various forms, among which remittances is the most prominent. Money sent home and its usage are viewed as the heart of the ‘migration-development nexus’ (Glytsos 2002; King et al. 2006; Stahl and Fred 1986). However, this perspective is criticized for emphasizing economic benefits and downplaying social and cultural effects of transnational practices. In addition, it tends to treat people who stay at home as solely benefitting from remittances while overlooking the consequences of migration on their lives beyond poverty alleviation. Another perspective takes the social dimensions of remittances into consideration and argues that migration involves not only a financial flow, but also ‘social remittances.’ Social remittances refer to ideas, behaviors, life-styles, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending-country communities through practices and ties linking migrants to their home villages (Levitt 1996:3-4). The lives of local people who never migrated themselves are influenced and transformed by transnational activities and ideologies of those who actually move (Kyle 2000; Levitt 2001). Nonetheless, this analysis has also been questioned for the tendency to view people left at home as passive recipients (Toyota et al. 2007). The approach focuses on various impacts of migration on the community of origin and its residents, but it sheds less light on how those left at home react to or are involved in migration processes. In fact, the relationships between the migrants and those who stay behind are open-ended and multidirectional in nature. Their experiences need to be explored in the broader social, economic, and political contexts and with an interactive perspective (Rigg 2007). The recent migration studies address the “migration-left behind nexus” (Toyota et al. 2007:157) and stress that by bringing those remained in departure communities into view we can gain new insights into migration within both internal and transnational contexts.
Indeed, relationships between migrants and those who stay in sending-country communities highlight the interplay between movement/flows, power, and agency. Here, Doreen Massey’s notion of ‘power-geometry’ (1993) provides helpful insight, especially in capturing the relationships in transnational space. Massey (1993:59) points out that modernity, within particular conditions, has produced time-space compression – movement and communication across space which implies geographical stretching out of social relations – which makes transnational mobility more possible. Under these conditions, movement/flows become an important element associated with the ability to access power. However, Massey maintains that the point of concern is not only who moves and who does not, but also who influences decisions and actions in transnational processes. She states that some people are involved in movement while others are not. “There are groups who really, in a sense, [are] in charge of time-space compression; who can effectively use it and turn it to [their] advantage…But there are groups who, although doing a lot of physical moving, are not ‘in charge’ of the process in the same way” (Massey 1993: 61). From Massey’s elaborations, interactions and social relations in transnational spaces are contested and complex and they also involve people who initiate and participate in flows/movement as well as those who do not directly engage in mobility. The depiction of people who stay behind is obviously not one of passive recipients without agency.

Taking the ‘left-behind’ debates into account, this research includes local people living in rural homes as much as the women engaged in transnational marriage. Specifically, it explores how those who remain in women’s natal villages mediate, encourage, and are involved in transnational marriage processes. It also looks at expectations, demands, debt, and gratitude associated with the marriages that inform their determination, decision, and participation in transnational marriages. It is these on-going processes that create a certain way of being community in the face local and global articulations (Appadurai 1996).

Transnational marriage: Romantic love and money

The gendered pattern presented in ‘global marriage-scapes’ has often led to a common assumption about transnational marriage in relation to love and economic incentives. The relationship is portrayed as opportunistic: women marry to resolve economic problems while men marry for romantic love. The normative version depicting the marriages in this dichotomous fashion draws basically on the Western idea conceptualizing an ‘authentic’
romantic relation based solely on romantic love. The intersection of love and money would inevitably erode the authenticity of romantic relationships. When they come into contact they contaminate each other – sentiments would be depleted by instrumental rationality while introducing sentiment into rational transactions produces inefficiency. However, this ethnocentric cultural ideal is widely apparent both in the academic world and beyond (Zelizer 2005:20-26).

Indeed, the cultural ideal emphasizing romantic love as a basis for marriage has been gradually evolving in Western societies since the nineteenth century. In a sense, this social construction of the marriage pattern is a ‘modern’ one. According to Edward Shorter (1975), the development of modern family in Western society was influenced largely by the surge of sentiment. The change took place when people placed affection, personal happiness, and individual fulfillment as priority criteria in choosing marriage partners. Prior to the nineteenth century, the main concern was given to ties with the surrounding social order that the family traditionally held so as to fulfill productive and reproductive functions. In his study on the development of the modern family, Shorter notes that the family in traditional society, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was held firmly within the matrix of a larger social order – the kin network, the wider community, and the ancestral traditions. With the surge of sentiment and the rise of the nuclear family, ties to the outside world were weakened, while connections binding members of the family together were reinforced. This change reversed the priorities of spouse choosing. In modern times, the cultural ideals of romantic love, personal affection, and individual fulfillment have been a basis for marriage in Western societies. These norms and practices have become prevalent in other parts of the world as well (Lindholm 2006:5-6; Shorter 1975: 13-15).

The dichotomous view of marriage has been criticized for its ignorance of the coexistence between intimate relations and economic activities. Scholars, for instance Amalia Cabezas (2009), Constable (2003) and Viviana Zelizer (2005), ask whether intimacy and money are two distinct and separate domains of social life or, in reality, intertwined and negotiated. Considering them as two distinctive spheres does not capture the multiplicity of relationships in the everyday practices of ordinary people. Zelizer (2005) particularly makes this point. She analyzes this tendency and concludes that there are two different ways this dichotomy is approached in the literature; she calls these: ‘Hostile Worlds’ and ‘Nothing But.’ ‘Hostile Worlds’ beliefs maintain separate boundaries between money and intimacy as they operate according to different principles. ‘Nothing
But’ views reduce intimate relations to three domains: economic rationality, culture, and politics. An economic reasoning is the most common version in which love, sex, and care are seen as nothing but commodities. Zelizer (2005: 20-22) argues that both perspectives cannot help us to capture the reality of day-to-day life in which intimate relations and economic activities are blended and people are actively engaged in negotiating such combinations in constructing their social lives. She proposes alternative explanations, glossed ‘Connected Lives’ or ‘Good Matches’ – the term ‘Good Matches’ was used in her later work (Zelizer 2006). Zelizer describes that in daily life, intersections between material resources and intimate relations take place all the time, but they only work when people make good matches between the two. A good match does not necessarily mean that the match is equal and just; but that it is viable. “It gets the economic work of the relationship done and sustains the relationship.” (Zelizer 2006: 307). Good matches demonstrate agreements between the partners in a relationship, which is particularly important for durable relationships such as stable marriages. Good matches also depend on meanings and practices available in the local milieu.

Using Zelizer’s terms, this study approaches transnational marriages from a ‘Connected Lives’ perspective. It aims to reveal how love and material resources complicate the relationships developed through these marriages by exploring the multiplicity of factors contributing to the current transnational marriage phenomenon. This insight adds to an understanding of inter- and transnational marriages, especially between Asian women and Western men which, thus far, have been conceptualized in relation to colonial culture, militarization, gendered imaginations, as well as the discourses of modernity and tradition (Cheng 2007; Cohen 2003; Constable 2003; Enloe 2000; Stoler 1992; Tolentino 1996; Weisman 2000).

The fact that the relationships developed through transnational marriages involve a wide range of actors and are embedded in different settings led this investigation to include various sites in which interactions and negotiations are enacted. Such contexts include mixed couples’ families, women’s natal families and community, as well as tourist sites where many mia farang initiated the transnational contacts which eventually resulted in long-term relationships. My analysis focuses on the interplay between economic means, intimacy and desires to create transnational connections and to maintain relationships within these sites. Furthermore, I also seek to explore how such interactions and social relations are facilitated and limited by the distinctive cultures and different interpretations of local and Western norms and practices regarding gender, marriage, and family.
Gender in Thai Society

An attempt to comprehend transnational marriages of Isan women would be difficult or impossible without understanding how cultural ascriptions of gender in Thai society give different expectations concerning social roles and identities between women and men. Thus far, the existing studies show diverse ways in which gender roles and relations in Thai society have been conceptualized. The insights are largely in tune with the development of feminist approaches. The conventional perspective explaining gender in relation to Buddhism is in line with the feminist mainstream of the 1970s, emphasizing the distinction of gender roles as well as the differences between sex and gender by relating them to biological, social and cultural determinants. In the later decades, the focus shifted to the analysis of gender in relation to modernity. The recent post-modernist/post-structuralist approach concentrates on gender identity, gendered subjectivity, and how the cultural discourses of gender regulate, constitute, or represent people’s experience in any given context (Moore 1994: 2-11).

An explanation connecting Thai gender to Buddhist beliefs is a prominent analysis of gender distinction. A core argument of this analysis is illustrated in the debate between Thomas Kirsch (1985, 1982) and Charles Keyes (1984). Kirsch relates the predominance of Thai women in the economic domain to their disadvantaged status in the religious world; women cannot earn the highest status, defined as the world of monkhood. Rather, they are confined to the roles of wife and/or mother. On the contrary, Keyes argues that although women are prevented from the spiritual power of monkhood, they enjoy a complementary status as mothers through sacrificing their sons to become monks. He states: “While a man must reject his “nature” (that is, his sexuality) in order to pursue the Path [joining the monkhood], a woman must first realize her “nature” (becoming a mother) as a prerequisite to her traversing the Path (joining the religious world)...In becoming a mother, a woman is enabled not only to nurture a child but also the Buddhist religion itself” (Keyes 1984: 229).

A gender distinction influenced by Buddhism is inherent in the Thai cultural norm of bun khun – a mutual reciprocity underlying relationships between parents and children in Thai families (Akin 1984). It is this cultural norm that ties women to their parents and

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9 When women become mae chi (nuns) they are not ordained. They wear white, shave their heads and observe five or eight percepts. Normally, mae chi spend their time cooking, cleaning, and assisting monks in services and study. Their ritual status is greatly inferior to that of monks and the store of merit these women earn cannot compare to that of monks (Van Esterik 2000: 74-78; Tannenbaum 1999: 244-245; Mills 1999: 78).
natal families; physically, emotionally, and materially. This contribution is a way for women to repay their moral debt to their parents, symbolizing the gratitude of a dutiful daughter.\(^\text{10}\) The notion of a ‘dutiful daughter’ is a powerful one. Embedded in parent-child relations, it influences gender roles and relations and shapes women’s lives in larger social contexts. For example, scholars explain prostitution in Thai society in relation to this notion as the profession allows women to fulfill this filial obligation. Frequently, an analysis of prostitution also points at Buddhist beliefs as a source of women’s subordination (Manderson 1992; Muecke 1992; Sukanya 1988; Thitsa 1980; Truong 1990). Indeed, this explanation has long been debated. Several scholars, for instance Keyes (1984), argue that the linkages of prostitution to Buddhism are less relevant than the influx of the capitalist economy into rural lifestyles. He links commercial sex to the pattern of economic development and modernization that creates differential opportunities between rural and urban sectors and on the lives of rural people, especially women. This view is emphasized by Chris Lyttleton (2000, 1994), Pasuk Phongpaichit (1982), Yos Santasombat (1992).

More recent works take a different perspective and explore gender relations in connection with modernization, emphasizing the expansion of industrialization and migration, both domestic and international (Anchalee and Nittaya 1992; Mills 1999; Supang et al. 1999; Whittaker 1999). Among these studies, Mary Beth Mills’ ethnography (1999) on Isan female migrant workers shows how the powerful desires of being \textit{thansamai} (modern) – consuming modern commodities, e.g. fashionable clothes, cosmetics, and jewelry and experiencing urban lifestyles and modern entertainment – have inspired rural women to engage in wage employment and live in a big city like Bangkok. By participating in rural-to-urban migration, women have challenged the customary gender norms of female spatial movement. Moreover, this mobility allows these women to realize their \textit{thansamai} desires and fulfill their obligation as dutiful daughters who support their parents and siblings in the rural home (Mills 1999: 17-19). In this study, \textit{mia farang} share female migrants’ experience in reproducing the dominant notion of dutiful daughters. Taking the analysis one step further, the study explores how the dutiful-daughter obligations shape female’s choices of marriage and reinforce the (re)construction of Thai femininity. It also looks at how the idea of desired marriage partners emphasized by

\(^\text{10}\) A distinction in gender inherent in this cultural norm that influences different expectations and ways in which daughters and sons repay the moral debt of \textit{bun khun} will be further elaborated in Chapter Five.
women reinforces the reproduction of the dutiful-daughter obligations and places local men into a vulnerable situation.

Through an examination of migrants’ daily life and consumption practices, Mills points out how female urban workers experience and perform dominate discourses of Thai modernity, especially the images of ‘modern women’ that they would like to duplicate. These women express pride in their acquisition of such experiences and life styles (Mills 1999:127-133). This becomes more apparent by focusing on embodiment and subjectivity in exploring Thai gender, especially as a part of Thai popular culture studies. By examining beauty pageants, Penney Van Esterik (1996, 2000) illustrates the changing notions of (female) beauty which is geared toward cultural hybridity. Since the late twentieth century, Eurasian and Amerasian features have become highly prized and more popular in the media and in popular discourses. The engendering of a Thai self is part and parcel of commercialization of beauty both in local and global contexts (Van Esterik 1996; Reynolds 1999). This transition creates a preference for children of mixed Thai-Western parents (luk krueng) which has become a part of women’s desires to engage in inter- and transnational marriage. Motivations propelling some mia farang in this study to opt for marriage illustrate this point. While this thesis does not focus on this topic, women’s desire for luk krueng, as a part of their motivations is addressed in Chapter Three.

The diverse views in conceptualizing gender offer an extensive conceptual tool to explore gender roles and relations from various angles. This study examines gender in relation to transnational marriages in an interactive way. It looks at how gender influences these marriages; and at the same time it also reveals how the marriages generate tensions and challenges to local norms and practices with respect to gender relations. The conventional perspective framing Thai gender in relation to Buddhist ethics helps in explaining economic contributions and moral connections of mia farang to their natal family in the rural home. The contemporary perspectives focusing on modernity and embodiment provide an insight to elucidate motivations, perceptions, and actions related to the marriage. Concurrently, all these aspects influence interactions and social relations between mia farang, their husbands, and other social actors in the women’s natal community in particular.

Since mia farang consist of women from various social and economic backgrounds, the study takes both gender as well as class into account, and analyzes how they shape and are shaped by transnational marriages. I wish to show how the marriages challenge the existing class structure in the village as much as women’s class background influences
their desires, decisions, and participation in this type of marital relations. Drawing on these perspectives, this thesis shall provide a meaningful way to understand on-going transitions in local communities in the face of global dynamism, especially with regard to gender and class.

The fieldwork approach: Focusing on the locality and following the people

As with most anthropological research, this dissertation is based on dual sources of information: my ethnographic fieldwork and relevant secondary data. The fieldwork was conducted in Nadokmai, a village in Udon Thani province which is the primary research site. Nadokmai is located 40 kilometers south-west of the town of Udon. Before locating the research site, I had visited a dozen villages in Udon Thani and Khon Kaen provinces. As mentioned, according to the NESDB’s survey report (2004), these two provinces and Nakhon Ratchasima were home to almost half of the *mia farang* in the Northeast. Based on this report and for a practical reason – the University where I worked is located in Khon Kaen – I started the survey of field site feasibility by visiting several villages in Khon Kaen province. After talking with the NESDB staff conducting the survey, I shifted my focus to Udon Thani and visited the villages where the number of women engaging in this type of marriage was high. Among these villages, Nadokmai stood out in terms of the willingness of its residents to share their experiences and ideas about the phenomenon. When introducing my research to the community leaders and local authorities, most of them had information and opinions about these marriages and indicated a willingness to share with me. In January 2008, I started my first round of fieldwork and resided in the village with my research assistant until the middle of May 2008.11

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11 The research assistant worked for me while she was looking for a job after completing her M.A. in Sociology from the university where I worked. She wanted to work with me because she was interested in the marriage phenomenon and had collected relevant secondary data to develop her master’s thesis proposal. She did, however, change her research topic. Her main contribution to my fieldwork was conducting a preliminary survey to collect background information about *mia farang* and their personal and marital information; collecting data on facts and figures, and on the development of the village. She was also helpful in putting me in contact with some villagers who she talked to and we agreed that these particular cases should be interviewed further.
The preliminary findings during the four and a half months of fieldwork led me to extend my research to Pattaya, the most popular contact zone among tourist destinations where \textit{mia farang} from the village met their future husbands. There were already a considerable number of village women who had been working in Pattaya in an attempt to make connections with Western men, expecting that the relationships could eventually lead to serious commitments and marriage.\textsuperscript{12} Similar to Udon town, Pattaya served as an R&R center for the American military during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, Pattaya became one of the most famous tourist destinations in Thailand, especially for transnational sex tourism. It is located in Chonburi Province, 650 kilometers southeast

\textsuperscript{12}Although tourist sites are common contact zones for women to meet and make connections with Western men, routes to engage in transnational marriages are varied. This issue will be addressed in Chapter Four.
of Udon and only 145 kilometers southeast of Bangkok (see Map 1). During the second round of my data collection, from October 2008 to May 2009, I conducted fieldwork at Pattaya for 25 days – from 8-23 November 2008 and from 28 January to 5 February 2009 – while continuing to focus on the village. In addition to the field sites in Thailand, since 2008 I have kept close contact with two Thai-Dutch couples living in the Netherlands whose wives are from Nadokmai. Furthermore, I occasionally met with Thai women and their Dutch husbands through participation in various social and cultural activities organized by Thai communities in the Netherlands, including a gathering at the Thai temple in Amsterdam for a religious ceremony. Data collected and understanding gained through the associations in the Netherlands enriched and complemented my ethnographic work in Nadokmai and Pattaya.

For these reasons, this research involves what George Marcus (1995) calls ‘multi-sited ethnography.’ While following the people involved in the phenomenon, it focuses on the locality where transnational marriages are embedded and where the mixed couples resettle or have regularly visited. This strategy helps understand how the system works in translocal and transnational sites. Marcus points out various ‘tracking’ strategies that have been employed in collecting information, including following the people, the stories, the conflicts, and the metaphors that concern them. This approach shifts from the conventional ethnography of a single-sited location to multiple sites. It is particularly relevant to the study of transnational ties and activities that could not be fully understood within a single particular setting (Marcus 1995:98).

While acknowledging the merits of Marcus’ approach of ‘multi-sited ethnography,’ I also take account of scholarly observations regarding the distribution of attention and (deep) involvement to maintain established standards of ethnographic research (Hannerz

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13 During the second round of the fieldwork, I worked with two assistants, Phimon and Sin, both residents of Nadokmai who had actively participated in community activities. Phimon was particularly interested in marriages between village women and farang men as she was informed – through meetings she attended while serving as a member of the village committee – that these marriages had served as a conduit for women trafficking. Sin was actively involved in various development activities in the village as well as local schools. He was also in charge of keeping records of facts and figures of the cluster of houses where he lived. Both of them assisted in validating information on mia farang’s background gathered during the first round of the fieldwork. They also kept me updated on things going on in the village and the villages nearby, especially with regard to events related to mia farang, their husbands, and their natal families. Their assistance in this regard helped in managing the multi-sited fieldwork while allowing me to focus on relevant events in the village. Sometimes, they also helped in making appointments for interviews and introduced me to villagers I wanted to meet. Their introduction, in some cases, made the villagers feel at ease and agree to give an interview.
Introduction

1998: 248; Hendry 2003: 498). The differences in terms of fieldwork duration and number of interviews in various field sites are cases in point of an unbalanced distribution of information gained from such locations. Inevitably, these variations reflect the depth of my ethnographical data and understanding at different field sites. Thus, it is important to note here that the central concern of this research is to contribute to the local end of transnational connections – the women’s natal village – while the translocal and transnational linkages provide more dynamic views and a deeper understanding of transnational processes and practices taking place at the village. By focusing on women’s natal village and following the people involved in these marital relations, I can accommodate the main concern of this research.

The major methodology employed throughout the fieldwork was in-depth interviews, observation, and participation. These different techniques were applied in relation to the specific contexts. For instance, in Pattaya observation was particularly important and became a key method in exploring and capturing daily life, interactions, and social relations while interviews were relatively limited. The information that I collected was mainly qualitative. It includes life stories, personal narratives, behavior, and descriptions of interactions and relationships I observed at the field sites. The fieldwork included interviews with 93 women and men, 86 in the village setting and seven in Pattaya (see Table 1, Appendix 1). In the village, I interviewed mia farang, their husbands, their parents and siblings, as well as village leaders and residents, local government staff, and school teachers. Among the twenty-six mia farang interviewed, nineteen women were having a relationship with Westerners and six had already ended their relationship at the time to the interview. Five of the Western partners interviewed had settled in the village (including one man living in a nearby village) for some years; the other six men were visiting their wives’ home village. In Pattaya, three women interviewed were from Nadokmai, three were from other rural villages in the Northeastern provinces, and one was from a village in the Central region.

In addition to qualitative data, a small preliminary survey on background information of mia farang, primarily demographic data and a brief history of their marriages, was also conducted. The survey provides relevant quantitative data to supplement ethnographic accounts. The preliminary results are presented in Appendix 2.
Gaining access to information: Identity and relationship

Conducting research in Isan villages was not a new experience for me; however, researching in the areas of intimate relations, sexuality, and transnational practices was, for me, an entirely novel field. Before engaging in fieldwork, I presumed that it would be difficult to conduct an interview on such personal matters, given that I would be reluctant to disclose details of my own personal life. My concern in this regard was mostly about how my own background – an unmarried woman in academia who had studied overseas – would shape relationships and rapport with villagers. I soon realized that my initial concern was not entirely justified. In various contexts, my background created perceptions on the part of villagers regarding what kinds of information I should or should not know or ask about, as well as expectations of particular forms of assistance that I could provide them. The extent to which these expectations were realizable could have an impact on my rapport with key informants, thus affecting my access to information. Such situations required a level of management and negotiation so as to maintain good relationships.

Although my career and training are different from most of the residents in Nadokmai, I am an Isan native and share some commonality in terms of social and cultural characteristics as well as language – I speak the local dialect – with the villagers. This common background and my experience in conducting research in rural villages enabled me to establish research relations with the villagers fairly quickly. My daily presence during the first round of fieldwork also allowed me to participate in activities and events in the village and become acquainted with local residents. Good relations helped many women feel comfortable to talk to me more openly. Nevertheless, these connections, in some situations, created expectations which I had to deal with. For instance, I was repeatedly asked by women’s parents or senior kin to help their daughters or nieces in making contact with Western men. A few women who went out of their way to help me establish connections with several people in the village seriously asked for assistance in this regard. One woman showed me a photo of her niece, told me about her niece’s marital problems, and asked me to introduce her to a farang man. This particular request created a situation that required negotiation. It should be mentioned when requests involved small tasks such as translating, filling in a visa application form, or finding books to improve somebody’s English, I always obliged. In the eyes of the villagers, my experience of living abroad, my ability to communicate with Western men, and my familiarity with the computer and the Internet qualified me as a potential agent capable of putting women in
contact with Western men. Since match-making service in the village was initiated by a local school teacher and a few teachers followed suit, the villagers thought I could be a better ‘agent’ in this business because I was not only a teacher but a university teacher.

In order to maintain the good relationships so far developed and not become entangled in match making requests, I gave various (ethical) explanations. For example, I explained that there were rules I had to follow in doing research, and the request to arrange a match was against such rules. One woman said no one would check whether I followed the rules or not. But the reasons I gave did not work and requests kept on coming. Finally I said that they should not count on me in this matter since I could not find a Western partner for myself even though I had been overseas for years. Interestingly, this explanation was the most convincing one. Such requests were often brought up during the initial period of the field research. Later on they became less frequent, but every now and then they turned up again.

As the fieldwork progressed many villagers, especially mia farang, became more at ease in talking about their lives, although there were those who showed reservations; some even refused to be interviewed. The women often shared with me their experiences of living abroad or visiting foreign countries, their connections and ties with those who stayed behind in the home village, their contributions to the village and to their parent’s and sibling’s households, as well as their relationships with their husbands. However, the conversation was often limited when it came to the issue of sexuality. This issue is admittedly underrepresented in this study. This must have something to do with my status as an unmarried woman. For my part, I was expected not to openly express my interest in or ask questions about sexual issues. This expectation is particularly true because when I tried to bring this up, women often asked, “Are you married?” This reaction was crystal clear: as an unmarried woman, I was not supposed to know about sexuality. While I was aware of this gender norm, I also presumed since I was not a young woman, other women might want to talk to me about sexuality openly. In addition, they knew that it was a part of my research. However, I realized that I had made an inaccurate assumption.

In another instance, my background as an unmarried woman was used as a silencer. When I attempted to discuss with village men what a bar girl had told me about the differences between Thai and farang clients in terms of sexuality, I was given a look that signaled I was violating the line of ‘appropriate behavior’ as far as my gender and marital status were concerned. Going against this could have impacted my relationships with the informants, which would inevitably have affected my access to data. Furthermore, these
encounters also reminded me of an ethical consideration to the effect that villagers might be willing to share some parts of their personal lives but not other. I was respectful and appreciative of their reactions and did not push further. There were, however, a few women who were willing to talk about sexual issues more openly.

**Structure of the dissertation**

This thesis aims to contribute to the body of knowledge of local-transnational articulations and their consequences on local transformations, particularly on gender, marriage and family. Initially it locates transnational marriages of Isan women in the Thai context as well as in global mobility. This is followed by situating the marriages within the relevant anthropological debates that provide a theoretical framework for exploring the phenomenon. Then, the findings are presented in six chapters.

In Chapter One, I situate transnational marriages in their historical roots. The chapter discusses the development of Thai women-Western men marriage in Thailand from social and historical perspectives. By going back to periods prior to the early twentieth century, it illustrates the socio-economic and political relevance of this marital relationship in various contexts. More recently, the marriages have been perceived as a means of obtaining a secure life not solely for the women themselves but for their families as well. On the basis of societal and individual significance, I shall argue that these marriages are, to some extent, socially acceptable and that the current popularity of transnational marriages is grounded in their social recognition and historical roots.

Chapter Two takes a close look at the village as a site where transnational marriages are embedded. In light of local and global articulations, the chapter focuses on transformation processes and the ways in which villagers have engaged with and negotiated such changes, namely commercialization of agriculture, internal and international labor migration, and most recently transnational marriage of village women. The chapter demonstrates that in recent decades, the ‘local’ and ‘global’ articulations have been intensified through transnational marriages. These marital relations offer an alternative for women who seek to go beyond their present predicaments associated with crises in their marriage and family lives as well as gender roles and relations. At the same time, this choice allows women to participate in global opportunities.

Chapter Three problematizes the ways in which transnational marriages are conceptualized within the binary opposition of the notions of romantic love and material
incentives. It presents the diverse and complex motivations that feed into ‘logics of desire’ propelling local women and Western men to engage in transnational marriages. These motivations arguably transcend both economic reasons and intimate relationships and are informed by local and Western norms and practices regarding gender, marriage, and family life, as well as the different interpretations of such norms. This chapter also underpins the idea of ‘irresponsible local men’ as a part of the complex motivations facilitating and legitimatizing women’s engagement in transnational marriage. Furthermore, the chapter also explores the paradox of ‘global hypergamy’ as marriage migration presents a reverse mobility pattern in terms of gender and geographical hierarchy. I wish to show that this aspect adds another layer to the multiplicity of the current transnational marriage phenomenon.

Chapter Four examines the ways in which women realize their desires to engage in transnational marriages. By focusing on Pattaya, a ‘space of opportunity and hope’, the chapter illustrates various ways, tactics, and practices women engaged in during their ‘negotiation processes’ to become a wife. The focus is on how women have used sex work as a means to materialize their desired goal. Women’s intentions and their practices are oriented towards establishing serious transnational relationships rather than focusing exclusively on the exchange of sex for money, as relationships between women in the sex industry and their clients are commonly presented in the literature. Based on my ethnographic exploration, I shall argue that the women exercise a great deal of agency to realize their desired goal.

In Chapter Five, I return to the village setting and investigate the multiplicity of mia farang images. It also explores how such images, as well as local norms and practices regarding gender, marriage, and parent-children ties shaped by a Thai cultural norm of bun khun, influence interactions and social relations between the women, their farang husbands, and local people in the village. The chapter looks at the relationships within three different contexts – the women’s natal family, the mixed couples, and the community. The ways in which material resources and ‘love’ have complicated the relationships within these contexts are examined. The analysis demonstrates that meanings of money extend beyond economic value to include social significance and prestige, as well as care, ‘love’, and belonging. In addition, this chapter also discusses how women’s obligations as dutiful daughters and their contribution to the community become important tools in their struggle for social recognition.
In Chapter Six I focus on the experiences of those who stay behind and the consequences of transnational marriage on on-going processes of local dynamics, especially with regard to gender relations, constructions of femininity, and class in the Thai context. Through exploring the reactions of local people, I argue that villagers living in the women’s natal community are not recipients without agency; rather they are involved in this type of transnational activity with clear aims and determination. On another score, I wish to show how transnational marriages of village women challenge parental authority regarding female choices of marriage and sexuality. With respect to gender relations, I shall argue that the idea of desired marriage partners drawn on images of ‘irresponsible local men’ reflects the rejection of local men, thereby placing these men into a vulnerable position. Another key aspect of the dynamics in the sending village is the emergence of a new social category comprising of mia farang. This chapter discusses whether this category is a class and how it influences the existing class structure in the village.

The conclusion recapitulates the substantive findings presented in the dissertation highlighting historical diversity and current complexity of transnational marriages which emphasize the coexistence and intertwining between material relations and emotional attachment. Similarly, consequences of such marriages on the local community also extend beyond material dimensions. All in all, this study not only challenges the binary view that is often used in describing these marriages, but also shows that transnational marriages have far-reaching effects that alters gender and class; while simultaneously contribute to life style changes and transformations in Isan society in the face of local-global articulations.
CHAPTER ONE

FROM INTERMARRIAGE TO TRANSMATIONAL MARRIAGE IN THAI SOCIETY: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The term ‘transnational marriage’ refers to a social phenomenon taking place in today’s world where massive mobility has become common-place on a global scale. In the case of Thailand one might ask the question whether transnational marriages are the same as marriages between Thais and Westerners (or foreigners) that took place in the past, and whether the two types are related. And if so, how does this relatedness influence the popularity of contemporary transnational marriage? These are the issues this chapter wishes to address.

At the outset, it is important to point out that transnational marriages are intermarriages in the sense that they are marriages between people of different ethnicities or cultures. But transnational marriages have an extra-territorial dimension which allows husbands and wives to move between their respective countries regularly while maintaining their relationships and networks at both ends.\(^{14}\) In discussing the particularities of such marriages, this chapter gives an overview of intermarriage from a historical perspective, taking into account of such factors as gender, class and ethnicity. The fact that Thai society has long been familiar with these marital relationships makes acceptance easier. The developments over the past centuries are context-specific and the forms of marriage are different from today’s transnational marriage. Embedded in its historical roots, transnational marriage as we see it today is closely connected to global trends. Historical insights help shed light on why transnational marriage emerges and expands in particular settings and not in others.

Transnational marriage, like other activities and practices in the contemporary world that cross national boundaries, represents an ‘unbounded’ and deterritorialized process (Basch et al. 1994). However, they are anchored or grounded in particular histories and places. These practices are inevitably underlined by constraints and opportunities.

\(^{14}\)The definitions and connotations of inter- and mixed marriage and transnational marriage are provided in a greater detail in the Introduction.
found in the localities where they occur. As Luis Guarnizo and Michael Smith argue, “[T]ransnational practices, while connecting collectivities located in more than one national territory, are embodied in specific social relations established between specific people, situated in unequivocal localities, at historically determined times” (1998:11). They also suggest that the ‘locality’ where the activities are embedded needs to be scrutinized and further conceptualized. Suzanne Sinke (2006), in her writing on historical perspectives on gender and migration, recognizes the historical roots of contemporary activities. She posits that history is not simply a phenomenon of the past that occurred in another place at a different time which can be compared to and distinguished from present practices. Rather, it is important to consider how the past and present phenomena are also related or connected since these connections provide a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the contemporary phenomenon in question.

In Thailand, as in other countries, the history of intermarriage is related to the immigration of various ethnic groups into the country. Among these groups, the Chinese represent the largest group and they were also the first to have arrived in the country as early as the thirteenth century. When the first Westerners – those of the Caucasian race – arrived in Siam in the sixteenth century, the Chinese had already engaged in mining activities in the Southern region (Skinner 1957: 2-3). From the sixteenth century until the Vietnam War (1965-1975), Westerners in Thailand were predominantly Europeans of various nationalities. However, during the Vietnam War, American servicemen made up the majority of Westerners staying in Thailand.

Not only did the Chinese account for the highest number of immigrants, they also played a key role in various sectors of the Siamese economy, especially in trading (rice, tin and timber), shipping and taxing. The Chinese were also granted high positions in the bureaucratic hierarchy such as town governors. The role of Chinese immigrants was particularly evident during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) when they became a part of the entrepreneurial class and took up professional jobs as well as wage labor

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15 It is noted that in Ayutthaya period (1424-1758) the immigrants included Indians, Persians, Japanese, Arab and Turkish (Dararat 2009: 99; Skinner 1957: 8-12; Wyatt 1994: 90-97). In the later period, immigrations have also included different ethnic groups from neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Intermarriage between Siamese and these immigrants was possible. In addition, marriage was also related to the indigenous inhabitants in the area where Siam was situated including Mon and Khmer (Wyatt 1984: 1).

16 Skinner (1957:149) notes that during the reigns of King Rama III and V, the governors of various towns in the South, the Northeast, and the Central regions, including Ranong, Songkhla, Pattani, Trang, Langsuan, Nakhon Ratchasima, Janthaburi and Paknam were Chinese immigrants or were born locally from a Thai mother, but still spoke Chinese. Their accomplishment encouraged the continuation of Chinese immigration.
(Skinner 1957: 213-227). Most Chinese immigrants were male. Intermarriages between these men and Siamese women in that period were promoted under an assimilation policy. In the meantime, the achievements of the Chinese in the economic and the bureaucratic spheres gave Chinese-Thai marriages a positive image. During the decades after 1910, despite the emphasis on nationalism by King Rama VI (1910-1925), the Chinese continued to play their key roles in the Thai economy and politics. Studies on the Chinese minority in Thai society and Thai-Chinese marriages have been substantially carried out elsewhere (see for examples, Boonyong 2004; Jiemin 2003; Skinner 1957). While acknowledging the important roles of Chinese immigrants, Thai-Chinese marriage and intermarriage between Thais and people of various ethnic groups in Thai society, this chapter focuses on Thai-Westerner marriage in order to accommodate the central concern of this research.

Most studies on intermarriage between Thai women and Westerners have centred on the period marked by the presence of American troops on Thai territory during the Vietnam War. By going back to the periods preceding the early twentieth century, this chapter provides a more comprehensive overview of this type of marriage. It explores the social and political relevance of these multiracial marriages in the context of Thai history in the three chronological time frames: the period prior to the early twentieth century, the Vietnam War era, and the epoch since the 1980s when tourism became an important source of national revenue and prolonged associations were formed between local women and foreign men –mostly tourists. This chapter focuses on social attitudes toward intermarriage over past centuries to gain insight into the level of social acceptance of transnational marriage in contemporary Thai society. One should bear in mind that the developments of these marital relations are context-specific, showing different forms of marital union as compared with today’s transnational marriage.

**Thai-European marriage prior to the early twentieth century**

*European merchants and envoys*

The Portuguese were the first Westerners to arrive in Siam in the early sixteenth century after they had captured Malacca in 1511. During the reign of King Ramathibodi II (1491-1529), they sent their first envoy to Ayutthaya. Portuguese merchants then began to arrive

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17Skinner (1957) notes that during the reign of King Rama V Chinese immigrants accounted for 60-75 percent of all skilled and unskilled labor in both agriculture and industrial sectors.
and establish residence in the kingdom. In addition to residential rights, they were also granted special trade privileges and religious liberty. In return Siam was assured supplies of guns and bullets (Wyatt 1984: 88; Hutchison 1985:22). Some of the Portuguese merchants took local wives. Jan Weisman (2000: 156-160) notes that the first intermarriage between local residents and Westerners involved a delegation of Portuguese Catholic missionaries.\(^{18}\) It is estimated that at the beginning of King Narai’s reign (1657-1688) there were as many as 2,000 Portuguese in Siam, including those whose ancestors were of mixed Portuguese-Siamese parentage. The decline in the number of Portuguese and Portuguese-Siamese residents and their commercial influence was evident when Siam signed trade agreements with various Western countries as a result of the Bowring Treaty in 1855.

During the reign of the King Narai, there were also foreigners from countries such as Holland, England, China and Japan. Most of these foreigners were engaged in international trade, and settled on the banks of the Chao Phraya river close to the docks (Dararat 2009:100). Europeans in Siam, like in other Southeast Asian countries, were far less than the Chinese in number, but both groups shared one thing: they were almost all male. Many of them were married, but they arrived without their women. Among the employees of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) working in Southeast Asia, only those who obtained the rank higher than merchant (koopman) were allowed to bring their families with them (Andaya 1998:21). As for the Chinese, lineage councils in their places of origin did not permit the wives to join their husbands on overseas journeys for fear of losing the entire family (Jiemin 2003; Skinner 1957).

Arriving in a foreign land, newcomers no doubt would need assistance to deal with an unfamiliar environment. Chinese and European traders alike wanted help to operate their businesses and to meet other needs such as housekeeping, companionship and as sexual partners. Barbara Andaya (1998: 13-15) notes that hooking up with a local woman and recognizing her as a wife was the most effective way to establish connections, allowing these men to obtain assistance and satisfy their sexual desires, although these marriages were temporary. The temporary marriages, which might last a few days, months or years, were critical to successful trading, not merely because of the kinship links they created but because throughout Southeast Asia it was women, not their men folk, who

\(^{18}\) These missionaries were either lay members of the church or priests. Weisman (2002:156) notes that they were under “ecclesiastic orders not so much to proselytize the people of Ayutthaya as to marry local women and produce children to be raised from birth in the Catholic faith.”
dominated the small trade. Women were involved in selling goods in markets; some owned shops or became hawkers. An example cited in Andaya’s work is the case of Alexander Hamilton, an experienced trader in Southeast Asia, indicating that European men benefited highly from relationships they had with local women. As wives, the women took care of them and performed all household chores. If their husbands had goods to sell, they set up shops and sold them or bartered them for those goods that could be sold in the foreign markets that their husbands had connections.

Temporary marriages could not have taken place without the compliance and involvement of local women. Being involved with or marrying foreign men provided women with opportunities to access desired goods as well as to become an agent or a sole seller. In the case of Thai women-Chinese men marriages, Skinner (1957:127-128) points out that their involvement in trading made women prefer Chinese men as they often knew more about the business than local men. Chinese men also had more to offer Thai women than did men of their own ethnic group. Andaya (1998:13) notes that in addition to commercial motives, temporary marriage in Southeast Asia between indigenous women and European men was boosted by the myth of Europeans as ‘stranger-kings’ who were perceived as wealthy. The VOC employees working in Ayutthaya, for example, lived in luxurious conditions. These Dutchmen also had relations with local women, although employees were required to refrain from sexual intercourse with Siamese women according to company rule. Gijsbert Heeck’s account of the situation around 1655 indicates that “most of them [VOC employees] had concubines or mistresses in order (so they said) to avoid the common whores, and they maintained them with all necessities, buying or building houses for them, each according to his means” (cited in Ten Brummelhuis 1987: 59-60). This cohabitation, though agreed upon by both parties, took place without legal document and Church approval; it was considered concubinage, not marriage, according to Europeans’ view. On the basis of this perception, VOC employees referred to the local women they cohabited with “as whores, sluts, trollops and the like” (Ten Brummelhuis 1987: 60). The perception of Westerners as wealthy people remains relevant and is an important factor in the popularity of transnational marriage in current times, although motivations propelling women to enter into this type of conjugal relations are diverse and complex, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Interrmarriages and liaisons between foreign men local women sometimes caused frictions between local communities and European administrations. In the Ayutthaya period, for example, there were disputes regarding authority over children. One well
known case was Jau Sote, a local Mon\textsuperscript{19} female trader who did business with the VOC Company during 1640-1658 and had liaisons with a number of VOC officers. After her death, there was an argument over whether her children should stay in Siam or be sent to Batavia to be raised as Christians as the VOC demanded (Andaya 1998; Dararat 2009). Such disputes were bound to increase with a growing number of Europeans in Siam. Accordingly, an edict forbidding Siamese women to marry foreign men was issued in the reign of King Ekathosarot (1605-1620). National security and religion were claimed as the major reasons behind the act. A Thai woman marrying a foreign man was likely to convert to the religion of her husband and might reveal information affecting national security. An article of this act stipulated that if the parents allowed their daughter to marry a foreign man, they would be punished, even with the death penalty. Foreign men mentioned in the law included those from England, Holland, Java, Malaysia, and India. This is the first piece of law concerning intermarriage in the legal history of Siam (Dararat 2009:100-101).

In a sense, the act was a deliberate attempt of the state to control personal relationships and the sexuality of its female, not male, citizenry as it dealt only with intermarriage between local women and foreign men. It was obviously gender-biased since the law was not applied to local men. In addition, it was also racially biased since the foreigners subjected to the law did not include Chinese. As pointed out earlier, the Chinese were a privileged group and intermarriages between local women and Chinese men were encouraged. The different views and approaches of the Siamese state toward intermarriage reflect how gender, ethnicity and sexuality were integrated into the national scene, in particular social and political and historical contexts.

When Siam opened up in 1855 as a result of the Bowring Treaty with England, the policies regarding marriage between Siamese and Europeans became more relaxed, under certain conditions. Marriage was considered legal only if the following conditions were met: first, the couple had to get permission from the parents or the caretakers of the woman; second, the couple had to attend the customary marriage rites of both the woman and the man; and third, the couple had to sign their names in front of government officials as well as a consular representative of the husband’s country (Dararat 2009: 104-108).

Despite the restrictions and regulations which placed limitations and put pressure to bear on this type of relationship, there were examples of lasting and successful intermarriages whose descendants became prominent figures in government and business

\textsuperscript{19}Mon is one of the ethnic groups in Thailand.
circles in Thai society, some of them were conferred with titles of nobility. The Savetsila family is one of the successful cases. The roots of this family can be traced back to Henry Alabaster, an Englishman who came to Siam as a deputy consul in 1857 during the reign of King Rama IV. Besides his diplomatic function, Alabaster also assisted in various activities including land survey, the construction of the country’s early road network, and the establishment of the Survey Office and the Post and Telegraph Office. For his many services to the Siamese crown, he was given the noble rank of Phraya, the highest rank ever attained by a foreigner in Siamese service. Alabaster died quite suddenly at the early age of 48. He left his Thai wife and two sons who also served in the Thai civil service and both were awarded the same rank as their father. His grandson, Sithi Savetsila, who is now in his nineties, had a most distinguished career. During World War II, he supported an underground resistance movement against Japan while studying engineering in the US. After the War, he joined the military and rose to the rank of Air Chief Marshall. He once served as Foreign Minister and his last position was Privy Councilor to the present King. In recent years, many members of this family have been active in government, business and political circles. The Bunnag is another prominent family whose ancestors included two Persian brothers – thus non-Westerners - married to Thai women. Members of this family have been connected with Thai nobility, and active in government and business circles (Akin 1996: 259-267; Weisman 2000: 161-165; Wyatt 1994: 90-97).

Intermarriage among elite/upper classes, its contexts, as well as laws and regulations related to it, are different from those concerning the lower social strata. Before exploring the upper class models, there was another group of women who married Dutch soldiers or former prisoners of World War II. These women met their husbands under special circumstances and their experiences of intermarriage had little in common with those involved with or married to foreign traders and envoys. This is the case of the ‘Siamese War Brides.’ Before proceeding to the next section, it is important to note that despite the fact that prisoners of World War II included soldiers of various nationalities, available literature concerning marriages between ex-prisoners of war and local women is rather limited. Drawing on available documents, the following section focuses on the group of Dutch soldiers or former Dutch prisoners.


21 Prisoners of World War II in Thailand included not only Dutch soldiers, but British and Australian military personnel as well. Captured by the Japanese army, thousands of these Allied prisoners were forced to work as
Siamese War Brides: A foretaste of transnational marriage

Although the war bride phenomenon involved a sizeable number of Thai women, the existing literature on this subject is rather limited. The limitation reflects that these women and their experiences seem not to be well recognized. This section draws on the studies by Han ten Brummelhuis (1994) and Arno Ooms (2002). According to both authors, there were as many as 2,000-2,500 marriages between Thai women and former Dutch prisoners-of-war after World War II. Some of the Thai-Dutch couples settled in Thailand; others moved to the Dutch Indies (now Indonesia), the Netherlands and other European countries. There were also Thai women who were left behind on their way to Europe, stranded in Indonesia, Singapore and Port Said in Egypt. Some of these women ended up selling sex for survival.

On August 9, 1964, the Thai-language newspaper, Kiti Sap, carried the headlines “Siamese Girls Who Followed Dutch Soldiers Confess Their Mistake: Instead of finding happiness with their husbands as they dreamed, they became public service girls” (Ooms 2002: 106). When the news spread out that Thai women had been abandoned by their Dutch husbands in foreign lands, popular reactions were hostile. A Dutchman accompanied by his Thai wife was assaulted by a group of youngsters in Bangkok. Some Thai columnists demanded that the government investigate such cases and bring back those who were stranded in various third countries.

It was not clear what the Thai government response was, but as Ooms (2002) points out, a Dutch investigation indicated that these abandoned women did not want to be repatriated to Thailand. Rather, they tried to find some means to survive in Batavia. Some made requests to the military commanders of Batavia to track down their Dutch husbands. This situation put strains on diplomatic relations between Thailand and Holland. Dutch officials then approached the Thai press to provide them with letters from Thai women living with their Dutch partners. An official investigation involving about 100 women followed, showing that the majority of these women were living happily with their laborers in constructing the Railway from Kanchanaburi, Thailand to Burma to move men and supplies to the Burmese front where the Japanese were fighting the British (further information on this matter see: http://www.kanchanaburi-info.com/en/muang.html; http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/pow/general_info.asp; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South-East_Asian_theatre_of_World_War_II: accessed March 2, 2012).

Ooms notes that his estimation was made by extrapolations from numbers given in newspaper articles. In 1946 alone, about 451-500 members of the Dutch Indies troops registered their marriage at the Dutch diplomatic mission in Bangkok (2002: 116). Citing Dutch documents, Ten Brummelhuis estimates there were about 2,000 Thai-Dutch marriages in 1945-1947 (1994:5).
husbands although some women complained of ‘erotomaniac inclinations’ (Ten Brummelhuis 1994:7).

Ten Brummelhuis attributes the ordeal of these Siamese brides to the prejudice of Dutch opinion associating them with the sex industry. In the eyes of ordinary Dutch people, Bangkok in those days was seen as a city of sin (these impressions still prevail today), and notorious areas like Patpong were contact zones for Western (and Dutch) men to meet up with Thai prostitutes for sexual gratification; the Siamese War Brides must have come from among these girls, so they reasoned. In reality Thai women who married ex-Dutch prisoners-of-war came from different socio-economic backgrounds. Based on his interviews with a limited number of Thai women living in the Netherlands, Ten Brummelhuis (1994:7) notes that some of these war brides realized that in the Western view, being involved in sex work is disapproved of morally and it is a sinful past, a stigma that could not be wiped out.

On the Thai side, the reactions can be read as a nationalistic resentment about foreigners taking women out of the country. However, it is interesting to note that women gave reasons to justify their choice of Western partners by criticizing local men for their maltreatment of their wives and their proclivity to polygamy, as Ten Brummelhuis points out. This view was shared by most women I interviewed for my current research. Their perceptions and experiences of local men as ‘irresponsible’ husbands and fathers played a key role in their engaging search for a better life through transnational marriage.

Based on a dynamic view of the Siamese War Bride phenomenon, there are at least two aspects that connect it to current transnational marriages. First, the war brides seem to be the first group of Thai women engaged in overseas migration through marriage, no matter whether they had ultimately reached their destination. Second, the ways in which Siamese War Brides were perceived and reacted to by both the Thai and Dutch sides suggested that the marriages were conceptualized beyond socio-economic, political and international-relation dimensions as previously depicted. Such reactions represented public perceptions and attitudes towards the war brides at the time. Furthermore, the brides’ opinions reflected prevailing public discourses on gender, marriage and sexuality. All this only goes show the multi-layered complexities of intermarriage in Thailand, and an attempt to capture this type of marriage is possible only when the multiplicity factor is

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23 Erotomaniac is a type of delusional disorder in which a person has a delusion that a particular person is deeply in love with them (http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/erotomaniac, accessed: May 25, 2012).
taken into account. The next section explores the upper class models of Thai-Westerner intermarriage which adds another aspect to the complexity.

**Elite/Upper class**

In his study of the social organization of Thailand in the early Bangkok period (1782-1873), Akin Rabibhadana (1996: 22-31) distinguishes two classes in Thai society: the mass of the population or commoners (phrai) and the elite/upper class or leaders (nai). Phrai were obliged to obey orders of their nai and civil servants were duty-bound to obey the orders of their superiors. The upper class consisted of the King and the royal family, royal aristocracy, and noblemen. This group held the political and economic power over the country while commoners served as the workforce. Members of the upper class had ample opportunities to meet with Westerners particularly after Siam was connected to various Western countries as a result of the Bowring Treaty (1855).

During his reign, King Rama V (1868-1910) particularly put emphasis on modern education to enable Thai people to play a greater role in the country’s development, rather than relying on foreigners’ expertise. Following this policy, the government supported young men, most of whom were of upper-class background, to pursue a Western education. Members of the elite, including the nobility and high royalty, began sending their children to be educated abroad. The King himself also sent his children to study in various Western countries. During their long study tour in the West, some of these young men formed relationship with local women. In foreign settings, intermarriage concerning members of a specific social class was facilitated and the pattern of Thai men marrying European women became the common gender pattern among privileged overseas students and young diplomats and other officials.

Intermarriage was limited under King Rama VI (1910-1925) who adopted a nationalistic policy in foreign affairs. In 1914 the King gave orders to the Thai Embassies in Paris, Berlin, London, St. Petersburg, and Tokyo to the effect that henceforth marriage between members of the royal family, aristocrats, and students studying and officials working overseas and foreign women had to receive prior royal approval. Those who violated this would be subjected to punishment. The penalties included transfer from one country to another and withholding promotion in case of government officials. In practice,

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24 A certain government position such as the chief of a Krom (department or regiment) would have under him a certain number of phrai and nai (Akin 1996: 30-31).
when requests were made, permission was generally granted with conditions and cautions attached. The examples below, indicated in Dararat Mattariganond’s work (2007), show how the royal decision was implemented.

A year after the royal order was issued, Mr. Niam, holder of a government scholarship to study ship building and maintenance in England, married an English woman while pursuing his internship at a local company. Since his marriage did not get prior royal approval, he was sent back to Thailand before finishing his education. After his return, the case was submitted to the King for his consideration as there had not been such a case in the Thai bureaucratic system. The King decided that Niam’s eight-year experience of overseas study should qualify him to join the military, even though he did not finish his education. However, the monarch added that Niam had to do a good job to compensate for his flaw and that he would not be provided with any subsidy or extra support from the government on account of having a foreign wife. And there was the case of a secretary at the Siamese Embassy at The Hague who, in 1924, asked for royal permission to marry a Belgian woman. While his request was approved, he received a note saying that the King did not appreciate the marriage, cautioning that marriage between a Thai man and a Westerner might cause difficulty for them in the future. For one thing, it might hinder the man’s career since he would not be promoted to be an Ambassador. Both cases emphasize how intermarriage was shaped under nationalism in a particular period of Thai history.

King Rama VI himself studied in England while his brother, Prince Chakrabongse, the second in line to the throne, was sent to Russia for his education. In 1906, without informing his father (King Rama V), the Prince married Ekaterina Ivanova Desnitsky, whom he called Katya. When he returned to Siam, he had to leave Katya in Singapore. However, a few weeks after his arrival the King and the Queen (Saowabha) learned about his marriage and were angry and exasperated. Knowing that his secret was out the Prince then sent for his wife to come from Singapore and live with him at his private residence. Katya started to learn Thai culture and language; she also adopted the dress worn by Thai women of the court. A year after her arrival, Katya met the Queen for the first time and she made a good impression on her. In 1908, she gave birth to a son.25 Her son inherited an official title, though this recognition did not indicate royal acceptance of her marriage with the Prince (Weisman 2000: 173-179). Under King Rama VI’s reign, the law regarding

25 The Prince’s and Katya’s marriage lasted until their son became twelve. Afterwards the Prince remarried a Siamese woman from an aristocratic family. Katya went to live with her brother in Beijing and Shanghai; and finally returned to Russia (http://th.wikipedia.org/, accessed June 17, 2012).
succession to the throne was issued in 1924. One of its provisions stipulated that members of the royal family who married a foreign wife or whose mother was a foreigner would not be eligible to inherit the throne. This was the case of Prince Chakrabongse and his son. As a result, the line of succession to the throne was shifted from Queen Saowabha’s descendants – ending with King Rama VII – to the lineage of another wife of the King, Sawang Watthana, the Queen’s sister, whose descendants were to become Rama VIII and Rama IX.26(Dararat 2007: 33). This case shows how the interplay of gender, ethnicity and politics in intermarriage affects not only individual lives but also the highest position in the land – the throne of the Kingdom of Thailand.

As for the upper class and members of the royalty, although the common pattern of intermarriage was Thai men marrying European women, the reversal of this pattern became apparent in recent years, especially when education opportunities became more available for women. Like their male compatriots sharing similar backgrounds, Thai women who pursued education abroad or worked with foreigners met their future husbands in foreign settings or at local workplaces. Since these women were often from well-to-do families and most of them had a relatively good education, their marriages were generally not motivated by the economic status of their Western husbands. However, it is noted that these women often suffered the same stigma borne by women associated with American servicemen during the Vietnam War (1965-1975) (Weisman 2000: 202). This issue will be explored in the following section.

From the available literature, it is quite clear that intermarriage between Thais and Westerners prior to the early twentieth century was intersected by gender and class. The prevalent gender patterns of such marriages represented the opposite models between members of the elite/upper class and the commoners. While the ‘upper class’ model became more noticeable in the later periods, the ‘commoner class’ pattern had been apparent for centuries. The phenomenon of transnational marriage of rural women in Thailand, especially in Isan, is characterized by the ‘commoner class’ pattern. From a historical perspective, the continuation of Thai-Westerner marriage among commoners shows that Thai society has been familiar with such unions, making social acceptance of contemporary transnational marriage much easier.

26King Rama V and Queen Soawabha had three sons who were in line to the throne, King Rama VI, Prince Chakrabongse, and King Rama VII. King Rama VI and VII did not have a son. Prince Chakrabongse and his son, according to the law could not ascend the throne. After the reign of King Rama VII, the power was shifted to King Rama VIII and IX who are grandsons of King Rama V and his wife Sawang Watthana (http://th.wikipedia.org/, accessed June 17, 2012).
The establishment of American air bases in Thailand in the mid 1960s played an important role in facilitating Thai woman-Western man marriages. The Vietnam War turned the towns adjacent to US air force bases including Udon, into locations where relationships between servicemen and Thai women were initiated, particularly those engaged in the entertainment and service sectors. With the advent of international tourism since the 1980s rural women went to work in the service industry at various tourist destinations. A number of women from Nadokmai went to work at Patpong, a well known nightlife area in Bangkok where some of them met their future husbands. More recently, beach resorts such as Pattaya, Phuket and Samui have become primary contact zones where transnational relations were initiated. This chapter focuses on the two consecutive historical periods during which Udon town and Patpong became major contact zones. The more contemporary development will be elaborated in Chapter Four.

The Vietnam War and intermarriage of rural Isan women

Marriages between Thai women and American servicemen in the Vietnam War era were facilitated by militarization. In many ways they were different from marriages involving Europeans and Chinese migrants that took place in earlier eras, where economic and political factors played a key role. Then foreign men who married Thai women were persons who came to work and stayed on, and most of the mixed couples continued to live in the country after their marriage. However in the Vietnam War period the American servicemen came only for war-related reasons. If the relationship with Thai women resulted in marriage, the wife normally left her homeland to live in the US with the husband. Intermarriage in this period mainly involved women of a particular background – rural women who were mainly engaged in entertainment and commercial sex – whereas women who married foreign husbands in the earlier times often came from various backgrounds and belonged to different social classes.

Unlike the Siamese War Bride phenomenon that played out exclusively in the Bangkok area – thus having little to do with Isan people – the interactions between Thai women and American servicemen during the Vietnam War took place around the US air bases in the Northeast. Local people had direct experiences with American servicemen; some ran small businesses while others worked at the military bases. Many women were engaged in the service and sex industries to accommodate the needs of American military personnel. It was during this period that residents of Nadokmai became aware of the
possibility of intermarriage as there were village women who married American servicemen. This involvement smoothed the way for women of later generations to engage in transnational marriage in the decades that followed.

The global power of the US in the aftermath of the World War II led to an expansion of its military bases in many parts of the world. In Asia in particular, American bases were set up in countries like Japan, Thailand, South Korea, and the Philippines. At these sites, entertainment businesses were established to serve the needs of American servicemen away from home. Women from the countryside who only played a marginal role in agriculture were attracted to these sites by employment opportunities generated by the influx of American military personnel. Encounters that followed were the first step to intermarriage between local women and American servicemen (Cheng 2007; Cohen 2003; Enloe 2000; Tolentino 1996). In the case of the Philippines, these interracial relations led to the ‘mail-order bride’ phenomenon that emerged in the mid 1970s (Tolentino 1996:56).

By hosting the US air bases during the Vietnam War, a number of localities in Thailand turned into places for Rest and Recreation (R&R) for American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Four out of seven US air bases were stationed in strategic areas in the Northeast while the other three were in Bangkok and other provinces in Central Thailand. It is estimated that in the mid 1960s as many as 6,500 soldiers per week flooded to Thailand for R&R (Weisman 2000:182). The total number of American troops at various locations in Thailand reached a peak of 140,000 in 1969, including those working at the bases and those coming for R&R leaves (Cohen 2003:60). This situation led to a drastic expansion of entertainment and service establishments. Restaurants, hotels, nightclubs, bars, massage parlors, coffee shops and brothels sprang up especially in areas surrounding the bases. These were magnets attracting women from rural areas especially from Isan, creating opportunity for them to come into direct contact with Americans.

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28 Four sites in Isan located in Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon Rachathani, and Udon Thani provinces. The other three locations in the central region included Bangkok (Don Muang), Nakhon Sawan (Takhli), and Chonburi (U-Tapao). It is noted that about 80% of all USAF air strikes over North Vietnam originated from air bases in Thailand. At the peak in 1969, a greater number of air force men were serving in Thailand than in South Vietnam (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Air_Force_in_Thailand: accessed June 7, 2008).

29 Pasuk (1982) points out that there was a tendency to separate local and foreign markets: bars, night clubs, coffee shops, and massage parlors were common contact places between Thai women and foreign men, while brothels served primarily local clients. There were particular bars and massage parlors which were popular with local men as well. In addition, she points out that although sex-for-sale existed in Thai society long
Relations between local women and their American clients at these establishments developed in various forms. The establishments catering for the American military, often brightly lit and noisy, should be distinguished from brothels serving local and Chinese customers in more discreet surroundings. The American servicemen treated their women and girls like ‘girlfriends’ and not as prostitutes. They would openly walk hand-in-hand with them in the street (Van Esterik 2000: 175). Sometimes the relationship reached a semi-permanent stage when the woman shared a home with her American boyfriend for the rest of his stay in the country. This kind of relationship is dubbed ‘mia chao’ (rented/hired wife): the woman would provide sexual service and do domestic work for her partner for a price. There was usually some kind of emotional involvement from both sides. Nonetheless, this relationship was understood to be a temporary one.

At first glance, mia chao seemed to be an exotic novelty on the social scene during the Vietnam War, but, earlier descriptions of arrangements made for foreign traders dating back to the early sixteenth century appeared strikingly familiar: arrangements that were made for the length of time a foreigner’s stay in the country that included housekeeping, trading, and a sexual partner. In the modern context, many of the Thai ‘wives’ and children born out of these relationships (luk khrueng, ‘mixed’ child) were left behind to fend for themselves. However there were cases ending up in lawful marriages, and these couples left Thailand and settled in the US after the husband’s tour of duty was over. Some couples returned to live in Thailand after they reached retirement age in the US.

It is not known exactly how many women and girls left their villages for Udon and how many formed liaisons with or were married to American military personnel. In the case of Nadokmai, six women from this village eventually married American GIs and left for the US with their husbands. At the time of my fieldwork these women were in their late fifties and early sixties. Their life stories recapitulate the motivations, means and meanings of their associations with Americans servicemen and how intermarriage was perceived and realized within a specific historical context.

In the following I will present the stories of two GI wives, Nang (56) and Phin (58). Nang’s story is typical of how village women became involved with American servicemen, regardless of whether or not the relationships eventually ended up in marriage.

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30The figure after person’s name indicates his/her age. Ages of the persons indicted in this study were accurate up to 2008 or 2009, depending on the time of the interviews.
Phin’s story took a different course. Phin gained social recognition, especially in Nadokmai as her improved economic situation enabled her to take care of her parents, support her siblings and make contributions to the village. Her success and consumer lifestyle had inspired women of younger generations to marry a Western husband. While other GI wives, including Nang, lived in the US and rarely returned to the village for home visit, Phin came back to live in Nadokmai after her husband passed away in 2003.

During my fieldwork, Nang did not return home so I did not meet her. Since leaving Thailand in 1973, she made only three visits, the last one in 2000. In fact I got Nang’s story from Chan (64), her older sister, who had a good memory and still kept contact with Nang. Her story reflects the conditions that prevailed at the time that encouraged poverty-stricken women to leave their village in search of a better life and become involved with American servicemen stationed at a nearby airbase in the process. These conditions and the way in which Nang searched for ‘better opportunities’ to support her family were also mentioned by other residents of Nadokmai whose sisters and daughters left the village and engaged in service work in Udon in the period between 1965 and 1975 when the Vietnam war ended.

I met Chan the first time in January 2008 through her older sister, Jit (66), who was married to a German. At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I explained the purpose of my research to residents of Nadokmai, the names of two women Jit and Phin, were often mentioned as first-generation village women who had married farang men. On the afternoon of January 17, 2008, I met Jit at her house for an interview. She told me that her younger sister Nang, not her, had married an American soldier. When I asked about Nang, Jit suggested that I should talk to her sister Chan as she kept communicating with Nang. A week later, I spent a morning with Chan at her house to talk with her about Nang.

Narrative 1.1: The quest for a ‘better life’ through service work and sex trade

Nang, like several other girls in Nadokmai at that time, left her home for the town of Udon in search of income to support her family. She ended up marrying James, an American soldier, and followed him to the US in 1973 after his term ended. Her sister, Chan recounted: “she [Nang] left for Udon with only ten baht in her pocket; three baht was spent for the bus fare. There she stayed with her friend while looking for a job. Nobody knew much about her life in the town…She left without informing anyone; my parents did not know. They could not do anything, though they were worried about
her. We didn’t hear from her for almost two years. Then, she came home with James and told my parents that she had been living with him at Nakhon Phanom [air base].”

Born to poor and landless parents who had six daughters and a mentally retarded son, Nang, Chan, and her sisters had to engage in wage work since they were young – soon after finishing four years of compulsory school. They worked as house maids or in the field in Nadokmai and villages nearby. Sometimes they received rice for their labor instead of cash. Contributions from these daughters, either in cash or kind, helped the family to make ends meet. Hearing about the possibility of earning good income in the town, Nang decided to head there. First she got a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant where she met James. Later she left the restaurant and worked at a massage parlor and a bar, where she earned much more money. Meanwhile she kept seeing James and when he was transferred to Nakhon Phanom air base she followed him there. Again she worked in a bar. In 1973, when James’ contract ended, they departed for Florida and settled there.

Before leaving for the US, Nang took James to the village and they had a small wedding ceremony with her relatives. Nang bought 50 rai\(^{31}\) of paddy and four rai of land in the village. She gave the paddy to her sisters and brother, the piece of land in the village was offered to four of her sisters. Chan and her family have been living on this land until now. The paddy field ensured adequate rice yield for family consumption. Nang’s contribution was vital in helping her siblings and their families improve their living standard, as Chan said: “Since we have the paddy, we no longer totally depend on wage and petty trade [selling cooked food in the community] which does not give much profit. In the past most of our income was spent to buy rice for consumption. Since we got land to grow rice, the [economic] situation of my family became much better.”

In Florida, Nang and her husband ran a Thai restaurant; the business was good but James got involved with other women working for them in the restaurant. In the end, they separated and the restaurant was closed. Later on, Nang remarried and got a job at a supermarket where she kept working until recently. Chan recalled that after her divorce from James and the closure of the restaurant, Nang rarely returned to Nadokmai. Her last visit was in 2000. “She did not earn as much as when she ran the restaurant. This

\(^{31}\)2.5 rai equals 1 acre
is why she could not afford to return home... The last time I talked to her, she said that she was having a serious health problem. Perhaps because she had been drinking and smoking a lot. The doctor did not allow her to travel long-distance,” Chan said.

Nang’s narrative indicates that the economic hardship of her family was the main reason compelling her to leave home in search of wage work in the town and finally engage in the sex trade. Residents of Nadokmai frequently mentioned poverty in explaining and justifying women’s involvement in commercial sex during the Vietnam War period. While this occupation has been considered as undesirable, it was often acknowledged as a necessary means for women to help their family get out of poverty. *Mia farang* and residents of Nadokmai were aware of the ambiguous attitude toward Thai women married to Western men, though many said this has changed recently. I shall deal with this issue in Chapter Five.

No doubt night-time jobs and sexual service was a common path followed by women before marrying American servicemen during the 1960s-1970s, it was not the only path. Phin, as shown in the following story, took a different route. Her story also illustrates the connections she has always maintained with her local village. As noted before, Phin has constantly supported her local folks and the community. These contributions are well recognized by residents of Nadokmai and they often referred to her as a successful *mia farang*.

**Narrative 1.2: Mia farang and social recognition**

Phin (58) married John, an African-American computer specialist who himself had two grown up children from a previous relationship. Phin is the oldest child in a family with four daughters and a son. Like Nang and other village girls of her generation, Phin has only four years schooling. At the age of 19, she went to town to find work and got a job as a caretaker of the elderly. The woman whom Phin took care of is the mother of a man called Wichai, whose house was located next to houses rented to GIs. There she met John, who was transferred here from Ubon air base. Phin recalled: “I saw him [John] on the first day when he moved in. A few days later, Khun Wichai told me that John liked me. I did not talk to him since I could not speak English. Later, I was told that John wanted to marry me. I did not give an answer. I wanted to talk to my parents first.” Wichai told Phin that John was a good guy and had a good job – a permanent position in the
military. However, Phin insisted on discussing the marriage proposal with her parents.

Her mother did not want Phin to marry a *farang* man out of fear that her daughter might have to leave home and live so far away, not to mention that she might be abandoned and would suffer if her husband did not take care of her. But her brother strongly supported her and asked their father to persuade their mother. Finally her parents agreed to meet John in the town. Phin’s mother expressed her concern to John and Wichai acted as interpreter. John gave his word that he would take good care of Phin adding that she could return to the village for home visits. The parents finally gave their approval and asked John to follow the Thai marriage custom – by asking Phin’s parents for their blessings and providing them with 50,000 baht and gold as bride wealth. They got married in May 1973. At that time, Phin was 19 and John was 47. Marrying a Westerner was quite unusual in Nadokmai at that time. Although there were a few village women who co-habited with GIs, they would not let their parents and the people in the village know about it. Phin’s marriage ceremony was held in the town, attended by her relatives.

After their marriage, John bought a house in the town and Phin lived with him there. In 1975, after the withdrawal of the US troops, the couple left Thailand and settled in Michigan. John retired from the military, and the following year he got a job with IBM where he worked until his retirement in 1990. John earned enough to allow Phin to live comfortably. Although she did not work, Phin could regularly send money home to support her parents and helped her siblings when they asked. She also returned for home visits every two years. In 1987, the couple bought a house in Michigan. They also built a big house in Nadokmai where Phin has been living since she returned to the village in 2003.

In 1994 John died; Phin stayed in the US and worked at a Thai restaurant. Phin said John had left her with enough means to live a comfortable life. Through her working she was able to maintain her social contacts. She recalled with emotion: “When he [John] was in the hospital he told me what I should do if he died. He talked about his pension which would be transferred to me; about the money he had in the bank…He told me to sell the house and return to Thailand if I wanted. He also said that if I meet a good man that I love, I should remarry. He was concerned about me until his last minute.”
In 2003, Phin sold the house in Michigan and returned to Nadokmai. Soon after her arrival, Phin and her family organized *kathin*\(^{32}\) (merit making) and afterwards she took her parents to Pattaya for a vacation. She was glad to do these things for them before it was too late. Phin’s father passed away in November 2005 and three months later her mother died. All Phin’s siblings were married; three sisters still lived in the village with their families, but her brother had moved and worked elsewhere. Since her return, Phin invested in a gift shop, a cell phone shop, and, recently, a shop selling trees. The revenue from these investments was to help her sisters with supplementary income for their families. However, her business did not fare well and Phin lost a lot of money. Phin also helped her brother by investing in his business; so far she did not receive any returns on this investment. Phin said that she did not expect to get back the money she had spent on her siblings. It is her obligation to help them, she said, adding: “We have no parents left and I am the oldest child; I have to help them.”

During the village Boat Racing Festival in October 2008, Phin invited me to have lunch at her sister’s house, located next to the reservoir where the festival took place. When I arrived, Phin was thanking and paying money back to a few women. A few days later when I met her, Phin complained about the high expenses – 50,000 baht (US$ 1,430) – she incurred on the day we had lunch. She borrowed the money to bail out her sister’s son who was charged for having a gun illegally. When I asked whether she expected her sister to pay her back, she replied: “She will if she has money.”

In addition to her support for her parents and siblings, Phin also played an active role in community affairs. As a main contributor to the village school’s revolving fund, she always gave money when the reserve ran low. She was the driving force behind, the school alumni in organizing *pha pa*\(^{33}\)

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\(^{32}\) *Kathin* is a Buddhist ritual. It has to be organized within 30 days of the end of the three-month rainy season retreat – the period during which monks take part in ceremonies and do not travel unless absolutely necessary. Each temple may hold a *kathin* ceremony once each year. On the appointed day, robes and other necessities of temple life are offered to the monks. Today, this ritual has evolved into a multiple-day ceremony in which villagers join in the merit making. Normally, the persons or family holding a *kathin* are major contributors in making donations. They also offer food, drink, and entertainment, such as *mo lam* (Isan folk band) to those joining the ritual during ceremony days. This ritual requires a considerable amount of money; at the same time it is considered as a great merit making event especially for major sponsors. Usually, those holding a *kathin* are relatively well-to-do households (Terwiel 1994).

\(^{33}\) *Pha Pa* is originally a Buddhist ritual to offer robes and objects for the monks’ personal use such as soap, medicines, packaged drinks, toilet paper, and cash gifts. Unlike *kathin, pha pa* can be organized any time of the year. This term has also been used for charitable activities such as fundraising or collecting rice, food, books, school materials etc. to give to schools, social organizations and those who are in need, although they are not related to religion. These activities are considered as a way of making merit. Religious significances and social meanings of *pha pa* are discussed further in Chapter Five.
during the New Year holiday to raise funds for educational activities and improve the school’s physical environment. In taking part in various religious, social and cultural activities, she saw her contributions as ways of making merit and believed that the offerings, in return, would give her a good life. Her generosity and good deeds were held in esteem by most of the residents in Nadokmai whom I talked to.

Nang and Phin followed different paths to the same goal – marrying an American serviceman. However their lives evolved quite differently after their arrival in the US. Back in their native village in Thailand, locals rarely mentioned Nang while Phin was often regarded as a successful *mia farang*. The social recognition Phin had earned was due to her economic status gained draws not solely on her economic improvement and her presence in the village scene, but also her contribution to the community as well as her support of her parents and siblings. Despite various differences, what these two women shared was their connection to and support of their natal families in their rural village. Though to different degrees, the contributions made a difference for those stayed behind.

The success stories of *mia farang* like Phin were told time and again in the village. During my fieldwork, I often heard villagers talk about the desirability of marrying Western men, how *mia farang* generously helped their families and contributed to community welfare. These accounts created high expectations among younger generations of women who staked their future in marrying a Western man. Fuelled by diverse and complex motivations, these expectations of a better future continue to propel them to take an active role in the current transnational marriages.

After the American forces withdrew from Thailand in the mid 1970s, intermarriage was prolonged by the unprecedented expansion of global tourism. Various transnational tourist destinations were developed and became the sites where connections between local women and foreign men were initiated and facilitated.

**Tourism and transnational marriage of rural women**

The growth of tourism perpetuated the association between Thai women, especially those working in the entertainment and service businesses, and foreign men – now mostly

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34 In Phin’s house and the houses of other *mia farang*, I noticed the display of certificates of merit that showed appreciation for their contributions to the village’s schools as well as to other community services. A sister of Son, another GI’s wife living in Florida, told me with pride that a few years ago Son donated a large sum (400,000 baht/10,525 US$) to a village temple for the construction of a Buddhist monastery. This contribution was made in memory of her mother who had passed away in 2002.
tourists. Since the 1980s, Thai tourism saw a dramatic rise of foreign visitors: the number increased from 629,000 in 1970 to 2.8 million in 1986, and by 2006 it reached 13.8 million. Among these tourists, males outnumber females by two to one (Truong 1990: 277; The National Statistic Office’s website\(^{35}\)). By all accounts, tourism became Thailand’s principal source of foreign exchange. Local and foreign investors played a key role in facilitating the expansion of tourism (Bishop and Robinson 1998: 18; Truong 1990: 270-278). Tourism and the sex trade were markedly linked, and a symbiotic relationship developed when tourists’ demand for commercial sex was met by local supply (Cohen 1996; Dahles 2009; Ryan and Hall 2001). It was under these conditions that the tourist industry became geared to ‘sex tourism.’ In many Asian countries, the development of tourism as a means to earn foreign exchange and to create local jobs has been going in this direction.

On the demand side, ‘sex package tours’ – a short trip to various destinations in Asia with a major aim to buy sex – were promoted in various European countries as well as Japan. Several European travel companies organized such tours to various Asian cities including Bangkok (Bishop and Robinson 1998: 88-91; Cohen 1996: 252-253). This development and the male-to-female ratio of foreign tourists noted above reflect the dominant discourse of sex tourism in which male tourists fly from developed countries to developing countries to play out their fantasies of an eroticized Orient populated by Asian women.\(^{36}\) This discourse has been noted in various Asian destinations as well as in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (Dahles 2009: 222-223).

The growth of (sex) tourism in Asia as well as in Thailand is facilitated by various factors and conditions. Aiwhah Ong (1985) views both industrialization and prostitution in Southeast Asia as vehicles to modernization, whereby tourism-related prostitution could be equated with industrial labor, the new form of trade in women’s bodies and labor in the international division of labor. In the same vein, Sakia Sassen (2000) conceptualizes the growing presence of women in alternative circuits in the global economy, including labor migration and prostitution as the feminization of survival. Drawing on data from various Asian countries, Sassen points out that remittances from women engaging in these circuits are significant resources not only for the survival of their households, but also for governments as resources to develop and modernize the countries.

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\(^{36}\)The emerging discourse of “female sex tourism” has been appeared in the literature on tourism as well, for example Cohen (1971) and De Albuquerque (1998).
Apart from the macro analysis relating the growth of tourism and sex industry to
global disparity, this development is also viewed in relation to the specific social and
economic conditions as well as the historical developments of particular countries. In the
case of Thailand, various studies reveal that the impacts of disparity development result in
growing inequalities and different opportunities between regions, as well as between urban
and rural sectors. This disparity becomes an important factor that underlines migration and
participation of women from disadvantaged areas in the sex industry as a way in seeking a
‘better life’ (Pasuk 1982; Yos 1992). Various studies also indicate that since most rural-to-
urban migrants have limited education and occupational skills, they have few options in
urban employment, often ending up in low-wage work or in the entertainment and sex
industry. Many women engaged in the sex industry have previously earned their living as
unskilled and semi-skilled workers as well as peddlers. The conditions of low
wages/incomes and a poor working environment turn many of them to commercial sex,
where they can earn much more money and enjoy better working conditions, especially if
they serve foreign clients (Cohen 1996; Odzer1990; Pataya 1999, 2002; Walker and
Ehrlich 1992). Although a migratory path of rural women towards participating in the sex
industry is prevalent, this does not mean that the majority of female workers migrating to
the cities become prostitutes (Mills 1999; Whittaker 1999).

Examining influences of material culture on ways of life of rural people, Keyes
(1984), as mentioned before, suggests that the penetration of capitalist economy into rural
lifestyles is more relevant in motivating rural women to engage in the sex industry than
Buddhist belief as a source of women’s subordination, although he recognizes that the Thai
culture of gender has played a part in this development. Yos (1992) who based his study on
commercial sex and the lives of rural women in Northern Thailand, makes a similar point,
suggesting that consumerism has become a powerful force in encouraging and maintaining
the sex industry.

It is worth noting that entertainment and service institutions that developed to
mediate the contacts between Thai girls and the American military servicemen provided
the foreground of transnational tourism expansion (Cohen 1996; Truong 1990). Such
destinations as Patpong and Pattaya, the infamous sex tourist area in Bangkok and the
Eastern beach resort which served as R&R sites in the 1960s-1970s became familiar sites
where associations between the male tourists and local women took place. In the
meantime, new tourist destinations such as Samui and Phuket in the Southern beach resorts
also blossomed and fast became new contact zones. For local women, these tourist
destinations, like Sosua – a transnational tourist town in the Dominica Republic as described in Brennan’s work (2004) – have become ‘spaces of opportunity and hope’ where they can meet and make connections with foreign men.

Unlike the American servicemen who resided and worked in Thailand at least on an annual basis, the tourists are likely to stay for only a short period of time, from a few days to a few weeks. However, some of these men return to the same women every year or every time they visit Thailand. Others keep communicating or sending gifts and money to the women (Cohen 1996; Walker and Ehrlich 1992). These relationships, in many cases, resulted in a long-term commitment, which was the experience of many women in Nadokmai as the case of Jit. Jit’s desire to marry a Western man was influenced largely by the image of a ‘good’ life and the economic improvement women marrying American serviceman enjoyed, as shown by the cases of Phin and her sister Nang. At the same time, her failed marriage with a native husband, who left her with two children to take care of, also forced Jit to find ways to earn a living and support her children. A woman of strong will, Jit headed for Bangkok and worked at a restaurant in Sukhumvit, a residential area popular with foreigners. There she met Gerhard, her future husband. Unlike the GI wives who left the village and moved abroad after their marriage, Jit and her husband decided to settle in Nadokmai and built a house there. With the support of her new husband Jit was able to raise her children from a former marriage and had a rather comfortable life. For village residents, Jit’s story showed how marriage with a Westerner could change a woman’s life, even though she encountered an uncertain future after her husband’s death.

**Narrative 1.3: The successful past and uncertain future**

Jit (66) was a mother with two children from a Thai father, met her future husband, Gerhard, at a restaurant in Bangkok. Unlike her sisters who finished compulsory education (four years of schooling), Jit dropped out early. Like Nang and her other sisters, she engaged in wage work at a young age. “I took any job just to earn an income; harvesting rice and jute, being a housemaid and helping at a shop selling sweets in Udon.” While working as a shop helper, Jit got to know a woman who offered her a higher salary. She followed the woman to Yala province in the South, and worked as a maid. There she met her husband, a man working at the municipality, Jit lived with him for eight years and gave birth to a daughter and a son. One

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37A plant which grows mainly in Southeast Asia. It provides fibers that are used to make rope.
day her husband brought home a woman whom he had been seeing. He asked Jit to tell the woman that she was his sister, not his wife. Jit found the idea repugnant and was furious. They started to quarrel and after a time she took the children – Duean and Phong – back to Nadokmai. Three months later, her husband came to the village and asked her to return to the South, but she refused.

After her separation, Jit had to find work. She left the children with her mother and sisters and joined Nang at the Nakhon Phanom air base. There, she landed a waitress job at a restaurant. In 1973 when Nang departed with James for the US, Jit returned to Nadokmai. It was difficult to earn an income in the village since she had to care for her children. In 1976, she headed for Bangkok looking for employment and the chance to make contact with Western men, hoping this would lead to an eventual marriage. She said, “I have learned that village women who marry farang, like Phin and Nang, have a ‘good’ life. Farang are wealthy. Mia farang can help their parents and relatives [financially]. So I decided to follow this path.” Jit worked in a restaurant in Sukhumvit Soi 11 where she met a much younger man from Norway and lived with him for almost a year. Jit thought that the young Norwegian would not take the relationship seriously and he might abandon her or force her into prostitution if she moved with him to his country. So Jit went back to work at the restaurant when her partner returned to Norway for a visit.

Just a few days after she had returned to work, Jit met Gerhard, a divorced German in his late fifties. Gerhard owned a four-story building in Berlin where he and his son lived on two floors and rented out the rest. His son was a medical doctor working in a hospital in Berlin. Jit lived with Gerhard in Bangkok for two years and finally got married in 1980. At that time Jit was 34 and Gerhard was 60. Jit gave birth to a son named Jack. Jit said: “I chose him [Gerhard] because he was responsible and also generous. He took care of my children; he brought them toys and took them out to places when they came to stay with us in Bangkok. He was not fussy with money...I thought he would take good care of me and my children...I was not disappointed”. The following year, they returned to live in Nadokmai and built a nice house with a swimming pool and a garage. They also bought factory-made furniture. They also bought 20 rai of paddy land. Their

\[38\] In Isan village in the early 1980s, factory-made furniture is a luxury. Nowadays, it is more common for households in Nadokmai to have factory furniture, though, to an extent, it indicates economic status of the owners.
house was one of the first houses in the village built by mixed couples. Gerhard was also the first Western man living in the village.

Gerhard returned to Germany for a few months annually. Sometimes Jit, Jack (Jit’s and Gerhard’s son) and Duean (Jit’s daughter from a local man) also joined him. The rest of the time Gerhard stayed in the village. Jit recalled that since there was no real grocery store in Nadokmai at that time, they had to drive to the town for their shopping. Her relatives joined them often on such trips and Gerhard would offer them a meal at a restaurant in town. Jit said, “We went to all the good restaurants in Udon.” She then named a few of them. On weekends, Gerhard allowed children from the village to swim in the pool; sometimes he taught them how to swim and gave them candies and sweets. Friends of their daughter and son were also welcome to the pool and could stay overnight in the house. Gerhard lived with Jit in Nadokmai for eighteen years. In 1998, the day before his planned departure for Germany, Gerhard was hit by a truck and died a few days later.

For Jit, living with Gerhard was the happiest and most joyful period of her life. She mentioned the various vacations the family enjoyed together: “We went to Samui, Phuket, Chumporn, Samet, and Chiang Mai. Sometimes we drove; sometimes we flew. The children always joined us on the trips... We ate at restaurants; the children could order whatever they wanted, never mind the cost.” With Gerhard’s support, Jit could also meet the material desires of her daughter and son. Duean had a lot of friends and they enjoyed going out together. She often asked for money and was rarely disappointed. When Duean and her partner ran a tour agency and a bar at Pattaya, Jit also supported them. However, their business did not last long. Jit bought a brand new car for her son, Phong, who worked in the Eastern Seaboard. When asked whether Gerhard was also happy with his married life, Jit replied: “I don’t know...I think he was since we lived together for almost 20 years. He enjoyed living in the village... The last time we went to Berlin and stayed there for four months, I complained that I missed home and Thai food. He said that he too missed the village.” Two months after Gerhard’s death, Duean, who had been ill, also died and left Jit a granddaughter, aged 11, who is now living in Norway with her husband. Jit admitted that after losing these two dear ones, she went insane and began to gamble; she wasted all the money Gerhard left to her in the bank.

Recently Jit and Jack were living on remittances from Phong. Jit was quite worried about Jack, who was 27 but had no job. After finishing high school
in the village, he did not take college education seriously. Like his mother, Jack’s life took a turn for the worse after the death of his father. Gerhard’s plan for Jack to study in Germany after high school did not materialize. Jack was disappointed with what happened to his life. He was also quite upset when he found out that the money his father left them was gone. Choked with emotion, Jit said that she felt very sorry for Jack. It was not at all his fault. Rather, she blamed herself for having failed to support him and not being a good mother. If she could live her life again she would keep the money Gerhard left to support Jack’s education, though he might not be able to study in Germany as his father had wished. With a good education, Jack could have a salaried job which would secure his future.

Jit, like Phin, was often mentioned as ‘pioneer’ in marrying a Westerner, the first generation of *mia farang* in the village. As she lived with her foreign husband in the village for a long time, local people could observe at first hand their comfortable way of living, how the children benefited from Gerhard’s wealth. Ironically, Jit’s misfortune after Gerhard’s death was largely ignored. When I brought this up, the general answer was that it had something to do with *karma*. Jit’s neighbor, a woman in her early sixties, commented that Jit’s ‘moral merit’ (*bun*) ended when Gerhard died; then her life took a downturn. She added that other *mia farang*, like Phin, thanks to their *bun* accumulated in past incarnations, are entitled to a ‘good life’ in the present life. Notwithstanding her difficulty in later years, in the eyes of the villagers Jit’s life with Gerhard epitomized what was good in a union between Thai women and Western men. The examples of Phin and others reinforced the desirability of marrying a Westerner husband in the minds of many village women and their parents.

Among the younger generation Nid (44), a friend of Duean, told me in an interview that the lifestyle of Duean and her mother Jit were very different from her own and those of other peers in the village. Duean lived in a big house with a swimming pool. She had everything; she could go out whenever she wanted. She had lots of nice clothes and jewelry. She was also generous, allowing her friends to swim at her house, even letting them to wear her swim suits. “Nobody of my generation could do what Duean did,” Nid said. It was obvious that her friend Duean could not have had such a good life if her

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39 The Buddhist concept of ‘*karma*’ is a result of actions in present and past lives. Good actions earn moral merit (*bun*); bad/wrong actions gain demerit (*bap*). *Karma* is persistently produced and reshaped throughout one’s lifetime and beyond. Suffering or happiness that a person has had is a result of his/her *karma* in past and present incarnations. One can change his/her *karma* by accumulating merit by moral deeds (Van Esterik 2000; Muecke 1992).
mother had not married a Westerner. Nid admitted that her decision to leave home and go to work in the Patpong area of Bankok was inspired, in part, by the sharp difference in living standards between Duean’s family and her own. Working in the Red Light district enabled Nid to support her two children and her mother. At Patpong, she met a Canadian with whom she fell in love and lived with him for a year, but the man eventually had to return to his country. Nid was involved in ‘red-light’ business for almost 20 years. In 2005, her mother died in a car accident, so she returned and stayed in the village to take care of her children and a handicapped sister.

Like Nid, a number of women in Nadokmai became aware of the prospects of a better life as illustrated by Jit’s experience. Undoubtedly there were others who admired Phin for her versatile social work that made her some sort of local celebrity. Both Jit and Phin as role models achieved their goals by marrying ‘good’ Western men. The stories of these women circulated in the village were mainly about the successful part of their life while their unfortunate experiences, for example Jit’s uncertain future were largely ignored. Certainly, this positive perception has motivated women engage in this type of marriage relation. In addition, the tremendous expansion of the tourism industry in recent years has also fuelled the desire of a number of rural women to make connections with Western men with marriage in mind. This desire was given a boost by the local government through cultural activities. For example, during the Songkran Festival in 2007 the municipality of Udon sponsored a parade featuring a troupe of mixed couples dressed up Thai traditional costumes. This was a focal point for the local media including cable TV and newspapers. During the celebration at night, farang men and their Thai wives were invited to give brief interviews on stage. Apart from personal information, the questions dealt with how farang men enjoyed living in Isan with their wives either for short annual visits or for long-term stay in the cases of those who resettled in Isan communities. Efforts to ‘sell’ Thai brides were conspicuous in the folders designed for tourists arriving at Udon Thani Airport: besides the city map, a brief city history, information about places to see, there was also information about legal procedures involved in marrying a Thai woman, Thai wedding customs, together with advertisements of marriage services and

40 During my fieldwork in 2008, I attended the Songkran Festival, but none of the mixed couples joined the parade. When I talked with a woman working at the municipality about participation of the couples in the past year celebration, as I saw in the CD recorded by one couple who joined the parade, the woman motioned that it was a good activity allowing the farang-in-law to experience Thai customs and making them feel as a part of Thai community. However, supporting such an activity could be viewed as encouraging transnational marriages. This concern made the municipality decide not including this activity in the festival in 2008.
house construction. All this was indicative of the extent to which provincial authorities accepted or even promoted this type of marriage.

When transnational desire resulted in a long-term commitment and the involved parties agreed to marry or live together, normally the woman left her home village to join her man in his home country where he had to get on with his career. This pattern of marriage migration applied to the majority of the mixed couples in Nadokmai. At the same time, there was an increasing number of Western partners, like Gerhard, who opted to settle in their wives’ villages or elsewhere in Thailand. Wherever they lived, women always kept contact with their families at home. Thai wives together with their foreign husbands, as mentioned, regularly visited their home villages. In the following section, I shall provide a brief background of these mixed couples and the ways they lived their lives.

**Mia farang, their husbands and their transnational lives**

Based on data collected in 2008, there were 159 women in Nadokmai who were married to or have lived with foreign men, and 22 women whose relationship had ended. These women accounted for eighteen percent of village women between the ages of 20 and 59. Their foreign partners were men from 21 nationalities. Half of the *mia farang* who were currently having a relationship were in the 31-40 age bracket; the youngest was 18 and the oldest was 56. Most women older than 45 had four years of schooling, while the majority of younger women had between six and nine years of education. There were three women with a Bachelor’s degree and one of them was studying for her Master’s at the time of my fieldwork (see Table 1 and 2; Appendix 2). Two-thirds of the women were divorced or separated from a former Thai partner before marrying a Western husband; about half of these women had children who had been born to a local father. About three-fourths of *mia farang* left their homes in the village to settle with their husband in various countries, while one-fourth stayed with their husbands in Thailand, either in their villages or elsewhere (see Table 3; Appendix 2). The data show that *mia farang* came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Some were from poor families without agricultural land; others had certain resources. There were also those from better-off households, having a college education and working as school teachers, nurses, civil servants or employees of private

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41 Such a map and flyers were supported by the municipality and tourist police.

42 Compulsory four-year primary education was instituted throughout the country in the 1930s. This was raised to six years in 1977 (Wyatt 1975).
enterprises. This diversity contrasted with the situation of the 1965-1975 period when women married to American servicemen mostly came from relatively poor households.

Most Western partners were European (81.8 percent) with Germans, Swedes and British leading the pack. Their age ranged from 27 to 73; the largest age group was the 41-50 bracket, accounting for 29.0 percent. Their occupations varied: one-fifth were self-employed or career professionals while 39.6 percent were involved in “blue-collar” work; 12.6 percent were pensioners (see Table 4 and 5; Appendix 2). Most of the Western men living with their Thai wives in the country were pensioners. Those still working in their own countries or elsewhere and whose wives resided in their own villages, came to stay with their wives every year for periods ranging from a few weeks to six months. Some visited their wives more than once a year. While being apart, couples kept in touch via telephone or internet. Mia farang living overseas contacted their children, parents and relatives in the village on a regular basis; many visited their homes in the village every year or every two years. The transnational life of a mia farang was reflected in Mon’s life story.

**Narrative 1.4: Transnational marriage and transnational life**

In 2005 Mon (37), a divorced mother with a son (10), married Mark (47), a divorced Dutchman also with a son (16). After their marriage, the couple had a son (2). In 2007 Mon went to the Netherlands to live with Mark. The couple opened a Thai restaurant in the Netherlands. In 2008 they bought a resort located not so far from Nadokmai, where fishing and lodging services are provided.

Mon was born to a poor family with three children; her parents were wage earners. Mon had only six years of compulsory education. Soon after finishing her schooling, she joined her parents and worked at various construction sites, including Phuket. There she found work at a supermarket and later at a bar. At Phuket, she dated an Italian and then a German man, but these relationships did not last long. She returned to Nadokmai after breaking up from the German boyfriend. Later, she lived with a local entrepreneur, the father of her first son, whom she met while working at a café in Sumut Sakhon, a province in central Thailand. He helped Mon open a shop selling cooked food. After she got pregnant, her business went down and she had to rely on her partner for support. However, he did not give Mon enough money to remit to her parents who could not work due to ill
health. Eventually Mon found out that her partner had been seeing another woman. She left him and returned to Nadokmai.

In 2004, Mon went to Phuket again and worked at a bar. She met Mark who was on vacation. They were together for most of his two-week vacation. Before leaving, Mark left her a considerable sum of money. Mon found out later that he had asked a friend who stayed at Phuket to check whether she was still working after getting the money. “He wanted to know whether I was lazy or not,” Mon said. A few months later, Mon went to the Netherlands with Mark’s help. Mark was taking care of his parents’ bakery shop and she helped in the shop during the three months she was in Holland. Mark said, “She is not like many women I knew. She works hard; she is not lazy and hardly sleeps at all.”

After they got married in 2005, Mon left her son with her parents and moved to the Netherlands. She called her son a few times a week. “I kept an eye on him via the telephone. We were together only a few months a year.” she said. In 2008, she managed to bring him to the Netherlands.

Before leaving for the Netherlands after her marriage in 2005, Mon bought 7 rai of land and built a new house. The house was designed and decorated in an urban style which set it apart from most houses in a rural setting. Every winter, Mon and her family returned to Nadokmai and stayed for a couple of months. In 2009, Mark’s parents also joined them and stayed for two weeks. Mon took them to various tourist sites in Thailand.

In the Netherlands, Mark and his parents agreed to close the bakery shop and open a Thai restaurant. Mon worked at the restaurant as a cook. The earnings allowed her to send money to support her parents and her siblings. Mon said, “I have to work. I cannot beg him [Mark] for money every time I want something. I don’t want to live like that. It would make me feel like I have no dignity…I am not afraid of working hard, but I am afraid of having nothing to eat.”

On a visit to Nadokmai in 2008, the couple bought a 29- rai lot with fishing ponds and lodging facilities, located on the road from the village to the town of Udon. They wanted to turn it to a fishing resort with a restaurant and invested in its renovation. When I met Mon at the resort in January 2009, she was busy dealing with customers who came to fish and with giving instructions to her uncle and another relative who helped with the renovation. Mark remarked to me that “she is the boss.” When I asked what did he mean? He said, “Well, she is the boss. Everyone here listens to her
and does what she wants. In her family, her parents, sister and brother all listen to her.” When the couple returned to the Netherlands, Mon’s mother and sister – herself a single mother with a daughter – took care of the resort. Mon called a few times a week to check on things.

Mon had plans for her sister to come and work at the restaurant in the Netherlands so that she could earn more income. She wished her sister would follow in her footsteps: marrying a ‘good’ Dutchman whom she likes. If something serious develops, like a long-term commitment, the sister could take her daughter to live with her in the Netherlands. Both her sister and mother agreed with this idea.

Like Phin, Mon epitomized the ideal mia farang in the eyes of Nadokmai residents, especially with regard to her economic achievement. In this respect, she was an exceptional woman, having businesses set up in her own country and in the country of her husband. Mon’s secure financial situation allowed her and her family to spend a few months in her native village each year. Certainly not every mia farang and her loved ones could afford annual visits like this. However, what Mon and most mia farang in Nadokmai had in common was their efforts to keep contact with their families back home. Women’s practices of maintaining and developing relationships and networks both at home and in their host countries, characterize the phenomenon of transnational marriage currently taking place in Nadokmai and elsewhere in Thai society. It is these practices that make present-day transnational marriage distinctive from intermarriage of the past.

**Conclusion**

Along with the immigration of various ethnic groups into the country, intermarriage in Thailand could be traced as far back as the thirteenth century in Thai social history and current transnational marriage is connected to this historical roots. Thai-Westerner intermarriage took place long before American troops set foot on Thai soil in the mid 1960s, making it easier for the Thai people to accept it. However, the motives and forms of today’s transnational marriage are different from those in the past. On another score, this chapter uncovers how these conjugal relationships are shaped by the intersecting of gender, class and ethnicity in specific historical contexts. Intermarriage often follows a gendered pattern and is linked closely with social class: for example, marriage between Thai women and Western (and Chinese) men was predominant among the mass of the population
whereas the pattern of Thai men-Western women marriage was observed mainly among the elite class and the royal family.

It goes without saying that meanings – in the social, political and economic senses – pertaining to intermarriage have changed over the years. Until the end of the King Rama V era (1868-1910), intermarriage was seen as a means to create and strengthen economic connections for state benefits and a strategy for modernizing the country. Emphasis on nationalism in the reign of King Rama VI (1910-1925) however made intermarriage between Thais and Westerners rather suspect on the grounds that it might undermine national security and subvert local religion. Laws and regulations were put in place to restrict intermarriage of Thai nationals, commoners as well as members of the privileged class. On another instance, Thai woman-Dutch man intermarriage took place within the specific context of ‘Siamese War Brides’ presents the multiplicity of how intermarriages were conceptualized. The way in which the war brides were perceived and reacted to – by both Thai and Dutch sides – had to do with perceptions, attitudes and ideas of people involved in and related to this phenomenon as much as socio-economic, political and international relation forces.

The presence of American troops in the 1960s-1970s brought a new dimension to the long story of intermarriage in Thai society that directly relates to the current phenomenon of transnational marriage. Experiences of village women who married American servicemen during that period made rural women aware of the possibilities of pursuing intermarriage as a way to escape poverty and to improve living conditions for themselves and their families. This interracial association was prolonged and even intensified in recent decades by the expansion of a tourism industry that turned bustling tourist sites into hot contact zones where connections between local women and the global male tourist were initiated – connections that could transform into permanent ties through (transnational) marriage.

In the course of Thai history, intermarriage in bygone eras and the recent phenomenon of transnational marriage between Thai women and Westerners have been going on against the backdrop of changing national policies and international upheavals. In the present context, its impact on the local socio-economic landscape is far-reaching, affecting individual lives at the grassroots level. Marrying Western men has been perceived as a means of obtaining a secure life not only for the women themselves but for their families as well. Transnational marriage that allows women to realize this desire has been facilitated by global flows while situated in the specific localities. In the next chapter,
I shall discuss how national and international political economy influenced agricultural production and transformed the social landscape of a rural village and the ways in which local people responded and negotiated the transitions that included international labor migration and transnational marriage.
CHAPTER TWO

NADOKMAI: THE VILLAGE AND ITS TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

It’s normal to have farang in this village. Currently there are about ten of them living with their wives. In this soi (lane) alone, there are two; everybody knows them. One of them has lived here for many years and rarely returns to his home [country]. The other lives with his wife for some months and returns to his country to work; then he comes back to the village again. He has done this for years…If you stay here until Songkran you will see many farang come with their wives to visit home. Some of them return to the village very year. They enjoy Songkran very much. Some join us in dancing, drinking, throwing water (len nam), and going to the temple. It’s a lot of fun; you will see.

Mali (67) gave me this account while I talked to her and two other women in their late fifties about mia farang in Nadokmai. Mali told me that she used to be afraid of farang, but now when she met them she just said “hello.” When the farang living on her soi got drunk, she told them in her Thai-English to “go home.” One of the two other women who joined the conversation and whose two daughters married Western men – one living with her husband in England and the other staying in Pattaya – said that she always looked forward to her daughters’ visit. The one living in England did not come to visit her as often as the one in Pattaya. Both regularly called and sent her money, especially on such occasions as Songkran and New Year. These accounts highlight the connections that link local residents of Nadokmai to the world beyond their village and the national borders. The ties made by village women with their Western partners from various parts of the world allow them to be regularly in touch with their families at the local end. This is one of the aspects of transnational marriage that is different from the intermarriage of village women in the 1960s and 1970s.

This chapter takes a close look at village transformations and explores the ways in which local people have engaged and negotiated the transitions. There are three factors of particular importance that relate local villagers to global dynamics: cash crop production,
international labor migration and transnational marriage. Cash crop production linking farmers to the world market became an integral part of rural livelihood in the Northeast in the 1960s. In the following two decades, labor migration – mainly by men in pursuit of overseas employment – gradually changed the social landscape of rural Isan. In recent decades, the ‘local’ and ‘global’ articulations have been intensified through the transnational marriage of village women. To explore these transition processes, it is necessary to situate the village in its broader context. The chapter starts with a brief discussion of socio-economic and political transformations in the Northeast in relation to national and global changes, and the impact these transformations have on the lives of Isan people. This will be followed by a description of the village of Nadokmai as a unit of observation which covers the first half of the chapter. The second half explores the village’s transformation in national and global contexts, with emphasis on the transnational connections mentioned above. In addition, kinship and its functions in the processes of transition will also be investigated.

Isan and its transformation

Situated on the Khorat Plateau, the Northeast – or Isan – covers one-third of Thailand’s land-area. However, among the four geographical regions in Thailand, the Northeast has long been considered the poorest, economically lagging behind the rest of country. The development of Isan in the mid-twentieth century was motivated not only by economic reasons, but also by national security concerns in the face of local communist insurgency, taking into account the geo-political situation of Southeast Asia at the height of the Cold War. For strategic reasons, various infrastructure improvement projects were implemented, which in turn facilitated the expansion of agricultural production and out-migration in the region. On another score, as Keyes (1967: 18-19) points out, the transportation network improvements and modern communications (e.g. the telegraphs) that were launched in the early twentieth century enabled the extension of political control over Isan and emphasized Bangkok as the economic and political center of the nation. Likewise, Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Peluso (1995) view this development as a part of the internal territorialization of state power that has become a strategy for modern states in establishing control over what people can do inside national boundaries.43

43In their analysis of state power with particular emphasis on natural resource management in Thailand, Vandergeest and Peluso state that “[T]erritorialization is about excluding and including people within particular geographic boundaries, and about controlling what people do and their access to natural resources
Apart from being the country’s largest region in terms of geographical size, Isan also contains the largest number of the country’s population. The large majority of the residents in the region speak several Tai dialects; their linguistic and cultural features differ from those of the Central region and are closer to those of the people of Laos (Keyes 1967: 2-3). In the Northeast, production of (glutinous) rice has been a staple. Before the first half of the twentieth century, peasant-livelihood in Isan was based heavily on production for subsistence and exchange. Even though trade and migration to engage in wage work, both within the region and beyond, were practiced, the scale was much lower than in later decades when rural communities were incorporated into a market-dependent economy. In the past, villagers’ lives revolved around kin groups; kinship formed the core structure of social organizations and relations. This situation has changed. Nowadays the livelihood of Isan peasants revolve around cash crop production, wage labor and migration, both internal and transnational (Lightfoot and Fuller 1984; Mills 1999; Whittaker 1999).

As a result of the Bowring Treaty signed in 1855, Thailand opened its borders to the world market and rice cultivation for export was promoted. However, this production was concentrated mainly in the Central region, especially in the Chao Phraya River delta while people in the Northeast continued to grow glutinous rice which was not for export (Pasuk and Baker 1995). Though Isan farmers had gradually cultivated non-glutinous rice varieties to sell, this trade was negligible compared to the large-scale rice business in the Central region. In the first half of the twentieth century, Isan lagged behind other regions in terms of commercial agricultural production. Economic disparities were associated in part with differences in agricultural productivity. Agricultural yields for the region were among the lowest in the country, due to generally unfertile soils and irregular rainfall patterns. To ensure household consumption needs, farmers always grew the staple crop of glutinous rice for their own use (Mills 1999; Whittaker 1999).

44 Glutinous or sticky rice (khao niao) is a type of Asian rice that is especially sticky when cooked. When raw, milled glutinous rice is white in color and fully opaque while non-glutinous rice varieties are somewhat translucent. Isan people eat glutinous rice as their staple food. This rice is also the main ingredient for various dished as well as sweets (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glutinous_rice (accessed: 8 March 2012) for more information).
In addition to glutinous rice cultivation, Isan villagers also got involved in cash-crop production which became widespread after World War II (Chatthip 1984; Keyes 1967). This production linked farmers to much wider national and international political and economic arenas. These crops included jute, which was introduced to this region in the late 1950s, cassava and sugarcane which came later. The Northeast became the primary producer of cassava (Ingram 1971; Long 1966). By 1985, the scale of the cassava trade had drastically expanded. However, cassava production did not compete with rice growing in terms of land use since this crop was cultivated in upland fields (Stengs 1986: 78-79). Mills notes that most households in Ban Naa Sakae – an Isan village where she conducted her fieldwork in the late 1980s – were engaged in cassava and jute cultivation. This production was a major, and often the only source of household income, especially in the period before wage labor became an important component of the rural economy (1999: 28, 44-46).

The expansion of cash crops in Isan was accelerated not only because of market demand, but also thanks to improvements in infrastructure strongly related to national security. The political and military turmoil in Laos and Vietnam from the 1950s to the 1970s posed a threat to the security of Thailand which led to the establishment of US air bases during the Vietnam War (Thak 1979). In addition, internal instability caused by Communist insurgency especially in the Northeast made the central government realize the need to improve channels of communication with the Isan population and to develop the region economically. Between 1955 and 1961, the Mitraphap Highway was built, funded by the U.S. as a part of the deal authorizing the setting up of American airbases on Thai territory. This highway connects various Isan provinces such as Naknon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen, Udon and Nongkhai with the capital of Bangkok. Apart from transportation improvement, an irrigation system and dams were also built with American aid. The two important dams in Isan at the time, the Nam Phong or Ubol Rathana Dam in Khon Kaen and the Lampao Dam in Kalasin, were constructed as part of an international Mekong project scheme (Keyes 1967: 56-57). Furthermore, the government also implemented the national five-year development plan which was first started in 1961. In the Northeast, the plan’s primary objective was to improve the living standard of local people through government incentives and agricultural projects to assist local villagers in shifting from

45 For more information about political conflicts in Laos, North Vietnam and Thailand and its consequences on development policy in Thailand, see Thak Chaloemtiarana (1979) and David Wilson (1966).
subsistence farming to cash crop production. The improvements which helped increase agricultural productivity and facilitate transportation of goods on the one hand and the expansion of world market for agricultural products (especially cassava in the 1970s) on the other, facilitated widespread cash crop cultivation and agricultural business in the region.

Besides the commercialization of agricultural production, labor migration was another key factor contributing to the rural transformation in Isan and linking its people to centers of power in the big cities such as Bangkok and beyond. Rural-urban migration was related to population pressures and the limitation of arable land in rural areas. At the same time, demand for labor in the cities, particularly in Bangkok, also raised employment opportunities for rural people (Keyes 1967; Lightfoot and Fuller 1984). There is no data available as to when exactly Isan people started to migrate in search of employment. However, it has been noted that because of the restriction of Chinese migrants to Bangkok since the late 1940s, employers turned to Thai peasants who wished to supplement their income especially during the dry season. In his study of Ban Nong Tun – an Isan village in Mahasarakhan province – Keyes (1967:36-37) observed that significant numbers of young males (mostly aged between 20 and 29) left their home villages to engage in wage work in Bangkok. These migrants were ‘temporary’, coming to the capital on a seasonal basis between harvesting and planting seasons. Textor (1961 cited in Anchalee and Nitaya 1992: 158) observed that in 1954 more than half of the 9,000 male pedicab divers in Bangkok had been born in the Northeast. Most of these migrants did not stay permanently; they worked in the city from December to April and returned to farm for the rest of the year.

Drawing on their long-term study in Roi Et province during 1976-1979, Paul Lightfoot and Theodore Fuller (1984) pointed out that out-migration was twice higher during the dry season than the periods during planting and harvesting seasons. They also

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46 Both government resources and, in great part, USAID assistance – also as a part of an exchange for hosting the US air bases – were allocated to support implementation of the plan (Keyes 1967).

47 Lightfoot and Fuller (1984: 86) note that the drastic growth of Bangkok’s population in the late 1940s to 1960 –781,700 in 1947 and 1,800,700 in 1960 – was largely a result of rural-urban migration. Migrants from Isan were the predominant group in some areas of Bangkok.

48 In fact, Isan villagers, especially men, have long been involved in long distance mobility. However, in the past this activity involved long distance trade rather than wage employment. Isan cattle and buffalo traders (nai hoi) who took the animals to markets in the Central region were well-known, especially in the periods during which rice production was expanded, thus requiring more draft animals (Chatthip 1984; Pasuk and Baker 1995).
showed various migratory destinations, including various towns in the Northeast and other regions. However, Bangkok was by far the most popular destination. The variation of migration routes was revealed in other studies. Andrea Whittaker (1999), for example, noted that migrants from Ban Srisaket – a village in Roi Et province where she undertook her research in 1992-1993 – mostly worked in the service industry, manufacturing and trade. Besides, a large number of men left the village to harvest sugarcane in Kanchanaburi, Central Thailand for periods from one to three months each year. Ban Srisaket was popularly known as a ‘sugarcane-cutting’ village. Other Isan villagers went to the South, working as laborers in rubber plantations and on fishing boats. In addition, the growing demand for housing in the big cities also attracted Isan villagers to construction work at various destinations.\(^{49}\)

In terms of gender distribution, Whittaker’s study (1999: 50-51) indicated a substantial number of females among migrants. This figure was particularly high among young people, as can be seen in the case of Ban Srisaket where the number of young female migrants (58.6 percent) exceeded that of their male counterparts (41.4 percent) among youth up to the age of twenty.\(^{50}\) High involvement of young women in rural-urban migration was also shown in Mills’ research (1999) which also indicated greater job opportunity in the service and manufacturing sectors for young unmarried women, especially in Bangkok. The observations at the village level are in line with surveys conducted by the National Statistics Office indicating that by the second half of the 1970s the number of women migrants to Bangkok had exceeded that of men (33,000 female migrants compared with 26,000 male migrants in 1974). In 1977, immigrants from the Northeast constituted the highest percentage of immigrants in Bangkok (45 percent of total in-migrants). This inter-regional migration was dominated by women while Isan men outweighed them in international migration, especially to the Middle East countries (Porpora and Lim 1987:86-87).

A boom in the textile industry in the 1980s gave rise to an increasingly feminized work force, which gave impetus for young women to leave their home villages and take up

\(^{49}\)This information is derived from my own observations, as I have been involved in research and development projects in various Isan provinces since the late 1980s.

\(^{50}\)Traditionally, spatial mobility is perceived as appropriate for men but not for women. This limitation is based on cultural norms and practices associated with gender and mobility. Given that throughout Thailand, as in other Southeast Asian countries, women have long been engaged in petty trade and selling home and forest products, their activity was rather limited to only local markets. However, the tradition has been challenged in more recent periods due to the expansion of capitalism and consumerism (Anchalee and Nitaya 1992; Ireson 1996; Mills 1999; Patcharin 1993; Walker 1999).
manufacturing jobs. Mills’ study which focused on Isan female migrants engaged in wage work in Bangkok, shows that their moves were not motivated by economic incentives alone but also by a desire to experience ‘modern’ (thansamai) life styles. Working and living in Bangkok enabled these women to fulfill their filial obligation as ‘dutiful daughters’ by sending money to support their parents back home. It also allowed them to get acquainted with new forms of entertainment and consumer commodities representing modern sophistication and self-identity. These images matched a steady barrage of media, much of which consisted of seductive symbolism, images and meanings of (Bangkok-based) Thai national culture (Mills 1999:80-86). Having acquired a taste of urban life, some migrants remained in the city and pursued wage employment for several years. This shows a continuous pattern rather than seasonal/circular migration, as noted in the earlier studies.

Along with domestic job mobility, overseas employment offered a new opportunity for villagers to earn their living since the late 1970s. International migration was fuelled by demand in the global labor market, especially in the oil-rich Middle East and high-income Asian countries, such as Taiwan, Singapore and Japan. Mills (1999) points out that most of the overseas laborers from the village where she conducted her ethnographic study were adult men, though some women also participated in this migration. This is in line with statistical data: in 1985 there were more than 200,000 Thai workers in the Middle East; most of them were male. Female migration was restricted by the government out of fear that women might be exploited and mistreated in foreign settings (Anchalee and Nitaya 1992:159). However, in recent decades, women’s involvement in overseas employment has become more significant, although this migration is still dominated by men.

In addition, out-migration of Isan villagers heading for both domestic and international destinations was spurred on by the establishment of U.S. air bases in the 1965-1975 period and the expansion of the transnational tourist industry in the following decades. Both R&R sites and tourist destinations like the town of Udon, the Patpong area of Bangkok and Pattaya Beach, offered employment opportunities attracting people from all over the country. Isan women, in particular, were involved in entertainment and service work as well as the sex industry catering for American servicemen and foreign male tourists. Transnational connections developed from these sites and in many instances resulted in international mobility, especially through marriage. In contemporary Isan, transnational marriage of women has become a familiar social phenomenon. Through these
marriages, local people have formed permanent links with various parts of the globe, virtually or symbolically.

The transnational marriage phenomenon was symptomatic of Keyes’ notion of ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ who came to see themselves as belonging to larger worlds than their home communities.\footnote{Keyes discusses the notion of ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ in his forthcoming book focusing on the relationship of rural Northeastern Thais and the Thai nation-state. I am grateful to Professor Charles Keyes for giving me permission to cite this revised version.} Drawing on his longitudinal research carried out since the 1960s, Keyes points out that in terms of income Isan villagers were dependent more on income from work outside the village or local enterprises – such as grocery shops, food stands or vehicles repairing than pure farming. Despite their mobility experience, both within Thailand and overseas, and access to a wealth of information through the media, migrants identified themselves as villagers and maintained close ties with their rural homes regardless of their current places of residence. Many migrants often returned home to assist in farming for short periods or for longer periods when they have stopped participating in off-farm work. This dynamic marks the extent of changes in contemporary Isan society.\footnote{The notion of ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ and how it challenges the existing class divisions in Isan villages as well as in Thai society will be elaborated further in Chapter Six.}

To provide background information for exploring how the residents of Nadokmai engaged in and negotiated with transformation processes generated by ‘local’ and ‘transnational’ connections, the following section describes the current context of the village as well as economic and social divergences of village’s households.

**Nadokmai: The village and its current context**

At the outset, it should be noted that the term ‘village’ or ‘muban’ used in this study to refer to Nadokmai is different from the definition of muban used for administration purpose.\footnote{In the Thai administration system, ‘muban’ is the smallest unit of control and resource allocation. Its definition focuses on “the boundaries – physical and conceptual – of the discrete and social entity of local community” (Hirsch 1993:2).} In referring to Nadokmai as a ‘village’ I wish to convey the local people’s sense of belonging to the same community. From the perspective of the residents, Nadokmai encompasses five muban. In the past, these muban were one village. Currently these muban comprise of slightly more than one thousand households with a population of four thousand three hundred; the male-to-female ratio is nearly balanced (49:51). Each muban now has its own administrative body and a village headman. However, residents of these
five *muban* have continuously associated, shared communal resources and participated in cultural and religious activities together. Regardless of which *muban* they live in, villagers often identified themselves as “*khon [mu]ban Nadokmai*” (people of Nadokmai village). This image is also used by outsiders when they refer to those from any of the five *muban*, even though each *muban* has its own name.

Driving through the village on an afternoon in December 2007 – the first time I saw Nadokmai – I noticed dense clusters of wooden and concrete houses surrounded by rice paddies. The entrance to the village was marked by government offices. A large reservoir was located next to a temple and a secondary school. The houses were built next to each other along both sides of the paved road passing through the village, connecting it to the main road to the town of Udon. Some of the houses were big, complete with lawns, gardens, garages, satellite dishes and nice fences in the front. These houses were designed in a style more representative of urban architecture rather than what one would find in a rural setting. Similar houses were to be found on the outskirts of the village. Later I learned that most of these houses belonged to *mia farang*. That evening, while talking to one of the village leaders whose house was situated at the corner next to the main junction, I observed a lot of motorcycles and vehicles passing by, especially pick-up trucks. These vehicles are common means of transportation inside and outside the village.

![Image of the main road passing through Nadokmai](image.png)

**Figure 2.1:** The main road passing through Nadokmai and connecting it to the town of Udon
Today, Nadokmai is a large and well-developed village with good infrastructure. It has a road network, electricity supply and a piped water system. My initial impression of Nadokmai was that it was not a typical rural village that usually consists of clusters of small wooden houses in an isolated location with limited public facilities and transportation to towns. Its position at the heart of the district has turned the village into a center of government services and trading in the area. The village houses the district and sub-district offices, the district police station and the non-formal education center. There

**Figure 2.2**: Newly constructed houses with garages, gardens and lawns belonging to *mia farang*
are also four large grocery shops, three schools, three temples, two internet cafés, and a market selling fresh and cooked food. Traders and customers involved in transactions in the market are not solely residents of Nadokmai, but also those from nearby villages.

Figure 2.3: The main junction in the center of Nadokmai (on the main road) where Western partners meet and socialize while waiting for their wives to buy food in the market

The main junction in the center of the village where the market is located is particularly busy during the morning and afternoon markets. The afternoon market starts around 4 p.m. During my stay in the village, I observed that while women went shopping for food, their Western husbands would get together to drink beer and chat outside one of the grocery shops on the corner. Whenever I was around, I always saw a few foreigners present, and there were new faces as well. Some of these men came from nearby villages where they lived with their wives. This was where the foreign husbands got to know each other, socialized, and shared experiences and information. It was also there that local people learned about what was happening in Nadokmai and nearby villages, particularly about mia farang (and their husbands). People might gossip about who was visiting home, whose husband was visiting the village, who just ended a relationship, who had a new partner, who bought or planned to buy paddy/land or renovate her house. I often got such information when I was there.

54These shops sell things which one can find at a grocery shop in larger towns. There are also medium-sized and small stores selling groceries, cooked food or both on every road and alley.

55These include the district secondary school and two primary schools.

56The internet café, which I often used during my stay in the village, was owned by a mia farang.
Residents of Nadokmai visited the town of Udon 40 kilometers away on a regular basis. Traders and shop owners came here to buy goods to resell in the village. A substantial number of villagers commuted to the town to work. Some parents sent their children to study in the provincial town, either in public or private schools, as they believed that the education standard there is better than at village schools. Most of these children were from well-to-do households and families with well-educated parents. Many mia farang also supported their own children from their former marriages to study in town. Residents also traveled to town for shopping, having meals, visiting entertainment sites, and enjoying their leisure time. This lifestyle is particularly evident among the younger generations and women living with Western partners.

The village is not a part of an irrigation scheme. Agriculture depends largely on rainfall. There are only limited areas where farmers can make use of water from the two village reservoirs. Data from the District Agricultural Office shows that slightly more than 60 percent of households in the village owned agricultural land – paddy and upland fields. About half of these families held up to ten rai of land; the other half owns more. 57 The number of households holding up to ten rai of land was slightly lower than that of the regional average. 58 Most households owning agricultural land cited farming as their occupation. Those having salaried jobs, selling groceries and other factory goods or running beauty salons, food stores and repair shops, indicated these activities as their occupation. Nevertheless, farming was not a major source of income in most cases. Rice yield was only enough for family consumption, whereas cash income came from other sources. Wages and remittances from family member(s) engaging in regular employment or living with a Western partner became increasingly important for their livelihood, especially for landless farmers and those families having small land holdings. These two groups constituted the majority of households in the village (70 percent). Phimon’s family represents such households.

Phimon (34) and her husband (44) owned seven rai of paddy. Located on poorly-watered areas, the harvest was low and hardly enough for the consumption needs of a four-

57 Information on land holdings is drawn from a survey of 618 households in Nadokmai. The survey was conducted by the District Agriculture Office (DAO) in 2007.

58 According to the 2003 agricultural census in the Northeast, the majority of households (60 percent) own 10-30 rai of land. Those who own up to 10 rai account for 30 percent. During the five-year period of 1998-2003, the number of households holding 10-30 rai of land declined (0.9 percent) while those having less than 10 rai increased (2.4 percent) (NSO, National Statistical Office 2003: 9, Table 1). Estimates from the survey indicate that in 2007 the regional average of households holding up to 10 rai would be 32.5 percent. The DAO’s survey shows that in Nadokmai families held up to 10 rai of land account for 30.0 percent.
member household – the parents and two boys aged thirteen and seven. The couple and Phimon’s sister, whose husband was away participating in overseas employment, worked on the land of Phinom’s parents. Rice harvest was shared among the households of her parents, her sister and her own. To earn hard cash, the couples took up various jobs. Phimon’s husband often found construction work. Instead of leaving the family to work far from home, he always looked for jobs in the village and nearby areas. Sometimes Phimon worked alongside her husband at construction sites. She also worked as a day laborer and occasionally sold cooked food in the village. Thanks to these diverse sources of income, Phimon’s family managed to make ends meet. Other households with small land holding in the village had to rely on remittances from children working in cities or daughters who married Western men to supplement their subsistence rice production. Even when they had a surplus of yield to sell, income from agriculture was insufficient to cover their living expenses in most cases. Families with no farm land were among the most vulnerable. Some rented out paddy fields to grow rice or worked on other people’s land and shared the yield. Others relied wholly on day labor which was usually available during transplanting and harvesting times. At other periods of the year, agricultural work was rather irregular. Remittances were particularly important for those households struggling just to get by. In this sense, labor migration as well as transnational marriage became an important means of earnings for rural livelihood.

While the majority of families had to struggle for survival, there were a number of prosperous households with large land holdings and substantial incomes from various sources. Lan’s family is a case in point. Lan (63) and her husband (67) owned more than 70 rai of land. After stopping growing cassava, the couple rented out most of their land and earned both cash and a surplus of rice that was available for sale for extra income. The family also ran a shop, one of the first few in the village, selling various products ranging from clothing and school materials to pots and pans, agricultural tools and religious materials. Apart from their big house in the center of the village where they ran their shop and where Lan lived with a son who was divorced and his two boys, the family owned another house near the farm where Lan’s husband worked. Her other two sons were married and lived with their families elsewhere in the village. Her only daughter lived in the Netherlands with her Dutch husband for seventeen years now. Lan did not expect regular remittances from her daughter, saying: “We are doing just fine, whatever she gives is extra.”
Better-off families in the village often supported their children in seeking work overseas. Take the case of Saeng and Sai. This family made good money from cash crops that enabled them to support their six sons to get employment abroad (Saeng’s and Sai’s story will be elaborated in the following section). International migration was made possible thanks to savings from a cassava plantation and extra borrowings to cover the high cost of overseas migration contracts. Since the 1980s, remittances from wage labor, both international and domestic, became an important component of household economies. Households with a less secure economic situation also took out loans to invest in overseas employment.

Other ‘respectable’ households in the village were those with member(s) holding salaried jobs or those with combined incomes derived from agricultural production and occupations such as teachers or government clerks. These positions were highly regarded in the local community. Take the case of Somsri’s family. Somsri (62) and her husband, Surasak (63) were retired teachers. Their three daughters were also teachers. Two daughters were married local men – a teacher and an engineer; the other, had an Englishman working for a land survey company from his country. Like many households with civil service incomes, this family lived in a large house furnished with factory-made furniture; it also had a computer with an internet connection. Apart from the large piece of land in the village where their house was built, the family also owned 25 rai of farm land. Some of this land was used to grow fruit and rubber trees and 20 rai were rented out, for which they received rice yield that was more than sufficient for their consumption. Annual revenues from rice on top of their pension ensured the economic security of the family. For this family, like Lan’s, transnational marriage that a daughter, Lita (37), engaged has little to do with economic incentive. Lita’s story and motivations propelling her to marry an English man will be presented in Chapter Three.

The diversity of households in Nadokmai presents a complex social landscape of rural livelihood as the village transforms itself through agricultural changes, labor migration, and the transnational marriage of village women. The remainder of this chapter examines these changes, how village residents have perceived, reacted to and negotiated these changes and how kinship played a part in the mobilization of labor and resources.

59 Government employees’ salaries were not particularly high, but one can obtain luxuries such as these with low interest rates. In addition civil servants also obtained free medical care and tuition support for children.
The village and agricultural transformation

In Nadokmai as in other rural communities, agriculture has shifted to commercial production of cash crops whereas rice cultivation remains an important factor in subsistence farming. The introduction of cash crops to the Northeast and the expansion of these crops have turned the region into a major producer of commercial crops such as cassava (Ingram 1971; Long 1966; Dixon 1999; Stengs 1986). This section focuses on how villagers of Nadokmai engaged in cash crop production and how this affected their household livelihood. It also examines the gender dynamic in relation to agricultural change in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of transnational marriage currently taking place in Isan society.

There was no record as to its original establishment but Nadokmai was believed to be founded in the 1910s. Thong, a man in his seventies told me that their parents were among the first people who came and settled in the eastern part of the present-day village. More people searching for farm land joined them in the following years and a small community was formed. In the mid-1940s, there were about 70 households in Nadokmai. By then a village headman had been appointed to help local authorities with the tasks of keeping public order such as arresting troublemakers. According to Thong, by the 1960s, arable land had become scarce and some farmers began to clear upland areas to grow rice, although productivity there was not as high as harvest from paddy land. Apart from rice, villagers also engaged in other farming activities to meet their own need, selling surplus products at the market.

Kham (79), a widow with a daughter married to a man from Belgium, told me that after their marriage her husband moved in and did some hard work in clearing her parents’ land for rice cultivation. It took some years to obtain a good yield. She worked in the field as well, but the main task of rice production was done by her husband and her father. Her task was to raise poultry, keep a fish pond and maintain the garden where she grew vegetables and fruit trees. The surplus was sold in the village, providing the household with substantial earnings. Kham vividly recalled the abundance of edible plants, herbs, mushrooms and insects in earlier times. When she had the good fortune of obtaining more than enough for consumption, she sold them. Khan’s experience in petty trade was shared

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60 Keyes (1976) points out that facing drought in the dry season and floods in the wet season, and the practice of searching for new fertile land for settlement was common throughout Isan at the turn of the twentieth century.
by other village women of her generation. Lan, for example, was involved in trading soon after finishing compulsory education and continued to do so until recently. Trading allowed her family to become one of the wealthy households in the village.

Women’s involvement in selling and buying is a sign of their control over household economics and resources (Bowie 2008:148). This involvement has been viewed as a contribution to the relatively independent and high status of Thai women, although the extent to which women and men enjoy complementary or asymmetrical status in Thai society has long been debated (Chavivun 1985; De Young 1958; Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1982, 1985; Van Esterik 1982). The arguments on gender in an agriculture-based society are often associated with Buddhism and women’s and men’s involvement in economic activities and other aspects of social life, as discussed in the Introduction. At the level of everyday practices in villages like Nadokmai, women and men share many farm tasks and domestic chores and both also benefit from their combined labor in the fields and in the home. The introduction of cash crops no doubt has an impact on the livelihood and gender dynamics of villagers as shown in the case of the family of Seang and Sai. Indeed, the experience of this family is shared by many villagers in Nadokmai, though each household might engage in this production on a different scale.

**Narrative 2.1: Rise and fall of cash crop production**

Saeng (76) and his wife Sai (66), have six sons who have married and lived with their own families; one son has health problems and lives with them after his divorce. This family lives in a big house built on a large piece of land located on the main road connecting the village to the town and other villages. Next to their house is a big silo where cash crops were once stored. However, it is now empty and being used as a parking space and playground for their grandchildren.

Saeng recalled that in 1960 after he got married, he moved to live with his wife in Nadokmai. In addition to glutinous rice, he started cultivating jute on sixteen rai of land. In 1970, when the price of jute went down and cassava was introduced to the region, Saeng switched to grow cassava. It was very good in the beginning and the earnings were a lot higher than what he had got from jute. So the family decided to buy an additional 30 rai of land to grow cassava. “We spent all of our savings to buy the land,” Sai said. Later on, they expanded cassava cultivation to an extra area of fifteen rai. Each year the family hired ten laborers, especially during the planting
and harvesting periods. Earnings from this crop enabled them to build a two-story house, buy a car, and support the education of their six children. But since cassava prices declined in the market in the late 1980s and production costs went up, especially wage rates, the family halted this production. That was ten years ago. Sai said: “When wages exceeded 100 baht/day/laborer we decided to stop. If we kept going, the earnings might just be enough to cover wages and other costs. We would not get anything.”

In 1991, they grew sugarcane, which did not require as much labor as cassava. Sugarcane production was under a sub-contract quota that they could not fulfill. After only one crop (lasting three years) they stopped, turning instead to eucalyptus and later on to mango. The family allocated twenty rai of land for mango cultivation. Sai said that mango provided a good income and did not require many laborers. However, two years ago their son and his wife went to work in Canada, leaving their two children behind. Taking care of the grandchildren was time-consuming and they had to cut down their work in the mango orchard. Their income dropped to 30 percent of what they had originally earned.

Sai said that her husband Saeng took charge of cassava cultivation; he regularly worked in the field along with other hired laborers. Their sons sometimes worked in the field when the need arose. Saeng made decisions about when to sell his cassava and how much; then he went to the middlemen who offered a reasonable price. Sai sometimes helped at the plantation and the mango orchard, but she spent most time working on her vegetable and fruit garden at home and selling the products at the village market. During the mango season, she also sold it at the market, which fetched higher prices than selling in bulk to traders. Incomes from Sai’s trading activity made a considerable contribution to household income. Such incomes were used to cover day-to-day household expenses while revenues from cash crop production made up the family’s annual savings. These savings allowed Saeng and Sai to support their six sons in getting overseas employment, although they had to get extra loans to meet the high cost of these contracts. Currently, two of their sons and a daughter-in-law are working in Canada (including the couple who left two children in their care), one is in Israel, and another in Singapore. Saeng said that his sons chose wage work rather than staying in farming and he agreed with their decision as he found that agriculture is not a good choice anymore.

The account illustrates how this family’s livelihood was closely linked to cash crop cultivation that spanned a period of over thirty years, changing from crop to crop in
response to market demand and price fluctuations. In the mid 1970s when the demand for cassava reached a peak, most households in Nadokmai took up this crop. However, not all farmers were successful like Saeng and Sai. Some said that only those farmers who took on cassava cultivation earlier on were able to make profits from it. Others found out that sugarcane did not provide good returns either. Income uncertainties were caused by fluctuations of commodity prices in the world market, something local producers had no way of knowing. In this situation, many farmers started to look for alternative ways of earning their living, mainly in wage employment, as in the case of the sons of Saeng and Sai. Accordingly, wage labor – predominantly linked to labor migration both within Thailand and abroad – became an important source of rural household income.

As the village transforms itself, a dynamic of gender differentiation emerged. Men led their families in search of farm land and engaged in cultivating rice whereas women focused on home grown production and selling these products, though they also helped in the fields. A shift to market agriculture allowed men to take control of cash crop production while women remained associated with home production and trading. The gender dynamic was clearly illustrated in Seang’s and Sai’s household as well as from Kham’s and Lan’s accounts. Women’s roles confined to domestic and local spaces became more evident in recent years as men left the village to engage in wage employment. Under this situation, support from their kinship network was vital in helping women meet filial obligations and maintain community activities.

**Matrilocality and migration**

In the Northeast as in other parts of Thailand, matrilocality and the practice of matrilocal residence is widespread at the village level (Amara 1990; De Young 1958; Keyes 1975; Mizuno 1978; Potter 1977). In his study of Ban Don Daeng in Khon Kaen province, Koichi Mizuno (1978:99) highlights key aspects of kinship as follows: celebrating weddings at the bride’s house, temporary residing of a new couple in the house of the wife’s parents, sons-in-law contributing their labor to the wife’s parents farms, dividing land inheritance between daughters, and the youngest daughter usually remaining with the parents to take care of them while receiving a portion of her parents’ land and inheriting the parents’ house. These particularities were also observed by scholars who conducted their research in Isan or in other regions of Thailand as mentioned above.
Reviewing Thai village ethnographies, Mills (1999:17-18) points out a range of features marking matrilocal and influencing gender roles and status. Among these are practices of land inheritance through female lineage, bride wealth payment and post marital residence in the wife’s home (at least in the initial period after marriage), all of which provide women with economic and emotional support. These customary practices are sources of female social power within village society. Matrilocal residence assigns different roles for wives and husbands in managing their households. In the first place it allows the wife to exert considerable control over household resources and financial transactions. Mobilization of labor and other resources is likely to be provided through the wife’s kinship network. All this gives the wife emotional support, enabling her to fulfill household obligations and to meet social expectations. Men, on the other hand, are dependent on their wives’ families and social network of their wives’ parents, both for their home and their access to agricultural land. When a man marries into a wife’s family in a new village he would experience feelings of isolation, and often the wife has to find ways to ease the pressure on her husband and mediate conflicts between him and members of her matrilineage (Bowie 2008: 139-141).

While female autonomy is supported by matrilocal and matrilineality, men gain formal authority as the role of household head is passed on to them by their father-in-laws through affinal ties (Amara 1990; Potter 1977). The traditional systems mediating gender relations have been changing through development activities and the expansion of capitalism. Generally, government development projects recognize men as household heads while ignoring women, especially in public roles. The advent of wage labor, both in agricultural and urban industrial sectors, has rewarded tasks conventionally done by men with higher wages. Also, men usually spend more time involved in wage work while women are attached to domestic responsibilities. This transition has been to the disadvantage of women (Whittaker 1999).

In line with the previous studies, the accounts provided by the residents of Nadokmai illustrate the dynamic of the practices of matrilocal and matrilocal residence throughout generations. The practices of land inheritance, for instance, are flexible as

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61 The government supported women to work together and form ‘Housewives’ Groups.’ These groups of women were encouraged to participate in processing agricultural products and making handicrafts, but opportunities to sell their products were very limited. Usually the Housewives’ Groups were asked to prepare and serve food at various public functions. Whittaker (1999:48) argues that these development activities produce and reproduce an urban middle-class discourse of women as housewives and fails to recognize the important role of rural women in agricultural production.
population increases and the size of land holdings decreases. Elderly villagers told me how parents gave their land to their children in the past, following the matrilateral inheritance rules according to which land was divided among daughters, whereas movable assets such as buffaloes and cattle were given to sons. This pattern has been shifting towards bilateral inheritance. The parents with whom I talked said that they gave or planned to give their agricultural land to both their daughters and sons. For those who own too little land it was not possible for them to divide their land among their children. In such cases, some parents might want to give their land to the children who had contributed their labor to farming and/or who had taken care of them. Others said that children who had economic difficulty should be given priority. In Nadokmai, there are couples who worked on the land of the husband’s parents, instead of the wife’s parents. In most of these cases, land holdings of the husband’s family were greater than that of the wife’s parents.

Similarly, the practice of matrilocal residence has been changing. Villagers who are in their sixties and seventies such as Kham, Sai and Lan, told me that they followed the practice of matrilocal residence. However, Lan did not settle in her parents’ compounds but moved to the center of the village which was a better location for trading. Other elderly women who did not live next door to their parental home said that this was not possible because of the lack of space. In recent years it was more common that a new couple or a husband might leave the village to engage in wage employment in cities or overseas countries soon after marriage. If only the husband departed, his wife usually lived with her parents. This situation became particularly relevant when migration became an integral part of rural household economies.

In Nadokmai, when the husband migrated to work in the cities or overseas, the family often received support from the wife’s relatives in maintaining control of their household. In the absence of her husband, the wife might move in with her parents. If the wife also had to move somewhere for work, she would leave the children under her parents’ care. In this way matrilocality and matrilineality have facilitated labor migration. This support was particularly important for overseas migration where migrants, mostly men, had to take a long leave of absence while their wives had to shoulder household burdens alone at home.

Being labor migrants, men hardly spend time with their family, often forfeiting their role of household head in taking care of their wife and children, except sending money. This situation, in many cases, had a negative effect on marriage and family life,
leading eventually to marital break-up. The following section explores how the residents of Nadokmai experienced migration and how it shaped their marriage and family life.

**Labor migration, marriage and family crises**

Labor migration in Isan has long been the subject of scholarly studies. However, little attention has been paid to the effects of migration on migrants’ households beyond material impacts, especially in the contemporary context associated with transnationalism. This section will deal with the connections between labor migration, marriage and family. Specifically, it looks at how migration, as an integral part of rural household economies, has influenced migrants’ marriages and resulted in family crises.

The establishment of the US air base in Udon in the mid 1960s helped create ample employment opportunities for inhabitants of Nadokmai and other villages around the town. The air base provided thousands of jobs in construction, administration and service with relatively high wages that went with them. Somsri, a retired school teacher, recalled that after graduation from teachers’ college in the mid-1960s, she took and passed the required exam to become a teacher. Many of her male counterparts who passed the exam did not take teaching job and went to work at the air base instead. A general-administration job at the base would pay twice the salary a school teacher would normally fetch. Income earning opportunities were available for unskilled laborers as well. Young women, like Jit and Nang engaged in service and entertainment work while a number of men worked at construction sites or drove pedicabs in the town. Somsri recalled that her father-in-law’s business of renting out pedicabs reached its peak during the period when GIs were stationed in the town. At that time, he had as many as 100 pedicabs and a large number of his clients were from Nadokmai.

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the employment situation in the town declined. However the implementation of a national development plan provided new opportunities for rural residents looking for wage work particularly in the big cities like Bangkok and the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate. Most villagers that I spoke to in

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62 The Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate - one of Thailand’s industrial zones – is concentrated in four Eastern provinces: Chon Buri (the province where Pattaya is situated), Rayong, Samut Prakan, and Chachoengsao. This industrial zone is a center for Thailand’s export-oriented manufacturing and shipping industries (Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand: [http://www.ieat.go.th/ieat/index.php](http://www.ieat.go.th/ieat/index.php), accessed: May 18, 2012). The availability of job opportunities has drawn people from all over the country to this economic zone. A substantial number of villagers from Nadokmai worked in the factories in this industrial zone, while others worked in the factories in and near Bangkok.
Nadokmai – both women and men under the age of fifty – had experiences working in the cities or overseas. Similarly, the life histories of mia farang in this study revealed that they had migrated and taken up wage work as factory workers, maids, shop helpers, waitresses and bar girls. Those with qualifications had salaried jobs, working as accountants and sales staff. In line with the findings of Mills’ work (1999), accounts of both women and men engaged in urban/industrial employment indicated that they were motivated not only by a desire to earn a decent income, but also by the opportunity to experience city life and become ‘thansamai.’

Most of the women and men engaged in employment away from the village met their future spouses at their work places. That was the case of Phong (38) who left for the Eastern Seaboard a few years after finishing the ninth grade (Mo 3) and currently worked as an occupational safety staff member for a Korean company. A dozen men of his kin now worked for different companies in these areas. Some of them, like Phong, married women they met in the workplace. Others married Phong’s female relatives.

Employment opportunities were available to women as well. Some women left their home village to work in the cities and formed relationship with men they met at the work places. A few years after finishing her compulsory education (Po 6, the sixth grade), Da (38) left home and worked as helper in a shop selling sweets in Bangkok for a year. During a visit home, a relative told her there was a better job at a textile factory where she could earn more money with greater independence and mobility. Da decided to not go back to the shop and joined the textile factory instead; there she met her partner, a mechanic. They lived together for five years (1992-1997) until she found out that he had been seeing another woman whom he had met before Da. She confronted him with this fact, but he kept seeing this other woman, so Da left him and returned home. In the village she could not find any employment and decided to apply for overseas work. In 2000, she got a contract to work at a textile factory in Taiwan for three years. After her return, she got another contract; she went again to Taiwan but this time after working for just five days, the factory was closed and she had to return home. Da later joined her friends in Pattaya and worked as a bar girl, hoping to meet a Western man with prospects of a long-term relationship. It is worth noting that Da, like most of the local couples in Nadokmai, did not formally register her marriage. In Thai society, couples earn social recognition and legitimacy through a customary wedding ceremony at which the groom presents sinsot (bride wealth) to the bride’s parents. This issue will be elaborated further in Chapter Five.
Da’s migratory and marriage experience is shared among many women in the village. The two sisters Kit (40) and Kan (38) also met their partners – both were wage earners – while working in Bangkok. Like Da, their relationships broke up because their partners were not reliable as providers; one of them was also involved with another woman. After separation they returned to the village to live with their parents. Kit then left her children under her parents’ care to work in a factory in Taiwan for two years. Both sisters eventually married Norwegian men and took their children to live with them in Norway. In Nadokmai, most mia farang expressed a desire to take their children from their previous relationships to live with them in the countries of their Western husbands. One-third of these women in the village were able to realize this wish.

The experiences of these women show how migration, marriage and kinship are closely related. When their marital relationships fail, it is common for women to turn to their parents and/or kin network for support without which it would be extremely difficult for them to shoulder alone the family burden because they are the ones, and not their (ex) partners, who have to take responsibility for the children. To get out of such situations, women like Kit, Kan and Da came to consider transnational marriage as a choice and have worked toward this goal.

Along with rural-urban migration, residents of Nadokmai, like Kit, Da as well as Seang’s and Sia’s sons, also took part in international employment. The opportunity to work overseas was plentiful in the 1980s and 1990s with an increased labor demand in the global market, especially in the Middle East and some parts of Asia such as Taiwan. Despite relatively high costs and the risk of being tricked by traffickers, overseas contract work was perceived by villagers as a way of earning good income. Village leaders and local government officials estimated that half of the households in Nadokmai, if not more, had at least one member engaged in overseas work at one time or another. International migration for work was predominated by men, though women also participated in overseas employment. This estimation was confirmed by my conversations with local residents. A number of villagers had more than one spells of overseas work in various countries. Sak, for instance, had worked in three countries over ten years. The following story sheds

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63 Udon Thani is one of the top provinces in the region in terms of rates of international migration. The province hosted a large company specializing in exporting laborers. In the period during which demand increased, the company provided training to teach and improve the skills of those who wanted to work abroad. A large number of villagers in Nadokmai participated in these training and received a contract through the company. Others worked through government agencies as well as through various private agents.
interesting light on how villagers were engaged in overseas employment and the effects it had on their lives and their families.

**Narrative 2.2: Engaging in overseas employment**

Sak (52) and his wife Suai (46) have two children, a daughter (23) who is in her last year of college and a son (17) pursuing vocational education. Sak was born and brought up in the village next to Nadokmai. He moved to live with his wife after they got married. The house was given to Suai by her grandmother, where they ran a shop selling snacks, drinks and cooked food.

At the age of fifteen, a few years after finishing compulsory education, Sak left home for Bangkok. “My main desire was to see Bangkok. At that time, I was not concerned much about earning money…I knew that in Bangkok I would have to work to support myself,” Sak recalled. His parents did not object to his decision, as they wanted him to get work after the harvesting season. Sak first worked at a gas station where he got meals and accommodation. After two years, he moved to a brewery. There, he learned how to drive a car. This new skill enabled him to move from carrying beer boxes to driving a forklift truck. He earned 3,000 baht/month (US$87) which was good income at the time. Sak worked for the beer company for almost two years before returning home and joined a road construction company where he learned to extend his driving skills; he could drive a truck, tractor, trailer and grader. These skills were assets facilitating his overseas employment prospects.

In 1978, when he was 21, Sak got his first one-year contract to work in Jordan as a driver at construction sites. The savings after paying for the cost of travel allowed him to apply for another job. During 1979-1984, he got two contracts for the same job in Iraq. After that he returned to Thailand and again applied for another job. He kept applying for overseas employment as it provided much better income than he could ever earn in Thailand.

While waiting for the results of his application, Sak’s mother suggested he should marry and recommended Suai to him. At that time, he was almost 30 and Suai was 24. The two of them knew each other and his mother knew her mother well. In 1984, they got married and Sak provided a bride wealth of 15,000 baht to Suai’s family. Five days after the marriage took place; Sak went to work in Saudi Arabia and stayed there for five years without returning for home visits. Suai stayed with her parents while Sak was away.
They communicated by writing letters. Suai said, “There was no telephone in the village at the time. A letter took 2-3 weeks to arrive. It was not like these days; *mia farang* can talk to their husbands every day. They can let their husbands know right away if something happens in the village.”

Talking about their marriage, Suai said that Sak did not disappoint her, although their marriage was arranged by their mothers. “I knew that he is a responsible and hard-working person,” she said. That was why she agreed to marry him in the first place.

After Sak’s return in 1990, the couple decided to invest in a small grocery shop which Suai had been taking care of. Later when the son began to go to school, she prepared and sold cooked food as well. Sak stuck to his occupation, driving a mini-bus serving commuters between the town and villages in the area. He became a familiar figure among local residents and involved himself in recruiting village women to work at the bars in Pattaya and Samui. Later he stopped his driver’s career and started a catering business, renting out amplifiers, tables, chairs, and kitchen utensils and supplying food and drinks for parties. The business was good since it was the only one in the village and nearby areas. However, his business slowed down as more competitors entered the field over the years. Suai told me that *mia farang* and their families were among the main customers. On their return visits, they often organized parties to mark homecoming, farewell and birthdays.

Undoubtedly, Sak’s overseas employment contributed substantially to the household’s economic security, enabling his family to support their children’s education. For Sak, working abroad was a matter of pride. He highly valued this overseas experience and related it to his success in catering business and recruiting village women to work at tourist destinations. Sak’s case was a success story of international labor migration. However, this was not always the case. Migrants and their families had different experiences regarding overseas work. Those who succeeded were able to buy paddy land, build or renovate their own houses, and invest in business as Sak did. But there were many who failed and were often in debt; many lost their family fields which they had put up as collateral for an overseas contract. Nonetheless, overseas employment was perceived as an opportunity to earn better income than working in Thailand and returnees kept looking for a chance to go abroad to work again.

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64 Two out of four big grocery shops in the village were owned by couples whose husbands participated in overseas employment. The biggest shop was run by a couple whose husband had won a lottery while working in Singapore.
In Nadokmai, while most of the overseas migrants were married men who left their wives and children behind to take up wage labor, there was a minority of single men, like Sak, and single women, like Da and Kit who went to work abroad. Single male migrants were likely to get married soon after their return to the village. These men had obtained a certain economic security and were considered potential suitors capable of taking care of a family. After their marriage some men might leave their wives to continue in overseas work, like the case of Sak. Female migrants might continue their jobs after marriage, but usually returned home when they became pregnant to give birth and stay on to bring up their child.

While overseas labor connected local men to various parts of the globe and provided them with a good income, women were left in the community to look after household tasks. However living alone away from home was not easy and many migrants experienced loneliness and frustration. Some men became involved with other women and spent their earnings on their new relationships instead of sending them home to support their wives and children. Others cut off communication with home altogether. This situation caused tension, worry and anger for the wives at home, often placing them in a desperate situation. Without remittances from their husbands the wives had difficulty in maintaining the household and bringing up the children; not to mention the loans they had to pay back in securing their husbands’ overseas labor contracts earlier. An example of how overseas migration had a negative affects a family’s life is the case of Mai. Indeed, the consequence of migration in this case also placed pressure on the relationship between Mai and her mother, who financially supported her sons-in-law working abroad.

Mai (47), now a divorced mother with two sons, put up her mother’s paddy for collateral to get a loan of 200,000 baht (US$ 5,714) for her husband to work in Brunei in 1994. A few months after his departure, he stopped communicating with her and ceased to send money home. Mai found out that he had become involved with another Thai woman whom he met in Brunei. “I couldn’t do anything...He told this woman that our sons were not his,” Maiexplained to me with sadness. She asked her husband to pay back the loan but he refused. “He always maintained he didn’t have money... I supported him to get work abroad. I asked my mother to help us getting a loan. I had to return the money to my mother,” Mai said. Her mother was quite disappointed, afraid that she might lose her land. She was angry at her son-in-law’s behavior. The mother-daughter relationship was under stress for years. Struggling with financial and family problems, Mai left her two sons with her mother and sister to look after and headed to Phuket in 1996 to work at a bar. She
considered this choice as the only alternative to earn enough money to pay off the debt and get her mother’s field back. Fortunately Mai met Tim, a Dutchman who asked her to marry him and move to the Netherlands with him. Tim also helped Mai pay off the loan so that her mother could get her land back. In 2005, Tim died; Mai remarried, again to another Dutchman who fell sick and died in 2007. After the husband’s funeral Mai returned to Nadokmai. She went to work at Pattaya in 2008, hoping that through connections with male tourists she could return to Europe again.

Like Mai, other women in Nadokmai faced similar problems as a result of their husbands’ overseas migration. While women’s accounts indicate various reasons for the popularity of transnational marriages, they also convey an image of local men as ‘irresponsible’ since they fail to fulfill their family obligations, thus lending legitimacy to women in their decision to seek transnational marriages. I shall elaborate on this issue in the following chapter.

In this section, I have pointed out that while internal and international migration has improved the economic situation of a number of households in Northeast Thailand, it also creates tensions and conflicts within migrants’ families which often lead to marriage break-up with huge debts to pay. This deplorable situation has been attributed to some migrants’ lack of responsibility as heads of household and often blamed on their promiscuity. Facing the burden of having to raise children single-handed and financial problems, many women turn to transnational marriage, a choice that has become more common in Nadokmai in the past decade.

**Transnational marriage and global connections**

From the afore-going discussions, one can see that a rise in transnational marriage of village women has something to do with labor migration ventures that go awry. Despite successful migrants like Sak, the gloomy picture of women suffering from bad behavior of local men away from home contrasts sharply with the good life and success stories of the mia farang circulating in the village. Though these stories are rather selective – as pointed out in the previous chapter, failed cases and negative aspects of mia farang’s lives have largely been ignored – they generate an optimistic perception of transnational marriages and propel women to turn to Western men. Some parents and senior kin were so captivated by these success stories that they urged their daughters and nieces to marry a Western partner. But motives of women involved in the current transnational marriage phenomenon
Logics of Desire and Transnational Marriage Practices

are diverse and complex; this issue is the central concern of the following chapter. Here I want to deal with local processes that facilitated women’s aspirations to make connection with foreign men – processes that reflect the ways in which local people engage in and negotiate a demand for suitable partners globally.

The idea of transnational marriage as an alternative for women trapped in marriage and family crises gave rise to facilitating agencies to meet women’s desire of making contact with Western men by taking them to work at tourist destinations or through match-making service. These local processes were important means in initiating transnational relationships, especially in the first decade of the 2000s. In many cases such connections resulted in a long-term commitment and marriage.

Sak – the man we discussed earlier who took village women to tourist sites to work as bar girls – told me how he got involved in the recruiting business. While transporting passengers in his mini-bus between the town of Udon, Nadokmai and other villages in the area, he was often asked to take women to work in Pattaya. At first he did not take the requests seriously until a mia farang in the village next to Nadokmai rented his van to move her stuff from Pattaya because her partner wanted her to leave her work and return to the village. When Sak arrived at Pattaya, he met a few women from Nadokmai who worked there as bar girls. They introduced him to a bar owner who told him she wanted girls to work for her. Sak then matched the demand of the bar owners with the village women’s desires to work at tourist sites. From that point on, he began to take women from Nadokmai and the surrounding villages to Pattaya and later on to Samui as well. During the peak period in the early years of the 2000s, he made almost monthly trips with eight to ten women in his van heading to either Pattaya or Samui. Sometimes the bar owners called him when they urgently needed girls. “They even paid me extra money on top of what I charged the girls for transportation and job recruitment,” Sak said. The month before (March 2008), three women had asked him to take them to Samui. He did not do it, but gave them the names of the bar owners who might offer them a job. Sak stopped his service a few years ago because there was some other business he needed to take care of. However, the requests still came now and then. As the service was not available anymore, women who attempted to initiate this transnational connection at meeting sites usually followed their friends and fellow villagers who worked or lived with their Western partners to the tourist destinations.

Sak has quite a positive view regarding marriages between local women and Western men. To him, it is a way for women to take care of their children, he said: “Most
men accept and support children from previous relationships, but Thai men do not. It is not in our culture...Women can also enjoy a better life and come across new experiences, especially when living abroad.” Sak was involved in overseas employment for ten years and he truly valued the experience as it opened his eyes and ears. He related various opportunities he had engaged in including taking village girls to tourist destinations to his overseas experience. Similarly, he believed that mia farang could also benefit from their experience living abroad; the experiences that village women would otherwise rarely have access to.

In addition to the services provided by Sak, during 2000-2003 a female school teacher took the initiative to help village women communicate with foreign men by translating letters and messages for them. Later she offered a match-making service, and gave English lessons and orientation courses in Western culture. At the peak of her work, she had approximately 80 clients, 30 of them used her match-making services and 50 used translation and training services. The clients were from various villages in the area. When she stopped her business, another female school teacher followed her footsteps, providing the same services. A few years later, she married an Englishman and moved to England. Besides these two well-established agencies, there were others who did similar work; however the service they gave was rather limited and based on a personal rather than business relationship.

Recently, match-making services in Nadokmai were handled by mia farang and their husbands. However, demand for this service has decreased considerably because village women would rather go to the tourist destinations where they can contact prospective partners face-to-face. In addition, women who used match-making services often complained that the process took longer than they expected. The best way was to head straight for Pattaya or other tourist sites. Match-making providers in the village and in the town told me the process took time partly because they wanted to make sure that their clients got a ‘good’ man who genuinely wished to establish a family and who was capable to support them financially. For the clients, however, a long wait meant more costs since the fee was charged on monthly basis.65 While this kind of service in the village was

65The two main agents in the village charged an initial fee of 3,000 baht (US$ 85.7) for the first three months. After that clients will be charged 1,000 baht per month (US$ 28.5). This cost did not include date arrangement and language and cultural training. Normally, the fee for date arrangement was paid directly to the agent by Western men. One of the agents in the village also charged 2 percent of money wired to women and when the relationship ended up in marriage, 20 percent of a bride wealth would also be charged. Similar procedures were applied by an agency in the town of Udon run by a mixed Thai-American couple who
declining, match-making and introduction agents were available at many internet shops in the district and provincial towns. During my fieldwork, most of the internet cafés in the town of Udon were run by mixed couples who also provided services of this sort.

The school teacher who first started the match-making agency in Nakodmai viewed this business as an alternative avenue for women wishing to marry a Western man, but not as a channel to recruit workers for the sex industry. She considered her service as a way to protect women from being involved in prostitution. However, some villagers criticized the involvement of school teachers in this service as ‘inappropriate’ because it implied their support for this type of marriage which ran counter to local expectations of teachers as role models, especially for students. A local leader, a man in his fifties, expressed the view that the teachers’ activities in mediating marriage between local women and Western men might set a (bad) example for students. Some villagers and school teachers concurred with this view while others considered this involvement as a personal choice that teachers, like any other village woman, was free to make. The reality on the ground was that at the time of my fieldwork, there were about five female teachers in local schools, both in Nadokmai and the surrounding villages. They married Western men; some of the couples had begun providing match-making services.

Local facilitating processes were in decline notwithstanding, village women still sought out various means to initiate relationships with Western men. Routes to transnational marriage will be discussed in Chapter Four. Through different paths, 159 women in Nadokmai were married to or had a long term relationship with foreign men from 21 countries. These ties and connections made by local women have linked a small village in Northeast Thailand to various parts of the globe. Such transnational practices have profound consequences on perceptions and daily life of local people in the communities where ties and networks across borders are grounded (Kyle 2000; Levitt 2001). In a sense, transnational connections also opened up spaces where local realities and global cultures meet and contest. This is a part of an on-going process of social transformation of locality (Appadurai 1996).
Conclusion

Since the middle of the twentieth century, local residents of Nadokmai have engaged in and negotiated a wide range of changes influencing their livelihood and connecting them to transnational perspectives. The transformation began in the 1960s with the promotion of cash-crop production linking villagers to wider market demands driven by the national and global economies. Since the 1980s when the contribution of cash-crop production to the household economy declined, labor migration opened new opportunities for rural residents, both women and men.

While labor migration provided villagers with substantial earnings and formed an integral part of rural household economies, it also affected marriage and family life. Women in this study often attributed their domestic problems with the negative effects of migration, pointing an accusing finger at men’s irresponsibility as household providers and their promiscuity. Problems faced by women included financial and mental pressure, conflict with their own parents and even eventual marital break-up. Transnational marriage offered an escape route for many of these women who sought to grow beyond their present predicaments to make a fresh start with foreigners, mainly from Western countries.

Apart from international labor migration, transnational marriages have also intensified the ‘local’ and ‘global’ articulation through cross border activities and ties that mia farang and their husbands continue to maintain. The ways in which these couples and local villagers have negotiated social relations and maneuvered tensions created by transnational marriage as well as its consequences on local cultures and the norms shaping villagers’ lives will be examined in Chapters Five and Six. In the following chapter, I shall seek to convey some portion of the rich experiences of women and men involved in transnational marriage to discuss motivations propelling them to opt for this kind of marital relation.
CHAPTER THREE

MOTIVATIONS AND THE LOGICS OF DESIRE

On June 25, 2008, a wedding ceremony for a woman from Nadokmai and a Dutch man at their house in Haarlem, a small city near Amsterdam, brought together about ten Thai women, including me. Most of them came with their Dutch partners. In the late afternoon, some of us spent time cooking Thai food, eating and chatting with one another. At one point, the conversation drifted toward me when one woman asked whether I had met a Dutchman I liked and if so would I marry him and stay in the Netherlands after finishing my studies. While I was pondering over this, she went on, “If you marry a Dutchman, you might be asked [by acquaintances and colleagues of both Thai women and Dutch partners] what makes you marry him. Do you love him or do you marry him because you want to stay here [in the Netherlands]?” Suddenly, another woman who worked at a grocery shop said, “Yes, my co-workers sometimes tease me about this. Once I was asked how much did my husband pay [to marry her]…I did not take it seriously, but it is the way they [some of her colleagues] think about us [Thai women with Dutch partners].”

This vignette reflects a common assumption about marriage between women from poorer and less developed countries with men from richer or more industrialized countries. From a migration perspective, a transnational relationship of this kind is often considered as a means enabling women to engage in overseas work. The material incentive and the opportunity to move to and work in more desirable locations in the global hierarchy are assumed to be women’s major motivations. Frequently, women engaged in this type of transnational relationship are associated with the sex industry (Pataya 2002; Piper and Roces 2003; Supang et.al 1999). In the vignette above, the women did not mention explicitly whether other people might think that they were involved in the sex business. Nevertheless, on other occasions, I was cautioned by some Thai women married to Dutchmen that if I considered marrying a Dutchman I might expect questions, direct or indirect, about whether I was involved in commercial sex. This perception was pervasive regardless of the personal history, experience and qualification of the woman in question.
The materialist assumptions entail that such conjugal relations have little or nothing to do with the modern ideal of romantic love and individual fulfillment, since economic reasons are incompatible with the Western stereotype of a love-based marriage. In the words of Charles Lindholm (2006:5), “[R]omantic love cannot be bought and sold, love cannot be calculated, it is mysterious, true and deep, spontaneous and compelling, it can strike anyone – even the most hardened cynic can be laid low by Cupid.” This postulation has helped to generate the binary opposition between romantic love and material motivation. The normative way in which transnational marriages are perceived is based on this dichotomous view.

There are, as I will argue, other factors in addition to economic explanations and the (Western) notion of romantic love that are associated with the popularity of current transnational marriages in Thai society. A transnationalism perspective arguing for, above all, the multiplicity of forces and flows influencing transnational practices and ties provides an insight that captures the underlying motivations encouraging women and men to engage in transnational marriage. Arguably material gains are not the sole motivation to marry. Historical and socio-cultural dimensions, as well as processes such as imaginations, planning, and strategizing are revealed as powerful forces shaping transnational practices (Brennan 2004; Constable 2005; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Vertovec 2004). Imaginations are particularly emphasized, for instance by Appadurai (1996), who relates the current massive mobility across national borders to the ways in which different possibilities for a better life are imagined on a global scale.

In addition, a gender approach with an emphasis on the impact of gender differences in perceptions, decisions and experiences associated with transnational practices, including marriages across national borders, also provides insights into the complexity of transnational relationships. Constable, one of the first authors to discuss gender and cross-cultural marriage, argues against the popular perception of this type of conjugal relation exclusively emphasizing material incentives and reducing the individual’s choices to economic rationale. According to her, since this view obscures the emotional dimension of desire, one should look at how emotion/passion, material motivations, and marriage are intertwined. Reducing these dimensions to the crude of economic motives is a great misrepresentation (Constable 2003: 118).

The goal of this chapter is to problematize the notion of binary opposition between romantic love and material incentives. By exploring the experiences of mia farang and their partners, most of whom were living in or visiting Nadokmai at the time of my
research, I seek to uncover the variety of factors and incentives encouraging them to become involved in intimate relationships, and to reveal how such motivations are imaginable and realizable. Drawing on transnational perspectives and a gender approach, I propose that the logics of desire compelling these women and men to opt for marriage constitute a complex set of multiple motivations that cannot be attributed to either economic reasons or emotional ties alone. Rather, the motivations combine in various manners and influence the ways in which marriage choices are made.

In a chapter in her book on correspondence relationships between Filipino/Chinese women and American men, Constable points out the links between political economy and the cultural logics of love and desire which form the basis upon which relationships across borders are imagined and realized. Through exploring such relationships in the contexts of Philippine/China and U.S. relations, she argues that “political economy is implicated in the production and reproduction of desire and is implicated in even the most minute and intimate levels of interaction” (Constable 2003: 145). American men’s attraction to Filipino and Chinese women was built on the idea of Asian women’s commitment to marriage and traditional family values, and could be traced back to historical connections between the US and these Far Eastern countries. As for some of the women, marrying an American man was desirable for a number of reasons: ‘modern’ ways of life in the U.S., constraints of norms and familial obligations in their home countries, as well as material advantages of this transnational relationship. Yet all this did not preclude feelings of love. As Constable indicates, the women and men in her study articulated a discourse on romantic love. On another dimension, this love and emotion are intertwined with political economy through what she calls the cultural logics of desire.

In examining the logics of desire compelling Isan women and the Western men to opt for marriage, in my research I apply a similar analytical approach, but with a different emphasis. In Chapter One, I have shown how the current marriage phenomenon is linked to its historical developments which can be viewed, in Constable’s words, as political economy dynamics in Thai society in the context of international relations. This chapter therefore focuses on how the logics of desire evolves around material resources, intimate relationships, socio-cultural dimensions, gender imaginations and fantasies as well as feminist ideas and how these multiple motivations combine and complicate this type of marital relation.

In addition, I shall examine the common stereotyping of gender mobility generated by transnational marriages – women ‘marrying up’ and as a consequence moving up to a
higher socio-economic position in the global hierarchy – which Constable terms ‘global hypergamy’ (2005a:10). My ethnographic study of women’s natal village enables me to propose a reverse pattern of marriage mobility: men from Western societies move to and resettle in their wives’ home village/country.

The following section reviews the debates surrounding the issues of gender, race and sexuality that motivate desires and facilitate marriages between Asian women and Western men. The discussion provides a theoretical framework for an in-depth investigation in later sections.

**Conceptualizing motivations and the logics of desire**

Among scholarly works on intermarriages and border-crossing sexual encounters in an Asian context, Ann Stoler’s insightful work (1992) reveals how sexuality, gender and race were linked to rules and politics which in turn influenced individuals and families in twentieth-century Asia. Through her analysis of métissage (interracial unions) of French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies which gave rise to an unwanted category of métis (mixed bloods), Stoler observes that ‘improper’ interethnic sexual relations were considered an affront to European prestige; a contribution to national decay and to the corrosion of European identities. She points out the coexistence between inclusionary impulses and exclusionary and discriminatory practices. While colonialism generated sexual desires and fantasies among the colonizer and the colonized alike, the rejection of métis as a distinct legal category intensified the politics of cultural difference and confirmed the practices of imposing European superiority at the same time. On another score, Stoler’s work shows how the gendered policing of – especially female – sexuality was intended to keep ethnic boundaries intact, and thus ensuring the endogamy of ethnic groups which in colonial contexts overlapped with classes. This study is one of the first academic works emphasizing the intrinsic relationships between sex, gender, race, class and power in Asia. Though the investigation was made within a colonial context, it sheds light on diverse circumstances and factors influencing the logics of desire and shaping conjugal relationships across borders, either by facilitating or restricting them. This highlights the fact that motivations and aspirations associated with such relationships extend beyond love and material motives.

Similar to colonialism, militarization also influenced sexual desires and encouraged interracial marital relations. Constable (2003) particularly makes this point when she
describes how military experiences shape gender imaginations and fantasies, encouraging American men to look for Filipina spouses. Some American servicemen who served in the Philippines retained images of the nurturing Filipino nurses and doctors. These fantasies enhanced the attraction of Filipinas as prospective wives devoted to domestic tasks. Encounters between Americans and Filipinas during colonial times fed American men with images of Filipinas as being more traditional, less modern and less influenced by feminism than Western women. These women were perceived as ideal wives and mothers embracing traditional familial values. Such male images about Asian women motivated them to look to Asia and other parts of the world for women who were thought to be committed to family values and the traditional role of a wife. Recently, there has been a growing body of literature discussing how such cognitive processes as gender imagination and fantasies facilitate transnational marriage and migration (Constable 2005; Piper and Roces 2003; Thai 2008).

While men are drawn to Asian women by the promise of ‘traditional values’, Asian women are often attracted to Western men and societies because of their assumptions about ‘modern’ ways of life and more flexible gender relations in Western countries than in their own homelands. Others anticipate escaping from limited marriage opportunities at home, particularly for divorced women, women with a high education as well as those who are past ‘marriageability’ according to local standards. Marrying a Western husband offers women a way to grow out of these local constraints as well as to escape from gender inequalities at home (Constable 2005a; Schein 2005; Thai 2005). Nevertheless, some women consider passion as the driving force behind their desire to marry a Western man (Constable 2003; McKay 2003).

Going one step further, Panitee (2009), in her study of marriages between Thai women and Dutchmen, points out that these marriages are facilitated and shaped by the distinctive cultural norms and practices relating to marriage and family in both societies. This work challenges the Euro-centric idea of modern marriage based basically on romantic love and individual choice and happiness. It illustrates how the families of both parties influence and engage in marriage decisions. In addition the roles of socio-economic status and life-courses of Thai-Dutch couples in shaping marriage motivations and the degrees of their family involvement in such marriage are also addressed. This study demonstrates diverse factors influencing marriage choices and experiences. The findings accentuate that transnational marriages must be conceptualized beyond love and material aspects.
Another view draws on Edward Said’s discursive notion of ‘Orientalism’ (1978). Said perceives Orientalism as a system of representations framed by a constellation of assumptions that brought the Orient into the Western learning, consciousness, and empire. For Said, Orientalism is a cultural apparatus for dealing with ‘other’ cultures and it “is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness” (Said 1978:204). Nonetheless, the Orient is an integral part of Western culture and its associations with the West take various forms; above all tourism is a prevalent one, especially in the recent decades. In the current dominant tourism discourse, Asia is often depicted as a reflection of Western men’s sexual fantasies. Most Western male tourists travel to Asia exclusively to consume the fantasies of the eroticized Orient (Cohen 1996; Dahles 2009). Such fantasies have inspired the desire for transnational encounters that might result in a long term relationship. Drawn on Said’s notion, Suriya and Pattana argue that farang men get married to Isan women with “some certain degrees of “masculinity Orientalizing” style of thought and rationalization” (2007: 3). The authors contend that these marriages allow men to fulfill their exotic dream of having Oriental wives, whereas Isan women find themselves ‘marrying up’ Occidental husbands as a means to escape poverty and enjoy happy endings and successful marriages.

In fact, men’s logics of desire as well as the diverse images of (tourist) men are far more complex. Brennan (2004), for instance, points out that in Sosua, a transnational tourist town in the Dominican Republic, European male tourists are seen as potential dupes who can rescue local women from poverty and help them to migrate from the island. For women, these men are readily exploitable. In her study of sex tourist men in Pattaya, Julia O’ Connell Davidson (1995) shows that some of British sex tourist men are upset of being rejected by women at home. This disappointment motivates them to engage in relationships that allow them to display a type of masculinity that they are unable to do in their relationships with women in their country. At the same time, there are also tourist men who claim to be looking for companionship, social belonging and a meaningful relationship while they are on holiday in such a tourist site as Pattaya (Garrick 2005). The diversity of motivations and inspirations leading to an initiation of transnational encounters that, in many cases, result in a long-term relationship extends beyond the typical dichotomous framework of love and economic benefits.

In addition to the multiplicity of motivations discussed above, the emergent literature also poses new challenges to assumptions about romantic love and its extrication
from economic reason. Drawing on her study on the international tourism industry in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Cabezes (2004:1010) points out the blurred boundaries between work and romantic relationships and between love and money. Eva Illouz (1997) shares this position while making a slightly different argument. She points out that by and large, romantic love is a product of a consumer society by which romantic desires are translated into economic practices through various forms of advertising and publicity in printed and other media. Illouz calls this process ‘commodification of romance’ (1997: 16-17). Within transnational spaces, this commodification materializes in a variety of ways such as dating websites, ‘mail-order bride’ and match-making agents (Constable 2005b; Nakamatsu 2005; Tolentino 1996; Wang and Chang 2002). These days, the power of technology has facilitated the penetration of advertising into rural, remote areas. In the Philippines, for example, Deirdre McKay (2003: 44-48) discusses the dream of transnational romance held by Filipina migrants and constructed by information and images gained through such media as movies, radio programs and books. Consequently, romantic versions of migration become a part of Philippine popular culture. These processes elucidate how romantic sentiments are linked to and influenced by economic exchanges in contemporary societies which affect how romantic love is conceived of and realized.

Indeed, the dichotomous perspectives in the studies of marriage across national borders are disputed by scholars such as Constable (2003) who argues against the portrayal of correspondence marriages within simple binary opposition notions of victim and agent, oppressor and oppressed, or East and West. Rather she suggests that research on transnational marriage should be “attentive to women and men’s motivations and experiences, and to subtle and complex renderings of power” (Constable 2003: 63). Others also argue against popular representations of ‘mail-order brides’ and women marrying men in richer countries as ‘trafficked women’ who are sold to foreign men. Such representations are incomplete since they do not take women’s agency into account (Doezema 1998; Kempado and Doezema 1998; Nakamatsu 2005).

Avoiding the dichotomization emphasizing economic reasons and romantic love, I argue further that it is the combination of diverse motivations that constitute the logics of desire shaping marriage choices. In what follows, I shall elaborate my argument by exploring how women’s and men’s inspirations to engage in transnational marriages are imaginable and realizable by focusing on the narratives relating the experiences of three mia farang. Apart from their life stories, the accounts also include experiences and
perspectives provided by other *mia farang*, their Western partners and local residents so as to reveal the nuanced influences of multiple and complex motivations, as well as variations of the logics of desire. Furthermore, the inspirations of Western partners will be also emphasized as it is a part of the complex set of motivations facilitating the current transnational marriage phenomenon.

**Transcending economic security and romantic love**

“It [the relationship between Sa and her Swedish husband] started with money, [I want because] I [Sa] needed to support my two children and to pay back a loan. I could not lose my house [as collateral]… It ended up with ‘love’.”

Sa, who had been living with a Swedish pensioner named Sven since 1999, gave me this thoughtful response when I asked what motivated her to marry him, how she saw her relationship and on what foundation it was built. At a moment during our conversation, after much thought Sa mentioned that she had experienced ‘real love’, though she admitted that she had told herself not to fall in love again after having gone through a terrible time when living with her ex-husband. The story about her relationship with Sven provides an explanation of her sentiments. It also indicates what inspired her to make contact with a Western man, which reflects a variety of factors and conditions that combined and influenced her decision.

**Narrative 3.1: It’s not just about romantic love and money.**

Sa (43), a divorced mother with two adult sons, met Sven (70), a divorced father with three adult children, during his vacation at Pattaya, where their relationship was initiated and blossomed. They lived together for almost two years in Pattaya before moving to Nadokmai in 2003. The couple decided to settle in Thailand and bought a house in the village where they lived until recently. Sven rarely returned to his home country. He planned to live in the village with his wife for good.

Sa decided to leave Nadokmai for Pattaya after her ex-husband left her with a large amount of debt and two sons to support. In order to pay for an overseas employment contract for the husband, Sa had put her house up as collateral to get a loan. The first contract went well; she was satisfied with the earnings. She then supported him when he decided to apply for another
contract. However, this time things went wrong. Sa recalled, “He did not send money home. When I phoned him he said that he did not have a job. Then, I asked him to return home if he could not find a job. But he did not…Whenever I asked him to send money, he always told me that he did not have money because he had no job…It was not just the loan; I had to eat, feed our sons, and pay for their school…He did not care what happened to me and our children. He did not care whether our house would be taken. He left me to face the problems all alone.” Although Sa worked very hard, she could not make ends meet. Paying off the large debt to keep the house was much more than she could manage. She decided to follow her friend to Pattaya and work at a bar. During her second month there, she met Sven.

After a week of living together, Sven asked Sa to stop working and marry him, but she refused. “It was too soon. I did not know anything about him; he did not know enough about me either.” They kept their relationship while Sa continued working at the bar until her three-month contract was over. She stopped working and lived with Sven. While living together in Pattaya, once Sa got sick and Sven took good care of her, which impressed her very much. “I truly appreciated what he did. I never received this kind of concern and care from my ex-husband, my parents and siblings…He always took good care of me when I was sick.” Sa emphasized this point as a part of the reason why she continued her relationship with Sven.

Like other couples, they sometimes fought and quarreled. Living in Pattaya, conflicts were often initiated by distrust and misunderstanding based primarily on gossips about Sa’s previous marriage among her friends working at the bar. The fact was that Sa had not yet officially divorced her first husband when she was living with Sven at Pattaya. This made him feel insecure about her previous relationship. After moving to Nadokmai, they were confronted by a new set of situations. In particular, the frequent requests for financial support they received from Sa’s relatives put a lot of pressure on the couple. Sa mentioned that Sven often wondered whether these people worked hard enough to help themselves. They should try to stand on their own feet, he said. Being the go-between for her husband and her relatives, Sa often became frustrated. She said, “I learned that money does not always bring happiness.” However, the couple managed to help as much as they could, although they were not able to respond to all requests and their support did not always meet the relatives’ expectations. When talking about this, Sven said in earnest that he realized how important it was for his wife to help her relatives, but it was not possible to support everyone. He truly admired her for the way she handle the situation.
Living together for 10 years and sharing both social pressure and happiness, Sa concluded that she experienced ‘real love’ (raktae). It developed on the basis of caring, understanding, helping each other and trust. She admitted that at the beginning she did not feel much affection for Sven. Undoubtedly, she felt sympathy for him since he was just separated from his former wife when they met. Being together, her passion gradually developed. She appreciated the financial responsibility Sven showed to her. He also got along with her siblings and showed kindness to her parents.

Sven stated that he found Sa attractive; that is why he asked her to marry soon after he met her. Living together, Sa always took good care of him. In the past few years he had health problems; her care and emotional support were particularly important to him. He said, “I cannot imagine how I can live without her…without her I would die.” Sven also mentioned that Sa was good in managing the household budget. She always planned ahead, especially when large amounts were at stake. She knew how to deal with her relatives’ demands effectively, managing to explain why she could or could not help them and why she could not support them as much as they expected.

This story highlights the various motivations influencing Sa and Sven to opt for marriage. Although economic reasons did play a part, their relationship was built on diverse factors. Sa’s appreciation of Sven’s care, especially while she was sick, his support allowing her to fulfill familial obligations as a mother and daughter and his good relations with her children and family had all influenced her decision to continue her relationship and eventually marry him. Similarly, Sven highly appreciated the physical and emotional support Sa gave him. This was totally lacking in his previous marriage. Sven mentioned that his ex-wife did what she wanted to and he did not expect proper care-taking by her. She was also quite demanding, especially with regard to financial matters. When he could not meet her demands, the relationship ended. His life with Sa was totally different and he was very happy with his second marriage.

The gendered stereotype of Asian women, including Thai women, as being committed to the traditional role of wife and devoted to family values, as discussed in the previous section, played a part here. This image is fostered through the experiences of Western men, like Sven, who had received ‘good’ care from their wives, as well as the perceptions of local women who considered their care-taking as reciprocal support to their husbands. This gender stereotype became a part of Western men’s motivation to meet and
marry Thai women. When I asked Thomas, an English man living in the village with his current Thai wife — his previous two marriages involved an English woman and a Thai woman — what motivates a Western man to marry a Thai woman, he said, “Let me tell you this. If a farang man gets home after work and he tells his wife, ‘I have a headache. I do not feel well,’ his farang wife will say: ‘There’s a bottle of pills on the shelf; go and get it.’ But his Thai wife will give him the pills with a glass of water…Thai women know how to take care of their husbands.” This is the image of Thai (and Asian) women in Western men’s minds; it influences their marriage choices.

Indeed, Thai women are appreciated for taking good care of their husbands (either Western or local men) and such care could become a motivation contributing to the logics of desire influencing marital relations and marriage decisions, as Sa’s case demonstrates. However an image of care provider is more associated with females than males. This image is particularly prevalent for Asian women as compared to Western women.

Physical attraction also plays an important role. The appeal of Asian women as typically petite, with a delicate bone structure and hairless skin is viewed as feminine. In her study of British male tourists in Pattaya, Davidson reveals that these features are attractive to Western men, as a respondent told her, “They’re all like film stars or models, aren’t they? It’s the hair and the skin, and they’re mostly always petite, you know, slim and small” (Davidson 1995:55). These men also romanticized Thai women as affectionate, respectable, innocent, loyal and natural. In addition, they were convinced that Thai women prefer white men and that the women themselves would like to be white. The sentiments of Western men in this regard, as well as Sven’s and Thomas’s experiences, suggest that even though romantic love is ideally central to marriage in the Western culture, it appears that it is not the sole basis on which their decision to engage in intimate relations were based upon.

In regard to Thai women, as with Sa, many mia farang admitted that their intimate relations did not begin with romantic love, but passion only came into play at the later stages of their relationships. Jin (47), a women living in a village next to Nadokmai who married a German man and had lived in Germany for 10 years, made the point that she could not imagine how husbands and wives, whether they are local or mixed couples, could live together for years without passionate ties. Jin perceived these marriages as conjugal relations based on reciprocal support, trust, care and sexuality in which emotional attachment and passionate ties develop. She saw the care taking and emotional support women provided to their husbands as a way to reciprocate the husband’s responsibility as
providers. During my time with Jin, I observed the considerable attention and care she gave to her husband. When I mentioned this to her, Jin said that her husband was good to her. He also helped Jin’s sister finish building her house and sometimes provided her family with financial help. Having lived together for more than 10 years, Jin admitted that she developed passion and emotional ties (rak lae phukphan) with her husband, though her relationship did not start with romantic love.

Another woman who argued that women did not marry Western men solely for economic reasons is Rung (32), a divorced mother with two children, aged ten and five. Rung lived with her Swedish partner for almost four years. Like Sa, Rung confessed that her relationship started with the need for money as she had to support her children after her relationship with her ex-partner had ended. Yet, Rung affirmed that she would not have stayed with her Swedish partner for four years if she had not had passion and had not cared for him. If she had only married for money, then her husband would not have been a good choice. In her view, he was not a rich man. However, he had provided an allowance to support her children. Rung appreciated it. “Even though it [the allowance] is not much, it ensures that my children have enough food to eat and that I can pay for their education. Their real father [her local partner] has never given his own children anything…ever, since we separated.”

Interestingly, when these women talked about passion or ‘love,’ they related it to care, trust and reciprocal support – which also involved financial support from their husbands. Sa spoke of her ‘real love’ in these terms. This meaning is different from the various definitions given to romantic love by people of diverse backgrounds, as indicated in Lindholm’s work mentioned earlier, which put emphasis on an individual’s happiness and fulfillment. The descriptions provided include such expressions as “love is blind”, “love overwhelms”, “a life without love is not worth living”, “marriage should be for love alone, and anything less is worthless and a sham” (Lindholm 2006: 5). These diverse sayings reflect different meanings of love cross-culturally.

Indeed, the distinction of cultural meanings of love has shaped the differences in interpreting money in relation to love. In his introduction of a volume of love letters written by tourist men to Bangkok bar girls, Yos (1992a) points out that in Western societies love and money are considered as mutually exclusive whereas in Thai society these two are rather overlapped. He posits that “the money itself cannot be distinguished between signs of affection, tender caring and love itself. Mutual or material dependence frequently engenders some sort of an emotional attachment on the part of the girl herself”
Logics of Desire and Transnational Marriage Practices

Although the women may enter into relations with Western men for economic reasons, while maintaining the relationships emotional attachment and desires may develop and play an important role in their relationships. This makes the line between money and love become blurred. It is on this basis that Sa, Jin, Rung and other mia farang in Nadokmai rationalized their marital relations with their Western partners.

The above discussion deals with diverse factors shaping the choices and decisions of both women and men in transnational marriage. The following section explores another aspect of this complex process, namely women’s perceptions of local males and their images of Western men – aspects that also contribute to the logics of desire encouraging village women to look for Western partners.

Local male image, gender imagination and the logics of desire

“I want a good man who is generous and warm-hearted…who is responsible for his family, accepts and supports my children and cares for my parents as well...My previous relationship [with a local man] taught me how life would be if the man [the partner] does not take family seriously.”

This is what Nisa told me when I asked her what kind of man she was looking for and what motivated her to eventually decide to make her choice and live with her Danish partner since 2004. Nisa’s life story represents the experiences of many mia farang in Nadokmai who had gone through rough times with a Thai partner. These women shared similar backgrounds with Nisa as to the conditions contributing to the termination of their previous relationships.

Narrative 3.2: “I look for a man who is responsible for the family”

Nisa (33) a divorced mother with a daughter (7), met Carsten, a Danish man in his early fifties during his vacation at Phuket in 2004. After their first interaction, he followed Nisa to Nadokmai. They agreed to continue their relationship and kept communicating when he returned to his country. Carsten worked for his parents’ construction company. He managed to come and stay with Nisa and the children in the village two or three times every year. He also called via the internet to talk with them every day. They had a son (2) who stayed with Nisa in Nadokmai.
Nisa graduated from a vocational college and went to Bangkok to work at a textile factory where she met her ex-partner, a Thai man who was the father of her daughter. She lived with him from 1997-2002. The relationship went well until she found out that he was seeing another woman. Conflicts occurred often and they fought frequently. The situation became worse when she got pregnant and he did not take care of her at all. Nisa finally left him and her job and returned to her parents in the village. She wanted to make sure that she could receive help and support during and after the delivery of her baby. “I was not wrong, he did not show up. I struggled and supported myself all alone,” Nisa said. She had brought up her daughter without any support from her husband. At one point, he asked Nisa for a reconciliation, but she did not want to go through the same situation again. As she said, “Thai men do not take any responsibility for the family and their children. What I went through could neither be corrected nor was there anything that could make me feel better [about Thai men]…Believe me, many women [mia farang] have the same experiences.”

To initiate connections with Western men, Nisa used a match-making service in the village. She got several contacts, but none worked out. Through long-distance communication, it was difficult to know whether the information given her was reliable or not. After nine months of using the service, she decided to adopt a different strategy. Nisa followed a village woman to Phuket and got a job at the same bar. In the second week, she met Carsten and stayed with him during his time at Phuket. They got along well. Then Nisa invited him to come and meet her daughter and parents in the village. He stayed at her house for a few days before returning to Denmark. Before leaving, he asked Nisa not to return to work at Phuket. He sent a regular allowance to take care of her and her daughter’s living expenses. He came to stay with her in Nadokmai whenever possible; he also paid for her trips to visit him in Denmark. Nisa had been there three times.

The couple renovated the house in Nadokmai where Nisa lived with her parents and children. Everyone had a room, and there was a playground for the children as well. Nisa’s daughter went to a private school in Udon. The girl commuted by minibus everyday; it took almost three hours for her to travel between home and school. In 2010, Nisa decided to move to Udon when her son reached pre-school age. She believed that private schools in the town provided better education than village schools. In May 2009 when I met Nisa before closing my fieldwork, she was living with her two children in a rented house in the town close to their children’s schools. With
financial support from Carsten, Nisa was able to fulfill her desire to educate her children in the best possible way.

Later on Nisa wanted to move to Denmark so that her children could have their education there. In such case, she would have to take care of the children alone if Carsten were to travel to work in other cities or other countries. She discussed this with him and they decided to wait until the children, especially their son, became older and could take care of themselves. Nisa said that thus far Carsten took the family seriously. He knew that she did not work and spent her time taking care of the children. He kept sending allowances regularly. What mattered most to him was the children’s well-being. He called almost every day via the internet. Both his son and stepdaughter did not feel that their father was a stranger as they could regularly talk and see him via the internet. He always tried to plan his visits to the village to coincide with the children’s birthdays. If he could not make it, he never failed to give them a gift and call them on their birthdays. Nisa said that as the father of her son and her husband Carsten did not disappoint her, even though they sometimes encountered conflicts and mistrust similar to those of other transnational couples.66

The story highlights Nísa’s experiences with her ex-Thai partner and her current Danish husband, setting them apart in terms of reliability and responsibility as husbands and fathers. Nisa’s Thai partner failed in carrying out his responsibility as a family provider and his sexual promiscuity was deplorable. Her experiences were similar to those of Sa, Rung, Mai, Jit and many other mia farang in Nadokmai whose marriages were fraught with crises and eventually broke up. Other women blamed their marital troubles on their husbands’ gambling and alcohol addictions. These women’s accounts conveyed an image of local men as ‘irresponsible’ towards their families (mai rappitchop khrop khrua), which became a factor encouraging and legitimizing women’s involvement in transnational marriage. Lita, a local school teacher, whose life story will be presented in the following section, talked about this image as a part of her inspiration to look for a relationship with a Western man. Lita stated that “Most Thai men [in rural villages in particular] spend their earnings on gambling, drinking and enjoying other women. They do not support their families (mai liang khrop khrua).…The family is not their priority. Women have to accept these male behaviors.” As a result, in Lita’s view, transnational marriage became an

66The issues of conflict and mistrust and how they influence relationships among mixed couples, including the case of Nisa and her husband, will be explored in Chapter Five.
alternative choice for women whose relationships were damaged beyond repair as well as for those who did not want to find themselves in such conditions.

While village men were aware of the poor image about themselves, they considered such male behaviors as reactions to pressures created by depressing conditions in their work environment such as failures in agriculture production and other occupational setbacks, not to mention loneliness and home sickness while living and working far away from home. Also when village men talked about male drinking, gambling and philandering behaviors they considered these as ‘normal things’ (*pen rueang thammada*) that distinguished their masculinity. In contrast, women regarded these as manifestations of male irresponsibility towards their families. A close look at different views on gender relations in Thai society offers a more nuanced understanding of the marital problems faced by local women.

The discussion of gender in the Introduction deals with various factors that shape the roles and expectations of women and men in Thai society. Gender differentiations are reinforced through cultural norms and institutionalized through socialization processes. In general, boys are given much more freedom than girls, who are given more household tasks and are subjected to more severe supervision in terms of spatial mobility and sexual activities. Young men are encouraged to socialize, to drink alcohol and to acquire sexual experience. Male peer group ‘outings’ (*thiao*) provide opportunities for getting together, drinking alcohol, visiting various entertainment locations with the possibility of seeking out prostitutes. These behaviors are seen as constituting masculinity. Men’s sexuality is seen as a common way for physical release and relaxation (Akin 1984; Chanpen et al. 1999; Pramualratana 1992). Traditionally, polygamous relationships were commonly accepted, especially among upper class men. Normally, the relationships involved material support husbands provided for their wives. In recent times, polygamy usually occurs in the form of a ‘minor wife’ (*mia noi*) and concubinage (Chanpen et al. 1999; Bencha 1992). In her study of love and marriage in Thai society in the twentieth century, Sumalee Bumroongsook (1995: 106-109) describes the negative public opinion about minor wives. Those who have a minor wife make an effort to hide the relationship. Her study also shows that minor wives among the middle and lower classes have become more prevalent. From this perspective, such male behaviors as philandering, drinking as well as gambling are very much embedded in the social fabric of Thai society. The ways in which these behaviors were explained in relation to pressure the men faced, generated by occupational failure, is only a part of the story.
In addition, the image of local men as ‘irresponsible’ in family matters as experienced by mia farang is also rooted in the cultural idea concerning the role of husbands as breadwinners and wives as homemakers as mentioned before. The study, done by John Knodel et al. (1999), discussing how ‘good spouses’ are defined by married Thai women and men underlies this cultural norm. Women expect that a ‘good husband’ first and foremost should be able to provide adequate support to his family, both financially and emotionally. Men for their part expect their wives to be good housewives and good mothers and understand their need to socialize with male friends. Some men are of the view that a wife should help in contributing to household income as well.

In contrast to a rather negative representation of local men, women imagine Western men to be good family men, who tend to please – and do things together with – their wives, who are not likely to sleep around and become involved in extramarital affairs, and who are more reliable providers. For women in Nadokmai, these images were reinforced by perceptions of how mia farang and their partners lived their lives. A local female school teacher in her late thirties, who married a local man, said that normally Thai men try to please their women during the courtship period; but after marrying or living together they are less concerned about them. Moreover, local husbands and wives are not likely to participate in the same activities: husbands would go out with their male friends, while wives join their female peers or stay at home to take care of the children. In contrast, mixed marriage couples in the village display a different set of behaviors. They would do things together more often, such as eating out, joining communal activities and shopping. Some women in the village perceived the kind of husband-wife relations displayed by mixed couples as the ideal family lifestyle they fantasized about. Both the imaginations about Western men and Western family relations fed into women’s motivation in seeking transnational marriage. Motivations such as improving material resources that mia farang and their parents obtained, and an assumption about ‘better-off Westerners’ – an issue I shall explore in Chapter Five – also complicated the logics of desire compelling women to look for a Western partner.

Interestingly, while many male villagers accepted that the image of local men as irresponsible people who did not take their family’s welfare seriously was relevant, they did not consider it as a factor that turned women away from local men, making them seek transnational marriage. Rather, these men often claimed that the desire of the women and of their parents to obtain economic wealth were a key motivation in seeking transnational marriages.
Local norms and preferences associated with marriage as well as fantasies about modernity and Western societies were also a part of the complex sets of motivations that made women to turn to Western men.

**Local norms and fantasies about modernity**

“It is not easy for a woman of my age [37 years old] living and working in a rural community to find a ‘local suitable match’ who is single and more or less has a similar education and career background, sharing a similar lifestyle and willing to take responsibility for his family.”

These are the words of Lita, a teacher from a relatively well-to-do background who married a man from the UK when we talked about the current popularity of transnational marriages. In her view, economic incentives and the image of local males as ‘irresponsible’ were the primary motivations encouraging women to marry Western partners. However, for her, material resources were less important in the search for a local suitor, due to her background. The limitation of eligible marriage choices Lita experienced was shared by other *mia farang* in the village who had similar social and economic backgrounds and who were more or less in the same age range. Lita’s life story reflects the complexity of a nuanced picture of logics of desire shaping women’s decisions to marry and particularly encouraging them to engage in transnational marriage.

**Narrative 3.3: A local ‘suitable partner’ is not easy to find**

In May 2008, after four years of communicating through internet chatting, Lita married Peter (42), an English man who worked for a land development company in his country. Lita taught at a local primary school in a village next to Nadokmai for more than ten years. In 2009, she left her secure job and her parents to live with Peter. Before they got to know each other, Peter had a relationship with an English woman and later with a Thai woman while Lita remained single.

To provide a comprehensive picture of Lita’s life story, I turn to her family background described earlier in Chapter Two. Lita was born into a ‘teacher family’ where both parents and three daughters were all teachers. Both of her sisters married Thai men and lived with their families elsewhere; only Lita stayed with her parents in the village. Lita’s parents were on pension. Her father spent his time taking care of 25 rai of farm land where various
fruit and rubber trees were grown. In addition, the family owned 20 rai of paddy land which they rented out. They lived in a spacious house on a large piece of land in the center of the village. As a teacher in a public school, Lita earned a regular income and plus other government benefits. Her parents also received benefits, such as free health care on top of their pension. Considering their large land holdings and respectable teaching positions, Lita’s family was located at the top the village hierarchy.

In 1997, a few years after she began her teaching career, her relatives urged her to see a man working at a local health center as a marriage prospect, but Lita did not like the idea. “He was not the right one. I did not like him,” Lita said. Later on, she was introduced to another man who worked at a local government office. After a while, she found out that he was having a relation with a young woman working at the same office; she then refused to see him again and ended the relationship. Afterwards, Lita did not see any man. Her sentiment (in the beginning of this section) is typical of the problem of finding a suitable partner in such a rural setting.

Working with an American volunteer at her school, Lita was encouraged to improve her English ability, through chatting via the internet. This was how her relationship with Peter started. “We chatted almost every day for years.” They told each other about their families. They talked about day-to-day activities. “He [Peter] told me about his working trips to various places, both in the UK and other European countries…Sometimes, we exchanged ideas about marriage between Thai women and farang men. Then, he sent me a book about Thai-Farang marriage. We often talked about the issues from the book.” In 2005, Peter came to meet Lita in Nadokmai and the following year she went to visit him in the UK for a month. She received a warm welcome from his parents.

In 2007, Peter came to Nadokmai again and asked Lita to marry him. They married the following year. When asked why she decided to marry, Lita said, “We got along well. We had several similarities which we could always share…Before we met for the first time; he told me that he would not be surprised if I found his clothes out-of-fashion. He was not a stylish kind of person. I told him not to expect me to wear a tank top either. The way he dressed did not bother me, but I did not ask how he felt about mine.”

In addition, Peter also told Lita that he was not a rich man, but he could take care of her. “We talked about his concern in this regard a few times, as he brought it up. I told him that it does not matter to me.”
Leaving home to live in the UK was a source of anxiety for both Lita and her parents. Her mother was concerned about Lita giving up her secure job and leaving her to live so far away from home. Lita had foreseen her life in the UK as a full time housewife, at least during the first few years. “Peter told me not to worry [to stay home with no job], he can take care of me. But I don’t want to be a housewife for the rest of my life…I certainly will improve my English and find a job.”

Obviously, Lita’s life story challenges the normative view that women from developing countries marry men from affluent countries solely because of economic incentives. Her economic and social background was rather secure. Her motivations to marry a Western man had less to do with economic gain. The limitation of marriage choices, which played a key role in guiding her to look for a Western partner, draws on the Thai cultural norm of spouse selection in which women are expected to marry a man of similar or higher socio-economic and educational background (Sumalee 1995). Following this cultural script, local marriage choices for educated women of Lita’s age and who are from a relatively affluent background are rather limited. This limitation in finding a suitable spouse locally was also experienced by Kanda (36), a nurse who was studying for a Master’s Degree during the time of my field work, as well as other women who remained single until their thirties. In Nadokmai, girls generally marry a few years after finishing nine-year secondary school, by the time they are in their early twenties or younger. This observation about marriage conforms to data from a national population survey indicating that most girls in rural areas marry by their early twenties.67 Those who continue their education may marry at an older age. After their thirties, marriage possibilities for women greatly decline. Obtaining a relatively high education and having good social economic background, like Lita and Kanda, might put more pressure on women.

It is worth noting that while it was relatively difficult for rural women in their thirties to find a man they consider to be the right and proper partner, there was also a single young woman – a school teacher in her early twenties – who stated categorically that marrying a local man was inconceivable for her. She rather wanted to marry a farang man. Her rejection of local men had much to do with her perception of local men as

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67 According to the survey in 1984, the average age at marriage of men and women in rural and urban areas were 24.5 and 22.4 years, respectively. In rural areas, women marry approximately 3.5 years earlier than in urban areas (Bencha 1992:27).
irresponsible heads of family who failed in local gender roles; this case will be discussed further in Chapter Six. This young teacher’s attitude shows the multiplicity of logics of desire propelling women to engage in the current phenomenon of transnational marriage.

Another aspect restricting local marriage opportunities for women, specifically those who were widowed or divorced, was the high value of chastity (and presumed virginity) attached to young womanhood. Married women were considered less desirable as suitable spouses. As shown in the previous chapter, two-thirds of the 159 mia frang in the village were divorced from a former Thai partner before marrying a Western husband, and half of these women had children from their previous relationships to support after the divorce. This situation seemed to leave them with little chance of remarrying a ‘decent’ Thai man. Transnational marriage provided a way out for these women.

Furthermore, some women mentioned their preference for a Thai-Western mixed child (luk krueng) as a part of their motivations to marry farang. Khwan (27), a dental assistant working at Pattaya who had just divorced her English husband after three years of marriage, said: “If I have children, I want a cute child with an upright nose like a Westerner’s, not mine. It is my inferiority complex, really...When studying sex education at school, I learned that if I marry an Asian man, I would never get a child with a prominent nose. I have kept thinking about this [prominent nose].” Based on her preference, Khwan said that “farang men look attractive and they are smart as well.” Although her marriage did not work out, Khwan’s desire to have luk krueng did not change. She talked about these children as good-looking and attractive. They represented ‘modernity’ (khwam thansamai). They could also become an actor or actress. Kanda shared Khwan’s passion for luk krueng which, in part, motivated her to seek connections with Western men. With her education background, Kanda, like Lita, had the ability to use internet for chatting with Western men and via this channel, she made a connection to her husband-to-be, an English man who had a PhD in information technology. After their first contact he visited her in Thailand very two or three months. This lasted for three years until they eventually got married at the end of 2009.

Both Khwan’s and Kanda’s desire to have luk krueng has to do with Thai’s passion about these children as they have acquired a privileged place in society, particularly in the media. Since the 1990s, luk krueng have become a Thai public fascination. They are popular as actors and actresses, singers, supermodels, beauty pageant contestants and social celebrities (Reynolds 1999: 270-271). These new-found images contrast sharply with past perceptions of often marginalized ‘mixed blood’ children, especially Thai-
American luk krueng of the Vietnam War era. Weisman (2000) notes that these luk krueng were often a reminder of past failures of Thai authorities in maintaining the state’s control over its socio-economic and political development as well as female sexuality. Women who engaged in relationships with American servicemen were taking their sexuality in their own hands. Thai men were no longer “in charge of the preservation of Thai women’s “good” image. Rather, the thousands of Thai women who entered into unmediated (e.g. by fathers or other male relatives) sexual relationships with American military men were taking control of their own sexuality and images” (Weisman 2000:8).

The construction by the Thai media of luk krueng as being self-confident, sophisticated, successful, beautiful and modern reflects shifting social attitudes in Thai society and in particular the Thai notion of beauty, being a part and parcel of the commodification of beauty in Thai popular culture (Reynolds 1999; Van Esterik 2000). According to Weisman (2000: 7-9), the current popularity of commodified luk krueng images represents a reassertion of Thai control over female sexuality during another period of social and economic transformation.

Besides the current preference of luk krueng, which is closely linked to ideas of modernity, women also imagined modern Western societies through various media which had reinforced the popularity of the current transnational marriages. Khwan, for instance, said, “I like the modern life styles and technologies I have seen in Hollywood movies since I was a young girl”. Khwan experienced the ‘modern life’ while living in the UK with her ex-husband. This reinforced her ideas about Western society. She admitted that her imaginations about the modernity of Western societies and her preference of luk krueng had a great deal in encouraging her to apply for a job in Pattaya, where there were more possibilities to meet with Westerners. Other women mentioned the comfortable lives and family relations of mixed couples in the village as a part of their fantasies about Western ways of life, as discussed earlier on. Imaginations about modernity and the local norms and practices regarding marriage combined and motivated women to make up their minds to go for a Western husband rather than a local one.

Thus far, the life stories and accounts from mia farang that I have discussed represent diverse sets of motivations. For women like Lita, Kanda and Khwan, their inspirations had less to do with material incentive whereas this factor weighs more heavily for other women. The associations between logics of desire and women’s backgrounds become more nuanced if one takes the notion of ‘gendered geographies of power’ (Mahler and Pessar 2001) into account. According to this notion, gender operates on multiple social
scales – e.g. the body, the family and the state. In particular, it emphasizes ‘social locations’ of persons in shaping their perceptions, motivations and practices. The term ‘social locations’ refers to a “person’s positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based and other socially stratifying factors” (Mahler and Pessar 2001: 445-446). In addition to social location, this concept also stresses that people’s agency – associated with initiative and such cognitive processes as imagining, planning and strategizing – enables them to initiate changes and engage in transnational possibilities. In connection with this, the variation of women’s backgrounds and characteristics constitute their ‘social locations,’ which shape their logics of desire and decisions to opt for marriage (as well as their marital experiences). Single educated women with prestigious economic and social status may not be motivated by economic gain. Rather they are driven by other factors, such as restrictive local norms and practices relating to gender, age at marriage and preferences associated with modernity, as in the cases of Lita, Kanda and Khwan. In contrast, less-educated women from relatively poorer households, whose previous marital relationship failed and who had to shoulder the burden of raising children, would be more appreciative of material incentives. However, the primary inspiration influencing women’s desire and decision to look for a Western partner, which was shared among most mia farang and village women who attempted to initiate this type of transnational connection, regardless of their ‘social locations,’ was the image of local men as irresponsible persons who failed to fulfill familial duties.

In my earlier discussion, I have briefly addressed Western partners’ perspectives regarding the images of Thai (and Asian) women which feed into their motivations in seeking relationships with Thai women. In the following section, based on my own research and available literature, I shall elaborate further on these perspectives, taking into account experiences, perceptions and practical considerations of Western men.

**Gendered stereotypes of Thai (and Asian) women and feminist ideas**

Existing studies connect Western men’s desires to marry Asian women with various motivating factors. These include cultures associated with gendered images and perceptions of modernity and traditions (Constable 2005), social and cultural norms and ideas about marriage in both women’s and men’s societies (Panittee 2009) and men’s Orientalizing fantasies about Asian women (Suriya and Pattana 2007). In addition, Ratana (2005) looks at cross-cultural marriages as a way in which both men and women – the
lonely Western men, mostly blue collar workers, and rural poor Thai women – become empowering to each other in regaining their denied backgrounds and identities at home. This view is interesting and is valid to a certain extent. Recent works, however, present a range of backgrounds of Thai women and Western men engaged in this type of marital relations. For example, Panitee’s work (2009) shows that the current Thai woman-Dutch man marriages involve not only rural poor women, but also women with good socio-economic and education backgrounds, some of them coming from urban-middle class families. Data from my own field work share similar trends, showing a substantial number (24.6 percent) of Western partners engaged in professional work and running own businesses. In terms of age, about half of Western husbands (48.9 percent) were younger than 50 years old (see Table 1 and 5, Appendix 2). The data shows a fairly good number of Western partners who had ‘good’ occupations and who were in the middle age.

While acknowledging the various ways in which Asian woman-Western man marriage was conceptualized in existing literature, I propose to look at these marriages from a different angle. I want to show how gendered stereotypes of Thai (and Asian) women on the one hand, and gender relations in Western societies influenced by feminist ideas on the other, combine and motivate Western men to opt for marriage and how this empowers them.

Many of the Western men I spoke with mentioned gendered stereotypes of Thai women, emphasizing an attachment to traditional gender roles and family values as a part of their motivation to marry a Thai wife. No doubt their response was guided by common images of Thai and other Asian women as portrayed in the popular media. These were reinforced by stories gleaned from the experiences of their friends who married Thai women as well as those – like the case of Sven and Thomas mentioned earlier – who went through different experiences of marriage in their home country and marriage with a Thai wife. The behavioral patterns of women in their home country and those in Thailand (and other Asian countries as well) must have induced these men to look elsewhere for relationships developed along different lines of gender relations than those they had experienced previously. Some viewed the failure of their previous marital relations as having something to do with the greater degree of women’s rights in their own home country compared to other parts of the world. Mike’s account below illustrates how these perceived differences in ideas and practices of gender caused his first marriage to fail.

Mike (42), an English man who lived with his wife and a new born daughter in a village next to Nadokmai, recounted that his first marriage came to an end because both he
and his ex-wife worked too hard and hardly had enough time for each other. They rarely went out or did things together. Sometimes, they did not see each other for many days. Although they lived in the same house, they were estranged to each other. They had different lives and saw things differently. They fought often and eventually divorced. Mike stated that it was not necessary for his ex-wife to work so hard. With his computer science degree, he got a good and well-paid job. His earnings would allow both of them to live a more than comfortable life even if she had not worked. But “she worked as hard as I did. I could not change her; she did what she wanted to.” This is how Mike saw his failed marriage. He said that if his ex-wife did not work that hard, they would have had more time for each other and the marriage might not have broken up.

Despite his disappointment with his ex-wife and his failed marriage, Mike was well aware of women’s rights and feminist ideas in Western societies, which were far stronger than in Thailand and other Asian countries. Mike and other Western partners in Nadokmai I spoke with realized that they could not expect Western women to take care of them as well as they would get from Thai (and Asian) women, as these were (or were thought to be) more committed to traditional gender roles. This is why statements like “Thai women know how to take care of their husbands,” often came up when we talked about motivations of Western men to meet and marry a Thai woman.

As most women in Western societies are relatively more autonomous and independent, some Western men feel resentment as their attempt to establish relationship with women in their own home is often denied. Davidson’s work (1995), mentioned earlier, reveals that the male British tourists in Pattaya talked about their disappointment resulting from being rejected by white women; this was particularly painful for men who were lacking in economic power, physical attraction and/or social skills. As a British tourist put it:

English women are ‘hard work’, that going to discos in England is ‘a waste of time’… [T]he fact that ‘pretty’ English women know they are pretty and they demand the world (they want to marry you then soak you for every penny when they divorce you)...I’m 48, I’m balding, I’m not as trim as I was. Would a charming, beautiful, young woman want me in England? No. I’d have to accept a big, fat, ugly woman. That’s all I could get (Davidson 1995:53).

From her feminist standpoint, Davidson views this kind of misogynistic attitude as a sign of men losing their patriarchal power and upsetting their notion of masculinity. In contrast
to their experience with women in their own societies, the Western male tourists were appreciative of the ways in which they were treated by the local women they met at the tourist sites. Thomas, who lived in Pattaya for some time after divorcing his Thai wife, recalled that many of the Western men he knew at Pattaya were quite pleased with the attention and gestures of kindness they were treated by the girls working at the site. “Some told me that they felt loved. These men kept in contact with the girls. Some of them eventually got married.” This is the case of many mia farang in Nadokmai who met their husbands at the tourist sites. Certainly, there were countless relationships that did not flourish or result in a long-term commitment.

Within the transnational tourism settings, Cabezas (2004) suggests that one should look at how intimate relations between the tourists and the locals developed along blurred boundaries between love and money, between romance and work, and as a way for people to make sense of their own lives. In the case of the Caribbean, by eroding these boundaries, local women shape the conditions of subordination within the global economy. “They navigate the interstices of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized structures imposed by the transnational tourism industry and the state. For them, this offers the possibility of escaping brutal poverty, whether through love, friendship, companionship, or sex with tourists” (Cabezas 2004: I010). In addition to this, I argue that this process enables some Western men to exercise a type of masculinity that they are unable to do in their relationships with Western women in their own countries, as well as to fulfill their desire for relationships embracing traditional gender roles and family values, as in the cases of Mike, Sven, and Thomas as well as some male British tourists in Davidson’s study. In a sense, these men challenged by proxy gender relations and norms of their own societies.

Looking at how gendered stereotypes of Thai (and Asian) women and gender roles and relations in Western societies, influenced by feminist ideas, combine and affect marriage choices provides another means of revealing the complicated logics of desire fostering the current transnational marriages. The discussion throughout this chapter provides nuanced explanations challenging the normative perception that views these marriages in a dichotomy between romantic love and economic incentives. Another assumption commonly made about this type of marriage is related to the way in which it is labeled ‘global hypergamy’ (Constable 2005a). This assumption is heavily associated with an economic paradigm while downplaying other aspects and factors that complicate desires propelling women and men to opt for transnational marriage. In the following section, I shall explore this assumption.
A reverse pattern of gendered global mobility: A complexity of ‘global hypergamy’

In anthropological theories, hypergamy refers to a specific form of marriage in which women marry into families of a higher status than their own with respect to social, economic and educational background (Barfield 1997; Rose 2004). This notion implies that such marriages provide a means for the upward social mobility of a bride. The normative mobility of brides from less developed countries to wealthier ones fits well with the pattern of ‘global hypergamy’ – women ‘marry up’ and thus move up to a higher socio-economic location in the global hierarchy (Constable 2005a: 10).

No doubt this pattern has certain merits in explaining current transnational marriages. However, further investigation is needed on how and in what sense such marriage represents upward mobility and in accordance to what criteria. A growing body of literature on marriage migration indicates that the way in which mobility is considered upward or downward, by referring to the economic development of particular locations/nations, is problematic (Constable 2005a; Oxfeld 2005; Suzuki 2005; Thai 2008). In line with this observation, I draw attention to reverse migration flows within a global hierarchy, with an accompanying gendered pattern – Western men from countries with higher economic standards in the global scale move and settle in their wives’ communities/countries. Such changes reflect the complexities of ‘global hypergamy’. I contend that the reverse pattern is also influenced by uneven global economic development through a two-directional migration that presents both upward and downward mobilities in the global hierarchy.

The disparities of economic development and currency value between the countries of Western men and local women are perceived as a primary cause drawing women to marry and move to more affluent locations. This logic of analysis focuses only on the dominant directional mobility and ignores other undercurrents that move in the opposite direction. The life stories of mia farang such as Lita, Mon, Mia and Phin, who resettled in their husband’s countries after marriage, represent the dominant pattern of marriage mobility. Nevertheless, there is a substantial number of mia farang in Nadokmai who did not engage in international mobility (22.6 percent), but remained in the village or resided elsewhere in Thailand (see Table 3, Appendix 2). For these women, their husbands either resettled with them in their home village/country or made regular visits to stay with them.
for certain periods of the year. This marriage mobility represents the reverse pattern of ‘global hypergamy.’

In actual fact, reverse mobility began in Nadokmai almost three decades ago when Jit’s German husband settled in the village in 1981. The number of the Western partners living in the village has gradually increased since then. The data collected in 2008 indicate that among 25 mia farang living in the village, there were three whose husbands had permanently resettled in the village for almost ten years; and one of them had lived there for three years. The husbands of the remaining 21 mia farang worked in their home countries or elsewhere and regularly traveled to be with their wives (and children) like Nisa’s husband. The length of their stay in Thailand varied usually from several months to a few weeks. In addition, there were eleven mia farang from Nadokmai living with their husbands in such tourist sites as Pattaya, Samui, Phuket and Cha-am. Most of these farang had settled with their wives in Thailand for five to ten years already. During my fieldwork, I also met six other Western men living in nearby villages; four of them had lived with their wives for more than five years while the other two had stayed less than five years. The steadily growing number of mixed couples resettling in the wives’ home communities underlies the reverse migration pattern.

Most of the Western partners who permanently resettled in Thailand were retirees who received state or employment-related pension from their countries. The mixed couples enjoyed a higher standard of living than the locals due to fact that the husbands’ money was worth so much more in Thailand than in their own countries. This kind of lifestyle would not have been possible back home on account of their pensions. Some of these men had no intention of returning to their home countries. Sven, for instance, told me without any hesitation when I asked whether he planned to return to Sweden: “I do not see any reason why I should leave here [Nadokmai]…You know, in Sweden, when I go out on Fridays and have two beers and chips, I’ll be charged about 2,000 baht (US$ 59). Here, with 2,000 baht we [he and his wife] can eat the whole week.” From their experiences of living in the village and visiting various places in Thailand, even on a part-time basis, some of the Western partners had foreseen their permanent resettlement in Thailand after retirement. These men had built a house; some invested in establishing businesses. Mon and her Dutch husband invested a large amount of money in a fishing resort with accommodations and food services (see Chapter One, Narrative 1.4). Similarly Rung and her Swedish partner ran a restaurant in the village at the time of my fieldwork. Other mixed couples invested in restaurants, bars, beauty salons and internet cafés. All this points
to an increasing trend of Western men coming to live with their wives in Thailand, which reflects a reversal of the normative migration pattern in terms of gender and upward mobility in the global economic hierarchy.

On another score, transnational marriages, as experienced by most mia farang in Nadokmai, are hypergamous in the sense that such marriages allow these women to upscale their economic and social status, even without moving to Western countries. This improvement is well recognized in the village, a topic I shall explore in Chapter Five. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that marrying a man from affluent countries would be hypergamous. Hung Cam Thai (2008) illustrates a case of a well educated woman from an elite family in Vietnam that experienced ‘downward’ mobility when she married a Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) low-wage earner in the US. This case is part of a wider pattern of Vietnamese-Viet Kieu marriages. Nobue Suzuki (2005) recounts the story of a Filipino living with her Japanese husband in Japan. Her experience as a hardworking and isolated housewife in Japan greatly contrasted with the privileges she enjoyed in the Philippines on her visits to her natal family to which she made considerable financial contributions. These examples of women’s downward class mobility suggest that whether or not the marriages can be considered hypergamous or fit the pattern of ‘global hypergamy’ needs to be investigated in their contextual specificity.

By paying attention to the diversity of marriage mobility, this section reveals that global economic disparities lead to two-way flows of marriage migration, thereby engendering reversal mobility in terms of both gender patterns and economic locations with respect to the notion of ‘global hypergamy.’ This finding suggests that the concept needs to be extended in such a way that geographical mobility becomes more complexly defined.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I have shown a diverse range of motivations constituting the logics of desire that compels Isan women and their Western husbands to engage in the current transnational marriages. The multiplicity so far presented challenges the normative and dichotomous interpretation of these marriages with either material incentives or romantic love. Based on the results of my fieldwork, I concur with current scholarly works that the logics of desire driving these women and men to opt for transnational marriage is rather complex, transcending both economic motivations and intimate relationships. The
common assertion that women marry because of material benefits and that men marry for romantic love is a simplification and does not capture the multiplicity of factors constituting the logics of desire and shaping marriage decisions of the women and men concerned.

The story of Sa and Sven (Narrative 3.1) illustrates how money and ‘love’ interacted and motivated them to opt for marriage which, by the way, complicated their marital relations. In addition, physical attraction and mutual care also played a part influencing marriage decision and relations. The motivations inspiring women to turn to Western men also include such factors as the generally unflattering image of local men as irresponsible heads of family, the limitation of marriage choices influenced by local norms and practices regarding gender and marriage, and women’s perceptions of modernity. These motivations combine and constitute the logics of desire turning Isan women to Western men. The ways in which these factors come together take various forms and the variations are related to ‘social locations’ of women. Nonetheless, the image of Thai men’s irresponsibility in family matters has been shared among women in Nadokmai regardless of their social economic circumstances. As for Western partners, their marriage choices are shaped by a gendered stereotyping of Thai (Asian) women associated with the role of home-making wives embracing traditional family values on the one hand and gender relations in Western societies influenced by feminist ideas on the other. These multiple factors reveal the complexity of the logics of desire motivating women and men to engage in transnational marriages.

The emerging marriage migration – both the ‘normal’ pattern of Thai women moving to their husbands’ countries and the reverse mobility with Western men moving to settle in their wives’ community/country – is engendered by global economic disparities. The reverse pattern represents a novel aspect of ‘global hypergamy’ seen from the lens of gender mobility and migration flows, adding another layer to the multiplicity of the current transnational marriages. However, this pattern has been largely ignored in scholarly research thus far. Both the multiple patterns of marriage migration and the diverse logics of desire challenge the common views in which transnational marriage has been perceived. These findings call for attention to the complexity of the transnational marriage phenomenon rather than focusing exclusively on the normative patterns. In the following chapter, I take one step further and focus on how women materialize their desires to become wives of Western men.
On Pattaya beach in the late morning of November 15, 2008, while I was taking a look at a Thai-English conversation book, a German tourist sitting next to me asked whether I could help him to communicate with a Thai girl named Tuk. He wanted to know the name and location of the bar where Tuk was working. Afterwards, I had a brief talk with Tuk; she told me that she was from Udon [but not from Nadokmai village]. Tuk started her work in Pattaya two weeks earlier after an absence of almost five years. A few days later, we met for a longer conversation.

Tuk (39) was separated from her local husband, the father of her daughter and son, after living together for ten years. When she found out for the first time that her husband was involved with another woman, Tuk had been with him for almost three years. “I always hoped that he would change, but he did not,” she mentioned with disappointment. A year after separation, Tuk left her children with her mother and went to Pattaya in 2004. There she met an Englishman and had a relationship with him for a year. After a serious commitment had developed, Tuk returned to her village and her English partner sent her an allowance to cover living expenses for her and her children. He also visited her in Udon a few times a year. Their relationship ended in 2006 when her partner returned to his ex-wife. Tuk then began to sell cooked food in the village, but it was difficult to make ends meet. In 2008, she decided to return to Pattaya with the hope of establishing a relationship with a Western man again. When talking about her English ex-partner, she broke down “I was heart-broken when he told me we would not meet anymore.”

Tuk’s account about her search for a Western man follows a well-trodden path of many a woman in Nadokmai as well as in other parts of Isan. The aim of leaving home to work at tourist sites such as Pattaya was to find a long-term relationship that might eventually lead to marriage. Like Tuk, some women returned to tourist destinations several times before
they could establish a serious relationship with a male tourist. Tourist sites offered these women hope that their desire to become a wife could be realized. The lives of many women in Nadokmai were changed through associations taking roots at tourist locations, especially in Pattaya where the majority of the village women interviewed met their Western partners. Pattaya is the most well-known town in Thailand for the four S’s – Sun, Sea, Sand, and Sex – where tourists’ demand for commercial sex is readily met by a local supply (Enloe 2000). The site attracts foreign (male) tourists from various parts of the world. At the same time, it offers local women opportunities to attain their desire to create transnational connections that might result in a long-term commitment.

This chapter explores the daily lives of women in Pattaya and the strategies which they employed to initiate long-term transnational connections. I will show that the relationships between tourist men and local women (for the most part sex workers) are far more complex than the exchange of sex for money as associations between sex workers and clients are normally thought about and presented in the literature. In doing this, I draw on the recent studies focusing on transnational (sex) tourism. Such works – for example Brennan (2004), Cabezas (2004, 2009), Deborah Pruitt and Suzanne LaFont (1995) – point out the indistinct boundaries between romance and work as well as between economic transactions and intimate relations (both sexual and otherwise). Furthermore, this chapter also explores the ways in which women deal with the insecurities they experience in realizing their hope to become wives of farang, through engaging in ritual practices and consulting fortune tellers.

To begin with, it is important to note that not all mia farang initiated their transnational relationship at tourist sites. My findings indicate that the routes to transnational marriage that women in Nadokmai employed reflect similar results with the previous works indicating a range of pathways via which women, especially those with rural backgrounds, met their Western husbands (Buapan et al. 2005; NESDB 2004; Ratana 2005; Supawatanakorn et al. 2005). The first route is the informal networks that link mia farang to their families, kin and friends in their home villages. Through these networks local women were put in contact with prospective partners from Western countries. The second route for women to meet future partners was entertainment settings and tourist destinations such as bars, night clubs and massage parlors. The two surveys – NESDB (2004) and Supawatanakorn et al. (2005) – conducted in a number of rural villages in nine Northeastern provinces indicate that the majority of women who married Western men met
their husbands while working in the service industry in various tourist destinations. The third channel was through match-making and date arrangement services. This channel was commonly used by women in Nadokmai. However, it was not a major path via which mia farang in the village met their future husbands. Fourth, some women made connections with Western men through internet chat, although this channel was limited to those with a certain degree of computer and language skills. Lastly, some women took a risk and travelled abroad in order to find marriage prospects (Buapan et al. 2005).

In Nadokmai, although many women employed multiple routes, the majority of the mia farang met their future husbands in Pattaya and other tourist destinations including Samui and Phuket. At the time of my fieldwork, there was a substantial number of village women working in Pattaya with the hope of making transnational connections which might result in a long-term relationship. Thus, I focused on Pattaya as a ‘space of hope and opportunity’ allowing women to fulfill their desire to marry a Western partner. The choice of Pattaya was made not only because it was the major route taken by women from Nadokmai, but because this tourist site allowed me to observe at first hand the interactions between local women and male foreign tourists in their daily lives.

The following section discusses concepts related to sex work, dealing with the issues of victimization and agency and reflecting upon practices and perceptions of sex tourism in transnational contexts. The rest of the chapter examines the daily practices of women, how they reinvent themselves to fit in with the new working environment, including a change of bodily appearance and efforts to improve language skills. In particular I pay attention to the ways women weight up options in choosing long-term relationships, as well as how they cope with uncertainties through ritual practices and consulting fortune tellers. The meanings of such practices and their relatedness to discourses of gender, sexuality and agency are also addressed in relation to women’s position in the global hierarchical contexts.

68 The NESDB’s survey, conducted in a number of villages in five provinces, reveals that 54% of a total 219 rural women who had married Western men met their husbands while working in the service industry in various tourist destinations; while 20% established contact with a husband through networks of family and friends; 26% met their husbands through travel and personal contacts (NESDB 2004). Another survey conducted in four provinces indicates that 58% of 231 mia farang met their husbands through working at tourist sites; 38% through networks of friends and family; and four percent through match-making agents and self-introduction via the internet (Supawatanakorn et al. 2005).
Sexuality, money and intimate relations: Women in transnational encounters

Women working in the sex industry, as well as those marrying Western men, have been generally viewed from two different perspectives, victimization and agency.\(^\text{69}\) The first view is based on an assumption that all forms of sex work are oppressive and women engaging in this work are exploited by those managing the industry, mostly men, and portrays these women as victims who are forced to choose this occupation.\(^\text{70}\) This approach has been taken on by both feminists and activists working against trafficking of women and supporting the abolition of prostitution, such as the Coalition Against Trafficking of Women (CATW) (Doezema 1998; Gozdzia\k and Collett 2005; Murray1998). In the same vein, those engaging in transnational marriages are portrayed as passive actors who married to overcome economic difficulties. These women would reinforce a patriarchal institution that affects all women and gender relations. This view has been severely criticized for ignoring women’s agency, experiences and opinions (Constable 2003; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Nakamatsu 2005; Oxfeld 2005; Pataya 2002).

The second perspective emphasizes that involvement in the sex industry is freely chosen by many women. Sex work is an occupation and women working in this industry deserve the same rights as workers in other sectors (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). Some authors, for instance Wendy Chapkis, postulate that sex work can be viewed as a “potentially liberatory terrain for women” (1997:1). She goes further and advocates that “the position of the prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in a male sexual practice, but instead can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order” (Chapkis 1997:29-30). This view does not consider sex work as passive and oppressive and suggests that it should not be read simply as a confirmation of male domination.

This debate highlights the issues of victimization and agency on the one hand, and economic powerlessness and empowerment of women on the other. Each of these perspectives is relevant only when the phenomena in question is contextually investigated.

\(^{\text{69}}\)The term ‘sex industry’ as used in the literature includes everyone who works in the industry, including hotel room service staff, maids and receptionists, bar owners and sex workers. For example, Cabezas (2004) points out that the tourism industry has produced a new pattern of sexual labor in tourist settings where work, leisure, romance and marriage are interwoven. In this context, it is difficult to discern what counts as prostitution.

\(^{\text{70}}\)See Doezema (1998) for the discussion on voluntary versus forced dichotomy and how this framework needs to be rethought.
rather than assuming that all sex workers encounter the same situations and considering them as a homogenous group. Narratives of these women suggest a wide range of experiences within the industry. Whether they are beneficial or tragic depends largely on the contexts of their work and their experiences, which are highly divergent. Within the context of Pattaya, it would be a great mistake if women’s involvement in the sex industry was seen only as exploitative. The results of my fieldwork show that the experiences of the women in Pattaya are similar to accounts of women working in Sosua as provided by Brennan (2004). As mentioned before, Sosua is a transnational tourist town in the Dominican Republic where sex trade and transnational ties created through networks of individuals, capital and marriage-based migration circuits become a focal point of the place. According to Brennan (2004: 16), Sosua is a ‘sexscape’\(^\text{71}\) in which sex work is not simply a survival strategy, but an ‘advancement’ strategy for women to marry tourist men and to migrate off the island. As she notes:

> These women, local agents, caught in the web of global economic relations, try to take advantage (to the extent that they can) of the men—and their citizenship—who are in Sosua to take advantage of them. In Sosua’s bar scene, European sex tourists might see Dominican sex workers as exotic and erotic and pick out one woman over another in the crowd, as a commodity for their pleasure and control, but Dominican sex workers often see the men, too, as readily exploitable. The men all are potential dupes, essentially walking visas, who can help the women to leave the island—and poverty (Brennan 2004:24).

Obviously, the Dominican sex workers are not powerless victims of exploitation. These women are capable of making use of the situation they encountered and some of them are able to change their lives, either temporally or permanently. This portrayal contrasts with the stereotype of exploited and helpless women working in the sex industry. Instead it highlights women’s agency despite their marginality and vulnerability as sex workers. Rejecting the victimization perspective, Kamala Kempadoo points out that “[b]y underlining agency, resistances to, and contestations of, oppressive and exploitative structures are uncovered, and the versions and ideologies inscribed in women’s practices

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\(^{71}\)As with Appadurai’s framework of five ‘scapes’ (1996) and Constable’s notion of ‘marriage-scapes’ (2005a) addressed in the Introduction, Brennan (2004) uses the term ‘sexscape’ to signify fluidity of international capital and flow on a global scale. ‘Sexscapes’ according to Brennan, are defined according to three key characteristics: international travel from the developed to the developing world, consumption of paid sex, and inequality.
[are] made visible. Such analyses position sex workers as actors in the global arena, as persons capable of making choices and decisions that lead to transformations of consciousness and changes in everyday life” (Kempadoo 1998:9).

Based on my ethnographic field work, this chapter examines how women have used sex work as a vehicle to obtain their desired goal of marrying or having a long-term relationship with a Western man, the path, as discussed in the earlier chapters, allowing many women to walk away from the depressive situations of family crises as well as local norms and practices relating to gender and marriage. By taking their experiences and voices into account, I want to show that women involved in the sex industry and transnational marriage are both “active subjects and subjects of domination” (Kempadoo 1998:9).

The narratives and sentiments provided by women who have been engaged in the sex industry themselves, as documented by Dave Walker and Richard Ehrlich (1992), Derek Sharron (2006) and Michael Schemmann (2007), demonstrate that most of them knew what they were getting themselves in to. A collection of love letters that Western men from various parts of the world wrote to bar girls in Patpong, complied by Walker and Ehrlich (1992) highlight both women’s negotiations and resistances in the given situations, as well as their consciousness of the expected outcomes. The stories also reflect that working in the sex industry allows women to make connections with Western men, which in many cases led to long-term relationships. This strategy is in line with what Sherry Ortner (2006) calls ‘intentionality’, and it tends to fit a continuum of the ‘hard’ definitions of agency. Ortner defines ‘intentionality’ as “a wide range of states, both cognitive and emotional, and at various levels of consciousness, that are directed forward toward some end” (2006: 134). The ‘hard’ conceptions emphasize the strong role of fully conscious intentionality drawn upon desires and courses of action with intention playing a strong role, whereas the ‘soft’ definitions of agency do not emphasize intentionality as a central component.

Although I agree with a women’s agency approach, it does have a limitation. It focuses exclusively on an exchange between sex and money and does not pay attention to the possibilities of intermingling between sexuality, money and intimate relations that might lead to a long-term commitment between women in the sex industry and their clients. Indeed, a victimization perspective also has this limitation. This makes the existing mainstream perspectives inadequate to apply to the group of women I interviewed. Mia farang in Nadokmai, as well as most of the women working at Pattaya I spoke with, did
not talk about their work as an occupation despite earnings from the work were important for themselves and their family stayed behind at home. Rather, the women perceived their involvement in the sex industry as a transitional moment in their transnational trajectory. They did not remain in this work when their goal, a long-term association with a Western partner, was realized. Nonetheless, the women, like Tuk, might resume the work again if their relationship ended. In this sense, the women employed sex work as a pragmatic means to reach their desired end. They did not see this work as an occupation they intended to maintain. In addition, it is also important to note that the women stayed with their work at the site for a limited time. Some women experienced only a few weeks or months. Having said this, I make no claim that these women represent the majority of those working in Pattaya, but a brief and temporary engagement in this work often appeared in the life stories of the women I spoke with. Yet in Nadokmai, there are women who have remained working in Pattaya and other tourist sites for years and were not yet able to settle into a transnational relationship as they wished, though these women had been in relationships with foreign tourists and left their work at the site several times.

Recent literature on transnational sex tourism has shed insightful light on how relationships between foreign tourists and locals can be conceptualized beyond the conventional notions of sex work. For instance, Cabezas (2009) views sex tourism and romance tourism mutually flow into each other. Based on her investigation of the tourism industry in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, Cabezas proposes to reconceptualize transnational encounters created through sexualized tourism, pointing out that transnational tourism generates new patterns of sexual labor that blur the lines between work and romance, and money and love. As she puts it, “the exchange of goods and money for sexual services is not an unambiguous commercial endeavor but a discursive construction that is contested and in motion, changing across time and space” (Cabezas 2009:4). This process presents a re-articulation of current insights on sexualized tourism and the affective processes of globalized enterprises in tourism development. Along the same line, Brennan’s work (2004: 20-21), mentioned earlier, illustrates how sex work became a strategy for Dominican women to migrate to the West as well as to provide economic stability and new ways of consuming. This chapter focuses on how women working in Pattaya negotiate encounters and associations with foreign male tourists at the meeting site so as to initiate long-term transnational connections which might change their lives. I shall argue that women’s practices and strategies in many instances extend beyond simple transaction between sexual service and money.
In addition, previous studies also indicate that relationships between male tourists and local women encompass complexities associated with gender, class and race (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2009; Davidson 1995; Kempado 1998). Manderson (1992) points out that an involvement in the sex industry of women - both first- and third-world women - is primarily related to gender relations. Furthermore, within the Sosua sexscape, Brennan (2004) illustrates that transnational practices are largely shaped by fantasies and desires which are intermingled with race, gender and nationality. Cabezas (2009) shows various ways in which practices and identities of locals and foreign tourists are inscribed to eroticize racialized, working-class subjects. At the same time, she notes that the encounters generate mutual advantages for the parties concerned and provides opportunities for participants to negotiate and extend the meaning of exchange beyond money and sex.

In terms of exchanges taking place within the sex industry, scholars noted different practices in Western and Thai societies. In Western countries, sexual services are made upon an explicit agreement understood by the parties concerned. Davidson’s work (1995) illustrates that in Britain, transactions normally involved an agreement to perform a specific service or task. In Thailand exchanges are far less explicitly contractually, but more open-ended. The women engaging in commercial sex understand that attachments can extend to a serious relationship and even marriage (Cohen 1996; Yos 1992a). This flexibility provides possibilities for local women and male tourists to negotiate their relationships far beyond the usual prostitute-client encounters as imagined in popular discourses and often portrayed in recent literature.

In what follows, I shall take a closer look at the various ways in which associations and negotiations initiated by the women working in Pattaya played out. To begin with, the next section explores Pattaya as a ‘space of hope and opportunity’ where women’s desires to become a wife are realized.

**Pattaya paradise: A ‘space of hope and opportunity’**

Located on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand, only a two-hour drive from Bangkok (see Map 1, the Introduction), Pattaya is a compact town that has everything the foreign tourists could possibly want. Serving as an ‘R&R’ site for the American military in the 1960s and 1970s during the Vietnam War, the development of service and entertainment industries in this town began then and has continued since. The promotion of the tourist industry after the American troops left, as a source of national revenue, has further propelled Pattaya to
become the country’s premier beach resort, especially for foreign tourists to enjoy sun, sea, sand and sex (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Cohen 2003, Truong 1990).

Pattaya is divided into three major zones; the Northern, Central and Southern zones. Northern Pattaya is the area where most of the tourists are Asians; Westerners are normally concentrated in Central Pattaya, while people from the Middle East and Russia usually go to Southern Pattaya. Women working in these zones also look different. Jun (29), a freelancer at Central Pattaya beach, mentioned to me that she would not get any clients if she works at North or South Pattaya because she is relatively slim and has dark skin. She further explained that Arab men prefer stout women; Asian men favor women who are relatively petite with light skin color. Her own physical appearance, shared with most Isan women, is attractive to Western men, she said. My observations at the three zones confirm these differentiations, which might help shed some light on the question of gender and race in relation to sexuality on the global scale. However, to accommodate the main theme of the study, this chapter focuses on Central Pattaya, where most tourists are Westerners.

Walking along the beach and the narrow lanes connecting to the beach-front road in Central Pattaya, I observed a wide range of entertainment services: bars, clubs, restaurants, discos, escort agencies, massage parlors, hotels and apartments. In the streets and on the beach, I heard English, Thai and other languages spoken. Bar girls, as well as personnel of the entertainment businesses, greeted tourists passing by in English and sometimes in other languages, but not Thai. Frequently I was also greeted in English. Among the variety of entertainment sites, bars were the most common.

On the night I visited Da (38), Dao (38) and Noi (27), the three friends from Nadokmai and a neighboring village, at the bar where they were working, there were about ten girls working there, most of them were from various Isan villages. The bar was located in a large open space together with dozens of others situated next to each other. This bar, like many others in the area, had a U-shape counter where patrons could talk to the girls and make orders over the counter. In the front, there were a few tables and chairs where the girls sat with their customers. Some women stayed outside the bar to invite passers by to come in. What differentiates them were their sizes. Some big bars were located inside of buildings and not in the open space. The business in the area where the three friends worked was rather busy. Whenever I passed by I always saw some girls serving customers inside the bars or standing outside to attract tourists.
Bars in the area where Dao, Da, and Noi were working sold drinks and snacks. Customers could also take the girls out. These bars did not include dancing or shows, although go-go dancing and sex performances were common in Pattaya as well as other tourist destinations like Patpong (Davidson 1995; Manderson 1992). Normally, each bar had a ‘mama-san’ to help the girls, especially new and inexperienced ones who did not speak English to communicate with customers. A mama-san also helped in settling problems between the girls and clients as well as conflicts among the girls themselves. To take bar girls out, clients had to pay a bar fine of 200-500 baht (US $6-14) to the bar.
owner; plus a sum that was negotiated directly with the girl.72 A fine was an important source of income for the bar. Bar girls earned a basic salary of 2,000-2,500 baht (US $58-73) plus a commission from drinks the customers bought for them and bar fines.73 However, these earnings were only minimal compared to income earned from going out with customers.

Apart from bar hostesses, in transnational tourist destinations like Pattaya there were other jobs available, for example shop helpers, sales staff at department stores, waitresses, masseuses, and house maids. These jobs also allowed women to make connections with foreign tourists that might result in sexual encounters and long-term relationships. Some of the women I met started their career at Pattaya by engaging in such jobs and later shifted to work at the bar (or at the beach as a freelancer) so as to maximize their opportunities. Yet, there were also women like Dao, Da and Noi, who directly engaged in bar work. As bar hostesses, they earned a relatively good income but their aim was not to remain in this profession for long. For them, the job is a pathway to establish long-term relationships with male foreign tourists.

In addition to those working at familiar entertainment outlets such as bars, night clubs and discos, there were also freelance women who approached tourists in other settings, especially at the beach. While freelancing is open for any woman, many of the freelance workers I met had prior experience working at the bars or in other entertainment and service businesses. Some worked only in the evening, doing other jobs during the day. Others worked from noon to the next morning. Jum, a woman from Isan who had been working at Pattaya beach for almost two years, called this as her ‘full-time job’. Normally, Jum started her work at noon and hung around on the beach until two o’clock the next morning. After going out with a client for a ‘short-time’ (a few hours), she usually returned to the beach and looked for another customer if it was not too late. But if the deal was ‘long-time’74 she stayed overnight with her client. Compared to her previous work at the discos and bars, Jum preferred freelancing because it gave her flexibility and a sense of freedom – being able to pick her clients at her own choosing. Unlike working at the bars

72 Davidson (1995) notes that at go-go and live sex show bars, a bar fine may be higher than bars only sell drinks and snacks, it varies from 300-1,000 baht (US $9-29).
73 Most of the bars in Pattaya, where the girls I spoke with worked, charged 300 baht (US $8.5) for a bar-fine; the bar owners got half of the fine and the other half went to the girl.
74 The English words ‘short-time’ and ‘long-time’ were commonly used by both bar girls and freelancers. Short-time meant a few hours while long-time normally referred to overnight agreements. Long-term could also mean an agreement lasting for weeks or months.
where women could get help from a mama-san in communicating with customers, freelancers had to be on their own so they needed a certain amount of experience and a good command of English to negotiate with prospective clients.

Figure 4.2: Girls hanging out on the beach waiting to be approached

Jang (20) was another girl I met on the beach. When I saw her she was sitting on the beach and reading an English conversation book. A few Western men came and talked briefly to her then left. Jang spoke rather good English. I complimented her for this ability. When we continued our conversation, I learned that those men had asked her to go with them, but she refused. Jang said that she normally hung out at the beach to meet with local
friends and to access the internet to chat with international friends from various countries that she had met in Pattaya. Hanging out on the beach and waiting for the right time to chat on the internet was her routine. While waiting, she was often approached by male tourists passing by. Most often she declined their proposals. Jang stressed that she only went with the ones she liked, many of them she continued to keep contact through internet chatting or see them whenever they returned to Thailand. On occasion, these men had given her financial and emotional support. Jang said that they were her friends and she valued this kind of relationship. Jang’s story is an example of how relationships between local women and foreign male tourists extend beyond a simple exchange of money for sex. It is likely that the men had similar feelings as they continued to support her. Indeed, Jang’s experience in this respect was shared by a number of women whose stories will be presented later in this chapter. Such accounts demonstrate a different picture of the prostitute-client relations as usually portrayed in guide books for (male sex) tourists, such as the one entitled “Money Number One” (Thistlewaite 2006). The book gives details about many of the traps which lie waiting for men arriving in Pattaya to fulfill their sexual desire. The author particularly warns of the various tricks that might leave them with an empty wallet or bank account.

It is interesting to note that Jang’s account places emphasis more on the friendship between her and her clients and less on the sexual encounter. This is a common feature shared by a number of bar girls and freelancers that I spoke with. They talked about such activities as going out shopping with their customers, accompanying them to entertainment sites and tourist attractions as well as ‘taking care’ of them. Instead of mentioning sex, the women used such terms as ‘going out with clients’ or ‘taking care of clients’ in describing their work. The usage of these terms as well as the cover stories tend to blur the nature of the association between women sex workers and their clients. It is also an attempt to neutralize the social stigma attached to sex work. This only goes to show that women were not naïve about their profession, especially those from rural villages such as Nadokmai, who engaged in this work at transnational tourist sites like Pattaya to realize their goal of becoming a mia farang.

Once their dream of a long-term relationship with a Western man was materialized, the women left their job, though they might resume this work when the relationship ended. Dao left Pattaya in 1999, after having developed a serious relationship with a German. He sent her and also came to stay with her in Nadokmai a few months every year. After seven years, he died. Dao did not return to Pattaya until 2008. Still wanting to renew
transnational connections Dao headed back to Pattaya, accompanied by Da and Noi. The three of them shared an apartment with two other women from Udon. All five women were bent on exploring opportunities of long-term relationship or marriage with Western men they met at Pattaya. Stories about Dao and Tuk with their ex-farang partners and others who had eventually married foreign tourists and migrated to the West (or Japan) must have fuelled the fantasy of many hopeful women that ‘anything could happen.’ It was convenient to overlook the disappointment and disillusion of those whose dreams had never been fulfilled, and so the image of Pattaya as a ‘space of hope and opportunity’ remained unchanged in the eyes of many.

From my interviews, the experiences and fantasies of the women working in Pattaya resemble those of Dominican and Haitian women operating in the Sosua sexscape, as described by Brennan, shrouded under an ever-changing ‘opportunity myth’ about access to visas and mobility to Europe through marriage to foreign tourists. Women and girls migrated to Sosua, ready to meet tourist men who could fulfill their dreams (Brennan 2004:14). These motivations drove women working in Sosua and Pattaya to strategically deploy sex work to reach their goal. This reflects the complexity of sex work which extends beyond the exchange of money for sex.

In addition to providing a space of hope and opportunity, Pattaya (and perhaps Sosua) has also generated particular images of women (and men) working there. The following section spotlights the processes in which women change their appearance and improve their skills to accommodate such images, as part of their strategies to get ahead.

**Bodily appearances and language skills**

Within such a ‘space of hope and opportunity,’ women working in the sex industry are expected to appear in certain ways and to have particular qualities. Being attractive and appealing to (tourist) men is particularly important as this increases the chances for a woman to be chosen above other women. Bodily appearances entail more than just how one looks. In her study of public sex performances in Patpong bars, Manderson (1992) points out that the performances reflect on Thai understandings of (Western) male sexuality. The ways women in the sex industry, especially in transnational tourist destinations, appear at work can be interpreted in this light, as a reflection on their understandings of Western male tourists’ expectations and desire. Women’s bodily appearance in Pattaya contrasts sharply with representations of female gender identities.
outside this touristic site. The following section takes a closer look at the processes of bodily appearances of the women involved so as to accommodate the expected images of women (sex workers) working in transnational tourist sites. In addition, it also examines the various ways women used to improve their communicating skills in their attempt to make connections with Western customers.

**Bodily appearances**

On a few occasions during my fieldwork at Pattaya, I went shopping with Dao, Da and Noi. They often stopped at shops selling clothes, shoes and jewelry but they did not buy anything, claiming that the prices were unreasonably high. However, once we went to a big, newly opened department store, each of them bought a bagful of cosmetics. While waiting for Dao and Noi who were still in the shop, Da told me that cosmetics and clothes were the largest part of her expenses and that this spending pattern was shared among all five girls living in the same apartment. The other two younger girls who did not come with us might spend more on dresses, shoes and accessories such as necklaces, pendants and bracelets. Since they had a lot of these things sometimes they let Da use them.

That day, Dao and Noi wore short pants and a tank top while Da put on a pair of casual slacks and a T-shirt. No-one wore any make-up; all three had their hair tied in the back. This contrasted sharply with how they appeared when we met the following night at the bar where they worked. All were dressed to the latest fashion complete with jewelry and stylish hairdos. Dao wore a fancy red spaghetti-top dress that just covered her knees, with high heels. She was heavily made-up. Noi put on very short pants and a slinky tank top. Her face was bright with make-up. Da wore jeans and a white top with a nice design. She also wore make-up and her long hair was set nicely. These three girls looked different from those I had met the day before.

A few days later when I met Dao again, I told her that I might not have recognized her if I had not known that she worked at that bar. She said that she had learned to dress and make herself look attractive when she started working at Pattaya ten years ago. As she recalled her experience then:

My friends told me to dress up; they would take me to see the owner of the bar where they worked. I had no idea what to put on since I did not have any fashionable clothes...I rarely wore cosmetics at home and at work [as a maid and baby-sitter] in Bangkok. A friend let me use hers. She made me up and set my hair. I was dressed up...I felt uncomfortable, unsure of
myself. I had never dressed like this in my life. I was very shy and did not know what to do. But I thought since my friends were dressed like this, I should do the same…That day, I got a job.

As she got on with the job, Dao became accustomed to the dress norms expected of women working in Pattaya, which she gradually adopted. This experience was shared by Da, who started working at a bar in Pattaya a few months before I met her in February 2008. Most of the times we met outside her work hours, Da was dressed rather casually. Even at the bar she dressed less skimpy than other women. When I mentioned this, she said that her roommates and friends at the bar often advised her to change her look; she should dress ‘with more style’ and to have more ‘sex appeal’. The roommates, two young girls in their early twenties, often advised her what to wear and how to dress to show her ‘feminine beauty’. To Da, these girls had a good sense of how to dress and they seemed to be confident in whatever clothes they put on, while she felt ill at ease, losing her self-esteem if she was to wear a spaghetti tank top, a very short skirt or hot pants, although she was aware that it was important for her job. Whether Dao and Da liked it or not, both managed to meet the expected images of bar girls in transnational tourist sites like Pattaya. Such constructed images of women are part of the process of commodification and these are reinforced by those who own or manage the businesses such as owners of bars/night clubs and mana-sans (Seabrook 1996).

Paradoxical as it might seem, when talking about bodily appearances of women in Pattaya, Da commented that anyone could dress any way she wanted. If they were gossiped about, women in Pattaya paid no attention to it. In a sense this gave them a degree of autonomy that they would not otherwise enjoy. In Thai society, a display of the female body in such a way that it attracts the (male) gaze is considered impropriety. Women who appear in this way are at risk of being regarded as ‘bad’ women. This communicative property of bodies is intimately connected to the pervasive view in the Thai dichotomy of ‘good/bad women’ (Harrison 1999). However, in Pattaya, being physically attractive and sexually appealing is a part of women’s strategies in drawing male tourists, the first step in their long-term scheme of getting a Western partner. This reflects their agency, whether or not the endeavors might actually result in a long-term commitment and marriage.
Language Skills

For women working in transnational tourist sites, improving language and communication skills means increasing possibilities of interacting with foreign tourists. This ability provides women not only opportunities to get clients, but to further develop relationships which might eventually allow them to reach their ultimate aim of long-term relationships. Given that most women engaged in sex trade in Pattaya and elsewhere did not have much schooling and their ability to speak other languages is quite limited, developing communication skills preoccupied most of their time.

Walking along Pattaya beach, I often observed girls reading Thai-English conversation books while waiting to be approached by passing tourists. A few of these girls allowed me to look at their books. The texts in these books are both in Thai and English with accompanying phonetic expressions. In addition to general conversation concerning greetings, introductions, apologies and thanks, the contents of the books included such topics as paying bar fine, behaving in the (hotel)room, safe sex, meeting parents, as well as girls and money (see for instance the ‘Bar Guide’ (2007) written by Mark Reynolds). In a big bookstore on the beach road, there was a huge section of conversation books in Thai and other languages including German, Italian, Russian, Danish as well as Japanese and Chinese. These books were effective tools to help women working on the beach and at the bars to communicate with foreign tourists.

Language skills are particular important at the early stage of the work. A mia farang in her early forties recalled her experience when she began working at Pattaya in 1995. During the first few days of work, her contact with customers was limited because she only knew a few English words. She could only greet them, but could not continue the conversation. She always sat at the corner of the bar with a gloomy countenance. As a new and inexperienced worker, she was helped by a mama-san who introduced her to customers and helped her communicate with them. Eventually, she got a five-day deal with her first customer, an American. On the first day, he was not pleased because she did not know much English and he only knew a few words of Thai. She was worried that he might break the deal as the mama-san had told her that if the clients were not satisfied they could pick other girls from the bar. On the morning of the second day, after having breakfast at the hotel the man bought a Thai-English conversation guide book to help with their communication. She could then, to some extent, share with him her feelings of unhappiness as he had noticed and asked her about this. By using the book, the woman was
able to tell him about her failed marriage and the children she had to support. Despite her broken English, the man understood her situation and had sympathy for her. She told me that the book really worked for her. Even though she could express herself clearly she could find the written words and pointed them to him. At the end of their five-day deal, he left her with a generous tip.

Improving communicating skills through learning languages is one of the activities provided by several organizations, especially Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), working with women in the sex industry in Thailand such as EMPOWER, Foundation for Women and Friends of Women. The idea is to enable women to deal with customers on a more equal basis. In Pattaya, there were a number of NGOs working with women, men and transgender people. During my fieldwork at Pattaya, I visited a Christian NGO which had been working with women in the sex industry for many years. Training was among the various activities and services provided by the organization. Apart from courses to create occupational opportunities for women, such as sewing, clothes designing, hair dressing, tie-dyeing and jewelry making, the organization also offered language lessons in English, German, French, etc. When I told the bar girls and freelancers about these services, some of them already knew about them. However, there were only a few who had taken the courses offered by this organization and others like it. Jum commented that it would not work for her to attend a course with a regular schedule, though she did try once. She could not manage to regularly attend classes, especially when getting long-time deals which could take days or weeks. Instead, most of the girls learned from the conversation books and from their friends or foreign customers. The longer the women were in the business, the more they felt comfortable to communicate with foreign tourists. Jum said that after two years working at the beach, she could negotiate better deals for herself.

Comparable to stories about associations with their clients, women’s accounts about language and communication problems seemed to de-eroticize their relationships. The restricted information in this respect reflects how women wanted to present their relationships to me as a researcher. It is also possible that this restriction might have something to do with the relationships itself, as Annette Hamilton (1997) points out. Hamilton points out the importance of intimate communication in fulfilling emotional and sexual pleasure and relates women’s (and men’s) (in)ability in communicating intimately and erotically to their language problems. Through exploring film and printed texts, she reveals the absence of intimate speech in farang-Thai relations and notes that with limited communication skills, women and men cannot enjoy emotional pleasure, which would add
Negotiating money, sex and marriage possibilities

Encounters between bar girls/freelancers and foreign male tourists, and the ways in which women and men interact as well as the reasons/expectations behind their associations are central to this section. Specifically, this part focuses on how women’s negotiation revolved around sex, material desire and possibilities for a long-term relationship and eventual marriage. In other words, I wish to show how the relationships between tourist men and female sex workers are far more ambiguous than prostitution-client relations often presented in the literature. Take the case of Jum. I have chosen her story not only because I knew her well, but also because her story reflects the complexity and tensions which are shared by many freelancers and bar girls at Pattaya, as well as by mia farang in Nadokmai who previously worked at the tourist sites.

Jum (29) was born into a family with five children in a rural Isan village. Two of her brothers and a sister had married and lived with their families. Her younger sister left home to work elsewhere and had not been in touch with the family for several years. This left Jum as the main financial contributor to her parents’ household. Like Dao, Da and most of mia farang in Nadokmai, Jum left her home village to engage in wage employment in the cities soon after finishing six years of compulsory schooling. She had worked as house maid, baby-sitter and shop helper in different cities in the Northeast, the South and in Bangkok. Her last job before heading for Pattaya was as a helper in a wholesale shop selling ready-made clothes and shoes in Bangkok. After the shop was closed in 2006, her life at Pattaya began. At that time she was in her mid-twenties. With the assistance of a friend’s sister, Jum got a job as a cashier in a disco. She also managed to work at a
department store during the day, though that job lasted only for a few months. Aiming for higher earnings and maximizing the opportunities to make connections with tourists, Jum left the disco and worked as a bar girl. Within a year she worked at a few bars. The last bar she joined did not attract a lot of customers, so she resigned and started working on the beach.

On her first day as a freelancer, she met an Italian man whom she ‘took care of’ for three weeks during his stay in Pattaya. It provided her with good earnings. Thereafter, she continued to hang about the beach. Jum, like most girls I met at Pattaya, talked about her work not just as a way to earn income, but as a means to develop transnational relationships that might lead to a serious commitment. The encounters, either on the basis of short-time or long-time deals, opened up this opportunity. Long-term relationships in particular offered a greater chance for interactions beyond just sexual service. This was precisely Jum’s experience. However, long-time agreements may not be the norm for sex tourists as they usually opt for multiple partners (Bishop and Robinson 1998; Davidson 1995).

Talking about going out with clients for days or weeks, Jum explained that there was more to the associations than sexual service. She often acted as a companion, tour guide and interpreter, did the shopping as well as tidied up the client’s room. The more pleased the customers were, the better the chance that they might return again, providing more opportunities for serious commitments to develop. Such services extending beyond the sexual encounter were common among the women I met at Pattaya when they went out with their clients for a long-time deal. From a male perspective, Davidson (1995) notes that services including both sexual and other forms of labor, as well as the ways in the girls take care of them with pleasing gestures, are interpreted, at least by British sex tourists, as expressions of genuine affection. These elements and the non-contractual nature of transactions in the Thai sex trade, which is different from an explicit agreement of providing specific tasks as practiced in Britain, gloss over the commercial nature of the encounters. Davidson postulates that these aspects make it possible for British tourists to pay for sexual services without seeing themselves as the kind of men who embrace the identity of a punter, as one of the men she met at Pattaya put it: “They’re more like girlfriends really. You do everything with them. It isn’t just sex, they’re not like prostitutes” (Davidson 1995:51).

For Jum, by taking care of her clients, accompanying them and doing things with them, she learned about their character: whether they were fair, generous, picky or stingy;
basically how they treated her on a personal level. A number of *mia farang* in Nadokmai who worked at the tourist sites shared Jum’s experience in this regard. According to them some men were polite and showed concern about the women they went out with. Others only cared about what they wanted. These personal experiences provide important information for women to anticipate the possibility of a long-term relationship or commitment with a particular man. As Jum told me:

> I think about what kind of person a man is as much as how he looks. If I do not like his look [old and unattractive], I wait to see if he is generous, polite and not fastidious. If so, I overcome my dislike [of his physical appearance]…I always ask myself, ‘Can I trust him?’ If the answer is ‘yes’, I could like him. It is not possible to get everything I want [a man who is good-looking, generous and not much older than her]…I look for a serious relationship and I want to be with a man that I like; not necessarily a millionaire, but one who understands and does not look down upon (*du thuk*) women [working in the sex industry].

Jum’s narrative reflects mixed feelings in considering choices of sexual partners. Noticeably, her criteria of a suitable long-term partner shaped her practices and the ways she dealt with customers. When going out or shopping with her clients, Jum sometimes expressed interest in such items as clothes, shoes or jewelry in order to see whether the men would offer to pay for them as gifts. If a man did not offer to pay even for a small gift, it raised the question of whether she could expect support and care from him. Similarly, Tuk told me that she felt ‘devalued’ whenever a customer asked for a discount on the bar fine. It made her wonder whether she could rely on someone who cared so much for so little money. Both Tuk and Jum considered the cash and gifts they received from their customers as not just material gains, but also as a gesture of generosity, an expression of affection on the part of the customers. Jum’s following account regarding her relationships with a Belgian and a Dutchman shows how bar girls and freelancers negotiate material desire, sex and marriage.

In September 2008, Jum got a five-day deal with a Belgian man in his forties working in Malaysia. They met a few times after the deal; then he asked her to leave her bar job and return to her home in the village. He promised to send remittances for her upkeeps. Jum returned to her village home, but could not stay for long; she went back to Pattaya after a week. At home, there was nothing for her to do and she became bored. More importantly, she was worried that her parents and neighbors would ask about her
work. They did not know that she worked in Pattaya. Her mother thought that she worked in the South. Soon after arriving in Pattaya, Jum ran into her Belgian boyfriend with another woman. Expecting that he was in Malaysia working and not enjoying time with other women in Pattaya, she was disappointed and decided to end the relationship. He admitted that he did not keep his promise, but he wanted to marry her. However, Jum declined, though he had asked her to re-consider the proposal a few times. She then returned to work on the beach. Her reason for turning him down was that she could not trust him as he did not do what he had told her. Ironically, she did not keep her part of the deal when she came back to Pattaya without telling him.

While ending the relationship with the Belgian man, Jum began to see Rob, a retired Dutchman she met on weekends at his house. Rob had been living in Pattaya for a few years. Unlike most of the Western men Jum had been associated with, Rob did not like going out every day. Rather, he enjoyed staying at home watching television, using the computer, working in the garden and sometimes cooking. On weekends, Jum usually joined him for these activities and cleaned the house for him. Rob was generous and helped her in times of need. He always gave her pocket money when she was going home. He also paid for her parents’ healthcare costs, unlike the Belgian who neither helped with her financial needs nor gave her gifts.

After my first trip to Pattaya (November 8-23, 2008), I talked to Jum on the phone a few times and learned that her relationship with Rob had further developed. When I returned to Pattaya in February 2009, Jum told me that she had stopped working on the beach and had been living with Rob for almost a month. He gave her certain monthly allowance which she was satisfied with. He also encouraged her in taking computer lessons and paid for them. Jum admitted that after living together for a few months, she did not see Rob as her client anymore. Rather, she anticipated a serious relationship to develop. However, she became doubtful after she learned that a young girl whom he had supported earlier had moved in with him a few days after Jum did. In April 2009, I called Jum; she was in the village, not in Pattaya, taking care of house renovations, which Rob helped fund. I gathered from our conversation that Jum was pleased and felt more secure about her relationship with Rob. To my surprise, in June 2009, a few days before my trip to Amsterdam, she phoned and told me that she had had a big fight with Rob. It did not involve the girl living in the house, but another woman he had been seeing lately. At that point, she left him and returned to work on the beach.
Sometimes when we talked about her clients, Jum mentioned the differences between young and old customers in relation to the sexual services these men required. She stressed that due to their physical condition, old men were more demanding than young men. Some older customers were fastidious and they were not satisfied with the services they received. This problem rarely occurred among young clients. So given the choice, she preferred a younger rather than an older client. However, her decision regarding her relationships with Rob and her Belgian boyfriend clearly indicated that age was not the sole factor but generosity and trustworthiness were important elements to be taken into account together with the possibility of a long-term commitment.

Although Jum’s story did not end up like a Cinderella dream come true as many mia farang in Nadokmai experienced, it represents the processes in which women entering into the transnational tourist scenes encounter. The women’s actions and negotiations highlighted their aim for future security which is extended beyond sex for money. Put differently, relationships between women in the sex industry and their clients, foreign tourists in this case, are far more complex than simply prostitute-client relations based exclusively on exchange of money and sexual gratification. The complexity is, to some extent, shaped, by Thai culture.

In Thai society, the intermingling of sex, mutual affection and material resources is embedded in the cultural norms, manifested through various marriage customs and practices. For example, criteria for spouse selection always involve future welfare of the family. Similarly, the Thai cultural norm of providing sinsot (bride wealth) by a groom to a bride’s family to legitimate the marriage indicates an intersection between marital relations, material resources and sex – an issue that will be future discussed in the following chapter. Within these contexts, material support from the men is perceived in relation to their love and care for women (Lyttleton 2000; Sumalee 1995; Whittaker 1999). Women’s practices of initiating connections with Western men who are perceived as potential patrons and partners are, in part, influenced by such local norms. In this light, marrying a man with good economic resources is cultural rather than instrumental.75

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75 It is important to note that the presence of polygamy which has continued until today in the form of a ‘minor wife’ or mia noi is another instance reflecting the intertwining between intimate relations and material support in Thai contexts of marital relations. Such liaisons are based largely on financial and social support that the male provides. In most cases, the husband is much older, richer and in a more powerful position than his minor wife. There are cases of men who gain financial benefits from the union since his second wife is richer than himself, as well as the cases when the liaison is claimed to be a result of mutual affection and proximity rather than women’s desires to obtain economic support (Sumalee 1995:106-110). Another important aspect worth explaining here as it relates to polygamous relationships is the associations and distinctions between minor wives and prostitutes which are captured in a dynamic view, as discussed in
One aspect worth elaborating here was the anxieties among many mia farang and women working in Pattaya that I interviewed. Though engaging in sex work at tourist sites was a pragmatic means for many women, including the majority of mia farang in Nadokmai, these women were not entirely free from feelings of guilt in taking up particular routes to transnational marriage. Jum, for example, did not let her mother and neighbors know where and what kind of work she did. The guilt, in part, made her feel uncomfortable at home. Jum admitted with regret that she had not yet figured out whether she would tell her parents about her job at Pattaya, as she knew they would be disappointed. She was also concerned about reactions from the neighbors who might find her work repulsive and would look down upon her and her parents. For both Jum and Tuk, who were from villages where there were only a few women working at tourist sites and living with a Western partner, the situation created much more tension for them regarding their work at Pattaya. Having pointed this out, I do not mean to say that in villages like Nadokmai, where the number of women marrying Western men was much higher, those women who were involved in sex work at Pattaya did not feel any guilt. Rather, they were aware of the stigma associated with sex work. Several mia farang in the village told me they had left for Pattaya without informing their parents. Otherwise they could not have left the village. One woman recalled that she had experienced moral guilt and sorrow, especially during the first few months working at Pattaya, though she made the choice herself with the hope of changing her life. Nonetheless, there were a number of parents who supported their daughters’ decision to go to Pattaya. Working at this site was seen as a pragmatic means in providing security for their daughters’ future and their own welfare. I shall explore parents’ expectations and reactions on the current phenomenon of transnational marriages in Chapter Six.

The processes in which women have engaged so as to realize their desire to be a transnational wife are complex and involve actions and negotiations in various realms and through different means and strategies. Apart from reconstructing self-identities to meet images of women working in transnational tourist sites and negotiating relationships with

Lyttleton’s study (2000). Mia noi, as a form of domestic sexuality, plays out in distinctly separate realm of experience from those marked by prostitution. Nevertheless, it is noted that the two realms are becoming less distinct when men talk about their patronage of commercial sex in relation to their wives’ sexual behavior. Also, in academic discourses, prostitution in Thai society is often linked to the cultural norm valuing female virginity; the presence of prostitution is to preserve a section of Thai women as virgins until marriage. See further discussion on how the issues of mia noi and prostitution are associated with gender relations, sexuality and AIDS in Thai society, especially in rural contexts in Lyttleton’s work.
clients, the women had also to manipulate their own fate to ensure their luck. The latter became a part of daily practices for many bar girls and freelancers working in Pattaya.

**Ritual practices and fortune tellers: Manipulating one’s fate**

Coping with uncertainties and insecurities is a permanent feature of the daily life of women working in Pattaya. There was no guarantee whether these women would be able to attract and finally get customers, whether the deals would be short-time or long-time, whether they would get a good client or whether their association with particular clients would lead to a long-term commitment as they had wished. Such pervasive feelings of uncertainty and anxiety gave shape to women’s day-to-day religious practices. Conducting rituals and consulting fortune tellers were part of a general strategy to manipulate their fate and ensure their luck. This section explores such rituals and practices in this regard.

Before describing women’s actions, it is important to note that working in such a ‘space of hope and opportunity’ like Pattaya is a manifestation of agency. This is similar to participating in such risk-taking behaviors as playing the stock market, buying lottery, gambling, engaging in crime, involving in extra marital relationships or risky sexual behavior in the age of AIDS as described in Gerben Nooteboom’s work (2003). Nooteboom points out various ‘styles’ of risk-taking behaviors pursued by villagers of different social categories in Krajan, a village located in East Java. 

His analysis reveals that such risk-taking behaviors represent an attractive style for some villagers who search for alternative to village norms of conformation. The practices “are oriented towards chances, thrills, and risk-taking rather than security” (Nooteboom 2003:223). I agree with Nooteboom that risk-taking is an expression of agency and that people do not always seek security. However, the women in this study who, in a sense, engaged in risk-taking, worked towards a clear aim in securing their future and establishing a ‘better life.’ Woman’s actions were directed towards this goal, regardless of whether such actions are positively or negatively valued. Their practices present a great deal of ‘intentionality’ (Ortner 2006). I consider the practices of rituals and consulting fortune tellers these women

76 Nooteboom used the term ‘style’ to represent the bridging gaps between structures and strategies, the core argument of his work. He posits that in actual practice structural and strategic views are highly complementary, as noted: “Social structures do not determine individual behavior; but they do set limits and shape it…[O]n the specific conditions, there may be more; or less room for individual efforts and strategies to further one’s interests (Nooteboom 2003: 53).
involved as a part of process in which women seeking transnational relationship realize their ultimate goal – becoming a wife.

In his recent article exploring relationships between religious certainty, ritual efficacy and human security, Oscar Salemink (2010) takes a close look at spirit mediumship in contemporary Vietnam in connection with uncertainties, insecurities and anxieties people encountered, linking to both physical and existential insecure conditions. Through an examination of how people dealt with such circumstances within different forms of uncertainty and insecurity, he points out that “when running risk, people often seek compensation for that risk, for instance by seeking spiritual intervention. This can then be interpreted as a form of compensating for insecurity and reducing anxiety – if not seeking more security – when engaging in risky adventures” (Salemink 2010:284). The ways in which spiritual interventions and ritual practices are conceptualized as a path for individuals to manage uncertainty, to deal with limitations of their existence and to ‘get on with life’ is a common theme in scholarly works. For instance, Irene Stengs (2009:251-256) relates the development of the King Chulalongkorn cult among urban, middle class Thais to the ‘uncertainty of modernity’ many people experience. Above all, the enormous economic growth in the 1980s generated income inequality and marginalized large sectors of society. Later, the 1997 economic crisis added to the critical situation that a larger majority of people in Thai society experienced. The rapid expansion of the cult of the Great King, who is interested in the lives of his people and their well-being, highlights the experiences and feelings of uncertainties and frustrations on the level of individual daily life. Guided by the insights of these works, I shall explore women’s actions with reference to a quest for manipulating their own fate and their desired goal.

**Ritual practices**

After the first interview I had with Jum in the late afternoon of November 14, 2008, I invited her for dinner but she declined. She wanted to go to South Pattaya to worship the statue of Sadet Pho Krom Luang Chumporn (locally called Krom Luang or Sadet Tia), as

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77 The four forms under the investigation included situation in which people faced mental and physical problems, economic insecurity and market risk, existential uncertainties relating to dead (eg. relatives missing during the war) and running deliberate risks in their management (Salemink 2010: 263).

78 Sadet Pho Krom Luang Chumporn was Prince Abhakara Kiartiwongse, the son of King Rama V. He studied naval science in England and was founder of the naval base in Sattahib, which became one of the American air bases during the Vietnam War. He was proclaimed ‘The Father of the Thai Navy.’ Krom Luang took a keen interest in herbal medicine and studied this subject by himself, then used his expertise to treat people without charging any fee. After his death in 1923, people considered him as a holy deity. Many
she had done while working in Pattaya. I joined her and we went up to the cliff beach where the statue is located. On the way, she mentioned that when she was unable to go up to revere Krom Luang, she would go to worship Chao Pho Ket Ngam (locally called Chao Pho) at the spirit house on the beach a little further north from the central beach where she operated.

At the cliff beach, the life-size statue of Krom Luang stood on a concrete block two meters high, looking out to the ocean. At the sides and the back of the base of the statue there were thousands of small figurines of horses, elephants and women that worshippers had presented to the statue. It is believed that these animals and women figurines would serve Krom Luang. Jum did not take along any figurines, but bought flowers, candles and incense at the entrance to offer to Krom Luang. I followed her. After our worshipping, Jum said that she always asked Krom Luang for his blessings when facing critical circumstances. When her parents were sick or she was in need of money, she made her wishes and prayed Krom Luang to help. She also begged for his compassion to help her get clients, especially the good-hearted ones with whom she could build up a long-lasting relationship. When her requests came true, she often expressed her gratitude by presenting him figurines and/or phlu (rockets usually fired as a salute). I observed people continuously coming up to worship the statue, including a few girls accompanied by Western men. Jum exchanged greetings with them. I was told later that these girls were freelancing at the beach.

Figure 4.3: Sadet Pho Krom Luang Chumporn statue

shrines and statues were erected all over the country in his honor – South Pattaya is the home to one of them. His medical skills made him widely known and people have often worshipped and asked for his blessings with regard to health problems. Due to his kindness, compassion (metta), and divine power, people have also asked him to help in other matters as well (Saran 2003).
On the way back, Jum offered to take me to see Pattaya before I was to leave in the next few days. She said that Pattaya has several interesting places where she sometimes took her clients to visit. During the following two evenings, Jum called me telling me that she might not be able to be my guide; she was on a bus heading to her home village. I asked if anything serious was going on at home. She replied that she was just taking money to her parents and would help them in harvesting rice for a few days before returning to Pattaya. Jum further explained that she had mentioned to Rob a few times that she wanted to give money to her parents to cover the costs of rice harvesting, but he did not respond. On the day we went to worship at Krom Luang, she asked him to help her out. When I dropped her off at the beach where she was based, Jum got a call from Rob requesting her to meet him the following day and to bring her bank book with her as well. Then he transferred 27,000 baht (US$ 771) to her account. She said, “Krom Luang is saksit (sacred); he has helped me out. I will present him phlu when I return to Pattaya, to thank him.” When I met her at Pattaya again during my second trip in February 2009, Jum seriously mentioned to me a few times that I should revere Krom Luang and ask for what I wished for. Knowing that I did not want to marry a Western man, she suggested I ask Krom Luang for help with the completion of my PhD study.

Jum’s account stressed the importance of the spiritual dimension in her daily existence as a sex worker. Her suggestion to me to express my wishes to Krom Luang testified to the seriousness of her faith in the divine. At Pattaya, it was common for women working there to stop to wai – a Thai way of expressing respect – when passing by the

**Figure 4.4:** Figurines of horses, elephants and women that worshippers presented to the Sadet Pho Krom Luang Chumporn statue
spirit house of Chao Pho Ket Ngam on the beach. Some women dropped in to express their wishes and ask for help. My conversations with some of these women revealed the wishes they made, largely in line with those of Jum’s, emphasizing both the desires to get (good) customers, and to reach their ultimate goal, having a long-term relationship or marrying a Western man. When their wishes came true, normally the women returned to venerate and express their gratitude to Chao Pho. The two cousins Wilai and Wanna, are cases in point.

Figure 4.5: Chao Pho Ket Ngam spirit house on Pattaya beach.

On the evening of February 1, 2009, I met Wilai and Wanna at the beach while they were heading to the spirit house with a big basket of fruits to offer to Chao Pho. Wilai (27), a divorced mother, had started her career in Pattaya at a massage parlor three weeks before; Wanna joined her a few days later. The women could not get along with their peers at the massage joint, so they resigned and began hanging out at the beach. Unfortunately they did not get any clients and they had no money since most of their savings had been spent on rent and food. On the day the girls spent their last twenty baht, they met a woman who took them to worship Chao Pho and suggested to them to make their wishes. That night Wilai got a Swedish customer. “He [Chao Pho] saved our lives [her and her cousin]. We had money for our next meal” Wilai said. Thereafter, the two cousins began to get clients. The cousins said that Chao Pho’s compassion (metta) had helped them to get customers.

79 According to a woman selling offerings in front of the spirit house, Chao Pho Ket Ngam is the spirit watching over the area and has compassion for those living and running businesses in the area. Owners of bars and other businesses in the area venerate him so as to ensure their good fortune. However, the majority of worshippers are women working at the bars and on the beach.
Therefore they brought a basket of fruits to thank him. Again, Wilai expressed her wish to Chao Pho that she wished to own a massage parlor and asked him to help her reach this goal. Wilai imagined that her dream would come true if she met a Western man who could support her.

Jum’s, Wilai’s, and Wanna’s stories show how their daily lives are shrouded under uncertainties and anxieties. Ritual practices provided them with spaces to manipulate uncertain circumstances, to deal with their anxieties as well as to challenge the limitations of their existence. In fact, most mia farang in Nadokmai told me that they had engaged in ritual practices before leaving the village for Pattaya and other tourist sites. It was common for these women to worship the ancestor spirits of the village (Tapuban or Tapu) so as to ensure that they would succeed in having contacts with Western men that would eventually result in marriage. Women employing other routes to engage transnational marriage such as match-making service and networks of kin and friends also expressed their wishes to the ancestor spirits and asked for their support in helping them to reach their goal. Similarly, those who were unsure about their future plans also revere the ancestor spirits and made their wishes. The stories of villagers whose wishes came true were attributed to the spiritual deliverance of Tapu and reinforced by such practices of worshipping.80

Indeed, ritual practices are common in Thai life, the same as in other Asian countries such as Vietnam, Taiwan, China and Japan (Salemink 2010). In the case of Thailand, the practices are prevalent among both rural residents and the urban-middle class. Although these practices have been embedded in different contexts, they share a common theme associated with uncertainty or insecurity people encounter in various dimensions of life, as well as with auspicious and good fortune people desired for (Akin 1996; Stengs 2009; Tambiah 1970). In urban contexts, Stengs (2009), as mentioned before, describes the widespread cult of worshipping King Chulalongkorn – The Great King - among the middle class as a way to cope with perceived and actual uncertainties in connection with the economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s. In rural contexts, according to Stanley Tambiah (1970: 263-269), worshipping the ancestor spirits of the village is a common practice ensuring agricultural production, the most vital occupation of the rural

80 According to the intermediary of the village’s guardian spirits (Chum), a man in his sixties who had helped villagers express their wishes to the village spirits, acquiring jobs overseas and marrying a Western husband were the most common themes. The Chum mentioned that the improvement of the house of the spirits and its landscape were made possible through donations of thankful villagers, especially mia farang, whose wishes were granted by the guardian spirits. Wishes expressed to the village deity also concerned passing an exam, getting promotion and having good health.
residents. It is also believed that the ancestor spirits have the power to grant benevolence and reward as well as punish, to bestow individual favors as well as inflict misfortune. The beliefs and practices of both rural and urban residents underline the importance of spiritual interventions.

The stories of Jum, Wilai and many other mia farang in Nadokmai illustrate how local beliefs and practices are extended to transnational spaces where women have to cope with anxieties and uncertainties created by interactions and relationships with male tourists from the West.

*Fortune tellers (mo du)*

At the beach in Central Pattaya, where the main road from the city met the road running along the beach, there was a concrete space where dolphin sculptures were located. This was a large area where both male tourists and freelancers hung out. Frequently, women passing by took advantage of the services provided at this place, such as nail painting, massage, snacks as well as assorted clothes, shoes and jewelry from the peddlers who often stopped to sell their goods. There were several fortune tellers based at this area. Their customers were mostly freelancers and bar girls.

On the afternoon of February 3, 2009, I was watching the busiest fortune teller at work. The woman used eggs as a means to make predictions. She put a few eggs on a plate with flowers and candles and asked her clients to make their wishes. In one particular case, the client was an Isan woman in her late twenties who had been working at a bar for a few months. The fortune teller asked her what she wanted to know. Then the fortune teller opened an egg and made her reading. The same procedure was repeated after another question was asked. The questions asked by this client reflected her worries that she had so few customers compared to other women working at the same bar. She lived mainly on her salary and minimal tips. The woman wanted to remit money to her parents back home, yet she was not able to do so thus far. She also asked whether she would ever find a Western man who would support her and be good to her. The fortune teller said that she had ‘good fortune’ (watsana di), and would have a bright future. Her desires would ultimately be fulfilled. For the moment, however, she was having ‘bad luck’ (duang maidi) and had to be patient. The obstacles would be overcome in the next few months.

Another client was a woman in her thirties. This woman had worked in a bar for some years and recently became a freelancer. Her questions were related to a few Western
men she had been associated with. She asked whether the Englishman she had met a few times who promised to meet her again would do so since the time he planned to come to Pattaya had elapsed but he did not show up. Then she asked about the German who had wired her money, but recently stopped providing support. Like other women, this one wanted to know whether the associations she currently had with Western men would lead to a serious relationship. Unsurprisingly, the fortune teller told her to be patient, not to be too hasty. She simply had to wait and then things would get better. If she did not receive support from this German, then she would get an even wealthier man, a generous man as well. She would finally meet a good man who would take her to live with him in his country. You are an attractive and clever woman, you will certainly have a bright future, the fortune teller told her. When the prediction ended, the fortune teller asked the woman whether her friend who used to come with her still worked on the beach or if she had left Pattaya and Thailand to be with her farang. It was clear that the woman had been here before and might be a regular client of this fortune teller.

Figure 4.6: Girls consulting fortune tellers on the beach
My conversation with a woman selling flowers next to another fortune teller operating in front of Chao Pho Ket Ngam spirit house, confirmed that many women came to consult fortune tellers regularly. The flower vendor said, “When they [women working on the beach] have problems – not being able to get clients or losing contacts with their farang who send them money – they often come to see a fortune teller or go to worship Chao Pho asking for help. Some women do both. This is why there are many fortune tellers on the beach.” Fortune tellers would not be able to maintain their career if there was no demand. While hanging out on the beach trying to attract tourists, freelancers might go to see a fortune teller asking about prospects of finding a client. Or after going with a customer for a short-time deal, normally women would return to the beach and look for new clients. Meanwhile they might consult a fortune teller about what lay in store for them.

Similar to ritual practices, consulting a fortune teller is not unusual in Thai life, especially in times of insecurity or when facing unforeseen circumstances. This practice is also a means to support decision making processes, to ensure an auspicious outcome and to prevent future maladies. Among favorite topics, future romance, marriage and divorce are common subjects that are discussed with fortune tellers. Sumalee (1995) confirms this in her study of love and marriage in Thailand in the twentieth century; among the various criteria concerning spouse selection, matching horoscopes is one of them. Normally, before the marriage negotiation is settled, parents of the bride or groom or both will consult an astrologer to see whether the horoscopes of the prospective couple are compatible. If the result is negative, the marriage may be called off. For women working in Pattaya, fortune tellers function in a similar way, providing consultations and predictions regarding unforeseen circumstances, though under different contexts. However, these women visited fortune tellers much more frequently and this became a part of everyday engagement for many of them. The frequency indicates that such practices have taken on a new significance in the transnational spaces where women had to cope with anxieties and uncertainties in their day-to-day life. These conditions influence future security as they might change women’s life as well as the lives of their dependents if a connection with their clients resulted in a long-term commitment.

The discussion thus far reveals that ritual practices and consulting fortune tellers are culturally and historically embedded. Such practices are shaped by local beliefs and

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cultural repertoire on the one hand and women’s strategic choices informed by their desired aim on the other. The uncertainties and anxieties inherent in the route these women took to realize their dream in making connections with Western men reveal their vulnerabilities in the global hierarchy which are shaped largely by their gender, class and nationality (Constable 2005; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Sassen 2000). In this context, spirituality offers a channel for women to nurture their hopes and overcome their limitations to reach their goal.

Conclusion

In attempting to understand how village women realized their desires to meet and make connections with Western men which might result in a long-term relationship, this chapter has explored a particular route to transnational marriages. By focusing specifically on Pattaya, a ‘space of hope and opportunity’, where the majority of mia farang in Nadokmai initiated transnational relations, I have shown how women working at the site have used sex work as a vehicle to reach their desired goal. Their actions reflect a high degree of ‘intentionality’ geared toward their goal. For these women, engaging in the sex industry should be understood as a part of their transnational trajectory in becoming a wife of a Westerner rather than their ultimate aim.

If intentionality is reflected in actions, then women working at the site did put a lot of efforts in changing their bodily appearance, in improving their language skills, and in managing liaisons with their clients to their best advantage. The reliance on ritual practices and fortune tellers could be seen as a way to cope with anxieties and uncertainties inherent in their trade. Such practices and strategies are indicative of the women’s determination to overcome their inferior position within global power hierarchies dictated by gender, ethnicity and class.

Women’s actions and negotiations at the site revolve around the issues of sexuality, money and desire for a long-term commitment. All this make relationships between male tourists and women (sex workers) far more ambiguous than prostitute-client associations as often represented in existing literature, focussing exclusively on the exchange of sex for money. My findings are in line with the recent works questioning such dichotomy and pointing out that sex, romance, material support and marriage are intertwined rather than separated in different spheres (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2004, 2009). This represents a
contradicting picture of a normative cultural ideal of marriage prevalent in modern Western societies, based solely on romantic love (see Chapter Three).

Women’s practices of employing sex work as a pragmatic means to enter into transnational marriage contrast with the existing studies – e.g. Pataya Ruenkaew (1999) and Supang Chantavanich et al. (1999) – indicating that marriages between Thai women and Western men is a means for women to engage in sex work in the Western countries, particularly in Germany. The way the women in this study employed sex work as a vehicle to marry a Western partner calls for a broader framework in studying women in the sex industry than the concepts currently used – a victimization/ oppression perspective and an approach viewing sex work as an occupation based exclusively on (sexual) service and economic return. These concepts entirely ignore such aspects as meaningful relationships, affection, and romance arising from interactions between sex workers and their clients as pointed out in the recent works of, for instance Brennan (2004) and Cabezas (2004, 2009). Confining to either economic or victimization perspectives inevitably blocks our understanding of the complexity of the current transnational marriage phenomenon, making us lose sight of the ways in which women (and men) involved in this phenomenon make sense of their lives.

The following chapter will investigate how intimate relations, material considerations and desires influence and shape relationships among people involved in and related to transnational marriages, namely the mia farang, their husbands and the local people in the women’s natal village.
CHAPTER FIVE

MIA FARANG: IMAGES, RELATIONSHIPS AND PRACTICES

Song: Ms. Dummy (Khun-i-puek)

1 Her real name is Bua-sri. 
   Her nickname is known as ‘Dummy’ for scoring last in her class. 
   Her friends call her ‘Ms. Dummy’; her teacher is tired of her. 
   Her awful and abundant ears and eye wax is frightening. 
   Her hair is bushy and wildly messy. 
   The nape of her neck is covered with slime.

2 Dummy, Dummy, Ms. Dummy, being dumber than all others, 
   Look at her head that is full of lice; she never carries any conversation 
   with anyone. 
   Adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing cannot get into her 
   thick mind; crying is all she can offer when her teacher calls on her. 
   After graduating from school, how are you going to make your living, 
   Ms. Dummy?

3 After graduating from elementary school, for several years, no one 
   ever hears any news from her. 
   Her friends are fully blossoming into young men and women. 
   They all are doing well in life. 
   Until the school’s Homecoming Day; Ms. Dummy appears in a wild 
   and colorful outfit of a high-status lady. 
   Everyone is stunned and stares unbelievingly; no one has ever 
   dreamed of seeing her in that stature. 
   Ms. Dummy is married to a farang husband and wearing abundant 
   gold jewelry that is dangling noisily during her walk over to present 
   funds to the school. 
   Being dummy, she nevertheless became a successful and poised 
   dummy. 
   Being an educated and integrative dummy, awesome, 
   People call her ‘International Dummy’ who brings prestige to her 
   natal village. 
   You do not disappoint me, my friend. 
   I am lucky to have a dummy friend who is very dummy like you.

(The first and third parts are repeated; then the song ends with the sentence below).

Find me a farang husband, will you, Ms. Dummy.
This Isan folksong was quite popular in the early 2000s. Many people in Nadokmai knew it. Although they did not remember much of the details, they recalled that it was about a woman whose life dramatically changed by virtue of marrying a farang man. Indeed, the song presents quite an extreme case – even if it draws on an actual life story – especially with regard to young Bua-sri’s personality and intellect. None of the mia farang or the women attempting to marry a farang partner whom I came to know has remotely resembled a personality and intellect similar to that of young Bua-sri as portrayed in the song. Nonetheless, the image of Bua-sri who showed up at the school's Homecoming Day with her farang husband caught on with most villagers who knew this song. The contrasting images of a young, “dumb” Bua-sri and a Bua-sri who appeared up at the school’s homecoming festivities are particularly evident when the song is presented through a video clip. Such multiple images of mia farang are one of the concerns of this chapter.

In addition to exploring the images of mia farang in their diversity, this chapter focuses on the local relationships involving these women, their husbands and their fellow villagers. I will show that these relationships revolve around money, marriage, and intimate ties. Moreover I shall explore the practices of concerned parties in managing and maneuvering the situations they encounter; how such practices shape and are shaped by local cultures and norms related to gender and marriage as well as the different interpretations of these cultural norms in Thai and Western societies.

The review of perspectives and literature regarding transnationalism studies as illustrated in the Introduction has shown that the connections between people involved in transnational activities and those who remain in women’s villages are maintained through two forms: remittance and ‘social remittance’\(^{82}\). While the analysis of the former focuses solely on money sent home and its usage and productivity in economic terms (Keely and Tran 1989; Stahl and Arnold 1986; Taylor 1999), a scrutiny of the latter takes into account the social dimensions transmitting from the receiving to sending societies (Levitt 1996, 2001). Even though these two perspectives are distinctive, both revolve around money by either giving it priority or discounting it. More importantly, both consider money in an economic sense. In my analysis, I pay special attention to the interconnections between money and social and cultural dimensions. Put differently, I want to show how money

\(^{82}\)See further discussion on these two perspectives and a definition of ‘social remittance’ in the Introduction.
could represent social and moral connections between migrants, in this case mia farang, and those who stay behind in their natal village.

In doing so, I do not limit the term ‘money’ only to economic meanings. I embrace Zelizer’s concept of ‘special money’ (1989) emphasizing social meanings of money as a conceptual tool for exploration. Zelizer proposes that the dominant utilitarian conception of market money, which reductively transforms the qualitative distinctions of items, values, and sentiments into an abstract quantity, has limitations in capturing the social meanings of money. The economic concept assumes that market exchange is free from cultural and social influences and constraints whereas “a model of ‘special monies’ is proposed to examine the extra-economic, social basis of modern money” (Zelizer 1989:350). In addition to an economic value, meanings of money are also marked by cultural and social structures mediated through the institutionalizing of controls, restrictions, and distinctions in sources, uses, and modes of allocation. Domestic money, for example, is allocated, calculated, and used according to a set of domestic rules distinct from the rules of the market. Following this line of reasoning, I want to show how interactions and social relations among people involved in and related to transnational marriage have been mediated through money and how money becomes a means representing care, love, recognition, and reaffirming gratitude as well as a sense of continuation of membership of the communities.

As local perceptions of mia farang (re)produced through different social processes and discourses have influenced their relationships and practices, I begin by exploring such perceptions. Then, I move on to examine the relationships and practices in which these women were involved within three different spheres: women’s natal family and kin network, mixed-couple relations, and the community.

The multiple images of mia farang

Mia farang consists of a heterogonous group of women. First of all they come from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Second, the routes these women take to enter into transnational marriages also vary. However, ideas about these women are often stereotyped. This part discusses how such ideas are (re)produced and how they shape attitudes and reactions of local people towards these women. In addition, responses from the women and their Western partners are also addressed.
From mia chao to mia farang

During the first few months of my fieldwork in Nadokmai, I was struck by the way some mia farang stated out right at the beginning of an interview with telling me where they had met their husbands. Some said, “You should know that I did not meet him [her husband] at Pattaya.” Others stated, “my older sister [or my relative] living with her husband in Germany [or England or Norway or...] recommended him to me” or “I met him through internet chatting.” With my limited information at the time, I questioned why they reported their paths to their ultimate goal without being asked where and how they met they husband. This puzzle led me to question ‘the means to an end’ of a transnational marriage. As I continued my fieldwork, I came to realize that this reaction had to do with the ambivalent images the women often were associated with, which were linked to an assumption about the women’s background of being involved in the sex industry.

As discussed in Chapter One, in the period 1965-1975 during the Vietnam War, the association between local women working in the sex and entertainment businesses and American servicemen occurred under the rubric of ‘mia chao,’ or rented wife. Though the association was understood to be a temporary one, there were relationships that were prolonged and eventually resulted in marriage. These marriages re-emphasized a connection between prostitution and marriage to Western men in the Thai collective memory, which continued to question all Thai-Western marriages. Regardless of what the background of the Thai wives might be, they were subjected to such interpretations. In Thai society, in general, this type of marital relation is viewed as a factor representing a potentially ‘fallen’ status of Thai women. Weisman (2000:202) asserts that many ‘good’ women having a Western husband, as well as those working with Western partners, took pains to maintain their reputation, which might be besmirched by their fellow country people. On another level, as addressed before, Weisman also points out that the commercialization of sex that took place during the presence of American military during the Vietnam War-era reflected the loss of control over Thai female sexuality (by Thai men) as women entered into sexual relationships with American servicemen and took control of their own sexuality and images. Thousands of Thai women engaged in this profession unmediated by men, either their fathers or other male relatives.

The residents of Nadokmai whom I spoke with told me they were well aware of the ‘look down’ attitude towards women marrying farang. However, there were mia farang and their parents and relatives who contended this had recently changed. The social stigma
attached to women marrying a Western husband had been diminishing and the transition had to do with women’s capability to support their natal family and kin. In general, the assumption represents the waning of social stigma surrounding the discourse of mia chao. However, the actions and concerns of those involved in and related to current transnational marriages provide a contrasting scenario. A number of mia farang, as mentioned in the beginning of this section, were worried about being questioned about their involvement in the sex industry. Similarly, some parents whose daughters married Western men shared similar concerns about their daughters’ image.

Somsri, a retired school teacher whose daughter, Lita, married Peter, a man from the UK is a case in point. Somsri was very much concerned about how Lita would be perceived by locals and whether she had been questioned about her background. She kept asking her colleagues at school if they had heard villagers gossiping about her daughter – she also asked me about this when I met her for an interview. Somsri recalled a conversation with her daughter regarding her decision to marry Peter. “Wait until I die, then you can go marry a farang. I am ashamed. I see only phuyinghakin (prostitutes) marrying farang.” Although this concern still bothered her, Somsri suggested that the way people looked at women married to Western men might have been changing since their Western spouses were received more warmly by women’s relatives and local people. She said:

Now women with farang husbands are not looked down upon (du thuk) as it was when I was young. At that time, only phuyinghakin became mia chao and some married American soldiers. ‘Good women’ would not associate themselves with farang men. These days, women and [their] farang husbands are rather appreciated. These women can help their parents out with difficulties. Some also help their siblings and relatives to obtain a good education and a good life…The community is more welcoming to farang and they have been encouraged to participate in local festivals. Last year, many farang and their wives joined a Songkran parade organized in the town [Udon]…Now, high class women [women of good economic, education, and career background] in the cities also marry farang.

Although Somsri talked about the changing attitude towards mia farang, her anxiety and concern regarding her daughter’s image reflected the lingering social stigma attached to current transitional marriages. The challenge inherent in the social discourse of mia chao

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83 Lita’s life story was presented in Chapter Three.
that troubled Somsri was shared among well-to-do and well-educated residents, such as shop owners, school teachers, and local government staff, who often related mia farang to a low level of education and an inability to manage financial matters, in addition to speculations about their possible involvement in the sex industry. The ways in which various groups of villagers interpreted the song “Ms. Dummy” highlighted at the beginning of the chapter reflected their diverse views.

Most people that I talked to about the song agreed that it represented a great deal of mia farang’s lives. However, their interpretations of it varied. Women with a Western partner considered it as representation of a successful life story. The woman in the story was finally accepted by her peers. Marrying a Western man allowed her to improve her economic status and become a woman with ‘new identities.’ She appeared with fashionable, urban-style clothes and expensive jewelry; she also made a donation to the school and gained recognition from her school friends. Her new identity was in stark contrast with her life in the past. Some mia farang in the village said that the story was very real to them, especially with respect to how their future was being changed. The way in which the song was interpreted as a success story was shared among parents and relatives of women engaged in this type of marital relation; most of whom enjoyed improved living conditions and a comfortable life supported by their daughters or nieces who married a Western man.

Local government staff and school teachers acknowledged the success of women with foreign husbands and their contribution to local schools and the community, as portrayed in the song. However, they pointed out that most of these women had a low education – only six years of compulsory school. Some were from poor families and had been involved in the sex industry. A school teacher observed that these women had often separated themselves and socialized only among mia farang, their relatives and closed friends. She viewed this behavior as a way to cover up their background, although their economic improvement was evident. This view was often shared by well-to-do residents. For example, Nipha (34), a grocery shop owner, recognized the economic improvement of mia farang and their parents which had contributed to her business. However, she claimed

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84 A woman who told me about the song suggested that I watch the music video clip, which should provide a clearer message of what the song conveyed than just listening to it on a CD. I took this advice and agreed with her, especially on the contrasting depictions of Bua-sri as a young girl and when she joined the school’s home coming celebrations in the company of her farang husband.
that many of them did not manage their money well. Some spent extravagantly on drinking, partying and night-life entertainment while staying in the village during their home visits. For Nipha, these spending patterns showed that the women did not know how to manage their budget. She related this to the limited schooling these women had and perceived such spending behavior as the cause of several failed marriages. The song presented only one part of a larger story, Nipha contended, and it was the only positive part. As a mother of two daughters, Nipha said she would accept her daughters’ eventual decision to marry a local man or a foreigner. She believed that education would help them to make the right decision and had worked towards this goal by investing in their schooling. Like children from the well-to-do families in the village, as well as some of those whose mothers married Western men, Nipha’s two daughters were studying at private schools in Udon.

While the song highlights economic well-being and social recognition (from friends) a woman obtains by virtue of marrying a farang husband, this image is only one side of a coin. The other side of the same coin shows an anxiety that permeates the collective memory of Thai society regarding mia chao. The ambivalent images are highlighted by the ways mia farang live their current lives on the one hand and the particular route they have taken to transnational marriage associated with commercial sex as well as connotations about women’s educational and occupational backgrounds on the other. The anxiety and challenging attitudes were particularly prevalent in urban settings and had often put women under pressure as they encountered situations in which they felt they were being looked down upon. These experiences are symptomatic of social prejudices keenly felt by the women themselves, as one said; “I often got odd looks when I walked with my husband near the hotel in Udon and other places. Though they [hotel staff and guests] did not say anything, I knew they questioned if I had a background that involved prostitution.” Another recalled; “While walking with my husband along the street, I heard someone (a male) say, ‘an old buffalo likes young grass’ (wua kae chop kin ya-on). I knew what was in his mind. He must have thought that I was fishing for an old farang for money.” Taking into account experiences of women in this respect, Sirijit (2009:137-145) associates the perceptions of mia farang among urban residents and the reactions these women encountered with an urban middle-class bias that is (re)produced through the discursive power of the urban elite, whereas aspirations of rural women for social and economic mobility are oppressed and invalidated. However, Sirijit looks only at the class factor in relation to rural-urban distinctions, ignoring class within rural
communities where the marriages are embedded. My findings show that the ambivalent images of *mia farang* exist within rural settings as well as in the context of a rural-urban divide.

The dilemma a number of women who expressed to me the means they took to achieve their ultimate goal, being *mia farang*, as well as women’s parents, like Somsri, have struggled over has to do with the co-existence of the social stigma produced through the discourse of *mia chao* and a secure future and comfortable life that women have obtained with Western partners.

**Strategic resources and a discourse about eroding families**

The multiple images of *mia farang* are (re)produced through various processes among which local leader perspectives and central government/academic discourses make up the key parts. The former perceives *mia farang* and their husbands as strategic resources capable of supporting community activities and social development, especially in terms of funding. The latter often views these women as victims who are at risk of being trafficked and regards the current transnational marriage phenomenon as symptomatic of a decline of the family institution and blames consumerism for changing ideas and practices around marriage.

In Nadokmai, the consumption power and comfortable living the *mai farang* enjoyed were evident: the possession of houses, cars, and other valuables, not to mention the enviable lifestyles of the mixed couples. The contributions these women and their husbands made to the community were for all to see, although this generosity was ambiguously viewed by locals. Such expressions of appreciation particularly came from community leaders: some viewed mixed couples as strategic resources for village development. For instance, when talking about *mia farang* and their husbands, the head of the sub-district municipality, a man in his sixties, often related them to (material) progress (*khwam charoen*) in the village as well as to an improvement in the living conditions of the women’s natal families. As he put it:

> Without *mia farang* and their husbands, we would not see as many cars and motor bikes, as well as the big, nice, brand new houses in the village as we do nowadays...These women take care of their parents and support their children’s education. Some build a new house for their parents and send them an allowance. These are the things *mia farang* and their husbands living in various countries have brought to the village...The women also co-
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operate with the community; they always contribute to communal development and village fairs...We regularly organize traditional festivals which villagers can enjoy; everyone in this area [Nadokmai and the surrounded villages] knows that fairs in Nadokmai are grand, there’s a lot of fun and no one can miss them. You will see.

This local leader, like some village committee members and local residents, often talked about these changes with pride. They viewed material improvement as symbols of khwam charoen indicating that their village was not left behind in the race for modernity. He also attributed the growth of businesses such as grocery stores, computer shops and restaurants in the village to the consumer power of mia farang, their husbands, and their natal households. At the same time, the economic improvement induced mixed couples to invest in various businesses both in the village and elsewhere. In the eyes of this local leader, transformation in the village over the previous decade, especially in terms of material progress, was largely influenced by overseas remittances from mia farang. Without this contribution, it would have been difficult for Nadokmai to reach this stage.

The municipal head pointed out that he neither supported nor rejected mixed marriages. As a community leader, he considered such marriages as personal choices. Moreover he welcomed these ‘foreign in-laws’ and appreciated the contributions they and their wives made to the community. This position was shared by some staff at the district office who often said that they took a ‘neutral’ stand, neither encouraging nor opposing mixed marriages. Neutral or not, the way in which this type of marriage is perceived as a means to bringing progress to the community has reinforced the image of mia farang (and their husbands) as strategic resources. To a certain extent, this image has, directly or indirectly, propelled women to enter into transnational marital relations.

The local optimistic view in this respect is totally different from the national government’s standpoint and some academic discourses which look at transnational marriage in connection with problems of women trafficking and the weakening of local traditions and family values. This government discourse is persistently (re)produced through the media: newspapers, television, websites, and other forms of government-supported activities. During my fieldwork in early 2008, a research team funded by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSO) collected information in Nadokmai to evaluate the implementation of a government project aimed at fighting human trafficking. One of the main purposes of the project was to provide information and raise public awareness about human trafficking, paying special attention to women
trafficking and its connections to current transnational marriages. A female leader in Nadokmai, who had attended a training session supported by the MSO in late 2007, shared with me her experience of having a hard time making sense of the information provided during the training.

The main theme of the two-day session was about trafficking in women and how marrying a *farang* man had been used as a means to lure women into transnational prostitution, especially in European countries. The training indicated that women marrying or attempting to marry Western partners were at risk of being victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. For her part, what she had heard contrasted with what she observed in Nadokmai. Most *mia farang* and their parents in the village had a better life as the daughters helped build new houses, buy farm land, and contribute to the community’s prosperity. Most of them seemed to have a good family life with their foreign husbands. If a woman got a ‘bad man’ – one who did not treat her well or did not care for her parents – she ended the relationship and tried to find a ‘good’ person. This leader found it was difficult to imagine how *mia farang* could be victims as she was told in the training. Her personal perceptions of *mia farang* and transnational marriage, which was shared among a number of village residents, reflected a gap between the state discourse and local realities, at least in Nadokmai.

Such a difference may have to do with how trafficking in women is defined. Though it is not clear about the meaning of trafficking referred to in this particular training, it is worth noting the definitions of ‘trafficking’ used in research and development works. In an edited volume on a global survey on human trafficking (Laczko and Gozdziak 2005) the term trafficking is defined in quite different ways, although at the international level there is a legal definition. 85 Some authors identify the term as including both sexual and labor exploitation. Others focus primarily on trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation. Some researchers label all sex workers as trafficked persons, based on the belief that no one would willingly enter in such an occupation, whilst others make a distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution (Doezeme 1998; Gozdziak and Collect 2005; Laczko 2005). In analyzing human trafficking, some works also include mail-order brides, arranged marriages, sham adoptions, forced labor, and slavery-like practices (Gozdziak and Collect 2005: 107). While it cannot be denied that trafficking practices do exist, in Nadokmai marrying a Western partner became a means to achieve a

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85 See Laczko (2005:10) for the UN-definition of the terms ‘trafficking in person.’
better life as many women and their rural kin experienced. Thus, this discourse did not resound in the lives of the women who married their husbands voluntarily and enjoyed a rather comfortable life. In this context, it is difficult to imagine these women as ignorant victims.

Alongside the image of women as victims, transnational marriages were often associated with the decline of the traditional family values. This issue was prevalent in the government discourses, the academic works, and the media, especially during the second half of the 2000s when news about transnational marriage, as well as stories, experiences, and opinions of Thai women and Western men involved in this type of marital relation, frequently appeared in the national and local printed press and online media. During my fieldwork in 2008, the issues around transnational marriages and their impact on local communities and cultural life were brought up by some mia farang and their Western partners after a news article in Kom Chad Luek national newspaper (March 4, 2008) reported on this issue. The news quoted comments of various government officials including the Khon Kaen and Nongkhai Education District Directors, the Director of the Northeastern Office of the NESDB, and the Secretary of the Ministry of Culture which indicated the desire of a number of Isan women and girls to become mia farang. This news article particularly emphasized this desire among very young people, including a kindergarten school girl who said: “I want to be a mia farang when I grow up,” believing that this was a means to become wealthy and to have big house (Kom Chad Luek, March 4, 2008: 15).

The news also reported comments made by Supawatanakorn Wongthanavasu, a lecturer at the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University. Based on her own research (Supawatanakorn et al. 2005), she associated transnational marriage to visible material gains – houses, cars, and money – pointing out that these material possessions were manifestations of consumerism which drove women to seek transnational marriage.

86Such national newspapers include Kom Chad Luek, March 4 and 27, 2008 and Thai Rat, February 7, 2009. Kom Chad Luek newspaper dedicated a column entitled “International Daughters-in-law, Farang Sons-in-law” (Saphai Inter, Khoei Farang) which I found throughout the period of April and May 2008. Isan News, the local monthly newspaper, also frequently contained news related to the Thai women-Western men marriages. For instance, the issue on April 1-30, 2008 presented the results of research conducted by a team of lecturers at the Faculty of Management Sciences, Khon Kaen University, on how the marriages influence the local economy. There are also online newspapers and websites such as www.manager.co.th, www.talkstory.com and www.udonmap.com (accessed January 24, 2011) which have often posted news and stories about transnational marriages and mixed couples.

87The website, www.talkstory.com/site/article.php?id=2027 (accessed August 25, 2008), contains more or less the same information as the newspaper article.
This signals that the attitudes of people were now more attached to material benefits. Supawatanakorn remarked that how difficult it was to get a decent job even for people with university degrees and those with jobs might not earn enough income to cover expenses. She revealed that some university students wanted to have a farang boyfriend as this could instantaneously change their lives. In her research, Supawatanakorn et al. (2005) relates transnational marriages to changes in the institution of family and claims that the on-going transition of ideas and practices around marriage by giving emphasis on economic security over social values has much to do with the current marriage phenomenon. This change signals the decline of the family institution in Isan.

A few mia farang in Nadokmai who read this article were dismayed because they thought it conveyed the messages that women married Western men for money only. A woman, who brought this up to me as she was not sure whether it was my research being quoted, commented that most mia farang, like her, had sought transnational marriage because of family crises, the irresponsibility of local men, and a desire to take care of their parents. She asked why such women’s experiences and commitments were not mentioned in the article. Another woman expressed the view that what was presented in the news was just a part of the story – which only dealt with the material side of it, thus creating a rather negative image of women with Western partners. While these women agreed that material desires played a part in motivating them to engage in transnational marriage, their views reflected the complexities inherent in this type of marriage which went beyond mere material considerations.

Similarly, a few Western partners I spoke with, who lived both in the village and in the town, pointed out that their Thai wives had helped their natal family and supported their children, and that they actively supported their wives in fulfilling these obligations. In their views, these women had conformed to local traditions regarding family values, and their support benefited their wives’ families, thus reinforcing the family institution at the local level rather than weakening it. Although some mia farang told me they had to convince their farang husbands to accept their situation and support them in upholding this local norm, the farang men for their part considered the way in which transnational marriage was presented as though it had brought negative changes to the Isan family and traditional culture as an urban-educated vision, ignoring realities in rural communities.

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88Two men were informed about the research through internet chatting. Another one was told by his wife, who read the Thai newspaper article.
The Western men’s views are in line with Sirijit’s commentaries (2009:142-151) on the negative tone of interpretation presented in Supawatanakorn’s work on (Thai) discourses of gender and class as seen from the perspectives of well-educated, middle- and upper-class women. These views see women as a homogenous group and overlook the differences in their experiences and the contexts in which these occur. I share Sirijit’s criticism since without taking the multiplicity and complexity of the transnational marriage phenomenon into consideration, such an analysis is bound to be static and rather ‘biased’ as mia farang and their Western partners in Nadokmai indicated. In Chapter Three I have highlighted the diverse motivations that draw Thai women and farang men to transnational marriage. These marriages are not solely based on the lures of consumerism, but are also shaped by other factors, among these gender relations in both Thai and Western societies are an important force. In particular, I suggest looking at how Thai gender relations play a role in motivating and reinforcing women to seek foreign partners and how local gender ideologies and practices have been renegotiated as a result of transnational marriage. By doing this we can better understand the impact of the current transnational marriage phenomenon on the dynamics of local norms and practices concerning marriage, gender, and family rather than viewing the phenomenon in relation to material benefits and how it results in the decline of the local family institution.

While the ambivalent images of mia farang are shaped and (re)produced through various factors and means, such as class (both in the contexts of rural village and a rural-urban divide), as well as local and central government/academic discourses, these images mainly revolve around an improvement of material resources that women gained by virtue of marrying Western partners. At the same time, this well-being also generates expectations and influenced relationships and practices developed under this type of marital relations. The second half of this chapter explores the social interactions and relations in various contexts. The following section focuses on the relationships within women’s natal families including their siblings.

**Bun khun and relationships within the female natal family**

*Bun khun*, a cultural norm that can be described as the debt of gratitude one feels toward anyone that is good to her/him, and is a key aspect of Thai family and social life. This norm applies to parent-children relations as well as to close interpersonal relationships among friends, relatives, and neighbors. A person may have *bun khun* to friends or
neighbors for assisting her/him to acquire a job or helping her/him out of a difficult situation. This cultural value is applicable to all Thais regardless of social status and class position (Mulder 1985; Pramualratana 1992). In the Thai family, relationships between parents and children are determined by this cultural norm (Akin 1984). By giving birth to children, and caring for and bringing them up, parents gain the debt of gratitude from their children. In return, children owe life-long gratitude and respect to their parents. It is this cultural norm that mia farang in Nadokmai and elsewhere talked about when describing their desire to find Western husbands. Almost all women mentioned their wishes of supporting their parents and children from previous relationships with local men, as one of their motivations.

Following ideals of bun khun reciprocity, children should be obedient and respectful to their parents as well as care for them in all ways possible. Support from children is particularly important when parents become older and can no longer work or help themselves. The ways in which daughters and sons are required to repay the debt of gratitude to parents differ, which has to be understood in the context of gender distinctions influenced by Thai Buddhist beliefs. A son is expected to be ordained as a Buddhist monk for a period of time in his life, preferably before his marriage. It is believed that by taking up the yellow robes, sons generate a store of merit for their parents. This act is considered to be a major way for sons to express their gratitude to their parents. However, it does not mean that he no longer has to take care of and support his parents, but expectations for sons to contribute to their parental households are relatively flexible. The different expectations towards a son’s and a daughter’s contribution to the parental household is reinforced by matrilocal principles; a man will leave his parents and move into his wife’s household, where he is expected to contribute to his in-law family. This cultural ideal shapes parents’ expectation towards daughters and sons differently (Mills 1999; Pramualratana 1992).

Women, according to Thai Buddhist practices, are not allowed to become monks. It is believed that females’ biological role as mothers connect them more closely to worldly attachments. According to Kirsch (1982), this connection reflects a disadvantaged status of women in the religious world. Daughters can repay the debt of gratitude to their parents by contributing to household affairs as well as by providing material necessities and comfort to their parents. The distinction of gender roles is reinforced through socialization processes. Normally, girls are trained to undertake domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of toddlers, as well as helping in the family fields from an early
age. Boys are given more freedom, although by the time they become grown-up men, sons are taught to perform strenuous tasks of farming such as plowing and wood felling (Mills 1999; Pramualratana 1992).

The life stories and accounts of many Nadokmai women such as Kham, Lan, Jit, and Phin, presented in Chapters One and Two reveal how these women, as young girls, helped their parents in domestic tasks and earned money by engaging in trading, working as a household helpers, and helping in the field. These roles reflect women’s attachment to their parental household, at the same time symbolizing the gratitude of a dutiful daughter, an ideal deeply valued in Thai society. With the prevalence of distinctive tasks in which girls and boys and women and men are involved, scholars also observed flexibility of gender roles in Thai society (see Hanks and Hanks 1963; Mills 1999; Potter 1977).

Phin’s story (Narrative 1.3, Chapter One) shows the recognition and fulfillment she had earned through supporting her parents and helping her siblings and their families, apart from contributing to the community. When talking about obligations to the natal family drawing on the notion of *bun khun*, Phin, like many other *mia farang* in Nadokmai, included her siblings, although she gave priority to taking care of her parents. In his paper on Thai women in a Bangkok slum community, Akin (1990) explains why a woman sacrificed her own education and worked hard to support her brother’s schooling as a way to repay a debt of gratitude to her parents. This analysis is framed by the cultural notion of *bun khun*. A number of *mia farang* in Nadokmai talked about support they provided to their siblings in this context.

Although *bun khun* reciprocity underlines women’s obligations to their parents, this does not mean that parents expect assistance and support from all daughters (and sons) equally. In Nadokmai, as in most parts of Thailand, some parents, especially those who cannot help themselves may rely heavily on the daily labor of one daughter while receiving financial support from other daughter(s) and son(s). Normally, daughters (and sons) who are relatively well-off are expected to contribute to parental households more in terms of financial support. Conversely, children, both daughters and son, who are in difficult situations or are in need of money, may get support from their parents. In this case the financial burden is often borne by siblings who are in a better economic situation. The account of Kaew’s sister, presented below, illustrates such a case. Nonetheless, most women, especially *mia farang* in Nadokmai, conformed to the principle of *bun khun* reciprocity; the cultural norm which is not only deeply rooted in Thai society, but also legitimizes their involvement in transnational marriages.
The rest of this section explores the ways in which *mia farang* attempted to maintain relationships characterized by *bun khun* and how ideals of this cultural norm shaped practices and relationships within their natal families. It also examines the role of Western partners in such a context. In connection with this, it is important to note that parent-child relations in Western societies are formalized in a different manner than that of Thai society. There are less expectation of reciprocity between the offspring and the elder generation. Rather, it emphasizes the nuclear family value and the relationship between spouses above the relations with parents of either wife’s or husband’s side (Panitee 2009:76-77). This cultural distinction might make it difficult for Western partners to comply with the wish of their Thai wives and to contribute financially to the needs of parent’s (and sibling’s), especially when regular demands were involved. Inevitably, the distinct differences of the cultural scripts had shaped relationships between the couples and created tensions among them and women’s parents. Kaew and her father’s experiences elaborate her attempt to conform to *bun khun* relations and how this cultural norm generated expectations and anxieties for Kaew and her father.

At the time I started my fieldwork in the village, Kaew (26), a divorced mother, began seeing Bob, an Australian man in his mid-fifties she had met at Pattaya on New Year’s Day (January 1, 2008), after working there for almost two months. Kaew and her six-year-old son lived under the same roof with her ailing father and her hard-drinking mother. Her other three sisters lived with their families in separate households; a sister that lived in the village next to Nadokmai worked at the sub-district municipality. Kaew’s only brother used to work overseas but he rarely contributed to the parent household financially. Due to their age and health conditions, Kaew’s parents could not work anymore; they had relied on remittances mainly from their daughters (and periodically from their son) while Kaew took care of domestic routines when she lived with them. Asking about her previous relationship, Kaew did not want to talk about it; she only mentioned that “we (her ex-partner and her) could not get along (*rao pai kan mai dai*).” According to an aunt of her best friend, Kaew’s partner was not reliable; he could neither support himself nor take care of his family as he did not have a secure job. This was the main reason why Kaew’s parents and her sisters wanted her to get a divorce. Kaew was finally convinced, though she still had affection for him, the woman reported.

I met Kaew for the first time at her house, a single-story, elevated wooden house; it was quite old, though its size was moderate. We sat and talked in the space beneath the house next to her parent’s room. Due to his ill-health, it was difficult for Kaew’s father to
use the stairs, therefore he and his wife lived in a simple room downstairs. Kaew mentioned, “My house is old and crappy. I want to renovate it and make a better room for my parents downstairs.” She told Bob about her concern about the house and her commitment to support her parents and son when he asked about her family. Bob accepted this with conditions. At my request, she recalled the conversation with Bob about this issue, and his response:

We were together for three days. We did not talk much because I do not speak much English. He asked about my life and my family. I told him that I have a son and parents to look after. He did not say much; he knew that I understood only a little of what he said, anyway… I returned home because my father got sick. He [Bob] called me every day and asked me to stay at home, and not to return to work at Pattaya again. He did not say clearly whether he would support me; but he sent me money. Then I stayed at home…He also sent me a gift catalogue and asked me to choose what I wanted [Kaew showed me a catalogue of jewelry, shoes, purses etc.]. I wanted to tell him don’t send me gifts; I would rather have money so that I can renovate my house…He came to see me in the village in March [2008] and stayed at the hotel in Udon, not at my house. Before leaving, he told me that my house is more like a hut than a real house and that he would help support my family, but it has to be step by step. He cannot make everything happen like magic since he is not a rich man.

When we met subsequently, Keaw expressed her worry about whether Bob would keep his promise to help renovate the family house. She mentioned that farang men are extremely suspicious that women might play tricks on them so they always check things out. Kaew waited with anxiety. Her father was also excited by the prospect of getting support from Bob as he had seen many wealthy mai farang’s families in the village. He knew that Bob had remitted his daughter an allowance. However, it was not certain whether he really would help in renovating the house. He said, “Many mia farang in the village build new houses or buy paddy land. Farang [men] are rich. Some of them build houses for their women, even though they are not married yet [formally registered the marriage]. I do not know what would happen to Kaew. It depends on her fate.” While parents expected their daughters to get material support from farang partners, many also expressed the wish that their daughters would have a better life by marrying a Western man after their bad spells with local men whose irresponsibility left them in the cold.
In May 2008, before my trip to Amsterdam to continue my Ph.D. program, it was not clear whether Kaew’s and her father’s expectation to have a new house built would materialize. Bob kept silent, but he paid for Kaew to visit him in Australia and she was waiting for a visa. In early 2009, when I returned to the village, the house was under construction. Kaew explained that she talked to Bob a few times about the house during her stay in Australia. Before her return to Thailand, he agreed to her request. They made a rough design of the two-story house with rooms downstairs for her parents. The construction began when Kaew came back to Nadokmai; during my last visit in August 2010, the house was finished. By that time Kaew and her son had already left for Australia. For Kaew, Bob’s decision in helping build the house testified to his commitment and seriousness about the relationship. This convinced her that he would take good care of her and her son, making it easier for her to leave the village and move to live with him in Australia.

After the family’s desire for a new house was realized, there was a financial crisis and Kaew was called upon to help the family out of this situation. Her oldest sister, who was working in the sub-district municipal office and very keen on politics, decided to run in the local council election. She had a better education than the other children – having graduated from a vocational school while her siblings had only four to six years of schooling. She also had a salary job whereas her siblings were engaged in farm work and labor employment. Kaew’s father thought that this background would facilitate his daughter’s political ambitions, and if these came true, she and the family would have a better future. He supported her by putting up the family’s paddy as collateral to take out a loan for her election campaign. However, she was defeated and he was at risk of losing the land. He realized that it was unlikely that she would be able to pay back the money. The only way out was to ask Kaew for support. However, he left the decision up to her since she had already done a lot for the family. When I ended my fieldwork and left the village, Kaew was in Australia. She was aware of her family’s situation, but it remained unclear how she reacted to the crisis and whether Bob would help his wife to save her family’s paddy.

The expectations for assistance from their natal families are a recurring problem for most mia farang in Nadokmai. These women told me that generally they could not ignore their elderly parents or siblings’ financial troubles; they felt obligated to help. Nevertheless, the support was dependent on their husband’s agreement, especially when it involved large sums of money, as in the case of Kaew’s family. While these women
conformed to female obligations as dutiful daughters, some complained that people in the home village, including their families, made endless demands on them, not realizing how hard they had to work overseas and the effort they put in to save enough money to remit home.

The story of Kaew and her natal family illustrates how the cultural norm of bun khun plays out in practice and how it shapes expectations and relationships within a woman’s natal family. It indicates a woman’s strategy in maintaining this norm; though an inconsistency between the cultural norm and individual choice, as in the case of Kaew’s sister, also existed. This means that bun khun is not the all-explaining concept. In conforming to this cultural norm, women are often put under great pressure. This situation requires adaptation and negotiation in order to maintain good relationships with their partners and their rural kin. To illuminate this point, I return to Sa’s story presented in Chapter Three (Narrative 3.1).

Sa and Sven had settled in Nadokmai since 2003 after living together in Pattaya for almost two years. Since moving to the village, the couple had taken care of Sa’s parents. When her mother – who had passed away – got sick, the couple took up most of the expenses for medication. Then, they had been taking care of her father who also developed health problems. Frequently, the couple was also confronted with requests for financial help from Sa’s siblings, and such demands put them under stress. Her moral attachment to her kin made Sa feel bad if she ignored the requests. At the same time she wanted to ensure the household’s financial security and have some savings for the future as well. Sven, for his part, had supported his wife in taking care of her elderly parents. However, it was difficult for him to also accept all requests from his wife’s siblings and help them. Sa’s assertion below indicates an example of how a couple managed to maintain moral ties with woman’s siblings and simultaneously keep good relationships between them:

At first, he [Sven] did not agree [to help her siblings]; though we responded to some requests. He always questioned whether they worked hard enough to help themselves. Now, he accepts it more, but this kind of request often irritated him…We talked about this whenever being asked to help. I told him that I understand him as he did a lot for my parents. But I would feel very bad if I did not help my siblings at all…Eventually, both of us agreed that it would not be possible to respond to all demands. We help with whatever we can; though it might be much less than they expected…I felt depressed whenever I was asked for (financial) support, especially when it involved a large amount.
Like Sven and Bob, many Western partners in Nadokmai helped their wives to fulfill filial obligations, although these men did not view their support from a perspective of the Thai cultural norm of *bun khun* reciprocity. Rather, they regarded this from a welfare providing perspective. Thailand did not have state-provided welfare such as unemployment and old-age benefits. Only those who worked as civil servants have pension and health care coverage after retirement. However, this was not applicable for most rural residents who engaged in agriculture, wage employment, and self-employed occupations. It was not until 2001 that the government implemented a health insurance scheme in which rural residents could receive benefits.89 With only very limited welfare provisions, aged parents relied heavily on their children. The English and Swedish partners, both engineers and in their forties, talked about women’s commitment and support for their parents in this context. They viewed children’s contribution to parents’ material needs, especially in terms of remittances, as a source of informal welfare which was different from the state provided welfare they had in their countries. From this perspective, the Swedish man had supported his wife, who did not have a job, by remitting an allowance to her mother in the village regularly.

In assisting their wives in fulfilling their *bun khun* obligations, regardless of their understanding and appreciation of this Thai cultural norm, Western partners were not naïve about requests for assistance. This concern was reflected in my conversation with two German men and a Swedish man getting together outside a grocery shop while waiting for their wives who were buying food in the village market. One of the German men said: “Let them [women’s parents] work if they are about my age and healthy. I am working. I will not support a father-in-law in his fifties who still can work.” A Swedish man in his mid-fifties added, “I told my wife I will take good care of her old mother. But if her younger brother [living with the parents] does not work and just asks her for money, she should kick him out [of the house].” Similar views were presented on websites where the issue of supporting women’s parents was also widely debated.90 In general, if the wives’ parents (and siblings) were old or if they were in financial dire straights or suffering from health

89 According to this system, when going to a public hospital, the patients pay only 30 Baht per visit to cover service and medical costs. Although rural residents benefit from this system, they complain about low-quality of treatment and services compared to private hospitals, which are much more expensive. The complaints are particularly evident among family members of *mia farang* who, through support of the mixed couples, sometimes visit private hospitals or clinics instead of local public hospitals or health centers.

problems, the Western partners did not deny requests for help, though their levels of support varied.

When their desire to carry out filial obligations was not realized, some women chose to terminate the relationship rather than remaining in a depressed situation. This is the case of Mon (see Narrative 1.4, Chapter One). Mon ended earlier on her relationships with two Western men and a local man who was the father of her son mainly because these men did not care for her parents. Living with Rob, her Dutch husband, and working as a cook in a Thai restaurant owned by her husband’s family Mon could regularly send home remittances to support her parents. She also helped her siblings and their families by hiring them to take care of the resort in which she and Rob invested, instead of giving or lending them money. Interestingly, many of the parents in Nadokmai were inclined to believe that overseas remittances came from sons-in-law. Even if the parents knew that their daughters had a job, they still believed that the sons-in-law earned more and that these men were wealthy. Undoubtedly this perception reinforced local expectations of contributions from mia farang and their partners to the women’s natal families and the community, an issue I shall elaborate in later sections.

The above discussions show that the relationships between mia farang, their husbands, and their parents (and siblings) developed around the cultural norm of bun khun reciprocity, obligating women to provide material support to their parental household, and possibly their siblings. Many of these women provided an allowance to their parents regularly. Material support represents an expression of women’s gratefulness toward their parents and at the same time epitomizes the cultural ideal of a dutiful daughter. Such support brings to mind Zelizer’s notion of ‘special money’ (1989) on which the concept of money extends beyond its economic value to encompass cultural and social meanings, a key aspect of Thai family life and which is deeply ingrained in Thai society. Another aspect showing how material resources could represent respect and gratitude to women’s parents as well as symbolize the groom’s commitment and willingness to take care of his bride is expressed through the local practice of sinsot (bride wealth).

**Bride wealth**

Looking at the various ways in which relationships mediated through transnational marriage are shaped in the contexts of cultural distinctions in Thai and Western society, I now focus on the practice of sinsot, its cultural meanings, and its influences on
transnational marital relations. Following Robin Fox’s work (1967) on kinship and marriage, I would translate the Thai term sinsot into English as ‘bride wealth’ – instead of ‘bride price’ as commonly used – so as to denote the aspect of social relations within and between kin groups. In Thailand, a woman and a man can acquire social acceptance and legitimacy as a couple through a wedding ceremony and by the groom offering bride wealth to the bride’s parents. The significance of bride wealth is based not solely on its economic value, but also represents the way the groom expresses his respect to the bride’s parents, thanking them for raising her up, and demonstrating to them that he has enough financial resources to support her after the wedding. The system of providing bride wealth is also interpreted in connection to bun khun reciprocity, a chance for the bride to repay the debt of gratitude to her mother (Akin 1984).

Furthermore, this cultural norm is also associated with matrilocality and the practices of matrilocal residence in Thai society as well as in Isan. According to the matrilocal rules, land is commonly inherited through the women’s line. In exchange for his right to share farm land and the household gained through marriage, traditionally a groom was required to provide bride wealth – forms of bride wealth could be money, gold, goods, cattle, and labor – to the family of the bride. Since the mid-twentieth century, as migration became an integral part of the livelihood of rural residents, the practices of matrilocal residence have been challenged. In Nadokmai, as well as in other rural communities, many newly-married couples or men who just got married left their home villages to engage in employment in the cities and foreign countries. In contrast to the post-marital residence norm, the custom of bride wealth is maintained both in rural and urban-middle class communities, though forms of payment have become diverse (Lyttleton 2000; Sumalee 1995; Whittaker 1999). The shifts have emphasized cash while such assets as a house, a car, gold, jewelry, and other valuables were also included, especially for wealthy matches. As a result of monetization of both urban and rural economies, an inflationary rate of bride wealth is noticeable, especially in the past two decades (Sumalee 1995; Whittaker 1999). The continuity of this customary practice confirms its cultural relevance; and its economic significance should be taken into account in relation to its social and cultural meanings.

91 Fox’s work suggests the different denotations of the terms bride wealth and bride price. He uses the term bride price when discussing the exchange between women and goods under exogamy principles so as to deal with the demographic problems caused by sex-ratio imbalance (Fox 1967: 175-180), while bride wealth is used in the context of the discussion on lineage and descent groups as well as relationships between a groom, a bride, and her children (Fox 1967: 109-120). This usage entails that bride price may associate more with exchange, especially in terms of materials/goods and women, whereas bride wealth denotes the aspect of social relations within and between kin groups. The Thai term sinsot denotes the latter perspective.
The size of the bride wealth varies according to the social and economic standing of the bride and her family. If a bride is from a distinguished family or if she has a secure occupation, the groom has to offer an amount significant enough to impress her parents and extended family. For many, bride wealth is related to aesthetic attributes of the bride as well. Normally, the amount is decided upon by the representatives of the bride’s and groom’s families prior to the wedding ceremony. The agreement on a bride wealth symbolizes the official sanctioning of a wedding. In practice, both for peasants and urban middle- and high-class families, the marriage ceremony and providing of bride wealth is more common than the formal registration of marriages by law (Lyttleton 2000; Whittaker 1999).

In Nadokmai, almost all of the married women and men I spoke with, regardless of their age, already organized this marriage custom – whether it was a small ceremony involving a small amount of bride wealth or a grand wedding with a relatively large value of bride wealth – while not very many of them had registered their marriage. In Thailand, the marriage registration law (for Thai couples) was issued in 1935 – almost four decades after the law concerning Thai-foreigner marriage was passed in 1897 (Dararat 2007:44-47), see more details in Chapter One. As a result of the law, only through legal registration a marriage is officially recognized. However, a customary wedding remains important as a rite to acquire social acceptance and legitimize marriage unions. In Western societies, norms regarding marriage are different. In the Netherlands, for example, since the mid-twentieth century a marriage rite is no longer viewed as an obligation to legitimize marriage. It is common for partners to live together and to marry later; there are cases when couples choose not to have a wedding ceremony or marriage registration (Panitee 2009:62-63). In addition, as discussed before, bride wealth payment is incompatible with the Western ideal that marriage is based mainly on romantic love. The practice of bride wealth in the view of Westerners represents a way of buying a wife; this issue has been widely discussed online. The debates indicate that ideally Western men do not accept this custom, though many of them conform to it.92 The different interpretation of bride wealth drawing on cultural distinctions inevitably influenced relationships among the parties concerned.

I now want to return to the life story of Lita (see Chapter Three, Narrative 3.3) to examine how the local norm of bride wealth might create tensions with regard to family

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and social relationships. On the basis of social and economic background, Lita’s family was among the top of the village hierarchy. Both of her parents were retired teachers and Lita was also a school teacher. Lita’s decision to marry Peter brought much concern to her mother, Somsri, who not only worried about her daughter’s reputation, which might be besmirched, but also about whether or not Peter would accept and! follow the local marriage ceremony. Another concern was the value of bride wealth which would have to be appropriate (mo som), in accordance with her family status.

To dispel her mother’s worries, Lita explained to her that Peter was well informed about Thai customs and ways of life. He read and often shared with her what he learned about Thai culture. He also had a few friends who married Thai women whom Lita had met when she visited him in England. Peter no doubt would get suggestions about Thai weddings form them. Lita admitted that she was not sure whether Peter would provide an adequate bride wealth as she did not ask him about this. She explained, “Talking about this [value of bride wealth] he might think that I was marrying him for money. I just hoped that he would not upset my family as he knew about Thai customs.” Peter did not tell Lita until a few months before the wedding. The amount he provided – 400,000 Baht (US$ 11,428) plus a gold necklace and a bracelet for Lita – was not disappointing. It was the highest bride wealth in terms of cash value among the mia farang in Nadokmai I knew then; the range was between 100,000-400,000 Baht (US$ 2,857-11,428). In some cases, bride wealth was provided in the form of land or a house, not cash. It was also common that, apart from money, there was also an amount of gold or jewelry. Usually, parents would give the gold and jewelry to their daughter and part of the money was used for the wedding ceremony and feast. In some cases, the foreign partners were expected to pay for the wedding feast apart from bride wealth.

When asked about her expectations of the value of the bride wealth, Somsri answered thoughtfully, “Sinsot is not a matter of money itself; however the amount has to be mo som (appropriate/adequate), which does not make the family sia na (lose face) [if it was too little].” Although Somsri did not say exactly how much the appropriate amount should be, her emphasis illustrates the concern about a family’s prestige and dignity attached to the bride wealth. The social significance of bride wealth was shared by villagers despite its varying sizes. When a bride wealth is considered ‘inappropriate’ – lower than what is expected – the women and their families would be the object of gossips. Women from a family of relatively good socio-economic background with a college
education like Lita would become a particular target of gossip if their expectation of an adequate bride was not met.

While bride wealth practice is applied to both local and transnational marriages, it is acceptable if a local man offers less than a Western man. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the value of the bride wealth has to be considered in relation to the social and economic status of the bride and her family. A school teacher from one of the well-to-do households in the village reported that two years ago his daughter married a Thai man she had met while studying in college. His son-in-law provided a bride wealth of 200,000 Baht (US$ 5,714) and shared the cost of a wedding feast while his family took up the expenses of the marriage rite. The teacher was pleased, though he mentioned that the bride wealth may not have been very high compared to the cases of women who married farang men.

Again as we have seen earlier, the image of ‘better-off Westerners’ has an impact on local expectations on bride wealth. While parents’ anticipations about bride wealth are shaped by this image, they also showed concern about the ability and willingness of Western men to take care of their daughters. For example, Wan, a woman in her fifties from an average household whose daughter married a German husband, commented that most parents had only limited information about personal and family background of Western men who were seeing their daughters. According to her, by providing an adequate bride wealth a man shows he has enough resources and is willing to take care of his wife, thus ensuring her future.

Unlike Lita and her mother, Wan and her daughter, Ooy (27) had a different experience with how bride wealth influenced transnational relationships. According to Wan, this local norm was the cause of the termination of a transnational relationship involving her daughter Ooy. Wan told me that Ooy had met Chris, an Englishman, in Samui in 2005. For almost a year, they kept contact. Chris remitted Ooy an allowance and gave 100,000 Bath (US$ 2,857) for renovating the house in the village. “They got along quite well. Chris came to be with Ooy in the village twice… He was a nice man and my daughter liked him very much,” Wan said. During his second visit, Chris and Ooy talked about marriage with Wan and her husband. Wan wanted them to follow Thai marriage customs and provide a bride wealth; she asked for 200,000 Bath (US$ 5,714). Chris did not refuse, but before leaving the village for England he told Ooy that he did not have money. A few weeks after leaving Thailand, he called and informed Ooy that he could not afford to pay the bride wealth. Ooy told him to save money and they could marry when he had enough savings, but he did not agree to this. He then stopped communicating with her.
Wan said that she did not know why he changed his mind. For Wan, the only possibility she could imagine was that he might not want to provide a bride wealth. It was not clear why Chris ended his relationship with Ooy. It was possible that he did not have enough money as he claimed or he did not want to continue the relationship. It might well be that Chris considered paying a bride wealth as a way of buying a wife which, on the basis of his cultural orientation, he could not accept. In any case, this brought the relationship to an end.

Ooy’s and Lita’s stories show how different interpretations of bride wealth based on distinctive cultural norms in Thai and Western societies shaped relations and created tensions among these women, their parents, and their partners. In late 2006, almost a year after the relationship with Chris did not work out, Ooy met Harmas, her present German husband through a friend she met at Samui. A few months after their first contact, Harmas paid for Ooy to visit him in Germany for three months. Then, in mid-2007 they got married. The marriage ceremony was held in Nadokmai. Harmas provided the bride wealth Wan requested; he also paid for the wedding feast. The couple left for Germany soon after the wedding.

As noted earlier, bride wealth for local marriages was negotiated by representatives of the bride’s and groom’s families. Though this practice was not applied for transnational marriage, the Western partners did negotiate to find compromising solutions. For example, Sa recounted that Sven asked her parents to choose between a bride wealth or a commitment to take care of them for the rest of their lives. Her parents chose the latter and he had kept his part of the deal thus far. Kham, a woman in her late seventies, also recalled that she did not ask for cash or gold, but requested her Belgian son-in-law to renovate her house. In this sense, accepting the custom of bride wealth does not necessarily mean that a Western partner has to offer the woman’s parents money, although it is common to do so. The form and value of bride wealth are negotiable and vary while its social significance is constantly considered in relation to material forms.

These experiences of mia farang, their partners, and their parents reveal how relationships generated through the local norm of bride wealth developed around money and material resources while its meanings extend beyond pure economic value. The various ways of negotiating and compromising in which these people have engaged reflect their attempts to manage and come to terms with the divergence of local and Western norms and practices regarding marriage so as to minimize tensions and maintain good relations and sustain married lives.
Trust and sexuality

Prior to my fieldwork, I assumed that besides cultural divergences, language differences might cause tensions between mixed couples. However, not too long after working in the village, I began to realize that my assumption was rather misguided. Speaking about conflicts and stresses attached to their relationships, most, if not all, of the mixed couples did not mention a language barrier as one of their foremost concerns. Rather, they talked about the tensions and ambiguities around the questions of trust and sexuality. Although the couples did encounter language hindrances, they managed to communicate well enough in their daily routine. These women and men applied various means to improve their communication abilities. Some women, especially those who planned to settle overseas, had taken language courses. One woman told me that at the beginning of the relationship her English husband taught her a few new words every day while having breakfast. Some couples got help from friends or neighbors who knew the languages. Others used dictionaries and conversation manuals as means for communication. As time went by, they picked up more words and phrases and their communication skills improved. Thus, rather than focusing on language and communication limitations, this section explores how mixed couples experienced and maneuvered their relationships revolving around trust and sexuality.

During my first interview with Nisa at her house during a late morning in February 2008, Carsten, her Danish husband called via the internet, so I left the house to let Nisa and the children speak to him in private. When we resumed the conversation, Nisa said that her husband regularly called, practically every day if he was at home in Denmark. She was pleased with his behavior. If anything came up she could talk to him right away. The children could speak to him and see him through a webcam almost every day; he was not a stranger to them. When asked whether making daily calls was common among mixed couples in Nadokmai who were living apart, Nisa replied, “Many men [with wives living in the village] call regularly, if not every day. They want to hear from their wives. Some are afraid their wives might see other men when they are away.”

At one point, Nisa mentioned that her husband was also suspicious. She told me: “[When calling] he sometimes asked me to move the webcam around so that he could see other parts of the house. I knew that he wanted to check whether there was another man in the house…I told him don’t worry. If I see another man, I will let you know and introduce him to you.” Still Nisa’s husband made this request every now and then. Nisa felt his
mistrust and it disappointed her, though she knew how her husband’s suspicious behavior came about. He suffered from a previous relationship with a Thai woman who left him to live with a local man. He did not tell her the whole story, but she became aware of it from the bits and pieces of what she heard from him. Apart from this, rumors about mia farang seeing local men during their husbands’ absence often circulated in the village. Nisa’s husband who spent considerable time in Nadokmai two or three times a year must have heard these stories.

Jin who lived with her German husband in the village next to Nadokmai shared her experience on how this kind of rumors caused distrust for her husband and generated tensions for her. Jin said that her husband was anxious about rumors of infidelity among mia farang. Whenever he heard such rumors, he was not happy to let her go out with friends or relatives without his company. This gave Jin a feeling of confinement, as she expressed:

I went to the temple in the morning, taking food to the monks, and returned home a bit late. He complained. He was afraid I might see other men. He always has this idea in mind and it has never changed, ever. Normally, we are together almost all the time. I rarely go out without him, but this does not change him…I don’t know what to do. I often feel I do not have freedom at all, really…When we were in Germany, he was not like this; I sometimes went shopping alone. I also visited or went out with Thai friends without him. He did not follow me every step or keep an eye on me like he does after we returned to live in the village.

Like Jin, other mia farang more or less expressed feelings of being a prisoner in their own houses because of distrust generated by speculations about their sexual behavior. Some did not want to be seen in the company of friends or tried to avoid going out altogether, especially while their husbands were staying with them in the village. They were worried that their husbands might think they used social occasions to see other men. Such suspicions might affect the marital relationship and lead to conflict or even separation eventually.

The sense of confinement in this case was mainly caused by gossips about their ‘loose’ behavior in the past connected with the sex trade, the common path leading many women in the village to transnational marriage. This of course ignored the diverse routes women actually took to marry a Western man and the current lives these women were living. For instance, when talking about a mia farang who was rumored to be involved
with a local man, a school teacher in his forties said he was not surprised, pointing to the woman’s past occupation as a sex worker. A British living with his Thai wife in the village shared the same view: “We can take a girl from a bar, but we cannot take a bar out of her.” These views reflect the social stigma linking *mia farang* to sexual immorality. The stigmatization underlines popular perceptions to the effect that once a woman has worked in the sex industry she has lost all sense of shame and can easily fall back into ‘sinful ways’. Her behavior is like that of a drug addict. This perspective is a part of general ideas about women involved in the sex industry (Nencel 2001). Whether the speculation about *mia farang*’s involvement in extramarital relations was true, or even relevant or not, it would certainly cause pressure to bear on current relationships.

Despite tension created through distrust, some *mia farang* shared a feeling of being treated differently from what they had experienced with local men. These women stated that their Western husbands respected the decisions they made about their sexuality and their bodies. Jin, for instance, said that her husband always showed his appreciation when she dressed nicely. “He would say ‘you look beautiful’ and he wants his wife to look good…He makes me feel confident about how I dress…He does not complain when I spend more money on clothes and cosmetics – if it does not occur too often. But he complains if I come home a bit later than expected.” Jin also openly said that her husband always cared about her feelings. If she did not feel well or was tired, and sometimes refused to have sex, he understood and accepted her decision. This experience was something that she never had with her Thai husband. I agree with Ratana (2005: 24-26) that exposure to the Western culture of sexuality and marriage made many village women become attracted to Western men more than local men. These experiences also allow woman to negotiate concepts of sexuality, marriage, and gender in Thai contexts. I shall explore the consequences of transnational marriages on the dynamics of local community, including the aspects of gender and sexuality in the following chapter.

**Motherhood and mixed-couple relations**

Studies show that more than half of Isan women who married Western men were widows or divorcees (NESDB 2004; Supawatanakorn et al. 2005). In Nadokmai, 63 percent of *mia farang* had a previous relationship with a local man and 90 percent of these women had children from a local father. For these women, motherhood obligations added another layer of multiplicity to their transnational marital relations. Just like the moral connections and
obligations to their parental households, women’s responsibility to take care of and support their children is influenced by the distinction of Thai and Western norms and practices.

In Thai society, especially in rural areas, after separation – regardless of whether or not a couple has formally registered their marriage – the woman is left alone to take care of the children financially, without contribution from their father. The common practice in this respect is different from norms in most of the Western societies where both parents, by law, are obligated to support the children until a certain age after termination of their relationship.

Based on Western norms regarding parental responsibility for children, most *mia farang* reported that normally their husbands accepted and helped them to fulfill their responsibilities as a mother although their experiences were different and the level of support also varied. According to these women, *farang* husbands were often bothered by the fact that the ex-partners of their Thai wives did not take any responsibility in providing for their own children.

In Nadokmai, one-third of *mia farang* were able to take their children from previous relationships to resettle in the countries of their *farang* husbands. Those *mia farang* who left children in the village under the care of their parents or siblings regularly remitted money to take care of the children’s upkeeps and education. As mentioned earlier, many *mia farang* supported their children to study in private schools in the town where they were expected to get a better quality of education. For example, Nisa sent her daughter and son to private schools in Udon. Then, she moved to live in the town to make it easy for them school; otherwise they would have to commute 80 kilometers daily between the village and their schools. Without Carsten’s support, this would not have been possible as Nisa had no job. Tang, a divorced mother with a daughter, who started the relationships with her German partner ten years ago, reported that her partner had continuously supported her daughter’s education. The last time I was in Nadokmai, the girl was studying for a Bachelor’s Degree at a private university in Bangkok, Tang’s partner had provided for all expenses related to her tuition and living allowance in Bangkok as Tang did not work.

Unlike females’ obligation to support their parents which does not go along with Western norms of generational relations within the family, women’s responsibility for children is not against the Western ideals of parenthood. Thus women’s aspiration to support their children caused fewer tensions to the mixed couples’ relationships as compared to their desire to uphold their parental household driven by the Thai cultural
norm of *bun khun*. Nevertheless, it was not always the case that Western partners would recognize and willingly help women to support their children. There were couples who struggled with the arrangement; some had experiences that this did not work out. For example, Khem (54), a divorced mother with two sons – now grown up – had struggled unsuccessfully for many years to get her English partner to support her sons. She finally gave up and decided to terminate the relationship.

Khem went to Phuket in 1981 and worked as a cook on boats taking tourists out to sea overnight. She met Ben, an Englishman in his early sixties, who was a boat repairer. They lived together and both contributed their share of housekeeping. Khem sent a part of her income to support the two sons she had left in the village with her sister. Ben neither contributed to the upkeeps of the children nor helped Khem’s sister, who took care of her sons even when she was sick. When the sons grew up and departed for Phuket to work, Ben helped them to find jobs, but he did not allow them to stay in the house, although there were rooms available. He told Khem that he wanted them to stand on their own feet. In 2006, her sister died; Khem came back to the village for the funeral and did not return to Phuket. She told me her side of the story:

He [Ben] called me several times and asked me to return to Phuket. I was tempted, as I could earn a lot more in Phuket than in the village. But, eventually I decided to not go back to him. He needed only me, not my children, let alone my relatives. He would never help them…You see, when his friends visited us they stayed in our house and we always took care of them and fed them with good food. I cooked for them. But my children could not stay in the house even for a few days…I will not forget this, ever. It is always in my mind. I felt I could not take it anymore when he refused to help my sister when she was sick…He did not show any concern even when he heard about her death.

Despite her partner’s refusal to support her children, Khem managed to bring them up herself. However, his rejection of her motherhood responsibilities not only created tensions but also resulted in the termination of their relationship. Putting Khem’s case at one end of the scale and Tang’s and Nisa’s cases at the other end, most women stated that their experiences were somewhere in-between. Their husbands helped them in fulfilling their motherhood obligations, though the men might not pay for all the costs related to children’s expenses and education as provided by Tang’s and Nisa’s partners. If the women worked, they usually kept their earnings to support their children (and parents).
Their partners helped pay or shared in covering the larger expenses such as tuition when requests were made. For their part, *mia farang* considered such support as an expression of care and love from their *farang* husbands. These were seen as men of responsibility in contrast with unreliable local men from their previous marriages. This on-going process illustrates how transnational marriage becomes a site where intimate relationships and material relations are intertwined.

The experiences of these women indicate that there are various ways of managing motherhood responsibilities. To a large extent, this commitment is facilitated by a prevalent Western norm regarding parenthood. However, tensions and possibilities of termination of relationships can occur when this female obligation is not recognized, as in Khem’s case. The relationship of a *mia farang* in Nadokmai and her husband is shaped by motherhood obligations to support children from the wife’s previous marriages. Again, this reflects how relationships revolve around money and marriage and how money transcends its economic value to represent care, responsibility and love.

**Community contributions and a women’s strategy**

Through their contributions to the community, *mia farang* are, to a certain extent, able to negotiate/challenge the negative images attributed to them. At the same time, the support generated local expectations towards their contribution, creating tension for some women. In this section, I deal with women’s experiences with community contribution, focusing on the *pha pa* ceremony as *mia farang* often organized this activity during their visits home.

*Pha pa* is a Buddhist ritual in which robes, goods for daily use, and money are offered to monks. Unlike, *kathin* – another Buddhist ritual which has to be organized within one month after the end of the monks’ retreat period during rainy season (*phansa*), *pha pa* can be organized at any time of the year. Being the main sponsor and organizer of these ceremonies, requires a certain amount of resources. The presentation of *pha pa* and *kathin* is a way of making merit and generating good *karma*. At the same time, it carries prestige and bring honor to organizers (Terwiel 1994: 209-211). The term *pha pa* is also used for fundraising or collecting goods for social and charity purposes, such as giving to schools, social organizations, and those who are in need, although the activities are not related to religion.

While drawing on a cultural idiom of Buddhist merit-making, *pha pa* also affirms a person’s moral and social ties to the community and rural kin. In her analysis of young
Isan women migrants working in Bangkok, Mills (1999: 138-146) shows that organizing a *pha pa* trip back home to a village temple provides the women with an opportunity, albeit temporarily, to maintain ties with their rural kin while remaining in urban wage work. Through this ritual women can combine their desire to be ‘good daughters’ who keep connections and support their home village and with their existence of ‘modern women’ who challenge familiar village standards of daughterly behavior by leaving the village home to work in the city. In a different context, Marjorie Muecke (1992: 893-894) interprets participation of women working in the sex industry in *pha pa* rituals and other merit-making activities as a way to compensate for their stigmatized work and to prevent them from being a prostitute in their next life. Marjorie Muecke views this in relation to the Buddhist ‘law of karma’ – good actions earn moral merit (*bun*); wrong actions result in demerit. By making merit a person can accumulate *bun* which can change his/her karma and the current life or next incarnations. As much as a way to deal with their negative image associated with past involvement in the sex trade, *mia farang* in Nadokmai (and village residents) considered merit making activities like *pha pa* as an expression of their economic success and their commitment to the home village. Nonetheless, local perceptions of women’s contributions are rather ambiguous.

On April 13, 2008, I met Sa and Sven at their house in the early morning to join in a *pha pa* ceremony to be held at the local Buddhist temple in the village next to Nadokmai where Sa was born and grew up. On the way to the temple, we stopped at the house of Sa’s friend, one of the main organizers, to take the donated money, which was hung on a small pole made from straw, a ‘money tree’, to the temple (see Figures 5.1). This *pha pa* was organized by three *mia farang* who grew up together. Two of the women lived with their husbands in Pattaya; the third was Sa who had left Pattaya and settled in Nadokmai for almost ten years now. The money was raised mostly from friends working and living in Pattaya, the rest was from residents of the women’s natal village. The ceremony was held during the *Songkran* festival when two of the main organizers and their families from Pattaya came to the home village for an annual visit. The day before the ceremony they prepared the ‘money tree’ from the donated money.

When we arrived at the temple, the *sala* (temple hall) was crowded with villagers. There were also those who came to the temple to make merit on the occasion of *Songkran*. The ‘money tree’ was put in the *sala*, between the crowd and monks (see Figure 5.2). Apart from the key donation of money to the temple, there were also smaller offerings for monks wrapped in bundles containing robes, medicines, packed drinks, toothpastes, soap
and detergent, etc. The religious ritual was conducted by the monks; then food was offered to them. While the monks were eating, a small group of participants, including several village leaders, and a woman, one of the organizers, took the money from the tree and counted it (see Figure 5.3). A total amount of about 30,000 baht (US$ 857) had been raised, which was announced to the people gathering in the sala. It was one way to acknowledge and publicize the good deeds of the organizers.

**Figure 5.1:** The money tree

**Figure 5.2:** The gatherings inside the sala
Sa and her friends were pleased with the contribution they made. She mentioned that the activity was put together in such a short time, and that if there had been more time, the contribution would have been higher. Then, the women talked about how they should prepare this merit-making activity next time so as to raise more money and allow more villagers to participate. One of the organizers mentioned that given more time, she could inform mia farang she got to know while visiting her husband’s home country so that they could raise money from Thai communities overseas. The amount of donated money is an indication of the degree of honor the ritual brings to the main sponsors.

The raised funds were normally given to the village temples or schools during home visits. The ceremony on the day the money was offered might be an elaborate affair as Sa and her friends did, or it could be quite simple with only a small attendance. For example, Pla and her German husband, before their visit home in October 2008, had raised funds from friends in Germany to donate to the village temple. On the day the money was to be handed over, they and a few relatives and neighbors went to the temple in the morning with food and drinks to offer to the monks. They attended the religious ritual and gave the money to the principal monk. Pla’s mother said that her daughter wanted to offer all the donated money to the temple rather than spend a part of it for a ceremony.

In a different context, the pha pa ceremony is organized in such a way that allows village residents and other local people to join in. During my fieldwork in 2009 I met Thip,
a *mia farang* married to a British on her home visit. Thip told me in an interview that she and another friend – a *mia farang* married to an Austrian – had organized a *pha pa* two years earlier during their home visits. Together they raised a relatively large donation (140,000 baht, US$ 4,000). The money was given to the village primary school where Thip and her friend studied when they were young. On the evening of the ceremonial day, there was a feast at the school. Village leaders, local government staff, and a number of women and their Western husbands of various nationalities were invited to participate. Residents of Nadokmai and those from nearby villages also joined in and greatly enjoyed the performance of *mo lam* (Isan folk dance) during the banquet. In addition, a former MP of Udon was asked to be the chairperson and was invited to thank Thip, her friend, and their husbands for their contributions. The way Thip told the event reflected her satisfaction and pride. Thip’s mother, who regularly contributed to school activities also proudly talked about her daughter’s good deeds. The mother further explained that several developments and improvements in the school, such as free lunch for students, learning materials, a fence, a road, and toilets were possible largely because of contributions made by *mia farang*.

When a *pha pa* ceremony is celebrated in such a way that allows a wide range of local people to participate – as Thip and her friend did – it provides an opportunity to enhance the women’s social prestige on the local scene. This social recognition, as well as the appreciation women gained by the support they gave to their parents, sharply contrasts with the negative image of *mia farang* (re)produced through their past connection with the sex trade. Thus their efforts to gain acknowledgements as generous donors and dutiful daughters can be interpreted as women’s strategy in offsetting their negative image related to the sex industry. Furthermore, the recognition also contrasted with the marginalization experienced by *mia farang* living with their partners overseas. Although my study does not focus on this aspect of transnational marriage, it is worth noting that many women I interviewed told me their experiences of being marginalized in one way or another. People were often suspicious that they had something to do with commercial sex. Some had been asked whether they married their husbands for money or for love. It is likely that such experiences made most *mia farang* I came to know keep silent about their lives overseas while some only talked about the positive aspects such as good wages, ‘modern’ lifestyle, good public health care and good social security system. These were sharply different from their previous experiences in Thailand. For their part, Western partners also admitted that they tried not to disclose to friends and colleagues about their wives’ social background.
and nationality, nor where they had met. This subject could only bring up further inquiries and tensions, regardless of the background of their wives, they told me.

Based on experiences both in their natal home village and in the host society, community contributions that brought them social recognition can be read as mia farang’s strategy in dealing with negative aspects of their status. On another score, such recognitions underline a connection between material resources and social appreciation, in other words, they emphasize social meanings of material contribution. Nevertheless, expectations of local people regarding contributions of mia farang and their husbands often generated tensions for these women.

**Contributions and tensions**

In March 2008, at a Community Sports Day, I noticed cheerleaders of one team wearing T-shirts of the same color and style with different labels on the back of the shirts. Many of the labels were names of Thai women and their Western husbands (see Figures 5.4). These were the names of those who donated money to buy the shirts. Although it is common in Thailand to see the names of donors on the items they sponsor, in Nadokmai I was struck by the appearance of a mixed couple’s names as well as names of Thai women with a foreign last names at communal places and facilities, e.g. chairs and tables in community centers, schools, temples and local government offices. In the village schools, I also saw pictures of women and their farang husbands visiting and making contributions to schools on the boards presenting school activities. In the houses of mia farang, a display of certificates indicating the donations they made to schools and local organizations was also observed.

Such contributions made by mia farang in many cases relieved the financial burden which would have fallen on village residents. A female market trader in her fifties gave this assessment: “We [villagers in Nadokmai] would have to donate the money; each household pays 200-300 baht to hire mo lam to perform in the customary ceremonies. Now, sometimes, mia farang just sponsor it. It does not really matter for them...They are richer [than us]. Some women regularly make contributions to the schools and support village fairs.” Generally, villagers like this trader were aware of and pleased about mia farang’s generosity. However, the contributions were also perceived as a way to gain social recognition and to cover up the women’s background and past career. This view was
particularly prevalent among the well-to-do and well-educated villagers, as discussed earlier.

![Figure 5.4: T-shirts with sponsor’s names worn by one team of cheerleaders on a Community Sport Day](image)

Despite these ambiguous attitudes, the contributions generally raised expectations among local people which brought pressure to bear on mia farang, especially those who had settled in the village. According to these women, they were not only expected to contribute more than other villagers; but on some occasions they were asked to provide specific items or amount of donation. Tensions developed when they could not meet these demands. As Sa expressed her feelings:
I really feel bad, even angry at myself that I cannot respond to the community requests. I have tried my best to meet these demands, but sometimes I truly could not make it and just contributed what I could… You know, there is a higher expectation of *mia farang*. I do not blame anyone; I do not blame the society. My siblings and relatives also expect [financial] support as well; they all thought we [*mia farang*] are rich and need our help. I understand them and I wish I had a lot more money so that I could help them all and help the community too.

Despite her disappointment, Sa kept making contributions when demands were made. The sentiment of being under pressure was shared with her friend who experienced being treated like an alien in the community, but both Sa and her friend kept on supporting social activities in the village. Sa recalled that in 2006, every household in the village was provided with a blanket, distributed through the district office. But, some *mia farang* households, including her friend’s and her own did not get one. When her friend asked the personnel at the district office why this was the case, she was told that some of the blankets were given to the poor and the elderly who could not afford to buy them. For Sa’s friend, the issue was not a matter of what she should get; rather she felt she was being treated like an outsider in her own village. If she had known she would have been more than willing to give blankets to those who needed them. Sa was also disappointed when she heard this from her friend. However, she insisted: “We still have to contribute to the community whatever we can. This is our home.”

Regardless of how local people perceive their contributions to community activities, *mia farang* see this as an affirmation of their commitment and belonging to their home village. These contributions are the glue that cements *mia farang*’s relations with the local folk – relations that are not always smooth as local expectations sometimes exceed these women’s financial capacities.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how the images of *mia farang* and the relationships and practices they were enmeshed in, revolve around their improved material situation and aspects of consumerism representing Western or middle-class life styles. At the same time, there are long-standing, unfavorable opinions of these women, in particular the *mia chao* discourse that associates women married to a Westerner with prostitution. In addition, there are state and academic discourses that link transnational marriages to human
trafficking and a decline of traditional family values. The fact is that *mia farang* makes up an inherently ambiguous category of women. This ambiguity often causes tension between these women and the local community, driving them to seek social recognition as dutiful daughters to their parents and worthy contributors to the general well-being of the community. This social recognition is important to counterbalance the generally negative opinions linking *mia farang* with the sex trade or human trafficking.

Interactions and social relations between *mia farang*, their husbands and local people are influenced by both local and Western norms and practices concerning gender, marriage, and family. Material support in mediating these relationships is essential to sustain and strengthen a marital relation, without which it is bound to fail. Although material benefits associated with current transnational marriages are prevalent, the meanings of these material dimensions have to be understood in relation to the specific social and cultural contexts. In connection with this, the notion of ‘special monies’ (Zelizer 1989) gives room to conceptualize material resources beyond their economic value. Thus social meanings of money can be mediated through cultural norms, social structures and the institutionalizing of controls, restrictions of resource allocation.

Guided by the notion of ‘special monies,’ this chapter unpacks the cultural and social significance of material and financial supports, and the way these influence and shape relationships among people involved in and related to transnational marriages within various contexts. Female filial obligations drawing on the cultural norm of *bun khun* reflect that material support (and other forms of support) of parents (and siblings) provided by *mia farang* symbolize their gratefulness to their parents and at the same time underline the value of a dutiful daughter. In addition, local bride wealth practices (*sinsot*) signify the gratitude a groom shows to his bride’s parents for bringing her up. This practice also denotes the willingness and ability of the groom to take care of his wife-to-be. The financial support that Western men provide to their wives to fulfill motherhood responsibilities towards children of an earlier union epitomizes the care and love these men have for their wives. This support decisively influences relationships between mixed couples, though marital relations are also shaped by trust and sexuality. At the community level, *mia farang*’s contributions to the home village reaffirm their sense of belonging and of continuation of being part of that community. These diverse social and cultural meanings of material resources testify to the complexity of the transnational marriage phenomenon involving a web of crisscrossing relationships, which cannot be captured solely from an economic perspective.
For a better understanding of the complex and multi-layered attributes of transnational marriage, the tensions that go with it, and the on-going dynamics of local norms and practices, special attention needs to be paid to the interactions between gender relations, marriage and class. These issues will be the focal points of the following chapter.
CHAPTER SIX

TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

Current studies on transnational migration have shown that border-crossing activities, ties, and networks are part of the processes of social transformation and (re)production of local communities while these connections are influenced by global and local cultures and flows (Appadurai 1996; Levitt et al. 2003; Massey et al. 1994; Vertovec 2004). Appadurai particularly argues that as local actors engage in social activities of production, reproduction, and representation, they unwittingly contribute to the creation of their localities. This process requires “the continuous construction, both practical and discursive, of an ethnoscape” (necessarily nonlocal) against which local practices and projects are imagined to take place” (Appadurai 1996:184). The production of locality, according to Appadurai (1996:198-199), is a fragile and difficult achievement associated with puzzling and sometimes contradictory occurrences, driven by the cultural, historical, and ecological setting, race and class, as well as gender and power. In the contemporary world, this production and social transformation also involve a new set of challenges related to displaced, deterritorialized populations as well as material and cultural flows through both electronic and virtual mediators.

The discussions in the previous chapters highlight transnational marriage as a strategy especially for women to deal with global dynamics. They also reveal how transnational marriage is shaped by the diversity of local and global cultures, ideas, values, and practices, especially in relation to gender, marriage and family. To provide another side of the picture, in this chapter I focus on the effects of transnational marriage on local dynamics, and specifically, how transnational marriage generates or challenges cultural ideas and practices pertaining to masculinity, femininity, and marriage. In particular, my exploration spotlights the contesting idea of desired marriage partners which, to some extent, places local men in a vulnerable situation, and at the same time reinforces constructions of (Thai) femininity.

93See Appadurai’s notion of five “scapes” in the Introduction.
In addition, this chapter also deals with the complexity of transnational processes in ‘sending’ communities by focusing on the people who stayed behind in women’s natal village. Research on transnational processes has mainly dwelled on connections between host and home societies through transnational social, economic, political, and familial ties (Basch et al. 1994; Kearney 1995; Schiller et al. 1992; Vertovec 2004). Recent transnational studies pay more attention to the experiences of people who stay behind and do not engage in mobility in relation to those who move (Toyota et al. 2007). This approach challenges previous contentions that regard those remaining in the home village as passive recipients, overlooking the fact that their ideas and actions disguise the complexity of the situation and limit our insights into (transnational) migration as well as transnational marriage (see more discussion on this topic in the Introduction). Engaging with the ‘left behind’ approach, this chapter explores reactions and ideas of parents whose daughters have married a Western partner or attempted to make such a move. By drawing on their life experiences, I wish to show that those who stay behind are important actors in the transnational processes, with their own agenda which they carry out with determination. Previous studies on migration – domestic, international, or transnational marriage migration – deal with the impacts of such mobility on migrants and their natal villages. The economic improvement in ‘sending’ communities made possible by remittances is at the heart of the ‘migration-development nexus’ (King et al. 2006). Apart from its positive aspects, migration also creates socio-economic differentiations among people living in sending villages (Fouron and Schiller 2001; Kyle 2000; Levitt 2001). Drawing on preceding works, I take a step further by looking at the transformations and differentiations in women’s natal village in the wake of transnational marriage. Specifically, I posit that mia farang constitute a distinct social category of its own within the socio-economic hierarchical structure in the village. To elaborate on this, I draw on social stratification concepts, particularly Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of class distinction (1984) viewing taste, manifested through consumption, as a class marker.

**Local men’s perspectives and reactions**

In the Thai context, transnational marriage might simply mean ‘a marriage of a Thai woman with a Western man’. However, my field research in Nadokmai indicates that how people regard such a marriage varies widely depending on their background, and gender is one of the key factors. From women’s perspectives, the motivations that propel them to
marry a Western partner are multiple and complex (see Chapter Three). Local men view these marriages as a way to improve the economic situation of women and their families. This view based on common sense is predominant and shared by many Western people as well as the Thai government and academic discourses (see Chapter Five). Some men emphasized that these marriages did not imply that ‘by nature’ Thai women feel less affection for Thai men than farang men. A father (32) with two children, who ran an internet shop in Nadokmai, concurred with this viewpoint. He stated:

If people [either female or male] can live a good life, nobody would want to marry a foreigner. Coming from different cultures and using different languages, it is difficult to develop a deep understanding and passion…I truly believe that women marry [Western men] out of difficulty, not because of love…Parents and senior kin also encourage their daughters and nieces to marry farang [men]. The elderly are less concerned about love than a secure future.

This view was shared among many village males. A man in his early thirties told me that his girlfriend, a divorced mother with two children, had left him after a one-year relationship to marry a Norwegian. This man sincerely believed that she did it for the future of her children, not for love. As he put it, “I understand. She wants her children to have a good education and a good future. Many women in the village marry farang men for the same reason.” As mentioned before, mia farang acknowledged that material aspects of transnational marriage were a part of their desire. At the same time, they also recognized other factors motivating them to turn to Western men, among these local men’s irresponsibility in caring for their family, and female filial obligations driven by the local norm of bun khun were the major ones. In contrast, local men often talked about transnational marriage purely in economic terms.

However men are not a homogenous category. Some older men had different opinions. They did not associate transnational marriage with affection and mere economic gains, but point to the profound impact it would have on local traditions and communities in the long term. Thawe (57), a man living in the village next to Nadokmai where there were many mia farang, speculated about changes in the physical appearance of Thai people in the future as there would be many luk krueng (children of mixed parentage). Thai traditions, ways of life, family values – including respect for the elderly, filial pity, etc – and Thai food and ways of dressing would also change as a result of Western influence. Thawe claimed that villagers did not foresee these long term effects and saw only the
immediate and positive side of marrying *farang* men, a means for obtaining economic wealth. These ideas are very much in line with governmental and academic discourses concerning the deterioration of Thai culture and the family institution caused by the current transnational marriages as discussed in Chapter Five. This line of reasoning neither recognizes the importance of human emotion nor takes into account the behavior of local men in family relations that drives women to seek transnational marriage in the first place.

Some men feel threatened by transnational marriage because it offers women in their community an alternative for marital relationship beyond what is available locally. When their relationships with local men did not work out, many women in Nadokmai turned to foreigners with whom they could enjoy a good marriage and a secure future for themselves and their natal families. It is important to note that in Thai society, women are expected to remain celibate until marriage. In general, divorced women and widows are not considered ideal marriage candidates for Thai men. However, this social norm about chastity has been challenged, and in both urban and rural settings, premarital sex has become more prevalent (Lyttleton 2000).

Nowadays transnational marriage offers an alternative not only for previously married women – the majority of women in Nadokmai engaged in this type of marriage once had a relationship with local men – but also for young, single women with a good education as well. The fact that an increasing number of young well-educated women have shown interest in seeking a *farang* partner is a highly interesting development. For these young girls, the images of local men as irresponsible and promiscuous, the limitation of marriage choices influenced by local norms and practices regarding gender and marriage, and their own perceptions of modernity are powerful forces that turn them to *farang* as prospective marriage partners (see Chapter Three). In any case, transnational marriage provides women with space to negotiate gendered power relations around marital relations and sexuality. Local men’s fears of losing their partners to foreigners are manifested in such expressions as, “If I dare to argue with my wife, I am afraid that she will leave me to marry a *farang*” and “I do not dare to cough or sneeze. If my wife is disappointed she may leave me to marry a *farang*.” Often these utterances were mentioned as a third person’s assertion and the expressions were made in an unserious and joking manner.

To shed light on such reactions, I draw on feminist studies in the field of language, particularly in the area of gender and humor. These studies point out how notions of masculinity and femininity are constructed and resisted through talk, particularly through humorous discourses (Cameron 1998; Crawford 2003; Mulkay 1988). Based on a social
construction paradigm, Michael Mulkay (1988) conceptualizes humor as a mode of discourse entailing the speaker’s goals and intentions in particular social circumstances. Unlike non-humorous talk emphasizing objective reality and avoiding self-contradiction and ambiguity, a humorous mode contains multiple interpretations of reality, paradox, and ambiguity. Following this line of reasoning, it is obvious that local men’s reactions reflect their realization of the transformations that challenge existing gender relations. The responses shrouded in an offhand and joking manner are a reflection of their insecurity and loss of control over female sexuality. This interpretation is in line with Weisman (2000) in her analysis of Thai women engaging in sexual relationships with American servicemen during the Vietnam War. Weisman argues that women’s involvement in the sex trade is an indicative of men’s failure in controlling female sexuality as these women took control of their own sexuality without having recourse to mediation by their fathers or older kin men.

The on-going changes as reflected in men’s responses to the current transnational marriages taking place in Nadokmai, as well as in other Isan villages, underlie gender dynamism that places local men in a vulnerable position. These changes have brought new challenges to gender relations especially with regard to marriage and sexuality.

**Desired marriage partners**

The life-stories of mia farang presented in the previous chapters reveal that many of these women had gone through crises in their previous relationships with local partners. Economic insecurity and strenuous relationships outside marriage were the primary causes for such problems. It was commonly believed that family crises were more often caused by men than by women. At this point, it is important to indicate that while female experiences are of primary concern in this research, they should be examined in relation to male insecurities as well. Local men often pointed to the precariousness of their occupations which made them stressful, and put pressure on the household economy. I shall elaborate on this issue in the following pages.

Based on women’s experiences of marriage crises, emerges an image of ‘irresponsible’ local men who do not take family seriously. Such men are rejected by women and their parents whereas a partner who is a reliable provider and a good family man is desired. Indeed, such characteristics of partner are common throughout generations (see Sumalee 2005); the mothers of mia farang mentioned similar criteria used by their own parents in considering their spouses, as we shall see in the next section. What
concerns us here is why these factors are brought up in the context of current transnational marriages and how we are to understand them in relation to gender dynamism in the current contexts of local and global encounters.

To capture how the notion of desired partners has emerged, it is necessary to understand it in the context of (transnational) migration in relation to the local kinship system and gender on the one hand and female filial obligations in Thai society on the other. As explained earlier, Northeast Thailand is a matrilocal society and the practice of matrilocal postmarital residence is common, although the change in this tradition has become more apparent in recent decades. Apart from giving women an important voice in the management of family and household economics, this cultural norm and practice also ensures physical, emotional, and material support women can obtain from their kin. This support enables a wife to manage and fulfill household responsibilities even in the absence of her husband. In this light, the cultural norm of matrilocal postmarital residence facilitate men’s domestic and international migration away from home to engage in labor employment, which has become an integral part of rural household economies since the 1980s.

With the rise of the global economy since the 1980s, village men (and women) have been drawn to overseas wage employment. This work is regarded as a considerable source of income which helps improve and strengthens household economic security. However, this is not always the case. As described in Chapter Two, migrants and their families have diverse experiences regarding overseas employment. Many men who left their wives and children behind in the rural home could or would not fulfill their responsibility of supporting them, leaving the wives to take on the household burden alone. Experiencing stress and loneliness as a result of working and living away from home, some of these men spent their earnings for their own pleasure and neglected to send remittances to their families at home. Others engaged in relationships with other women. Such experiences with past partners were common in the narratives of mia farang. It was situations like these that tend to paint local men as ‘irresponsible’ heads of family, an image that was implanted in the minds of many women. While migration provides men with opportunities to become good providers, at the same time it draws them away from their families. For families having a husband/father working overseas, failure to send home regular remittances is indicative of the man’s irresponsibility as head of family.

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94As addressed in Chapter Two, women are likely to return to the village home after marriage and have children while men remain away in their work.
Although the discussions thus far highlight material aspects that play a major role in the failure of marital relationships, this does not mean that the troubles women had in their relationship with local men were only in economic terms. The narratives of women reveal that male promiscuity and unfaithfulness were also to blame for marital breakdowns. Many of these women ended up in divorce and had to bring up their children alone. As far as husband-wife relationships were concerned, some mia farang complained that their husbands did not care for their family except providing an income. One mia farang said that she never had a real ‘family life’ while living with her local husband as he rarely spent time with her and their children. Her husband lived his life outside the home; he worked at the district police station and spent his free time with his male friends while she stayed home taking care of the two children and doing domestic chores. On occasions, the woman and her husband joined the same events such as customary and communal activities, but he went with his friends not with her and their children. This kind of family relations is completely different from her life with her English partner with whom she always did things together such as shopping, eating out, and joining communal activities. Such a contrast way of life women experienced, directly or indirectly, became a factor contributing to the rejection of local. This motivated single women, some of whom were well educated and had a secure career, such as Lita and Kanda (see Chapter Three), to opt for marrying Western partners.

Another example among women who strongly believed that marrying a local man was an unfeasible choice was a school teacher in her early twenties, Suda. Suda was fluent in English and had a few American friends while studying in college. She critically commented on the behaviors of Thai men such as promiscuity, drinking, and their neglect of family obligations which she found unacceptable. While rejecting such behavior, the young teacher was attracted by an assumption about more flexible gender roles in American (and Western) society as compared to the local norms, as she learned from her friends and from movies. She expressed her sympathy for women whose husbands did not take their families seriously and who were left to shoulder their household burden alone. For her, marrying a local man was inconceivable. Suda’s account shows that such male behavior is no longer accepted, especially by young.

The emerging idea of desired partners who are reliable and good family men has to be understood in the light of the traditional female familial obligations shaped by the Thai gender system. The cultural norm of bun khun tying women to the well-being of their natal family is deeply rooted in Thai culture and given a high value in Thai society. Ideally, the
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Support children provide to their parents can be in the form of labor, money, or emotional ties (see Chapter Five). With the economic changes and the rise of domestic and overseas migration, it is less frequent for children to contribute their labor to the parents’ household. Providing remittances has become more common, especially for female migrants (including mia farang) who are more consistent in sending their earnings to parents at home as compared to their male migrant counterparts (Mills 1999; Whittaker 1999). The accounts of mia farang show that most of them have managed to remit money to support their parents as well as their children and, in some cases, siblings, at home either regularly or on request. Contributions from daughters with a Western husband are increasingly important in Nadokmai as well as in other communities in the Northeast. In this light, transnational marriage allowing women to fulfill the bun khun obligation highlights economic aspects of constructions of femininity in the Thai context.

In a different context, in a mixed-marriage union, mia farang are expected to take major responsibility for the household burdens and many of these women have engaged in this task. A preference for a wife sticking to traditional gender roles and family values is a key factor motivating Western men to seek a Thai (or other Asian) partner. Most, if not all, Western partners involved in this research expected care from their wives. This observation is consistent with Constable’s comment that some Western men desire a home in which the man is ‘the king of his castle,’ where he can see himself as the dominant figure. These men look to Asia and other parts of the world for women who are thought to be committed to traditional family values (Constable 2003:66). Mia farang residing in Nadokmai as well as those living with their husbands in other parts of the world were aware of and complied with these expectations. Local men, for their part, remarked that mia farang always took good care of their (Western) husbands, but Thai women did not do the same with their local partners. Admittedly, these women viewed care taking and household tasks they involved as a way to reciprocate their husbands’ support. Regardless of how such practices are conceived, they underline female domestic roles and traditional family values.

The idea of desired marriage partners emphasizing reliable and good family men implies a dismissal of local men as unfit and thus legitimizing women’s engaging in transnational marriage. At the same time it reinforces constructions of (Thai) femininity as it allows women to conform to female filial obligations shaped by the cultural norm of bun khun, while extending their domestic roles to a ‘global village’ where they live with their husbands. Moreover, the idea is a powerful one, for it provides incentives not only to
women who directly experienced marriage crises involving local men, but also to young single women to opt for transnational marriage right from the start. This dynamic is a part of on-going changes in Isan society which contribute to the popularity of transnational marriages.

**Roles of parents in transnational marriages**

The above discussions illustrate the impact of transnational marriage on gender relations and dynamics in women’s marriage decision. In this section, I explore parents’ involvement in transnational marriages so as to elucidate the reactions of villagers who remain in sending communities in transnational activities. I wish to show that those who stay behind have been actively involved in facilitating and encouraging transnational connections rather than being merely passive recipients who benefit from and are influenced by financial and social remittances generated by transnational marriage and migration. Parents’ involvement shows their support in materializing transnational connection as much as their determination and actions to fulfill their desired goals.

One important issue addressed in the previous chapter is the ambivalent feelings of parents about their daughters being *mia farang*. On the one hand, they believed that their daughters would have a happy and secure life by marrying a Westerner. On the other hand, they were worried about the social stigma that comes with being *mia farang* and about their daughters’ safety while living far away in another country. This feeling was shared by many parents I spoke with, including those who were confident that their daughters were mature enough to deal with the situations as they arose. Nevertheless, these worries were put aside once their daughters had made up their minds to pursue their desire. Parents’ support took various forms and with varying degrees of involvement. Usually, they helped with taking care of grandchildren when their daughters were away trying to make contact with Western men. Some helped pay or contributed to match-making service expenses. Others were actively involved in arranging contacts or direct meetings between their daughters and prospective partners.

The following cases involving a mother, Bua and a father, Chai, illustrate the various steps parents might take to pave the way for their daughter to marry a Western partner. Bua, a mother in her late fifties, recounted how she managed for Nuan (34), her divorced daughter with a son, to marry a German man. Nuan worked as an accountant in a company in Udon after graduating from a vocational college. She married a school teacher;
her marriage went well until she found out that her husband had been seeing another woman. The man wanted to maintain relationships with both women, but she could not accept this idea and decided to end the relationship. Bua encouraged her daughter to re-marry and strongly suggested her to look for a Western man. If she married a Thai man, Bua believed that she would face the same problem and would suffer again. Nuan was persuaded, but she was not serious about making it happen, according to her mother. As Bua recounted, “She [Nuan] said that she would not go to Pattaya, definitely not... A friend helped her to contact farang men through the internet. It did not work, and for almost two years nothing happened [she did not get any serious connections].” To help her daughter, Bua turned to match-making agents by asking those who knew or had used these services. She was told about an agency in Udon ran by a mia farang and her German partner. Bua went there a few times to get information and talk to the woman owner. Finally she decided to use the service and paid 120,000 baht (US$ 3,430) for the service charge. Bua recalled that after paying the cost she was under a great deal of pressure and kept worrying about whether such a large amount of money was well spent. Looking back, Bua realized that it was a large risk since there was no guarantee that it would work. If not, she would lose her money. Fortunately, Nuan was put in contact with a German man whom she married eventually, within eight months after paying the agency. Nuan left the village for Germany in 2003 and also managed to take her son to live there with her.

Bua’s account indicates that her determination and deep involvement were instrumental in getting her daughter successfully into transnational marriage. It was cases like this that encouraged parents and elderly residents in Nadokmai to ease the way for their daughters and nieces to pursue the transnational marital alternative. This is not to say that Bua was not aware of the social stigma attached to women marrying Western partners. However, since her daughter had suffered a bad first marriage, an attempt to get her a happy new life with a farang would outweigh the social consequences of such a union. And not to mention the economic windfall that went with it. Bua anticipated that when Nuan’s economic status became secure; she could contribute to her natal family. Obviously Bua was by no means a passive recipient of the benefits of a transnational marriage.

In Nadokmai, fathers also played an active role in getting their daughters onto the transnational marital track. A well publicized case concerns Chai, a father who put in a great deal of effort to make it possible for his daughter, Nam (18), a high school graduate,

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95The charge included a one-way ticket and a tourist visa to Germany. Bua contacted this match-making agent in 2002. At the time of my fieldwork, the agency had ceased its operations.
to marry a Western husband. During my fieldwork, I met with Chai and his wife a few times, but neither of them wanted to talk about their daughter Nam, who was preparing to visit the US sponsored by Martin, a retired American man she had been seeing. I learned from their neighbors that Chai had tried various strategies to enable his daughter to make contact with farang men, though his wife had taken a rather neutral role in all this. For example he once took his daughter to town to meet with a man Nam had contacted on the internet and he paid for an interpreter to help his daughter communicate with the man. When mia farang returned to the village on their home visits, he would ask them to introduce farang men to his daughter. In mid 2009, Chai rented out his van to Martin, an American, through a ‘local’ farang married to a woman in Nadokmai. He put Martin in touch with his daughter. Nam met with Martin while he stayed in the village. After returning to the US, Martin continued to communicate with her, sending money for her expenses and her English courses. He also proposed to pay for her to visit him in the US, but the visa application was not approved. Nam then reapplied. To prepare for her visit to the US, Nam went to Bangkok to take English courses supported by Martin. A female relative of Chai’s wife told me Chai was satisfied with the ‘progress’ his daughter had made so far. He also predicted that Nam would have a good future as Martin seemed to be a reliable person as shown by his support for her and especially the efforts he made to get her to come to the US.

The villagers, for their part, often raised questions about the wide age gap between Nam and Martin. The issue was about happiness versus a secure life. A woman in her forties whose daughter was a friend of Nam, commented on the rashness of Chai’s attitude. “She [Nam] just finished her school and has not had a chance to learn how life is. I do not agree with what her father has done. I feel sorry for the girl, really…I cannot imagine how an eighteen-year-old girl will be happy with a man in his sixties. He is older than her father; he belongs to her grandfather’s generation.” The woman pointed out that parents sometimes focus more on a good future rather than the personal feelings and happiness of their daughters. Like Bua, Chai’s hopes for his daughter to have a secure life were apparent. But in steering his daughter towards transnational marital relationship, no doubt he also wished to reap material benefits for himself, as he had seen similar cases in the

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96 Among various ways to meet and make connections with Western men, an introduction by mia farang (and their husbands) is considered to be a rather safe way to ensure the reliability of prospective partners. It is common for parents (and senior kin) to try this channel to initiate transnational connections for their daughters (and nieces). Some women also took this path to meet their future husbands although it is not the major route women in Nadokmai took to engage in transnational marriage thus far.
village – the same motives shared by Bua. Obviously, Chai and Bua, the ones who stayed behind, were active actors in facilitating this transnational process that had been transforming the rural landscape of Isan communities.

Parents’ roles in transnational marriage were sometimes criticized in terms of morality when they encouraged and provided the means for their daughters to go and work at notorious tourist destinations like Pattaya that served as contact zones (see Chapter Four). A local primary school teacher in his fifties said that support from parents and elderly kin for women to work at Pattaya in search of marital possibilities with Western men is immoral since it would set a bad example for young girls, making them think the quick way to get rich is to marry a *farang* by whatever means, including selling their bodies. While this view was shared by most villagers, some said that while working at places like Pattaya might be an ‘immoral’ practice, it was ‘morally justified’ since it allowed women to earn money to support their parents. Those parents who encouraged their daughters to go to Pattaya saw this as the most practical way to make initial contact even though they were aware of the social stigma attached to women working at such sites. For women and girls from rural villages, tourist destinations like Pattaya were the most obvious places to look around for prospective Western partners.

The ways women’s parents were involved in transnational marriages as I have shown thus far, indicates that they were active players with their own motives and agendas which they carried out with determination. If they were considered the ones who were ‘left behind’, their actions showed that they were by no means passive bystanders just benefiting from and influenced by transnational activities. An important question is whether such active involvement also implies parents’ authority over children, especially with regard to their choices of partners and female sexual behavior.

**Parents’ authority over daughters’ choices of marriage partner**

In discussing parents’ authority in the context of transnational marriage, I will take a close look at the ways in which parents might influence their daughters’ choices of marriage partner and female sexual behavior. As for choices of spouse, I draw on the experiences of both mothers and daughters about how they got to know their future husbands. The purpose of this comparison is to contextualize the changes in the face of local and global encounters. Then, I move on to discuss parents’ influences on female sexual behavior.
About the choice of a spouse, parents often compared how *mia farang* chose their partners with their own experiences in their youth. Kham (79), a widow whose daughter married a Belgian man and had lived with him in his home country for twelve years, told me that her parents picked a husband for her out of four men – a teacher, a folk healer, a farmer, and a son of a local trader – who proposed to her. The farmer, her late husband, was chosen since her parents wanted a good laborer who could help with the household farming. Kham accepted her parents’ choice without any fuss, as she explained, “This [arranged marriage] is the way it was at that time...In my time, parents and the elderly always said that by living together, we [the couples] will eventually love each other.” This experience was shared by Noi (62), a widow whose two daughters were married to *farangs*: a Greek and an Englishman. Noi was married to a man who had been in monkhood for many years; this was the reason why her parents chose him. Through ordination, her parents believed that he had become a ‘mature man’, capable to take care of a family of his own. 97 Like Kham, Noi obeyed her parents’ decision. The arranged marriages had worked well for both women and lasted until their husbands passed away. 98 These accounts illustrate parents’ influences on their children’s choice of marriage as well as the criteria for selecting a son-in-law. Today, agricultural skills are no longer an important factor in selecting a son in law; generally parents appreciate a man with a good job and/or having a secure economic situation. A man’s ability and willingness to take care of his family is highly regarded.

With regard to her children’s choice of spouse, Noi recounted that she had nothing to do with her daughters’ choices of partners. Both of them met their husbands through an agency in Bangkok while they worked as babysitters. Noi did not know much how her daughters got to know these men. She only heard about them through her daughters and met them for the first time when they came to the village with the girls. She could not communicate with the sons-in-law because of the language barrier. Likewise, Kham was

97 Traditionally, a young man is not socially accepted until he has become a monk. Normally, when a son reaches the age of twenty, his parents would insist that he is to be ordained before getting married and beginning his career. From this viewpoint, ordination is a rite of passage to become a ‘mature man’ who is able to take care of himself and his own family (Kirsch 1966; [http://www.thaiaccesstours.com/thailand-interesting-information/buddhism-002.html](http://www.thaiaccesstours.com/thailand-interesting-information/buddhism-002.html), accessed: March 28, 2010). The ordination is also a way for a man to express his gratitude to his parents, as discussed in Chapter Five.

98 Other village women of the mothers’ generation told me their marriages were not arranged, but approved by their parents. Some recalled that they had met and contacted their husbands themselves, not through an arrangement by their parents or senior kin. However, their parents approved their marriage. Those who had met their husbands through their parents recounted that they had been seeing their men for some time before marriage; some accepted that love developed on their part.
not involved in her daughter’s relationship with her Belgian husband. “They met in Bangkok while I was in the village. He [her Belgian son-in-law] asked to marry my daughter the first time I met him. I did not know much about him...My daughter chose him; then they got married.” The decline of parental authority over their children’s choice of spouses is shared by most mia farang’s parents in Nadokmai, including those encouraging their daughters to go and work at Pattaya for contacting Western men. A mother in her late fifties – I had met her for the first time at Pattaya when she was visiting her daughter working there as a bar girl – admitted that she had encouraged her daughter to go to Pattaya to look for a ‘good’ farang man who would take care of her and her son from a previous marriage. Her daughter had several relationships with different farang partners during her four years of working at Pattaya. The woman said she had no influence on her daughter’s choice of partners. She rarely met these men in order to get to know them, and anyway she could not communicate with them as she could speak only Thai. Her daughter picked her partners all by herself.

Generally, the decline of authority over children’s choice of partner was common among parents whom I talked to, including those with daughters (and sons) engaged in employment away from home. Parents’ experiences in this regard are in line with Mills’ (1999) and Teresa Sobieszczyk’s (2002) studies on migration, both domestic and international. These works indicate that being away from their natal home, women are able to exercise a high degree of autonomy over their decisions and actions, free from supervision from parents and elderly kin. In the case of transnational marriage, parents’ authority is negligible since their daughters not only reside in a distant place, but they are also associated with men having other cultures and languages that parents know nothing about. Decisions about personal relationship and eventual marriage are almost entirely in the daughters’ hands. Despite their efforts in paving the way for their daughters to meet prospective foreign partners, parents have little say in the final outcome. This situation allows women to enjoy a certain degree of freedom over their decisions and actions in the search for suitable foreign partners, although they remain tied up with their parental home through the morality of bun khun relations.

When talking with villagers about parents’ authority in relation to women’s choices of partners and sexual behavior, rumors and gossips about ‘sexual immorality’ of mia farang were often brought up. Chan, a woman in her mid-sixties, alleged that the mia farang living opposite her house had been seeing a local man while her husband was away. This kind of gossip caused concern to the parents of the mia farang but in actual fact they
could not do much about the situation. In Chan’s words: “The parents cannot do anything. They have to follow their daughter’s wishes since this mia farang supports the whole family. She built a new house where she lives with her parents and her two daughters [from a farang father]. She provides allowances to her parents and helped her siblings [financially] as well.” Indeed, the explanations regarding this kind of rumors are varied. Some villagers spoke of this as a women’s choice and explained, like Chan, that these women had done so much for their natal family, thus they could have their wishes met as well. Others related the speculation to a wide age gap between the mixed couples.99 A local school teacher commenting on parents’ support of their daughters to work at Pattaya, said that apart from the loss of parental authority over their children, such rumors reflected upon the moral deprivation within rural society. For him, not just the women who were said to be involved in relationships outside of marriage should be blamed, but male lovers should be condemned as well since these men, too, have played a part in the decline of morality.

Thus far, my examination of the roles of parents in transnational marriage shows that the ones ‘left behind’ are actually active players in these cross-country engagements. However, this does not imply parents’ authority over women’s choices of marriage partner. On the contrary, most parents experienced a decline in their ability to influence their daughters’ decision in this respect as well as in supervising female sexual behavior. This paradox is part of on-going social transformations, reflecting the process of production of locality pertaining to Isan communities, particularly in such villages as Nadokmai where transnational marriage is an important social phenomenon. In order to capture the multi-layered dynamics generated by this type of marital relation, it is important to look at how people relate to each other and deal with transnational marriages. To do this, I propose to approach mia farang as a distinct social category.

**Mia farang: An emerging social category**

Based on their improved economic well-being and distinctive lifestyles, I posit that mia farang constitute a distinct social category. In this section, I wish to explore what criteria

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99 As indicated in Chapter One, the age difference between the couples varied widely. In most cases, women were younger than men; in only 8 per cent of the sample men and women were the same age or women were older. Couples with women younger than men by 1-10 years accounts for 33 per cent; differences of 11-20 years and 21-30 years account for 20 and 21 per cent respectively. There was one case where the age difference is more than 40 years (also see Table 2, Appendix 2).
this emerging category can be considered a ‘class’ of its own and how it affects villagers, especially those in the privileged positions in the existing hierarchy. To take a closer look at this dynamics, I employ social stratification analysis and draw particularly on Bourdieu’s notion of class distinction (1984), suggesting that taste is a cultural and symbolic marker for class.

Social stratification is one of the mainstream theories in social analysis, among which the Marxist and Weberian approaches to class analysis are most prominent (Wright 2003). In Marxist theory, class is a core concept in the theoretical structure, and is defined in relation to production, more specifically to ownership of the means of production and to labor. This definition is less applicable to the emerging social category of *mia farang* which is characterized by improved material wealth and enhanced consumption – often times perceived as conspicuous consumption – rather than in relation to production in the Marxist sense. While Marxist analysis focuses basically on economic production, Max Weber distinguishes class as a function of economic order and status group associated with social honor and consumption; castes and ethnic groups are specific instances of endogamous status groups for Weber. Weber explicitly connects status or ‘honor’ groups with a common style of life manifested in patterns of consumption and association. He points out that wealth is not necessarily the primary cause of status, though some forms of property ownership are linked to prestige (Cox 1950; Weber 1947).

In a sense Bourdieu’s notion of class distinction, like Weber’s class stratification, focuses on consumption as manifestation of taste. Bourdieu claims that taste – consumer preferences and life styles – indicates individual’s status and reflects a symbolic hierarchy determined by the dominants to reinforce their distinction from other classes in the society. Society incorporates “symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, […] as one of the key makers of ‘class’ and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction” (Bourdieu 1984: 66). Bourdieu believes that class distinction “is most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions…” (1984:77). In this sense, taste becomes a class marker and it has to do with consumption. Furthermore, he points out that taste/consumption is conditioned by a varying combination of economic capital (assets, cash), social capital (acquaintance, recognition, networks,
Bourdieu particularly emphasizes the dominance of cultural capital as class marker, to the effect that “differences in cultural capital mark the differences between the classes” (1984:69). However, he does not ignore the importance of other two forms of capital in the formation of cultural capital. For instance, he attributes the ability in producing arts and playing music instruments in relation not only to dispositions associated with long establishment in art and culture, but also to economic means and spare time (Bourdieu 1984:75). This indicates that taste as cultural capital is linked to other forms of capital and that these various forms of capital are, to an extent, mutually convertible.

In Nadokmai, as shown in the previous chapters, material improvement and consumption patterns symbolizing middle-class ideals are amply manifested in the living standard and lifestyle of *mia farang* (and their natal families). Many of these women were able to augment their assets – a house, car, consumer goods as well as paddy land. Some also invested in local businesses such as bars, restaurants and internet cafés. Their daily behavior and leisure activities constituted distinctive styles setting them apart from most other villagers, including those belonging to privileged groups in the village hierarchy. Similar observations regarding consumption and display of consumer goods in the natal homes of *mia farang* appeared in Panitee’s work (2009). Furthermore, this pattern of consumption was also common among labor migrants as well. Mills (1998:304-307) observes that migrants (and their families) use their wages and remittances for acquisition of expensive commodity items (refrigerators, television sets, etc.) and construction of new, urban-style houses, apart from food and other subsistence requirements. These material possessions not only underpin ‘modern’ sophistication and urban achievement of migrants and their families, but are also important symbols in migrant households’ claims to status and prestige. Likewise, Panitee (2009:193-195) relates consumption of Thai migrant wives to the Thai idea of life overseas, associating it with a modern Western (and middle class) lifestyle, with visions of imagined places and the type of modernity local people fantasize about. According to Bourdieu, these consumptions are a symbolic hierarchy and a marker for class.

The ethnographic descriptions of the village in Chapter Two show that many of the relatively new houses with garden and lawn built in the style typical of urban-middle class

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100 See further discussion on three forms of capital and how the structure of the distribution of these different capitals represents the structure of the social world and determines practices in Bourdieu’s work on *The Forms of Capital* (1986).
owners, belong to mia farang. During my stay in the village, I visited a few mia farang in their houses furnished with expensive, factory made furniture, a modern kitchen with a dining-table set, a microwave oven and refrigerator, a living room with a sofa set, large television and stereo equipment. These expensive and factory-made commodities are different from locally made furniture in most middle class households in the village. From my observation, the mia farang and their Thai family members living in the houses rarely used such spaces and this furniture. One mia farang explained that she preferred the Isan style of having meal, sitting in a circle on a mat on the floor or with a low table. The dining table was used by her husband during his stay. He also used the (modern) kitchen in the house when he cooked, but she often cooked at an old kitchen outside the house. A similar story was told by a mother of another mia farang when she took me to see her daughter’s house. The woman said that the living room, which was well furnished, was hardly used when her son-in-law was in his home country. Usually, members of her family spent their daytime at an open-air place outside the house; they ate, chatted, socialized with the neighbors and sometime took a nap there. Despite the limited utilization, ‘modern’ and luxurious furniture indicates the status of the households and symbolizes the distinction from others families. In this sense, these commodities constitute an index for class mobility.

In addition to consumption pattern typical of middle-class lifestyles, mia farang and their natal families earned social recognition through contributing to the community and making merit, as shown in the previous chapter. During my time in Nadokmai, it was often the case that mia farang were the top contributors in supporting communal, school and religious activities. This situation is different from the past when contributing to the community and making merit by donating a considerable amount of money (and other material resources) were usually done by people at the top of the village hierarchy and the urban elite. As Bourdieu points out, financial contributions and merit making are cultural markers for class distinctions, and at the same time, symbolize assets and recognition/merit. In other words, cultural markers for class become cultural capital that can be mutually converted into economic capital (assets) and social capital (recognition/merit). In the Weberian sense, such practices of community contribution and merit making as well as (conspicuous) consumption are an indication for social honor or status. Thus, in line with the theories of Bourdieu and Weber – but not Marx – the practices signify both economic mobility and enhanced social honor, and the social category of mia farang could be construed as an emergent class.
While conspicuous consumption practiced by *mia farang* reflects their increased material wealth, local people especially those in privileged positions (e.g. grocery shop owners, school teachers, and local civil servants) and the urban-middle class regard such highly visible forms of consumption that are often attributed to ‘nouveaux riches.’ This has something to do with certain ‘folk’ or ‘vernacular’ perceptions of honorable/meritorious behavior (Sampson 1994). Local views, in this case, draw largely on such factors as social origin of *mia farang* – rural and poor, marginal education, stigmatization associating women marrying a Western husband with the sex industry, etc. Put differently, the emergent class of *mia farang* contains ambiguities derived from their enhanced material wealth and rising status on the one hand, and their generally low class background and the stigma associating them with prostitution on the other.

In looking at *mia farang*, the privileged villagers and the urban-middle class, it is worth taking up Keyes’s recent idea of ‘cosmopolitan [Isan] villagers’ underpinning the articulations of Isan peasants with global dynamics. Keyes (forthcoming) points out that the old elite remained rooted in the village whereas the peasants were on the move and became ‘cosmopolitan.’ By getting involved in enormous domestic and international mobility and receiving a massive amount of information from the media, Isan peasants have come to see themselves as belonging to much larger worlds than their home villages. This dynamics marks the extent of changes in contemporary Isan society. Keyes elaborates on such transformations by relating cosmopolitan villagers’ experience to the politics of populist democracy in Thailand. He argues that Isan villagers make a rational political choice, on the basis of their experiences, in supporting populist policies (Keyes, forthcoming: 17). The overwhelming support of the party promoting such policies in the 2011 election reflects a backlash against Thai politics which have long represented the middle-class and elite. In other words, Keyes’ perspective speaks of the overturning of the old village and urban elites through electoral politics based on the new ‘cosmopolitan’ peasant class.

I would submit that *mia farang* are a perfect example of Keyes’s ‘cosmopolitan villagers.’ The emergence of these women as a new social category – representing a new ‘class’ – parallels the relative waning of the ‘rooted’ old village elite, who increasingly experience a decline or a perceived decline of their prominence and impact. These dynamics impose tensions onto the existing class divisions in the village; specifically it generates challenges to the old village social order. This situation has, in part, contributed
to the multiplicity of local perceptions and reactions toward *mia farang* and the current transnational marriages.

**Conclusion**

Recognizing the impact of transnational marriages on economic improvement and on income and employment growth in the Northeast region in general (Kullapapruk and Vilaiwan 2006), this chapter investigates social and cultural consequences of such marriages and the ways people in the women’s natal villages perceived and engaged in this type of conjugal relations. Transnational marriage challenges traditional notions of gender in relation to marriage and sexuality. In particular it often places local men in a vulnerable situation, by highlighting the idea of desired partners as reliable and good family men, putting local men on the spot as unfit husbands. This idea is a powerful one; it motivates not only women whose previous relationship with a local partner has failed, but also young and single women to seek transnational marriage. At the same time, it also reinforces certain (Thai) constructions of femininity by allowing women to fulfill their filial obligations drawn from the Thai cultural norm of *bun khun* and underpinning female reproductive roles, especially within the contexts of mixed-couple families.

Looking at local dynamics as reflected by the reactions of women’s parents, this chapter reveals a whole range of activities on the part of parents in encouraging and assisting their daughters in the transnational marriage process. Nonetheless, this does not mean that they have control over their children’s choice of marriage partners. Regarding the debates on transnational migration and the ‘left behind,’ the findings show that with determination, clear aims and intention, the villagers who stay behind have actively encouraged and facilitated transnational marriages. They are active actors supporting and making transnational connections become realizable. These people are not simply passive recipients benefiting from and affected by remittance and social remittance generated through transnational processes.

Another key aspect of the dynamics in the sending community has to do with the emergence of a new social category comprising of *mia farang*. This category is characterized by distinctive consumption patterns that set these women apart from the old village elite. Thus, in Weberian-Bourdieuian terms these women form an emergent class that challenges the old class divisions in the village. The overturning of the old village and
urban elites runs parallel with Keyes’s view on ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ pointing to the extent of changes in contemporary Isan society, and in Thailand in general.

All in all, the current dynamics and subtle shifts taking place in Nadokmai generated by transnational marriage of village women are a part of social transformations and (re)production of Isan communities in the face of local and global encounters. Stories of *mia farang*, their husbands and villagers of Nadokmai presented in this study are remarkable examples of how people engage in and experience global opportunities, as well as how such engagement influences their lives and the life of their community.
CONCLUSION

This research focuses on transnational marriages of women in the Isan village of Nadokmai, the ways in which people in the village perceive and approach these marriages, as well as the consequences of such marriages on village life, particularly with respect to gender relations, marriage and family. In attempting to understand this growing social phenomenon, the study draws on the debates concerning transnationalism, gender, and connections between marriage, money, and intimacy. As marriages of Thai women with Western men – so called ‘transnational marriages’ – are commonly viewed, both in the West and locally, as a shortcut to wealth for poor village women, this thesis asks the question whether material benefits are indeed the main factor upon which such marital relationships are built. If not, what are the other motivations encouraging local women (and Western men) to marry. How are such motivations as well as the relationships between mixed marriage couples and between mia farang, their husbands and their local folks shaped by local and Western cultures/norms and imaginations about Western societies and lifestyles? The study also explores the processes in which women fulfill their desire to marry a Western partner. By focusing on the lived experiences of the couples as well as their wider social environment in the wives’ native villages, the research reveals the complexity of the processes that constitute transnational marriage currently taking place in Isan. Furthermore, it investigates how this social phenomenon contributes to the transitions taking place in present-day Thai society in the face of local-global articulations. This concluding part recapitulates the substantive findings and (re)emphasizes the contributions of this study to the relevant fields and theoretical concepts upon which it developed.

**Historical diversity and current complexity**

In searching for insights in transnational marriages beyond the common-sense, a normative view based on a perspective highlighting financial motivations, this thesis explores the historical roots of contemporary transnational marriages. Whereas most, if not all, of the studies on Thai woman-Western man marriages connect these marital relations with the
presence of American troops in Thailand during the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s, this study shows that intermarriage in Thai society can be traced as far back as the thirteenth century and that conjugal relations between Thai woman and Western man were first documented in the early sixteenth century along with the arrival of Westerners in Siam.

From historical perspectives, interracial marriages were shaped by the intersection of gender, class, and ethnicity (Chapter One). Evidently, intermarriages often followed a gendered pattern and were linked closely with social class – marriage between Thai women and Western men was observed among the mass of the population whereas the pattern of Thai men-Western women marriage occurred mainly among the elite class and the royal family. Furthermore, while marriages between Thai women and Chinese men were promoted under assimilation policies, especially during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), marriages between Thais and Westerners were rather restricted due to the emphasis on nationalism by King Rama VI (1910-1925), under whose reign laws and regulations regarding Thai-Western marriages were promulgated. In addition historical explorations also reveal an accepted utilitarian dimension to interracial marriages which nevertheless did not exclude the emotional factor.

Despite the fact that today’s transnational marriage is context-specific, showing different forms of conjugal unions as compared to those of the past, the present phenomenon has its roots in interracial marriages dating back centuries ago. The increased popularity of this type of marriage and the regularity of contacts between mia farang (and their husbands) with their families in rural communities are the most prevalent characteristics of current transnational marriages. The family bonds and wider social relations within their home village are particularly crucial for the women. This continuous investment is a determining factor in the success of the marriage. Inevitably, such transnational connections and practices shape perceptions and expectations concerning mixed couples and complicate social relationships between mia farang, their husbands and local people in the women’s natal communities.

Another significant point reflecting historical connections between this type of marital relation nowadays and that of the past is women’s awareness of the possibilities of escaping from their predicaments caused by marriage problems with local men, to improve their living conditions, and to fulfill social obligations as dutiful daughters. To a great extent, such awareness was realized through the experiences of GI’s wives during the Vietnam War. Despite the ambivalent attitudes towards these women – associated with
admiration and jealousy for their material improvement on the one hand and a negative image connecting them to prostitution on the other – stories of these women, especially those who became influential local figures, have inspired women of later generations to marry Western husbands. Transnational marriages nowadays are perceived as individuals’ deliberate choices. This is quite different from interracial unions in the past which were often viewed in association with the country’s politics, modernization, as well as international relations. This dynamic is indicative of a change of perceptions and meanings over ‘mixed marriages’ in Thai society, emphasizing individuals’ (and their families’) strategies in the face of local-global articulations rather than state concerns for international relations and development.

The highly valued cultural idea of a dutiful daughter supporting her parents and family is another important factor in present-day transnational marriages. As described in Chapter Five, a wide range of factors influencing relationships among people involved in and related to the marriages is explored, among these the notion of a dutiful daughter based on a Thai cultural norm of bun khun plays a key part in shaping these marriages. Gender roles determined by bun khun reciprocity underline female life-long obligations to their parents (and natal family). Fulfilling this norm through maintaining connections with and continuing support for their parents allows women to gain merit/social recognition. However, the obligations shape the relationships and practices developed within both women’s natal and conjugal families. It is precisely this dimension – the women’s strong sense of obligation towards their families, and not being able to let that go, and the relationship with their husbands – that is most crucial in making these marriages possible or in the end, impossible. In addition, tensions generated by the distinction of this local norm and Western cultural ideas of the family – with emphasis more on the conjugal unit than on connections with the natal family of both sides – are prevalent and experienced by mia farang, their husbands and relatives. Diverse motivations may make women want to engage in a transnational marriage (e.g. failure of an earlier marriage, local norms and practices regarding gender and marriage, fantasies about Western society and ‘modernity’) but one motivation is always at the forefront: the obligations shaped by the dutiful-daughter notion. This is especially the case for women from limited-resource backgrounds. This is not to say that these women marry foreigners solely because of material incentives. Rather, I argue that there are diverse sets of motivations at play, associated with women’s positions within power hierarchies, or what Mahler and Pessar (2001) call ‘social locations.’ In the cases of mia farang, their ‘social locations’ are defined by socio-
economic status, educational background, age, marital status, and marriage possibility. As elaborated in Chapter Three, for some of these women their status of low education and low income ‘locate’ them in a position in which transnational marriage becomes a viable alternative to fulfill their roles as a dutiful daughter. Other women situated in different positions engage in this type of conjugal relation for different reasons; nevertheless they always uphold dutiful-daughter obligations.

The explanations of Thai women’s contributions to their natal households drawing on the cultural norm of bun khun and the daughter’s filial duty are prevalent in a number of studies in the fields of labor migration, marriage migration, and prostitution (Buapan et al. 2005; Mills 1999; Muecke 1992; Panitee 2009; Sirijit 2009; Sukanya 1988; Thisa 1980). My analysis builds on these studies; its results reaffirms that the idea of a dutiful daughter is an important factor both in explaining and legitimizing the engagement of women in transnational marriages. In this light, this local norm provides women with room to combine their obligation to be good daughters and to go out of the local limitations relating to gender relations and marriage problems and possibilities.

Apart from nurturing close ties with their rural family, most mia farang maintain good connections within the local community, especially through material contributions to religious and social causes locally. Such contributions allow them to maintain a village-based identity and reaffirm a commitment to their natal community. These contributions testify to their economic achievement as shown by their new roles as community benefactors. That these benevolent acts are appreciated by fellow villagers enhance their sense of belonging and bring them social prestige. Together with the fulfillment of the bun khun obligation, these acts combine to mitigate the ambivalent attitudes toward mia farang.

Despite the diversity of mia farang’s backgrounds, perceptions about them are mostly stereotyped. While a number of authors have indicated a decrease of social stigma and negative attitude towards women having a Western husband (Panitee 2009; Ratana 2005; Weisman 2000), my research shows that the image of the mia farang is at best ambiguous and complex. The negative stereotypes connect mia farang with prostitution under the rubric of mia chao or tourist destinations catering for the sex industry. In addition, official and academic discourses often treat transnational marriages as disguised trafficking and a threat to local traditions and the family institution. Paradoxically mia farang’s positive image builds on their fulfilling the traditional norm of a dutiful daughter. Also, local government staff and village leaders see mia farang and their husbands as strategic resources for development of their community. As shown in Chapter Five, this
duality is inherent in each marriage. The ambiguities generated by such perceptions and attitudes create tensions and complicate the relationships and practices developed under this type of marital relations, especially between mia farang and local people within their village and beyond.

To understand the phenomenon of mia farang in Nadokmai and elsewhere in Thai society, I propose to approach them as a distinct social category. This category is defined by the improved economic well-being, distinctive lifestyles, and the social recognition and prestige that these women obtained through fulfilling social obligations as dutiful daughters and making contributions to their home village. Drawing on Weberian-Bourdieuian social stratification analyses emphasizing consumption in relation to status and ‘honor’ groups (Weber 1947) and taste, manifested through consumption preferences and lifestyles, as a cultural and symbolic marker for class (Bourdieu 1984), I argue that mia farang make up a new ‘class,’ though not a class in the Marxist sense. This emerging ‘class’ accentuates class divisions in the village. The overturning of the old village (and urban) elites runs parallel with Keyes’s view on ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ (forthcoming) pointing out the relative decline of the ‘rooted’ old village elite as a part of social transformations in contemporary Isan society and in Thailand in general. Moreover, this emerging ‘class’ and its influences on the structure of village hierarchy reminds us to reconsider the ways in which this type of marriage is conceptualized in relation to class. For instance in Sirijit’s work (2009) discussed in Chapter Five, class is viewed in association with rural-urban distinctions, thus ignoring class within rural communities where the marriages are embedded. Based on this study, I suggest that a framework of analyzing class needs to emphasize both the rural settings where the phenomenon is situated and the contexts of a rural-urban divide.

**Beyond material relations**

In attempting to understand transnational marriages and their impact on the local community, I find that a prevalent, dichotomous view conceptualizing local woman-Western man marriages into an ‘either/or’ opposition between material motivations and romantic love has shrouded the complexity of the phenomenon in many ways. The stories of mia farang and their husbands presented in this dissertation entail a variety of factors shaping marriage decisions and experiences of both women and men. Obviously, marrying a farang is not just a shortcut to wealth for women; nor do men become involved in this
type of marriage solely because of romantic love. My research suggests that the ‘logics of
desire’ compelling women and men to opt for transnational marriage constitute a complex
set of multiple motivations that cannot be attributed to either economic reasons or
emotional ties alone. Rather, these motivations combine and influence the ways in which
marriage choices are made. For Western partners, their marriage choices are shaped by a
variety of factors, the most common of which are a gendered stereotyping of Thai (Asian)
women in association with the role of home-making wives embracing traditional family
values, as well as gender relations in Western societies influenced by feminist ideologies.
As for Thai women, apart from the powerful notion of dutiful daughter, the motivations
inspiring them to look for Western men also include such factors as the image of
‘irresponsible local men’, the limitation of marriage choices influenced by local norms and
practices regarding gender and marriage as well as women’s perceptions of modernity and
their marital experiences with local partners.

On another score, my findings reflect Zilezer’s notion of ‘Connected Lives’
(2005) which argues for intermingling of intimacy and material transactions in the realities
of the day-to-day life, to the effect that people are actively engaged in negotiating such
combinations in constructing their social lives. The experiences and sentiments of Isan
women and Western men presented in this dissertation reveal that they are continuously
weigh up such factors as economic opportunities and constraints, filial obligations, ‘love’,
imaginations, individual experiences and desires that mingle and shape their marriage
decision and conjugal relationships. Evidently, such factors extend far beyond material
relations and romantic love.

Sex, money, and desire for a long-term relationship came into play as male tourists
and local women interacted in Pattaya, a ‘space of hope and opportunity’ where
transnational ties of many mia farang from Nadokmai were initiated (Chapter Four). Most
of the bar girls and freelancers I spoke with perceived their work as a vehicle to meet and
make connections with Western men, hoping that an association would result in a serious
relationship. Through exploring women’s strategies and tactics in managing, negotiating,
and maintaining associations with their customers, my research clearly shows that these
women invested in their relationships with their clients with desires beyond a mere
exchange of money for sex. This is a path that changes the lives of a number of women and
allows them (and their dependents) to obtain a relatively secure future, keeping in mind the
fact that many others working at the site have not succeeded in this endeavor.
The motivations propelling women and men to look for a serious relationship and factors shaping their interactions and social relations within various contexts – e.g. a ‘space of hope and opportunity,’ a conjugal unit and women’s natal family and community – reflect the importance given to economic resources with their meanings extended beyond economic value. Such material support provided by a Western partner to his wife, her parents, children, and relatives represent expressions of ‘love,’ care, and commitment. Similarly, bar girls view the gifts and money tourist men give them as a sign of serious interest and care. The allowance and other material resources that women provide to their parents symbolize their gratefulness as a dutiful daughter. Likewise, community contributions made by women signify their belonging, commitment, and social recognition. Apart from their economic significance, these transactions also have social and symbolic meanings as they are embedded in local norms and values, thereby influencing expectations, social relations, and practices of people involved in and related to transnational marriages.

Thus far, most studies on inter- and transnational marriages both in Thai and Asian contexts are conceptualized in relation to colonial culture, militarization, gendered imaginations, and the discourses of modernity and tradition, as I have discussed in the preceding chapters. The insights into how economic opportunities and intimate relationships combine and play a part in the ‘logics of desire’ as well as complicate relationships and practices developed under this type of marital relations brings a new dimension to the existing body of literature on the subject.

**Transnational marriage and transnationalism**

In exploring the “migration-left behind nexus” (Toyota et al. 2007), that includes the wider social environment of the women, I show that there are other important players in the field – parents, extended family members and other villagers living in the women’s natal community. These people are by no means passive onlookers but for the most part are active participants in the processes of migration and transnational mobility. This approach draws on the critiques of both the ‘migration-development nexus’ perspective (King et al. 2006; Stahl and Fred 1986), focusing on economic benefits while downplaying social and cultural effects of migration and transnational practices, and the ‘social remittances’ perspective (Levitt 1996, 2001) taking social dimensions into consideration but overlooking the active involvement of people who remain behind in transnational
processes. By exploring the motives and actions of women’s parents in transnational marriage processes (see Chapter Six), the findings of my research highlight the active roles of the ‘left behind.’ The parents are not passive recipients, merely benefitting from and affected by financial and social remittances flowing from the receiving countries to sending communities in the home countries. The encouragement and support they give to their daughters are a testimony of their desired aims for a secure future of their daughters, their grandchildren, as well as for themselves. It is the intention, determination, involvement and the high degree of agency of those staying behind that make transnational connections/marriages possible.

The involvement of those who do not directly engage in the marriages has been noted in recent works in various countries of Asia, including Abelmann’s and Kim’s (2005), Freeman’s (2005) and Wang’s and Chang’s (2002) studies. In line with my study, these authors reveal the roles of marriage brokers and government policies, as well as the groom’s and the bride’s parents in facilitating or limiting transnational marriages. The observations on the ways in which these kinds of transnational relations have been realized demonstrate diverse groups of people remaining in sending communities who have influenced, managed, and controlled transnational activities. These insights suggest that in transnational studies the issue of agency should not be conceptualized in relation to geographical mobility alone – looking at who moves and who stays. Rather, one should take into account the various actors who support, initiate, and control decisions and practices to engage and participate in transnational activities in the framework of what Massey refers to as the ‘power geometry’ (1993, 1994) as discussed in the Introduction. Focusing on the interplay between movement/flows, power, and agency in transnational spaces, Massey reminds us that the point of concern is not only those who move and those who do not, and those who do the moving may not necessarily be ‘in charge’ of the process. In fact those who do not move may influence decisions and actions in transnational processes, as shown in the case of the women’s parents described in this study.

As far as transnational mobility is concerned, this thesis reveals the diversity of marriage migration on a global scale. My findings in particular show a reverse pattern of gendered mobility with respect to the notion of ‘global hypergamy’ – women ‘marry up’ and thus move to a higher socio-economic location in the global hierarchy. No doubt this concept has certain merits in explaining current transnational marriages. However, the growing number of Western partners from countries with higher economic standards in the
global scale who have moved and settled in their wives’ communities/countries reflects a paradox of such migration patterns. This reverse mobility, as I have argued, is also influenced by uneven global economic developments through a two-directional migration that presents both upward and downward mobilities in the global hierarchy. This result is in line with recent studies on Vietnamese and Filipino women who experienced downward class mobility through transnational marriage and migration to countries located in better economic positions in the global hierarchy as shown by Thai (2008; 2005) and Suzuki (2005). My study indicates that almost half of marriage partners of mia farang from rural villages like Nadokmai are blue collar workers from the West. This does not actually represent a ‘marrying up’ move in a ‘class’ sense. However in real life situations mixed couples living in the village (and elsewhere in Thailand) enjoy a higher living standard. This represents an upward mobility on the local scene. As a result, I suggest that the notion of ‘global hypergamy’ (see Chapter Three) needs to be redefined to understand the complex nature of geographical mobility and that further investigation is needed to see how and in what sense such a marriage represents upward (or downward) mobility.

Another significant point related to transnationalism which emerges from my study concerns the ways in which sex work has been conceptualized, especially within transnational tourist spaces. To understand how women realize their desire to marry a Western partner, I focus on interactions and associations between tourist men and local women working in Pattaya, one of the best known tourist destinations in Thailand (Chapter Four). I found that both of the main approaches applied to the analysis of sex work – one focusing on women’s victimization and oppression, the other arguing for women’s agency and viewing sex work exclusively in relation to economic transaction – are rather limited in capturing the life realities of the women whom I met. These women were proud of their contributions to their natal families and communities as well as their children’s development. Some even spoke of their ‘good’ marriage and the love they genuinely had for their farang husbands. Women’s experiences in this respect point to the fact that an approach considering sex work exclusively as either women’s exploitation and subordination or economic activities overlooks how this profession is used as a means to a specific end that is meaningful for women (and their dependents), and how the boundaries between money, sex, and the imagining of possibilities for a better life overlap and become

101 Data in Table 5, Appendix 2 shows that 39.6 percent of Western men marrying women in Nadokmai are involved in blue collar work. Those engaging in professional work and self-employed business account for 24.6 percent, and 12.6 percent are pensioners.
Logics of Desire and Transnational Marriage Practices


Drawing on these findings, I would posit a more nuanced approach that can account for not only money and sexuality, but also for intimate social relations and the desire for a meaningful life. By taking into account the multiple motivations and the various ways in which such motivations combine and shape marriage decisions and relationships, we may gain a better understanding of women’s lives and how they make sense of their own lives on their own terms. In other words, the findings highlights the fact that sex work is entangled in a multitude of social relations; therefore a pure sex work or sexual slavery-oriented perspective looking at sexual commerce in isolation distorts the position of sex work in a transnational marriage trajectory.

Local dynamics and complexities

Focusing on women’s natal village, this thesis demonstrates that transnational marriages represent more than women’s strategy in coping with family crises and asymmetrical gender relations, or in fulfilling their personal desires. Such marriages also serve as a channel for women’s natal families and rural residents to be involved in the interactions between local particulars and global processes. The material improvement in the village with the trappings of modernity such as urban styled houses, cars, large grocery stores, etc. together with improvements in public places such as schools, temples, and local government offices, were largely funded by mixed couples. In Nadokmai, some families depend largely on financial support from their daughters or nieces so as to make ends meet. For others, remittances bring new wealth to be invested locally. Some are able to travel to foreign countries for the first time to visit their daughters. Through regular contacts with their daughters, nieces, mothers, and friends living in various parts of the globe, and thanks to modern telecommunication many villagers, young and old, are instantly connected to the world beyond their home village and home land. Along with economic changes, my findings show that cultural norms and values also undergo transformation that influence the social lives of local people as well.

While material improvements are easily observed, social and cultural transformations are often more subtle, profound, and complex. Transnational marriages could strengthen or challenge local norms and practices in various ways. The local norm of female obligations to parents is strengthened as the marriage allows women to fulfill the
Thai notion of ‘dutiful daughters’. It is worth noticing that through these marriages women also extend their domestic roles to various parts of the globe where they live with their husbands. Such norms and practices reinforce the constructions of (Thai) femininity. Likewise, mixed couples conform with the practices related to Thai marriage such as sinsot (bride wealth) and customary wedding, although forms of marriage ceremony and the amount of sinsot are more diverse as compared to the past.

At the same time, the emergence of a new ‘class’ of mia farang challenges the existing village socio-economic hierarchy, making inroads into the ranks of villagers in privileged positions, especially the well-to-do and well educated who feel. Another significant consequence of transformation generated by transnational marriages of village women has taken place in the realm of gender. As mentioned, the powerful idea of desired-partner underpins the rejection of local men as unfit and thus legitimates women’s engaging in transnational marriage. This emerging idea works for both women who have experienced failed marriage and unmarried, young women. Through analyzing local men’s reactions to this on-going process in line with feminist studies in the field of language (Cameron 1998; Crawford 2003; Mulkay 1988), I posit that women’s alternative for 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.

The on-going transformations in Nadokmai brought about by transnational marriages of village women are something the villagers have to come to terms with. The current popularity of transnational marriages as well as the reverse trend of mobility in which Western partners move (or plan to move) to resettle with their wives in the village may accelerate changes at the local end that villagers are likely to encounter in the future. Indeed, the everyday experiences of mia farang and Nadokmai’s villagers in negotiating local and global articulations may be shared by residents of other communities in Thai society and elsewhere as transnational marriage and migration have become more visible in recent decades. My findings indicate that any attempt to understand such marriages and their consequences would be incomplete if one fails to take into account the diversity of local and global processes that make these marriages imaginable and realizable, and the various ways in which people have engaged in and negotiated this relationship. These processes, though diverse and complex, are historically and culturally specific; thereby foregrounding the importance of their context.
The primary conclusion of this dissertation is that transnational marriage entails two types of complexity. The first concerns the social, cultural and economic impact of such marriages on women’s natal communities. The second involves relationships and multiple motivations transcending both material considerations and romantic love. Stories of *mia farang*, their parents, their husbands and people living in their natal villages highlighted in this dissertation remind us that the phenomenon of transnational marriage is far more complex than merely a short cut to wealth. Rather, these marriages are situated in the processes of social transition and reproduction in the face of local-global encounters, in which gender, class, life styles, norms and practices regarding marriage and family are put to severe test, along with imaginations about a better life for all concerned.
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Logics of Desire and Transnational Marriage Practices


Kullapapruk Phiewthong-ngam and Vilaiwan Mahawerawat. 2006. Phonkrathop thi koet chak kan chai jai konh klum khu somrot chao tangchat thi doen thang khao ma thongthiao rue tang thinhan na khet Phak Tawan-ok Chiangmuea to raidai lae kan chang ngan konh phak (The Effects of non-Thai Spouse's Expenditure for Travelling or Settling Down in the Northeast on Income and Employment in the Region). Khon Kaen: Faculty of Management Sciences, Khon Kaen University (Thai Language).


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**Newspaper**


*Kom Chad Luek*, March 4, 2008.

*Kom Chad Luek*, March 27, 2008.


**Website**


GLOSSARY OF THAI TERMS

*bap*  Buddhist demerit

*bun*  Buddhist merit; moral merit

*bun khun*  debt of gratitude; especially between parents and children or patron and client

*du thuk*  look down upon

*faen*  boy- or girlfriend(s)

*farang*  Caucasian or white men/women

*karma*  the Buddhist concept explaining a result of actions in present and past lives; good actions earn moral merit (bun), bad/wrong actions gain demerit (bap)

*kathin*  a Buddhist ritual organized within 30 days of the end of the monk’s three-month rainy season retreat (phansa)

*Khoei*  son(s)-in-law

*khwam charoen*  process; often an emphasis on material progress

*luk khrueng*  children of mixed Thai-Western parents

*mae chi*  nun(s)

*mia chao*  a ‘hired wife’

*mia farang/phanraya farang*  a Thai wife of a Western man

*mia noi*  a minor wife

*mo du*  fortune teller(s)

*mo lam*  an Isan folk performance including singing and dancing

*muban*  village(s)

*phanraya/mia*  a wife
**phansa**
the monks’ retreat period during three months in rainy season

**pha pa**
a Buddhist ritual to offer robes and objects for the monks’ personal use such as soap, medicine, packaged drinks, toilet paper, and cash gifts

**raktae**
‘real love’

**rai**
a measure of land area equal to approximately four-tenths of an acre: 2.5 rai equals 1 acre

**sami/phua**
husband(s)

**saphai**
daughter(s)-in-law

**sinsot**
bride payment which is given by the grooms to the bride’s family

**songkran**
a Thai festival holds on April 13-15; the most obvious activity is the throwing of water, thus it is known as the water festival.

**thansamai**
modern, up-to-date
**APPENDIX 1**

**Interviewed cases**

**Table 1:** Interviewed cases divided by sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. The Village Setting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia Farang</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2 women are from other villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19 women are currently in relationship with a Western partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 women already ended the relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s parents</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman’s siblings</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village residents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1 man and 2 women are from the village next to Nadokmai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village leaders/school teachers/government</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Some of the village school teachers and local government officers live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>officers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in other villages, but have worked in Nadokmai for some years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Husbands</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 men live with their wives in other villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Pattaya</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar Girls</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 women are from Nadokmai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>68</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Background information of *mia farang* and the foreign husbands in Nadokmai in 2008

**Table 1**: Age of *mia farang* and the foreign husbands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (year)</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-70</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>159</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>159</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**: Women’s education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Po 4 (grade 4)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Po 6 (grade 6)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo 3 (grade 9)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo 6 (grade 12)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powocho (Vocational education: 3 years after grade 9)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powoso (Vocational education: 5 years after grade 9)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>159</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Settlement locations (places where women have settled)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overseas: mainly partners’ home countries</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadokmai</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand: outside Nadokmai</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>159</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Regions and countries of origin of the foreign husbands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions/Countries</th>
<th>Number (159)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>European</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>81.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxemburg</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australia</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 5: Husband’s occupation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘blue collar’ work*</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional work**</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/self-employ***</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No job</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioner</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>159</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:  
* ‘blue collar’ work includes such jobs as car drivers, construction worker, mechanic man, car repairer, pumper, chef, and salesman.  
** Professional work includes engineer, police man, architect, medical doctor, language teacher, accountant and computer man. These jobs require college education.  
*** Business/self-employ includes construction sub-contractor, running a restaurant, house renting business, and agriculture.
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 

\textit{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 \textit{mia farang} associated with economic achievement and new roles as community benefactors on the one hand and social stigma produced through the discourse of \textit{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.
**SUMMARY IN DUTCH**

*Logica’s van verlangen en transnationale huwelijksgebruiken in dorpsgemeenschappen in Noordoost Thailand*

In de Thaise regio Isan vinden een opvallend veel transnationale huwelijken plaats. Het doel van dit onderzoek is het begrijpen op welke manieren dorpsbewoners in het Noordoosten van Thailand (Isan) deze huwelijken ervaren, wat de consequenties zijn van zulke huwelijken voor het dorpsleven, en wat dit sociale fenomeen ons vertelt over de maatschappij van Isan (en Thailand) in de context van globalisering. De studie maakt gebruik van actuele theorieën over gender, transnationalisme en debatten over huwelijk, geld, en intimiteit. Het grootste deel van het onderzoek is gebaseerd op een kwalitatieve benadering. Data zijn primair verzameld middels etnografisch onderzoek, waarbij gebruik is gemaakt van diepte-interviews, observatie en participatie. Aanvullende data met betrekking tot achtergrondinformatie over de zogenaamde *mia farang*, de Thaise bruiden van westerse mannen, en hun huwelijksvorming zijn verzameld middels een verkennende vragenlijst. Aangezien de transnationale echtparen sterke banden hebben met de geboortedorpen van de vrouwen lag de nadruk van het veldwerk op een dorp in Isan waar vele transnationale echtparen een groot gedeelte van het jaar wonen. De weg naar het huwelijk leidt langs verschillende transle en transnationale locaties en personen, en in dit onderzoek werden de vrouwen gevolgd naar deze locaties bij hun pogingen om een geschikte huwelijkspartner te vinden en daarmee te leven.

In een poging inzicht te verkrijgen in de transnationale huwelijken, buiten het gebruikelijke normatieve kader waarbij de nadruk ligt op financiële motieven, toont deze studie de historische diversiteit en de huidige complexiteit van zulke huwelijken. Terwijl de meeste studies naar huwelijken tussen Thaise vrouwen en westerse mannen betrekking hebben op de relaties die ontstonden tijdens de aanwezigheid van Amerikaanse troepen in Thailand tijdens de Vietnam oorlog, toont mijn onderzoek aan dat deze interraciale huwelijken voor het eerst gedocumenteerd werden in de vroeg zestiende eeuw, ten tijde van de aankomst van westerlingen in Siam. In het verleden hadden deze relaties een utilitaristische dimensie, zonder de emotionele factor uit te sluiten. Vandaag de dag hebben de transnationale relaties verschillende vormen, afhankelijk van de context. Het meest opvallende kenmerk zijn de frequent contacten tussen de *mia farang* en hun echtgenoten met de families in de rivale gemeenschappen. Deze familie contacten zijn op hun beurt
wier bepalend voor de beeldvorming rondom gemengde huwelijken wat de relaties tussen deze vrouwen, hun echtgenoten en de lokale bewoners van de geboortedorpen van de vrouwen bepaalt, en soms ook bemoeilijkt.

De lokale vrouwen (en westere mannen) hebben diverse en complexe beweegredenen voor het aangaan van transnationale huwelijken die zowel economische motieven als verlangens naar een intieme relatie overstijgen. Deze beweegredenen zijn gevormd door lokale en westere normen en gebruiken ten aanzien van gender en het huwelijk, ideeën over westere samenlevingen en levensstijlen, en de sociale posities van vrouwen in de mondiaale hiërarchie. In mijn bevindingen benadruk ik vooral het idee van ‘onverantwoordelijke lokale mannen’ als deel van de redenering die het aangaan van transnationale huwelijken door vrouwen lokaal mogelijk maakt en legitimeert.

De Thaise badplaats Pattaya was een van de onderzoekslocaties waar de ‘onderhandelingsprocessen’ tussen lokale vrouwen die vaak werken als barmeisjes, en westere mannen konden worden geobserveerd. Om een westere man te trouwen gebruiken vrouwen verschillende strategieën en tactieken die verder gaan dan alleen de uitwisseling van geld voor seksuele ervaringen. De vrouwen verklaarden dat hun verlangen om een lange termijn-relatie aan te gaan altijd een grote rol speelde. Deze vrouwen beschouwden hun werk in de bar als een manier om kennis te maken en banden te onderhouden met westere mannen, wat zou moeten resulteren in een serieuze relatie. Deze relaties hebben de levens van een aantal vrouwen compleet veranderd, maar niet alle vrouwen die in Pattaya werken is het gelukt een dergelijke relatie aan te gaan. Mijn bevindingen leiden tot een meer genuanceerd beeld van sekswerk. Ik heb de totstandkoming van transnationale huwelijken deels geanalyseerd vanuit het perspectief van sekswerk, maar zonder sekswerk uitsluitend te benaderen vanuit een perspectief van seksuele uitbuiing of puur economisch gewin.

De ervaringen van vrouwen die transnationale huwelijken aangaan tonen aan dat ze voortdurend verschillende factoren afwegen zoals economische kansen, lokale beperkingen, mondiale mogelijkheden en individuele verlangens. Deze gezamenlijke factoren beïnvloeden hun besluit tot het aangaan van een relatie of huwelijk. Door hun relaties zijn ze in staat om aan de verplichtingen van de Thaise culturele norm hun khun, de verschuldigde dankbaarheid aan de ouders, te voldoen, en een bijdrage te leveren aan hun geboortedorp, waardoor zij sociale erkenning krijgen. De positie waarin de mia farang verkeren is ambivalent: aan de ene kant maakt hun bijdrage aan de lokale samenleving hen
tot weldoeners, aan de andere kant is er het stigma van de mia chao, de gehuurde vrouw die tegen betaling seksuele en huishoudelijke diensten verleent aan haar partner.

De bijdragen van de vrouwen hebben niet alleen een economische waarde, maar vooral ook een sociale en symbolische betekenis van dankbaarheid als eerbiedige dochter en gemeenschapslid. Evenzo staat de materiële steun die westere partners aan hun vrouwen en haar verwanten geven voor liefde, zorg en toewijding. De meeste studies tot dusverre naar inter- en transnationale huwelijken, zowel in Thailand als in de bredere Aziatische context, worden bestudeerd in relatie tot koloniale cultuur, militarisatie, gender relaties en het discours van moderniteit en traditie. Maar mijn bevindingen over de manier waarop economische mogelijkheden, intieme relaties en sociale en symbolische dimensies van economische praktijken samenkomen en vrouwen ertoe bewegen om een transnationaal huwelijk aan te gaan, alsmede hoe dit hun relaties en activiteiten compliceert, maken een andere conceptualisering van dit soort huwelijksrelaties mogelijk.

Een ander thema dat in dit onderzoek naar voren kwam was de lokale complexiteit die ontstaat door de transnationale huwelijken. De bevindingen geven weer dat de keuze van de vrouwen voor een huwelijksrelatie met een westere man lokale gender-gerelateerde machtsrelaties problematiseert waardoor de lokale mannen in een kwetsbare positie gebracht worden. Op basis van het beeld van de ‘onverantwoordelijke lokale man’, worden lokale mannen als ongeschikt bestempeld, en daarmee wordt het aangaan van transnationale huwelijken door vrouwen gelegitimeerd. Bovendien ontstaat middels de mia farang een nieuwe sociale categorie, namelijk een nieuwe ‘klasse’ gebaseerd op consumptie en levensstijl die in conflict is met de bestaande sociaal-economische hiërarchie binnen het dorp.

Verder toont dit onderzoek aan dat transnationale huwelijken meer vertegenwoordigen dan de strategieën van vrouwen om met asymmetrische genderrelaties, familiecrises of de vervulling vervullen van persoonlijke verlangens om te gaan. Deze huwelijken dienen als manier voor de families van de vrouwen en de rurale bevolking om deel te nemen in mondiale processen. Volharding en steun van de ouders van de vrouw in het mogelijkmaken van transnationale huwelijken voor hun dochters toont hun betrokkenheid bij transnationale processen aan. Dit bevestigt de actieve rol van de ‘achterblijvers’. Wat dit betreft werpen mijn bevindingen licht op het concept ‘human agency’ – menselijke handelingsintentionaliteit – in transnationale studies die in beschouwing zouden moeten nemen welke verschillende actoren beslissingen en gebruiken
steunen, initiëren en aangaan, in plaats van alleen te focussen op hen die zelf deelnemen aan geografische mobiliteit. De actuele dynamieken en kleine verschuivingen in het dorp, ontstaan door transnationale huwelijken, zijn deel van de sociale transformaties in de Isangemeenschappen in de context van lokale en mondiale ontmoetingen.