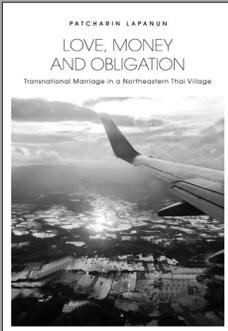


doi: 10.14456/jms.2019.20



ISBN 978-981-4722-91-9

**Book Review:**

Patcharin Lapanun.

**Love, Money and Obligation:  
Transnational Marriage in  
a Northeastern Thai Village**

Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. 198 pages.

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*Received: November 11, 2019*

*Revised: November 27, 2019*

*Accepted: December 16, 2019*

Over the last couple of decades there has been a large number of marriages between Thai women and foreign men, especially European. The phenomenon of *phua farang* (foreign husbands) sometimes resident in Thai villages, has become well known. Many are in Isan, Northeast Thailand, notorious for being the poorest part of the country. The Thai population census of 2010 found 27,357 foreigners living in villages in Northeast Thailand, 90 % of whom were sons-in-laws of local villagers. Eighty percent of these foreign sons-in-laws were Europeans. The village in upper Isan which Patcharin Lapanun chose as her main fieldwork site has a population around 4,300 including 159 Thai women married to foreigners from 21 countries, also mostly Europeans. In press coverage and some academic work, this phenomenon of *phua farang* has often been viewed either as another example of foreign men exploiting local poor women or a form of disguised trafficking. Patcharin Lapanun sees it differently.

Patcharin Lapanun teaches anthropology in Khon Kaen University in Northeast Thailand. In this book she sets the *phua farang*

into an international context. She details the socio-economic backgrounds of the Thai women involved; traces the geography in which these liaisons are negotiated; analyses the complex motivations that drove both the foreign men and Thai women into transnational marriages; discusses the reasons for the success or failure of such unions; and examines the impact on the local society. Throughout she combines academic rigor with human sensitivity.

She makes four main arguments in this book.

First, she rejects the suggestion that the main reason for these transnational marriages is the material basis of the relationship, and did not find evidence of a disguised trafficking mechanism. She sees no threat to local traditions and the family institution. She argues that, deep down, these relationships are about “the logics of desire” (p. 14). The pair are often sexually attracted to one another in the first place. The decision to join in matrimony, however, is situated in a complex social context. The woman’s local kin play an important and often decisive role. Both parties are influenced by “local and Western cultural norms regarding gender and marriage, as well as gender fantasies about Western societies and life styles” (p. 161).

She analyses the women in two groups. The first and largest group includes village women with relatively scant education. The second includes women with more education and often professional jobs such as teachers. Women in both groups tend to have a negative perception of local men as unreliable, both as partners and providers. The women’s decisions to seek a transnational marriage are deliberate choices by individuals. However, in the case of both groups, especially the less educated, the approval of their parents is important to their decision to marry foreigners.

Most of the less educated women in Patcharin’s sample have had failed marriage with local men. Their choice of another partner is very much influenced by considerations of reliability and economic security. Often they have personally observed successful transnational marriages in their villages, and these have demonstration effects, incentivizing them to seek the same. Through her in-depth ethnographic

work, Patcharin shows that the decisive motivation for the less educated women to marry foreigners is to fulfill their social obligations as dutiful daughters.

As a dutiful daughter, the wife wishes to maintain links and support for her parents after the marriage because this in return will bring her merit (*bun*) and social recognition within their village society. Patcharin found that some women, who began liaisons with foreigners because of sexual attraction and fantasy about western lifestyles, veered away from marriage once they found that the male partners were not willing to include her parents as part of their life together, including providing some financial supporting and keeping regular contacts. From the viewpoint of the women, the terms on which a liaison may advance to a long-term commitment are very clear. Where the women have children from a previous marriage, they require the prospective husband to agree to take care of them also in the future. These terms underlie the negotiation through the period of courtship.

In cases where these terms are met and a successful marriage is made, the women enjoy better living conditions, and a better social standing and respect in the village.

Second, Patcharin shows that several people in the women's natal village participate as "agency" to influence and facilitate the relationships that may or may not lead to an eventual marriage. In one case, a father, who was influenced by the demonstration effects of successful marriages to foreigners in his village, took it upon himself to seek an agent to find a suitable foreign partner for his very young daughter, even being prepared to pay the agent's fees.

Third, Patcharin argues that Thai women marrying foreign men, particularly European men, constitute an "emerging social category" (p. 155), which impacts on the social class divisions in the village, challenges local norms and practices, and presents challenges to the local elites.

Local men in the villages with many *phua farang* tend to explain that local women marry foreigners because they want to be rich and lead a more comfortable life. They do not accept the women's

perception of themselves as being unreliable and not paying enough attention to their roles as providers for the family.

Others in the villages and elsewhere have ambiguous and complex perceptions of village women marrying foreigners. There is a hangover from the Cold War era, with memories of *mia chao* or hired wives, and association with sex tourism. Such perceptions are linked to the marginal position of Isan in the national context and to Laotian ethnicity and culture among Isan people, as distinct from being “Thai” as defined by Bangkok or Central Thai elites.

Yet there is also a positive image of these women as bringers of wealth, new practices and values, at the same time as being dutiful daughters. In the eyes of local government and village leaders, these women along with their husbands are “strategic resources for the development of their community” (p. 170).

Fourth, Patcharin argues that transnational marriage is complex and has had many new socio-economic consequences. She shows that “its historical roots are also diverse and ingrained in historical and cultural specificities dating back several centuries” (p. 161). Unions between Chinese and local Thai women can be traced back to the thirteenth century, and those with Europeans began from the sixteenth century, with the coming of the Portuguese to Ayutthaya.

One of the most fascinating passages of the book is about Pattaya as one of the key sites for starting these liaisons, as a “space of opportunity and hope” (p. 115). Pattaya became well-known at the height of the Cold War for providing “rest and recreation” for American soldiers fighting in Vietnam, and remains notorious as a destination for sex tourism. Patcharin describes another side of this seaside resort. Thai women and European men have developed the place as a new kind of site for meeting and negotiation in search of relationships that will fulfil their desires to create transnational connections that might result in long-term commitments. Many of Patcharin’s sample women initiated their transnational ties to foreign men in Pattaya, with the view to marry one of them eventually.

The women who come to Pataya to seek a desirable “foreign husband” cover a wide range of personalities, including various types of freelance women. Some may just sit on the beach reading a book, waiting to approach or to be approached by a foreign tourist, who may just want to have a companion for a day, or for a short holiday period. She relates how a near middle age lady from Isan, who had two children from her failed marriage to a local Thai, decided to go to Pataya to find an alternative foreign partner as her lifelong husband. Her first foreign partner lasted for three years, then he told her that he had decided to go back to his wife. The Thai woman was devastated but did not lose hope and continued to frequent Pataya in hope of meeting the “right” person one day.

Patcharin also shows how the women going to Pattaya learn to remake themselves as desirable bodies that European men will want to marry. They learn how to change their hair styles, their clothing, their make-up, the way they walk, talk and behave to attract the foreign men. They need to make some investment in their new looks. They study which places in the town offer the best opportunities to find their catch. It is a job. She compares Pattaya to Sosua in the Dominican Republic where Brennan (2004) has argued that “sex work is not simply a survival strategy, but an ‘advancement’ strategy for them to marry male tourist and migrate off the island” (p. 115).

This well-written book is a very valuable contribution to many fields of study including the growing global phenomenon of transnational marriage, the strategies of Thai and other women in the context of globalization, and the changing nature of the Thai village. Patcharin moves her study beyond the studies of prostitution, sex tourism, and trafficking by taking these transnational liaisons seriously, by acknowledging the importance of desire, and by setting the couples into their complex social contexts peopled by parents, children from previous relationships, village elites, and many others. Patcharin brings to the study not only a local perspective combined with academic rigor, but also a large measure of humanity and compassion.