

It's Not Just About Money: Transnational Marriages of Isan Women¹

ไม่ใช่เพียงเพราะเงิน: การแต่งงานข้ามชาติของผู้หญิงอีสาน

Patcharin Lapanun² / พัชรินทร์ ลากานันท์

Abstract

Transnational marriages between Isan women and Western men are a striking social phenomenon in contemporary Thai society. This paper aims to explain these marriages; it discusses the problematic binary opposition of the notions of romantic love and material incentives, which views such marriages as based on either money or romantic love. Drawn on the results of my fieldwork in an Isan village, this paper presents the diverse and complex motivations that feed into 'logics of desire' propelling village women and Western men to engage in the current transnational marriages. The logics of desire, I argue, transcend both economic reasons and intimate relationships and are informed by local and Western norms and practices regarding gender, marriage, and family. In addition, fantasies about modernity, a gendered stereotyping of Thai (Asian) women associated with the role of home-making wives, and gender relations in Western societies influenced by feminist ideas also play a part in shaping marriage choices and decisions. Based on the findings, I maintain that the dichotomous view is a simplification and does not capture the multiplicity of factors shaping marriage decisions or the meanings of these conjugal relationships for the women and men concerned.

Keywords: Transnational marriage, Gender relations, Isan women

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² Faculty Member, Sociology and Anthropology, Khon Kaen University; Researcher, Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region (CERP).

บทคัดย่อ

การแต่งงานข้ามชาติระหว่างผู้หญิงอีสานกับผู้ชายตะวันตกเป็นปรากฏการณ์ทางสังคมหนึ่งที่ได้รับ ความสนใจในสังคมไทยปัจจุบัน บทความนี้มุ่งอธิบายปรากฏการณ์ดังกล่าว จุดเน้นของบทความคือ การตั้งคำถามกับแนวคิดคู่ตรงข้ามที่ใช้ในการอธิบายความสัมพันธ์ลักษณะนี้ นั่นคือ การมองว่าผู้หญิงแต่งงานเพราะเงิน ส่วนผู้ชายแต่งงานเพราะความรัก (romantic love) ข้อมูลจากการทำงานภาคสนามในหมู่บ้านอีสานแห่งหนึ่ง สะท้อนความหลากหลายและซับซ้อนของแรงจูงใจอันเป็นองค์ประกอบใน 'ตรรกะของความปรารถนา' (logics of desire) ที่ผลักดันให้ทั้งหญิงและชายก้าวสู่การแต่งงานข้ามชาติ แรงจูงใจเหล่านี้ประกอบด้วย ปัจจัยและเงื่อนไขที่ไม่ได้จำกัดเฉพาะเหตุผลทางเศรษฐกิจและความรักเท่านั้น บรรทัดฐานและประเพณีปฏิบัติในสังคมไทยและสังคมตะวันตกที่เกี่ยวกับเรื่องเพศสภาพ (gender) การแต่งงาน และครอบครัว มีอิทธิพลต่อตรรกะของความปรารถนา นอกจากนี้ จินตนาการเกี่ยวกับความทันสมัย ภาพลักษณ์ของผู้หญิงไทย (และผู้หญิงเอเชีย) ที่ถูกเชื่อมโยงกับบทบาทตามประเพณีของผู้หญิง รวมทั้งความสัมพันธ์หญิง-ชาย (gender relations) ในสังคมตะวันตกที่ได้รับอิทธิพลจากแนวคิดสตรีนิยม ล้วนส่งผลต่อทางเลือกและการตัดสินใจแต่งงาน จากข้อค้นพบผู้เขียนเสนอว่า คำอธิบายภายใต้กรอบคิดชั่วคราวข้ามไม่สามารถสะท้อนถึงความหลากหลายและซับซ้อนของเงื่อนไขต่างๆ ที่ส่งผลต่อการตัดสินใจ รวมทั้งความหมายของการแต่งงานหญิงสำหรับหญิงและชายเหล่านี้

คำสำคัญ: การแต่งงานข้ามชาติ ความสัมพันธ์หญิง-ชาย ผู้หญิงอีสาน

Introduction

When a woman from poorer and less developed countries marries a man from richer or more industrialized countries, material incentives and opportunities to move to and work in more desirable locations in the global hierarchy are assumed to be women's major motivations. 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. This economic view draws basically on the binary opposition between romantic love and material motivation, the normative way

in which the current marriages between Isan (Thai) women and *farang* men (Caucasian or white men) are perceived.

This article aims to problematize the notion of binary opposition between romantic love and material incentives. By exploring the experiences of *mia farang*³ and their partners, I want to show that the 'logics of desire' compelling these women and men to opt for transnational marriage⁴ 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. I shall elaborate my argument by exploring how women's (and men's) inspirations to engage in the marriages are imaginable and realizable. To do this, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork - the major methodology employed throughout the fieldwork was in-depth interviews, observation, and participation - conducted in 2008-2009 in Nadokmai⁵, a studied 'village' in Udon Thani Province, 40 kilometers south-west of the provincial town.

³ The Thai term *mia farang* literally means a Thai wife of a Western man. To villagers in the studied village, 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*. There is another Thai term, *phanraya farang*, which also refers to Westerner's wives and denotes a better sense of respect compared to *mia farang*. However, villagers I interviewed rarely used the term *phanraya farang*. Following villagers' usage, in this paper I use the term *mia farang*.

⁴ In this paper, the term 'transnational marriage' refers to marriages between people living in different countries and the couples move between the host and home countries regularly and they also maintain their relationships and networks in both countries. This connotation is different from the terms intermarriage/mixed marriage/interethnic marriage which are normally used in a rather general sense referring to marriages between people of different ethnicities or cultures with little consideration of whether the couples are from the same or different countries and whether they maintain relationships in their home and host countries.

⁵ The village's name and all person names quoted in this paper are pseudonyms.

The term 'village' used in this paper to refer to Nadokmai is different from the definition of *muban* used for administration purpose. 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* which, in the past, were one village. Currently these *muban* comprise of 1,045 households with a population of 4, 229; 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.

Nadokmai is an affluent village with well-developed infrastructure. 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, completed 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. Most of these houses belonged to *mia farang*. 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 relationships had ended. These women accounted for 18 percent of village women between the ages of 20 and 59. Their foreign partners were men from 21 nationalities. 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.

As a point of departure in exploring women's and men's inspirations to engage in transnational marriages, the following section reviews the debates surrounding the issues of gender, sexuality, and race that motivate desires and facilitate marriages between Asian women and Western men in particular.

Conceptualizing motivations and the 'logics of desire'

Among scholarly works on intermarriages and border-crossing sexual encounters in an Asian context, Ann Stoler's analysis (1992) of *métissage* (interracial unions) of French Indochina and the Netherlands Indie reveals how sexuality, gender and race were linked to rules and politics which in turn influenced individuals and families. This work indicates that 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. 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. 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 gender imagination and fantasies facilitate transnational marriage (and migration) (Constable, 2005; Piper and Roces,

2003; Thai Hung Cam, 2008). These works highlights the fact that motivations and aspirations associated with such conjugal relationships extend beyond love and material motives.

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; Suksomboon 2009; Thai Hung Cam, 2008). Nevertheless, some women consider passion as the driving force behind their desire to marry a Western man (Constable, 2003; McKay, 2003).

Another view draws on Edward Said’s discursive notion of ‘Orientalism’ (Said, 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. 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, Smutkupt and Kitiarsa (2007: 3) argue that *farang* men get married to Isan women with "some certain degrees of "masculinity Orientalizing" style of thought and rationalization". 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.

The emergent literature also poses new challenges to assumptions about romantic love and its extrication from economic reason. Cabezes (2004), for instance, points out the blurred boundaries between labor practices and romance relationships and between love and money. Illouz (1997) shares this position while making a slightly different argument; stating that 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. She calls this process 'commodification of romance' (Illouz, 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, 2005a; Tolentino, 1996; Wang and Chang, 2002). 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.

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. In doing this, I draw on the narratives relating the experiences of three *mia farang* in Nadokmai. 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

Sa (43)⁶, 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.

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. Her husband did not send money home. Sa

⁶ The figure after person's name indicates his/her age. Ages of the persons indicted in this paper were accurate up to 2008 or 2009, depending on the time of the interviews.

worked very hard but 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 and they lived together. Sven stated that he found Sa attractive; that is why he asked her to marry soon after he met her.

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. This made Sven 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. 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.

Living together for 10 years and sharing both 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. On his part, Sven said that 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.”

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 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 as this was totally lacking in his previous marriage.

Similar to Sven, most Western partners I met in Nadokmai mentioned about the gendered stereotype of Asian women, including Thai women - being committed to the traditional role of wife and devoted to family values - as a part of Western men’s motivation to meet and marry Thai women. 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 and practices of local women who considered their care-taking as reciprocal support to their husbands. When I asked Thomas, an English man living in the village with his wife, 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). 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.

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 woman 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 her 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 and support of women's natal family these men provided.

Sa's, Jin's, Sven's and Thomas' accounts present diverse factors shaping their choices and decisions to engage in transnational marriage which extend beyond material incentives and romantic love. 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

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. Carsten worked for his parents' construction company. He managed to come and stay with Nisa in the village two or three times every year. They had a son (2) who stayed with his mother 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. The relationship went well until she found out that he was seeing another woman. 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. Nisa was not wrong; her partner did not show up. She struggled and supported herself all alone. Based on her experience, Nisa 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."

In 2004, Nisa followed a village woman to Phuket and got a job at the same bar. There, she met Carsten and stayed with him during his vacation. They agreed to continue their relationship and kept communicating when he returned to his country. Carsten sent a regular allowance to take care for Nisa's and her daughter living

expenses. His support allowed Nisa to fulfill her desire to educate her children in the best possible way; she sent her daughter to a private school in Udon. He also renovated the house in Nadokmai where Nisa lived with her parents and children. Thus far, Carsten took the family seriously. He called almost every day via the internet and always tried to plan his visits to the village to coincide with the children's birthdays. Nisa said that as a father and a husband Carsten did not disappoint her, even though they sometimes encountered conflicts and mistrust similar to those of other couples.

The story highlights Nisa'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 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 rap-phet-chop 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 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, especially those engaging in overseas employment. Also when village men talked about male drinking, gambling and philandering behaviors they considered these as 'normal things' (*pen reuang thammada*) that distinguished their masculinity. On the contrary, 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. 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. Male peer group 'outings' (*thiaw*) 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 (Rabibhadana, 1984; Saengtienchai et al., 1999; Pramualratana, 1992). Traditionally, polygamous relationships were commonly accepted, especially among upper class men. In recent times, polygamy usually occurs in the form of a 'minor wife' or *mia noi*

(Saengtienchai et al., 1999; Yoddumnern-Attig, 1992). In her study of love and marriage in Thai society in the twentieth century, Bumroongsook (1995: 106-109) notes 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 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. Some women in the village perceived the kind of husband-wife relations displayed by mixed couples - doing things together such as eating out, joining communal activities and shopping - 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.

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/preferences and fantasies about modernity

In May 2008, after four years of communicating through internet chatting, Lita (37) 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. 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 - both were on pension - in a spacious house on a large piece of land in the center of the village. Considering their large land holdings (20 rai of paddy and 25 rai of farm land) and respectable teaching positions, Lita's family was located at the top the village hierarchy.

In 1997, Lita was urged (by her relative) to see a man working at a local health center as a marriage prospect, but Lita did not like him. 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. She said, "It is not easy for a woman of my age living and working in a rural community to find a 'local suitable match' who is single and more or less has a similar educational and career background, sharing a similar life style and willing to take responsibility for his family."

Lita met Peter through internet chatting. They chatted almost every day for years. "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. 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."

Lita recalled that Peter told her that he was not a rich man, but he could take care of her. "He brought this up a few times. I told him that it does not matter to me." Lita appreciated Peter's willingness to take care of her. At the same time, she emphasized that "I don't want to be a housewife for the rest of my life...I certainly will improve my English and find a job [after moving to live with him in English]." In 2009, she left her secure job and her parents to England.

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, in part, 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 (Bumroongsook, 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 when I interviewed her, 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.⁷ 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.

Some women mentioned their preference for a Thai-Western mixed child (*luuk kreung*) 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]." Although her marriage did not work out, Khwan's desire to have *luuk kreung* did not change. She talked about

⁷ 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 (Yoddumnern-Attig, 1992: 27).

these children as good-looking and attractive. They represented 'modernity' (*khwan thansamai*). They could also become an actor or actress. Kanda shared Khwan's passion for *luuk khreung* which, in part, motivated her to seek connections with Western men. Through internet chatting, Kanda made a connection to her husband-to-be, an English man who had a PhD in information technology. They got married at the end of 2009.

Khwan's and Kanda's desire to have *luuk kreung* 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, *luuk kreung* 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 *luuk kreung* of the Vietnam War era (Weisman, 2000). The construction of *luuk kreung*'s images by the Thai media as being self-confident, sophisticated, successful, beautiful and modern is a part and parcel of the commodification of beauty in Thai popular culture (Reynolds, 1999; Van Esterik, 2000).

Thus far, the life stories and accounts from *mia farang* presented in this paper represent diverse sets of motivations compelling these women to engage in transnational marriages. 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 educated women with prestigious economic and social status may be motivated by such factors as restrictive local norms and practices relating to gender, age at marriage and preferences associated with modernity. 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, that was shared among most *mia farang* and village women who attempted to initiate this type of transnational connection, regardless of their background was the image of local men as irresponsible persons who failed to fulfill familial duties.

In the 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, 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 Thai (and 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 (Suksomboon, 2009), men's Orientalizing fantasies about Asian women (Smutkupt and Kitiarsa, 2007) and a way in which both the Western men, mostly blue collar workers, and rural Thai women become empowering to each other in regaining their denied backgrounds and identities at home (Tosakul Boonmathya, 2005). While acknowledging the various ways in which Thai 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 also reinforced by stories gleaned from the experiences of their friends who married Thai women. A comparative 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 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 (1995) points out that male British tourists whom she met in Pattaya talked about their disappointment resulting from being rejected by white women; 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 and kept in contact with the girls. 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 money and love. This is a way for people to make sense of their own lives. Adding 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, and to fulfill their desire for relationships embracing traditional gender roles and family values. In a sense, these men challenged gender relations and norms of their own societies.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have shown a diverse range of motivations constituting the logics of desire that compels Isan women and Western men to engage in transnational marriages. The multiplicity so far presented challenges the normative and dichotomous interpretation of these marriages with either material incentives or romantic love. The results of this study allow me to 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 multiple factors and the complexity of the logics of desire motivating Isan women and Western men to opt for marriage emphasize to us that the current transnational marriages are not just about money. 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. The ways in which these factors come together take various forms and the variations are related to women's background. 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. Any attempt to capture these marriages would be disguised without taking such complexities into account. On another score, experiences of women and men engaging in transnational marriages provide good examples of how people make sense of their life in the face of local and global encounter.

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