

Love, money and obligation: transnational marriage in a northeastern thai village

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Love, Money and Obligation. Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village, by **Patcharin Lapanun**. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2019. 198 pp. ISBN: 978-981-4722-91-9 (paper)

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Partnerships between Thai women and Western men, often much older, are an increasingly common sight in cities across North America, Europe and Australia. Likewise an alien sociologist landing at the massive gateway to the world Suvarnabhumi Bangkok International Airport could easily deduce this as *the* most common type of family structure. While Thai-Westerner relationships are remarkably prevalent, women in them are subject to stigmatising stereotypes in Thailand and the West. *Mia farang* has the connotation of a gold-digging prostitute in Thailand, while Thai women from all walks of life face similar sexualised discrimination in the West. An article of mine on women's experiences was greeted on social media by a Western man posting a picture of a Thai woman with an ATM machine superimposed over her body, backed by approving vindictive comments by others. My surprise was they bothered to read it at all. This book by Patcharin Lapanun sets out to confront the idea that these relationships are just about "money".

Over the last decades the growing research on Thai-Westerner partnerships has made important strides forward, driven by feminist perspectives and female scholars. Early days focussed on sex-work, superseded by influential cross-border marriage migration perspectives, inspired by anthropologist Nicole Constable (2005) among others. This work has always struggled to balance "victimhood vs agency" interpretations and "material vs emotional" explanations when accounting for why women from poor rural backgrounds migrate to tourist-zones in search of a better life by hooking up with wealthy foreign men. These are not easy questions for researchers seeking to validate a subject's experience in a way that also represents it authentically. Patcharin Lapanun makes a welcome contribution to this tricky terrain. As the title suggests, she wishes to place emotional (Love) before material (Money) concerns as the basis for women's aspirations, but importantly she adds context too, by focussing on how all such ideas and motivations are culturally embedded in the social roles of women in rural settings (Obligation). As 'dutiful daughters' women from rural Northeastern villages build on a matrilineal tradition where self-sacrifice for parents and the natal family is normal. The search for a better life (for herself and for her family) should be viewed through this lens of obligation. Such obligations are self-imposed as well as social pressures exerted by family relations, which strongly shape an individual's social opportunities and life-trajectory in Thailand.

By advancing this perspective, the author sits among a generation of female Thai scholars, among others, Sirijit Sunanta, Panitee Suksomboon, Chantane Charoensri and Pattraporn Chuenglersiri, who draw from their own cosmopolitan experiences to provide deep gendered

views on how the transnational processes manifest in Thai-Western partnerships, represent and carry significant social transformations that are fundamentally changing society. While to outsiders this topic, dealing with women from a rural region, may seem peripheral, it indicates a bigger picture. These women's life-trajectories bring out many contradictions that result from the deep social transformations of Thai society, that have occurred in tandem with rapid unprecedented economic development driven by specific globalisation processes (Statham et al 2020). Pathbreaking research by Jonathan Rigg (2019) and Charles Keyes (2014) demonstrates that the social and political transformation of 'the rural' is fundamental to understanding Thailand's globalised development. Massive waves of emigration (especially young women) from villages to cities, and internationally across the globe, by people who retain surprisingly high cultural obligations to return, has generated rural regions populated by "village cosmopolitans". Today, rural communities are sustained more by migrants' remittances than agricultural production. Lapanun is therefore right to see women's aspirations, lives, and perceived outcomes, within this radical social transformation of rural Thailand. In a sense, they are a vanguard of these social transformations, which their own lives significantly drive and represent.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Northeastern village and (sex)tourist city Pattaya, Lapanun builds a picture of couples, whose unions generate a sort of bottom-up transnational "bi-localism" by drawing families and social fabrics of globally distant places together through cross-border connections. The author generates empathetic feelings towards subjects, who appear as ordinary people caught up in complex everyday challenges of globalisation processes that decisively shape their lives, but not always in ways they fully comprehend. This perspective is valuable, but standard in the academic state-of-the-art. It is popularised brilliantly in films by anthropologist/documentary-maker Sine Plambech.

More innovative is Lapanun's inclusion of natal family within the primary unit of analysis. This provides a step towards embedding women's lives within rural social transformations. Parents and family who remain in the natal village are a pervasive social network of relationships, through which women see their obligations – as "dutiful daughters"- and which shape their behaviour influentially throughout a relationship cycle with a Western man. Lapanun calls this the "left-behind" population of transnationalism. It is questionable how much natal families are actually "left behind". An alternative viewpoint is that some families exert power over and use their "dutiful daughters" to meet their own goals of rural transformation. Some women in my research lamented high demands placed on them by families to provide materially, while feeling left emotionally distant and alone from their own parents and children (Statham 2020/2021). It remains a question of interpretation, but I think there is a darker side to these relationships. Women can be locked into alienating lives with difficult ageing foreign men on whom they are dependent, while facing high social pressures from families. Even materially "successful" women face considerable psychological challenges, because they mediate constantly between husband and natal family expectations, and face these problems alone, or can only really share their feelings with other *mia farang*.

Arguably the most interesting claim from Lapanun's study is that these women are a new "class" determined by distinctive patterns of consumption and social recognition. Importantly, this goes back to the fundamental importance of explaining the prevalence of Thai-Western partnerships through social transformation processes. It is true that new money and massive remittance homes that spring up in built by "successful" *mia farang* challenge traditional social hierarchies, values and gender roles of the village. Lapanun is right, there is a new visible social category of matriarchs whose transnational networks and life-styles

become aspirations for other women (and their families) to follow suit. However, it is also important to point out that this enhanced status works only in rural Thailand and tourist-zones. Middle-class Bangkokian society permits no space for inclusion of this new “class”. On the contrary, discrimination tends to push and displace Thai-Western relationships to enclaves in the rural Northeast and tourist cities, where birds of a feather flock together, but remain largely separated from mainstream Thai society.

In sum, this book is a worthy read that I would recommend to anyone interested in marriage migration and rural social transformation. It advances understanding on Thai-Western partnerships with comprehensive coverage and brings important original insights to the fore.

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