

**GLOBAL WIFE, LOCAL DAUGHTER: GENDER, FAMILY, AND NATION IN
TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES IN NORHTEAST THAILAND**

by

Sirijit Sunanta

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explains the emergence and continuous growth of transnational marriages in Northeast Thailand through a gendered and localized analysis of globalization. The Foreign Husband (*Phua Farang*) phenomenon, or inter-racial/cross national marriages between Thai women and foreign men, has grown substantially in the last ten years, particularly in Isan or the Northeast Region of Thailand. In 2003-2004 as many as 15,000 women from Isan provinces are married to or engaged in romantic relationships with foreign men mainly from Western European countries and the U.S. Transnationally married Isan women send remittances to their families, schools, and temples, thus contributing to the economic and social transformation of agrarian villages in Thailand's poorest region. The Phua Farang phenomenon among rural Isan women, and the volume of revenue the phenomenon generates, perplex Thai society and stirs nation-wide debates. I demonstrate through combined gender, class and political economic analyses how the Phua Farang phenomenon in Isan is implicated in the interconnected "worlds" between the global and the local, the macro and micro scales, as well as the production and reproduction realms. Exploring localized global processes that take place at various scales—from the individual, the family and community, to the nation-state and the global political economy—this dissertation reveals on-going struggles between structural forces from "above" and everyday resistance on the ground by classed, ethnicized and gendered subjects exercising their agency. Internal struggles within the Thai nation, shown in ethnicized, classed, and gendered moral and nationalist discourses around the Phua Farang phenomenon, further problematize the dichotomy between the "colonizing global capitalism" and the much celebrated local alternatives to modernity.

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Chapter One

The Phua Farang Phenomenon in Transnational Context

Introduction

On Friday March 10, 2006, *Thairath*, a major national newspaper in Thailand, reported the murder of Chompoonut Gobram by her Belgian boyfriend. The sub-headline read: “Belgian man who cruelly murdered Thai girlfriend out of jealousy jumps bail and flies back to Belgium, turns himself in to Belgian authorities: A lesson for Thai women seeking foreign husbands.” Starting with the murder, the news article criticized the recent phenomenon in which Thai women, particularly those from Northeastern provinces, marry foreign men and migrate to a foreign country for perceived economic reasons. Although marriages between Thai women and foreign men are not new, their increased number and visibility have raised public attention and stirred debates within Thailand.

In Thailand, within the past five to ten years, the Foreign Husband (*Phua Farang*) phenomenon, or inter-racial/cross national marriages between Thai women and foreign men, has grown substantially, particularly in the Northeast or Isan region. The Thai term “Phua Farang” literally means “foreign husband” -- “Farang” is the term Thais use to refer to foreigners, especially white Westerners and “Phua” in the Thai vernacular means “husband.” In 2003-2004, Thailand’s National Economic and Development Board (NESDB) conducted a survey in Thailand’s Northeastern provinces, finding that as many as 15,000 women are married to foreign men, mainly from Western European countries and the U.S. The women send remittances of approximately 1,464 million baht (CAD\$ 44,360,000) a year in total to their families in Thailand, and spend a further 77,200 baht

(CAD\$ 2,340) per month with their husbands during yearly visits to Thailand. Mainly focusing on the economic aspects of the phenomenon, the NESDB has developed state-centric policy recommendations that emphasize the economic potential this group of women have in promoting OTOP (One Tambon, One Product) in foreign markets. OTOP was one of the major village-level policies initiated by the Thaksin Shinawatra's government as a strategy to promote small-scale entrepreneurship at the village level.¹

As the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Northeastern provinces continues to grow and its economic gain becomes evident, Thai society tries to make sense of it, while the state struggles to find its position in dealing with the emerged inter-racial, cross-cultural marriage trend. The common perceptions of this phenomenon shown in the media as well as in everyday conversations include some of the following elements that tend to revolve around its morality and desirability:

“Is the Phua Farang trend good or bad?”

“Maybe it's good because it promotes local economy (*Khei Farang-Khei Settakit* or Foreign in-laws Economic in-laws.)”²

“Maybe it's bad because it encourages women to take an easy way for economic mobility and unlucky women get slashed in their attempts.”

“Maybe it's good because foreign in-laws appreciate Thai culture (*Khei Farang Rak Wattanatatham Thai.*)”³

“Maybe it's bad because the ‘real’ Thai culture is threatened.”

¹ It encourages each district (Tambon) to come up with its own local product to be marketed at a local and national level.

² Such as the study of Kallapapruk Phewthongnagm from Khon Kaen university shown on Thailand's channel 9 TV on April 14, 2008.

³ See for example “Loh Rua Chumchon Khei Tangchat: Samruat Farang Rak Thin Isan” [Looking around Foreign In-law Community: Exploring Farangs Conserving Isan Community]. 2007. <<http://webboard.mthai.com/7/2007-07-03/332423.html>> Accessed July 28, 2008.

These are some of the common views around the Phua Farang phenomenon currently circulating in Thai society that demand greater scrutiny. The above NESDB recommendation targeting Thai Isan foreigners' wives (*Mia Farangs*) as promoters of Thai products overseas follows the “maybe it's good because it promotes local economy” rationale. The Thai state's gestures and policies towards the Phua Farang phenomenon had not been concretely formed when a military coup ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in September 2006. Amidst the height of nationalist sentiments surrounding this political turn, national initiatives and policies around the Phua Farang phenomenon in the post-Thaksin era have turned into teaching morality to women and rural population as well as raising women's awareness about the danger of human trafficking. This new approach may seem benign and well-intended but as will be argued in Chapter Five of this dissertation, it is not as harmless as it appears; rather, it is the result of classed, ethnicized and gendered nationalist discourses that endow women and the rural countryside with the responsibility of preserving the nation.

General discourses around the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thai society, including those taken up by policy makers, rarely represent women and rural families' perspectives. The “good” and the “bad” of the Phua Farang phenomenon and the reasons often mobilized to explain this phenomenon are based on multiple perspectives, but rarely on the interests of those directly involved – the *Mia Farangs* and their families, the *Phua Farangs*, and the members of Isan villages where brides, wives and girlfriends in this study originate. This thesis aims at filling this important void in the general understanding of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand. It explores the Phua Farang trend in two Northeastern Thai villages from the perspectives and experiences of the

women, their families, and village community members, and compares the village perspectives to that of general perceptions outside the community. The ultimate goal of this study is to push for a better informed social policy that takes into account the experiences and perspectives of women, their families and their rural communities. The voices of the women who participate in cross-border relationships, their family members, and village community members shed light on alternative knowledge about a phenomenon that has recently stirred nation-wide debates. Critical analyses of local/community and national/Thai discourses and the divergence and dissonance between the two reveal the system of power and hierarchies within Thai society in which gender, class, and ethnicity are (re)constituted and (re)produced in the media, in state-led economic social policies, and in everyday village and city life.

I am using the vernaculars “Phua” and “Mia” in this dissertation at the expense of the more refined terms for husband and wife, “Sami” and “Phanraya,” respectively. In the dominant national Thai culture prevalent in urbanized and educated circles, where subtlety is valued and refinement constitutes a class marker, the terms “Phua” and “Mia” are often associated with uncultured lower class and are not considered appropriate terms to use in some contexts, particularly the more polite and formal. Many Thais prefer to use the more subtle and class-neutral term “*Faen*”⁴ in daily conversations to refer to male-female relationships or intimate partnerships that range from casual dating boyfriends/girlfriends, to live-in partners, and formally married husbands and wives. The term “Mia Farang,” in particular, conjures negative connotations of bargirls and “rental wives” when used in some contexts, particularly in city colloquial usage. Nevertheless, I use “Phua,” “Mia,” “Phua Farang,” and “Mia Farang” because these are the terms that are

⁴ From English “Fan”

also commonly spoken in daily life by rural villagers, whose perspective this dissertation aims to represent. With my explanation come my apologies to Thai women who are married to or dating foreign men, who may find the term “Mia Farang” offensive. My use of the term to refer to women married to or dating foreign men is certainly not meant as an insult or denigration, but based on my privileging the local Isan linguistic usage.

In the following sections, I outline some of the key assumptions and insights that underpin the structure and arguments of this dissertation. First, I state the need to see the Phua Farang as a phenomenon emerging from a situated form of globalization that contextualizes the local in the regional/global, and where the global makes sense of meaning mainly at the local. Second, I underscore the importance of seeing situated globalization not just in economic/productive terms but also in social/cultural/reproductive terms, when examining how foreign husbands are inserted in matrilineal Isan communities to help reproduce kin and family in a more complex environment. Third, I view globalization and the nation-state as social constructs demonstrating the important links between sub-national and transnational migration, or how the Phua Farang phenomenon contributes to the village scale-jumping to global space, thus bypassing the Thai nation-state. Fourth, I contend that transnational or cross-border marriages and the closely connected trend of Thai sex tourism are forms of gendered mobility that create dynamic “transnational contact zones” at the local level, where people implicated in the Phua Farang phenomenon and international tourism participate in transnationalities without actually crossing national borders. Lastly, I argue that gendered mobility through the Phua Farang phenomenon occurs through the exercise of women’s agency. This study is informed by the concept of agency as the expression of “everyday forms of

resistance,” (see Dirks et al. 1994, Kerkvliet 1990, Scott 1985) by classed and gendered people in order to transcend their structural limitations, maximize their benefits, contest current realities, or create new versions of social realities (Constable 1997: 203). In the Phua Farang phenomenon, the exercise of this agency is often propelled by the production of a new global imagination in this era of increased transnational linkages.

The Phua Farang Phenomenon: Thinking of Situated Globalization

This study draws on globalization—the academic and popular discourses suggesting the processes and mechanisms by which the world is interconnected and what happens in one place has effects on other locations half the world away. Rather than simply espousing theoretical abstractions such as “flows,” “mobility,” “time-space compression,” “cultural syncretism” and other concepts associated with globalization and transnationalism studies, this dissertation adopts a feminist approach in looking at “situated globalization” (for parallel feminist critics of globalization and transnationalism see Nagar et al 2002, Pratt and Yeoh 2003, and Eschle 2004). In this dissertation, transnational/global processes are examined as personal, embodied, and embedded processes situated within structural inequalities and power relations (Pessar and Mahler 2001). In Chapter Two, for example, I situate the “Phua Farang” phenomenon in the larger context of Thailand’s history, political economy, and the country’s position in the international arena, as well as the particular social history of the research site. In Chapters Two and Three, I explain how the rural/urban divide and the marginalization of the village economy after Thailand’s rapid economic development, as well as the weakness of Thailand’s economy compared to industrialized countries, play crucial roles

in shaping this transnational phenomenon. By contextualizing the local in the global, I seek to delineate analytical interconnectedness between reproduction and production and between the macro and micro scales. Marital relations and actions that take place at the personal level will be analyzed in relation to those practices and actions at the household, community, national, and global scales. Through the Phua Farang phenomenon in Northeast Thailand, I explore globalization as it is lived and experienced by socially situated subjects—working-class rural women from Northeast Thailand, their families, and the village community. I place emphasis on both the empirical micro-level impacts of cross-border marriage, as well as discourses surrounding these marriages as an arena in which notions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nation, and citizenship intersect.

Thinking of Situated Globalization in Reproductive Terms

Feminists writing on globalization have already provided a critique of an overly economic approach in globalization discourses that emphasizes production but often ignores reproduction (e.g., Nagar et al 2002, Pratt and Yeoh 2003, and Eschle 2004). The consideration of close interconnection between production and reproduction offers a better understanding of situated globalization than a perspective focusing on the economy and financial flows alone. For example, a significant part of global relations can be understood in the domestic analogy “international division of labour” or “global division of labour” (Parrenas 2005), in which economically weaker states take up the world’s reproductive duty. This division of labour takes various forms, such as the large-scale export of mostly female Filipino nannies, home support workers and registered nurses to Australia, New Zealand, North American, Middle Eastern, and East Asian countries; the

trend for Europeans, North Americans, and Japanese citizens to retire in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines; and the boom of tourism and recreational industries, including medical tourism, in Thailand. When working-age labour migrants from poorer countries migrate for higher incomes in wealthier countries, they often leave their children behind to be cared for in the home countries where care is much more affordable. The above examples of “global division of labour” are products of an unequal global economy and they are directly and indirectly encouraged by both sending and receiving states. Immigration policies of wealthier receiving countries welcome low cost reproductive labour of Filipino nurses and nannies but not their dependents (Parrenas 2005). The Thai state has been actively promoting the Thai tourism industry, one of the country’s leading foreign revenues. Thai tourism, like the care service industry, provides affordable leisure experience and recreational activities, including those of the sexual and adventurous types, to weary workers and travelers from all over the world.

On a smaller scale, weaker and marginalized sectors within a nation-state utilize a more intimate form of global mobility for their own reproduction by arranging marital partners from overseas. While Japan and South Korea prosper through industrialization and represent the power of the Asian economy, their agrarian countryside constitutes the marginalized residue of the pre-industrialized past. Rural farming families in Japan and Korea are facing a reproductive crisis as Japanese and Korean women refuse to marry farming bachelors and families resort to importing brides from the Philippines and Vietnam. The bride shortage in the Japanese and Korean countryside has emerged due to women’s aversion to hard labour and the highly patriarchal family values operating in rural farming (Abelmann and Kim 2005, Nakamasu 2005). More importantly, these

factors have emerged from a much broader process: the growth of employment opportunities and new options available to and taken by rural women relocated to cities. Farming families in Japan and South Korea compromise the meaning of family and kin by welcoming the ethnic, racial, and cultural “others” into the family so as to reproduce it under conditions of the local bride shortage. This compromise is comparable to the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand’s rural Northeast region. The important difference is that as a predominantly matrilineal society, Thailand’s Northeast (Isan) families incorporate foreign husbands rather than foreign brides to help sustain the family and the community through Isan daughters’ commitment to the “traditional agrarian values” of nurturing and sharing their wealth with their families, as will be illustrated in Chapters Three and Four. Foreign in-laws in Isan rural villages help out not so much by reproducing farming or agrarian families per se, but by releasing the wives’ families from the agrarian life and offering them new opportunities and roles to take up in an increasingly more complex and socially differentiated peri-urban rural economy. Both the bride shortage in rural Japan and Korea, and the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand’s Isan region reflect the crisis of the agriculture sector and the larger trend of people fleeing “traditional” farming lives for other alternatives made available by urbanization and global capitalism.

Nation-State and Globalization as Social Constructs

The recently emerged theorization of globalization and transnationalism revolves around the hegemony of the nation-state, debating whether or not and in what ways a nation-state is undermined by global mobility. Globalization theory predicts the gradual

demise of nation-states amidst massive flows of goods, people, and capital, while transnationalism literature contends that the nation state remains (and, by implication, will remain) a powerful actor that stretches its influence across geographical borders through its mobile citizens (Kearney 1995, Basch et al. 1994). I agree with transnationalism's contention that the nation-state remains an important actor in channeling in-coming and out-going flows, especially those of migrants; yet, I emphasize that other scales of analysis should not be ignored. I find the recently-coined term "transnational migration" rather urban-biased and focused on South-to-North-migration. It is insufficient to explain the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Isan region, where urban-based foreign husbands partially relocate to rural Thai villages. Moreover, the term implies border crossing at a nation-to-nation level, while disregarding intense urbanization and continuous flows of rural-to-urban migration in developing countries. Given the regionalist sentiment among Isan migrants in Bangkok and other cities in Thailand (Keyes 1966, 2008, Suthep 2005) and in host countries abroad, long distance social ties and multiple belongings are not new concepts, but rather the cultural maintenance of indigenous Isan social customs and practices. The characterization of "transmigrants" as those who, through their everyday activities, "develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political—that span borders" (Basch et al 1994: 7) applies to Isan factory workers in Bangkok as much as to Isan wives in Switzerland who maintain strong ties not only to their friends and neighbours of the same ethno-linguistic origins, but also to their rural villages. Focusing on transnational migration alone is to miss the important link between sub-national and transnational migration and the inter-scale dynamics between the

village, the nation, and the global. Hence, Chapter Four explores the ways in which the Phua Farang phenomenon contributes to the scale-jump of the Isan village to global space, bypassing the nation state that has failed to resolve regional disparities, such as income gaps and differences in amenities and livelihood opportunities.

While globalization is celebrated by some theorists as a potentially free and open space for multiple voices, democracy, and the subversion of structural oppression (Featherstone 1990), others depict globalization as the global domination of multinational corporations and Western cultural imperialism (for example Klein 2000, Tomlinson 1991). While I do not believe in the theoretical “free floating” quality of globalization, I also have mixed feelings about anti-globalization sentiments, particularly in the resurgent forms of nativist localism, traditionalism, and nationalism. It is undeniable that global capitalism constitutes a powerful system that organizes the social world in the present, but there are also other systems of power that are forced upon individuals. Perspectives from micro scales—individuals, families, and community—demonstrate that persons are simultaneously structured as well as, in a sense, inspired by global modernity, as they negotiate their places within multiple systems of power. Thus Chapters Three and Four explore the agency of working-class/rural Thai-Isan women in strategizing social and economic mobility, as well as community-based philanthropy through transnational relationships with foreign men. I analyze the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, and one’s position in the national and global economy shape one’s agency and global imagination.

Concurrently, anti-globalization perspectives, under the banners of nationalism, localism, and traditionalism, draw on discourses of globalization as “Western cultural

imperialism” to justify an internal social hierarchy in which women and other marginalized groups within the nation are disadvantaged. In Chapter Five, I argue that negative perceptions in Thai society towards Isan women in “Phua Farang” relationships are grounded on nationalist discourses that endow women and the rural countryside with the overwhelming responsibility of preserving the Thai national cultural identity. Moral judgement derived from nationalist discourses is disempowering for these women and functions as a mechanism that perpetuates internal social hierarchy.

Transnational Marriages: Gender and Mobility

Studies on transnational marriages are growing and the direction is shifting. Constable (2003) and Suzuki’s (2003) groundbreaking criticism of the “women’s trafficking” discourse in earlier literature on Third-World-woman/First-World-man marriages inspired research interest in this expanding phenomenon. By bringing in women’s voices and agency, Constable and Suzuki debunk the myth and sensationalized images of the “mail-order bride” in North America and the “foreign bride” in Japan as powerless and innocent victims.⁵ In addition, recent studies on transnational and cross-border marriages from various locations have emerged, focusing on global-local relations and female mobility through marriage. The new perspective from which recent transnational marriages are explored is that of “spatial hypergamy”—or the notion that women marry “up” geographically into wealthier locations—although in many cases they marry “down” in other aspects, such as in education, class, and lifestyle (Constable 2005, Thai 2005).

⁵ A rich feminist literature that explores the exercise of women’s agency in transnational spaces, through their crucial roles in the domestic realm, includes the works of Barber 2000, Parrenas 2001a, 2001b, 2005, and Constable 1997.

This dissertation is shaped by this analytic shift in the direction towards studies on transnational marriages in general. Unlike most studies on cross-border marriages that are carried out in the countries of resettlement of foreign brides, my approach is to explore the sending locality with more depth and greater attention to village-level constructs and perceptions. After spending time in the villages in Udonthani, I realized that the divide between the sending and receiving ends often gets blurred and that the flows are obviously two-way. While the majority of women migrate after their marriages to foreign men, a significant number of women stay in the village while their foreign partners travel back and forth between Thailand and their countries of origin. Some of these women are awaiting the final stage of their immigration process, while some have not yet come to terms with their relationships with foreign boyfriends, and some simply do not have the intention to immigrate at all. Moreover, even among those women who resettle abroad permanently or temporarily, the transnational flows of brides are more complex than common assumptions of assimilation and resettlement. Among the women who have migrated to their husbands' countries, some have concrete plans to come back to live in their villages of origin, and the majority maintain strong ties with their families in the villages through regular remittances and visits. There are also instances of foreign men seeking residency in the villages or spending a good amount of time in Thailand while maintaining their jobs and residency in their countries of birth. While the choice of where the couples themselves reside and work is not uniform, the local is where they play out their transnational relationships. Inter-racial couples consisting of local women and foreign men are highly visible in downtown Udonthani as well as in the villages in which I conducted my field research. In fact, the local

community has become the dynamic transnational “contact zone” (Pratt 1999) due to the Phua Farang phenomenon; local people themselves who are directly or indirectly connected to this phenomenon are engaged in transnationalism without actually crossing national borders. The analysis of local social dynamics and gender relations will serve to explain the Phua Farang concentration, or trend, in this location, as well as the close transnational ties between villages and their women in migration.

Tourism as Transnational Space

Due to the close association between the Phua Farang phenomenon in the Isan region and Thailand’s tourism and sex tourism, the academic literature exploring the relationships between Thai “sex-workers” and foreign tourists is highly relevant to this study. Similar to the shift in transnational marriage literature, agency and identity (re)formation inform recent studies on encounters between Thai “sex- workers” and foreign tourists. Spaces of tourism and the loosely defined “sex tourism” constitute a transnational site in which people from the marginalized sections of Thai society challenge their given social positions (e.g., Askew 1998, Cohen 1996, 2003, Malam 2008, Montgomery 1998). Tourist space as transnational space is by no means free of power structures, as people are differentially channeled into this space according to their existing social positioning. Marginalized identities and positions are often only temporarily challenged in the illusive tourist space, and a “Cinderella moment” lasts only until the clock strikes midnight (see for example Brennan 2001). At other times, tourists’ visits stretch over time and places, and prostitutes become more permanent girlfriends and wives. It is out of these blurry borders between the local and the global, tourists and

residents, wives and prostitutes, that the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Isan region has emerged.

Because of the time limitation for this research, I was not able to access the long term success of individual women who use transitional marriages to challenge their marginality. The degree of individuals' success in using "spatial hypergamy" for economic and social mobility is an important aspect to look into, but it is not the major focus in this dissertation (my overall impression is that the results are mixed, some more "positive" than others). Rather than assess the micro-individual and macro-social impacts of "spatial hypergamy," this dissertation identifies what mobilizes the rapid growth of the Phua Farang phenomenon and analyzes how it affects existing social orders at the local and national scales.

Methodology

For this village-based ethnographic study I spent six months—from October 2006 to March 2007—in two neighboring villages in District A, Udonthani Province, Northeastern Thailand.⁶ The data for this study come from my participant observation, casual conversations, and semi-structured interviews with six overlapping groups of people in the community, about their views and experiences regarding the Phua Farang phenomenon. The groups of interview informants included:

- (1) Prominent community members, public figures, and the elderly (n=10). I interviewed the District A's Chief, a senior Buddhist monk, two elderly residents, two former Sub-District heads, the mayor of the municipality, a school principal,

⁶ The name of the province is real while those of the district and villages under studied are pseudonyms.

the registrar at District A Office, and a District Mayor. Three out of ten informants in this category were females.

(2) Family members of women who married foreign men or have foreign boyfriends/partners (n=6). For this category, I interviewed a couple whose two daughters are married to foreign men (German and Austrian); a shop and restaurant owner whose sister is in the UK, married to a British man; a single mother whose daughter is in Thailand but has a long-distance relationship with a French boyfriend; a mother of a young woman who is living in Krabi, a southern province of Thailand, with her live-in boyfriend from Sweden; and a father of a woman who is married to an American and living in the US. Pooled from over a hundred households with daughters in cross-border marriages or romantic relationships, most of my interview informants were those I knew through my host family and people I worked with at the village's elementary school.

(3) Foreign husbands and boyfriends of Thai women from the villages (n=4). I interviewed four people in this category. They were from France, Austria, Germany, and Denmark. In addition, I had an off-tape conversation with a German man and I interviewed a German husband of my friend, a Thai scholar from Udonthani. The men who were included in the study were those I met by chance or by introduction of a member in the community. Only those who could communicate in English were included. Most of the foreign husbands do not live in the villages; only those who were in the villages at the time of my field research were included.

(4) Thai women who are married to, or in a romantic relationship with, foreign men (n=8). Of approximately one hundred village women who have foreign husbands or boyfriends, I interviewed eight women who were in the villages at the time. They were either living there while in long-distance relationships with their foreign husbands/boyfriends, or visiting their families before going back to live in their husbands' countries. The only exception was a widow of a retired US officer who returned to live in the village permanently after twenty-nine years of residence in the United States. I was introduced to the women by my host family, my friend at the Non Formal Education Center, and the teachers at the public school I volunteered at. I met some of the women during the village's school functions. Additionally, I interviewed a Thai scholar from Udonthani whom I know from my graduate studies in Canada. She is married to a German scholar she met in graduate school in Canada.⁷

(5) Local males (n=9). Aside from male informants who are classified as prominent community members and family members of women who are in transnational marriages or relationship with foreign men (Categories 1 and 2), a male member of the village was one of my interview subjects. He was with the former Sub-district head whom I interviewed (under category 1) who showed interest in sharing his views on the "Phua Farang" phenomenon in the village.

(6) Local females (n=16). Besides the women in Categories 1, 2 and 4, I also interviewed a female school teacher who helped village women find foreign

⁷ This woman is rather different from my other respondents in terms of her educational status, the background of her husband, and the circumstances in which their relationship develops.

boyfriends via the Internet. I was introduced to her by the registrar at the municipality office, who is one of her best friends. My data from local males and local females were mostly from casual conversations I had with local people during my everyday interactions in the villages.

The interviews were digitally recorded, with each taking between 20 minutes and two hours. All but one Thai-Isan research subjects were able to communicate in standard Thai, the language used in the interviews. The one exception was the 82 year-old-man who only spoke the Isan dialect. Yet the interview with him was possible because standard Thai and Isan dialect are mutually intelligible. Approximately half of the times I conducted an interview, I was accompanied either by my host (P' Jom) or Chantani, one of my colleagues at the District Non Formal Educational Office. The rest of the time, especially after I had established relationships with more villagers in the community, I did not need to be accompanied when conducting interviews. Foreign husbands or boyfriends of village women were interviewed in English. The interviews normally took place at the residence or work-place of the research subjects. Three interviews were conducted at the District Public Library, P' Jom's work-place and my research base. I transcribed all the recorded interviews myself and the English quotations of the interviews in this dissertation are my own translations from the Thai interview transcripts.

Apart from ethnographic data, I examined important discourses around the Phua Farang phenomenon in the wider Thai society by critically analyzing representations of the cross-cultural marriages and romantic relationships between Thai women and foreign

men in Thai language newspapers and online news and blogs from March 2006 to July 2008.

Issues of Access and Trust

Because of the increased media attention on the “Phua Farang” phenomenon and negative portrayals of the women and bride-sending communities, villagers are sensitive about this issue, and at times, reticent in discussion with an outsider. Once I arrived in the villages, I started contacting prominent community members such as the District Chief, a revered senior Buddhist monk, and a school principal for interviews. Most of the people in this category gave me full cooperation and were very open and eager to discuss the topic once I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my research. Other than giving me the overall picture of the Phua Farang phenomenon in the villages and the historical context of the community, they made reference to interesting cases that I should look into or persons I should talk to for further information. At times, they introduced me to potential interview informants, such as women with foreign husbands/boyfriends and their family members. My host family, who are members of the community, were very helpful in helping me establish connections in the villages and with making initial contacts with prominent community members and other potential interview informants. The foreign husbands I interviewed were quite open and cooperative. The group that required the most time for building a relationship and rapport with was village women who are in marriages or relationships with foreign men. I did gain consent from some women for interviews, but not until I entered my third month in the villages. For the women who have already migrated with their husbands and were back only for a short

visit, I had barely enough time to meet them, let alone establish relationships with them. In Thailand for a short visit, the women were mostly busy with family or social obligations and travel schedules, accompanying their husbands on trips to different places. I regarded the avoidance of or non-response to interview requests as the women's declining my invitation.

My Relationship to the Research

I grew up in Thailand in a middle-class family and had never left the country until I came to Canada for graduate study as a recipient of a national scholarship at age twenty-five. My doctoral research took me back to Thailand after my four years of study in Canada. Part of my inspiration to do this research comes from my experience working in the Immigrant Visa Unit at the US embassy in Bangkok, where I met many Thai women who applied for US immigrant visas to join their American husbands or fiancés.

My identity as a Thai academic from North America going back to study a Thai village marks me as a native scholar going back to my "roots" to study my own group. Yet when I entered my research site, I did not consider myself a community "insider." In the rural village, a relatively tight-knit community, I stood out as an outsider. I was not from the Northeastern region, I could not speak the local dialect, and I had no knowledge or previous relationship with the community prior to my research. Unlike most of the people I studied, I was raised by college graduate parents working as professionals. My appearance and mannerisms mark me as a person who does not belong in the community. I agree with Lal (1996) that, because of our complex and multiple identities and social locations, claiming the "native" status is problematic, and that being from the country is

not sufficient to make a researcher an insider. At the same time, it is unproductive to be preoccupied with differences and the fixed self/other division. Identities and social locations are always changing and even more so in transnational space. Some of my female respondents, after marriage and migration, have gained material wealth that far exceeds my modest research fund, and likely, my future earnings as a university professor. Time spent abroad makes some migrant women feel they no longer belong to their place of origin the way they used to (Constable 1999, Gamburd 2000), the feeling I share as a returning Thai scholar.

In a way, my being “from North America” sets me on a common ground with some of my key informants. Aunt Muang (pseudonym)⁸ migrated to Detroit, USA, after she married an African American serviceman in 1970. She came back to live in Ban Karawek in 2002, eight years after her husband passed away. Now an American citizen coming back to the village after twenty-nine years in the United States, she loves talking about America and she found me an enjoyable companion who shares the experience of living in North America. She would say to me, “You know what it’s like in America. People are crazily busy during the tax season.” Or “I really love bubble bath. You know bubble bath. My friend from the US who just came here to visit bought me a bottle of bubble bath soap.” My English language skills and familiarity with immigration procedures draw me closer to some of my Mia Farang research subjects who constantly strive to live their transnational lives. Although Aunt Muang lived in the US for over twenty years, she knows little written English and she asked me to double check a form on her pension arrangement that she wanted to send to the US government. I helped another key informant with questions on US immigration processes. Duan and her

⁸ All my research subjects represented in this dissertation are given pseudonyms.

American boyfriend were filing for a fiancé visa petition for her and her 15-year-old daughter to immigrate to the US. Duan was interested in learning English before moving to the US; I helped her find books and spent time helping her with her English.

My past experience working at the Immigrant Visa Unit of the US embassy in Bangkok gave me a unique perspective on intermarriages and migration. As an embassy employee, I was in a position of an authority located on one side of the visa interview window. While I experienced stress and pressure on my side of the window, dealing with classified materials and completing tasks that required accuracy and skill in dealing with the public, I had only a vague idea about the experience of people on the other side of the window that waited with great anxiety for their immigration applications. In my research, I have a different relationship with this group of people. I definitely had a more personal and more equal relationship with migrant women during my field research than I had when I worked at the American Embassy. The cold, rigid, and bureaucratic atmosphere at the Consular office prevents warm feelings and most visa applicants feel disempowered and intimidated in that space. In the villages, I worked in the women's own social space, among their relatives and friends, and in the setting that they felt comfortable in. At times during my stay in the villages, it was I who felt intimidated being on my own in a completely new environment and uncertain of how my presence and my research would be received.

A role that I did not expect, but that people in my research site saw me enacting, was that of a potential intermarriage agent. Since foreign husbands have become popular among women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, many women in the villages are seeking romantic relationships with foreign men. The fact that I speak English, use a

computer and the Internet, and know people in Canada and the US made me a strong potential intermarriage agent. Young women whom I was friends with at District A's Non Formal Education Center pointed this out to me when they jokingly asked me to introduce them to foreign men. I laughed at the joke but some of the women brought it up repeatedly and I realized they were not completely joking. Koi, a young married woman from Ban Sri Udon who worked at District A's Non Formal Education Center said to me "Seriously, P' Jiab, you can make a fortune out of this. You will get 50 per cent of the *Ka Dong* (bride price) from the women if you successfully manage to get a foreign man to marry them." This situation surprised me because it did not occur to me that I was a qualified transnational marriage agent. The service was indeed in demand because more village women are interested in meeting foreigners with the help of new information and communication technology, and most of them need assistance using the Internet, communicating in English via email, and placing their profiles on international dating websites.

Research Site

I chose Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon (pseudonyms)⁹ in Udonthani province as my research sites because of their high representation of *Khei Farang* (foreign in-laws). According to Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board (2004), Udonthani province is ranked second in overall number of women married to foreign men. The figure of women from Udonthani who are married to foreign men or in romantic relationships with foreign male partners as of 2004 is 2,228 (Udonthani's total population is about 220,000). Within Udonthani province, District A, where Ban

⁹ Names of villages and neighborhoods in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

Karawek and Ban Sri Udon are located, is famous for having a large number of *Khei Farang*; a local survey in 2003-2004 shows that there were as many as 512 women from the district who have foreign boyfriends/husbands (Choksamarn et al. 2006).¹⁰ Ban Karawek is known for having the most *Mia Farang* (foreigner's wives) and the longest history of this practice. Other than their high representation of women who are engaged in transnational relationships with foreign men, Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon were chosen because of their location—39 kilometers from the center of Udonthani—which was practical for my trips to the library, stores, and the airport. Another very important reason is that I found suitable accommodation and a very helpful assistant in Ban Sri Udon, through the assistance of my father.

I was introduced to P' Jom of District A's Public Library through the Udonthani Non-Formal Education Center's Director, who is a good friend of my father. P' Jom is a native of Ban Sri Udon and living in the village with her family of four—her parents and her fourteen year-old daughter—which later became my host family. Ban Karawek is 3.5 kilometers away from Ban Sri Udon and I traveled between the two villages on a daily basis. While I was connected to villagers in Ban Sri Udon mostly through P' Jom and her family, my network in Ban Karawek was built around Ban Karawek's Elementary School where I volunteered to teach English. In the middle between Ban Sri Udon and Ban Karawek is the administrative/official center of District A: the District Office, a police station, a municipality office, a Health Center, and the Non Formal Education Center and Public Library. Ban Sri Udon and Ban Karawek are at the center of District A and are

¹⁰ The numbers of Khei Farangs in local surveys vary from one survey to another, depending on the methods used in gathering statistic data and the definition of "Khei Farangs," e.g. as legal marital partners, or the broader definition that includes foreign men who are engaged in "romantic relationships" with Thai women. The number and profiles of foreign men who are "Khei Farangs" are also constantly changing because many Thai woman-Foreign man romantic liaisons are short-lived.

more populated than other villages in the district. There are also more sophisticated shops and stores here than in other neighbouring villages.

P' Jom's mother, Grandma Juta, is a prominent senior resident in Ban Sri Udon. Her grandparents were among those who migrated from Loei Province and founded Ban Sri Udon 80–100 years ago. Her younger brother is a former head of Sri Udon Sub District, and Grandma Juta is well-known leader of a silk weaving group composed of 5-8 women whose products are patronized by Her Majesty the Queen. While most of the villagers work in agriculture, Grandma Juta's children have earned higher education and are employed in government offices or are running their own businesses. All of Grandma Juta's children are now adults and only P' Jom remains in the parental household. P' Jom is a single mother raising a 14 year-old daughter and working on a contract position at the District's Public library.

Once I arrived in Ban Sri Udon and Ban Karawek, I was caught up in the middle of local politics. Ban Sri Udon and Ban Karawek have recently obtained "Municipality" status and four villages in Ban Sri Udon and five villages in Ban Karawek were merged into Sri Udon–Karawek Municipality, a new political constituency, in 2002. The merging led to a serious political competition between the former head of Sri Udon Sub District and the former head of Karawek Sub District, who were both running for the mayor of Sri Udon-Karawek municipality in 2006. The stakes are high because the municipal constituency is allocated a large share of the district's budget to spend at its discretion, in accordance with the new (decentralization) policy of the national government to distribute more administrative powers and a larger budget to local administrations. As a close-knit community, people in Ban Sri Udon and Ban Karawek

are highly involved in what happens in their community and even more so in local politics. Villagers in Ban Sri Udon and Ban Karawek are divided into two political camps supporting the two candidates, and in the midst of this political tension, the villagers often have a clear idea of who is on which side of the political fence. At the time of my arrival in October 2006, the result of the July 2006 election was pending because the former head of Sri Udon Sub District had filed a complaint accusing the winning candidate (the former head of Karawek Sub District) of corruption and misconduct during the campaign and election. The intense political atmosphere had inevitable implications for me and my field research because the former head of Sri Udon Sub District is the younger brother of Grandma Juta, my host.

Living with P' Jom and her family gave me many advantages during my fieldwork, but at times it restricted my access to certain events and people. For example, P' Jom would prefer that I did not interview some people in the community such as people at her work place, a family who lived next door, and a woman whose son was married to one of P' Jom's relatives but later broke up with her. The family who lived next to P' Jom's has a daughter who is married to a German man and has migrated to Germany. The family supported the other candidate in the municipality mayor's election. They often got together and drank with other villagers at the house of a former provincial politician who also supported the former head of Karawek Sub district. P' Jom told me that she did not want to get involved with them for fear that "we" would become a topic of their gossiping. P' Jom expressed her wish that I interview only "decent" cases of women who married foreign men. On one occasion, she did not approve of my going to an evening event put together by women migrants at Ban Karawek School and when I

went without her approval, she called my mother to report it. Being independent since seventeen and by myself through college, working years, and later years doing graduate study in Canada, I was surprised to be subjected to parental control at age 29 at the instigation of my local host family. The fact that I was a (relatively) young unmarried female and new to the community subjected me to protective treatment.

Outline of the Chapters

Over all, this thesis demonstrates, through the Phua Farang phenomenon, that gender underlies the globalization of the local, and the reverse, the localization of the global. To explicate the interconnection of the global and the local that underpins the emergence and constant growth of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Isan region, this thesis is organized by scale of analysis, delineating relationships between multiple scales.

Chapter Two starts with the macro scale. It situates the "Phua Farang" phenomenon in the larger context of Thailand's history, political economy, and the country's role and position in the international arena. It introduces the Isan region and village as geographic units undergoing rapid agrarian transition from their pre-capitalist subsistence economies to the period of colonization and greater integration into the national Thai political economy. I explain how the Cold War period, the presence of American military installations in the Isan region, and the post-war economic boom have set the stage for the growth of Thailand as a major destination for sex tourism and the migration of Isan women to work in manufacturing and service industries, including urban "rest and recreation" centres, as sex workers. Focusing on the Isan region and the

two villages chosen as research sites, I will examine how the rapid transformation of agrarian life caused by inter-related factors – increased commercialization of agriculture, agrarian crises, gendered patterns of outmigration, changing employment patterns, and the spread of consumerism and modern urban lifestyles – contribute to new imaginations and desires on the part of local women and foreign men implicated in the Phua Farang phenomenon.

Chapter Three focuses on the globalization of the individual and the mind, i.e. what I call global imagination, examining how transnational subjectivity is materially constructed. It explores individual women's desire, inspiration, and global imagination as they consider and engage in transnational "romantic relationships" with foreign men. Unlike the popular depiction of the Thai bride in the Western world as young, naïve women who fall into exploitative hands of western men, Isan Mia Farangs consciously and actively initiate transnational "romantic" and marital relationships with foreign men. Seeking foreign husbands, rural Isan women envision social and economic mobility that could enable them to circumvent restraints in their immediate locality. In this sense, cross-border relationships with Phua Farangs constitute a form of "transnationalism from below" (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), an action by (gendered and classed) individuals to contest domination from "above," by capitalism and the state. The globalization of the imaginable pool of marital partners for Isan women disturbs local gender and marital dynamics, placing local Thai men in a new challenging position.

Chapter Four explores the globalization of the Isan village through the Phua Farang phenomenon and the implication of local gender ideologies in this specific transitional activity. I argue that Isan's matrilocal practice and women's familial

obligations to natal families contribute to the emergence of the Phua Farang as a phenomenon that contradicts earlier assumptions of preferred loyalties, residence and resettlement of women and their partners. Upholding the kin-based collective Isan village, Isan wives overseas maintain strong social ties and economic commitment to their natal families and village community. Positioned in the transition between the subsistence agrarian life and the market economy, village community perceptions towards the Phua Farang phenomenon have been shifting. Strongly opposed 30 years ago, rural families and village communities are now generally approved of the Phua Farang phenomenon. They compromised the old meanings of kin and family by welcoming the racial and religious “others” into the family and the community in order to maximize their opportunities within the economic constraints at the national level. At the village level, Isan villagers including Mia Farangs and their families talk about the Phua Farang phenomenon in the language of family responsibility, ameliorating negative perceptions towards perceived uncontrolled female sexuality including past employment in prostitution.

Chapter Five demonstrates that gendered transnationalism from “below,” through the Phua Farang phenomenon in Isan rural villages, is met with resistance from “above” at the urban dominated provincial and national levels. Outside the rural community, the Phua Farang phenomenon is often criticized in everyday conversations, in the media, as well as by some academics and state officials as a moral pathology in the rural population in general, and in rural women in particular, due to their excessive greed. I argue that moral criticisms and the social stigmatization of Isan Mia Farangs outside the village community are embedded in gender, ethnic and class bias and the urban-rural divide in

Thai society. Urban critics against the Phua Farang phenomenon, including those in Thai nationalist discourses, work to discipline women and rural people and to perpetuate the status quo threatened by rural women's new found transnational gender mobility. This resistance from "above" is important because it affects the life and reality of people in the Phua Farang phenomenon on the ground, particularly when it informs national policies, initiatives, laws, and regulations that govern individuals.

In Chapter Six, I revisit important concepts elaborated throughout the dissertation: individuals' everyday contestation of their place in society by drawing on rather than openly challenging operating structures; the politics of scale and the mutually constitutive relations between the global and the local; concurrent transformation and continuation of agrarian social values and practices amidst rapid social and economic changes; and potentials and shortfalls of identity based politics.

Chapter Two

The Village, the Nation, and the Global:

Situating the Phua Farang Phenomenon in Local and Global Contexts

This chapter provides an examination of the larger social and historical context to situate the “Phua Farang” (Foreign Husband) phenomenon in Thailand’s Northeast, or Isan, region. It portrays a brief historical overview of over a century of interrelations between three scales of analysis—the village, the nation, and the global. It is the power dynamics between these three geographical and social spaces that the Isan’s “Phua Farang” trend and Isan women’s border-crossing activity is embedded in and challenges at the same time.

Thailand’s landscape is generally divided into 4 geographical regions—the central, the north, the northeast, and the south. The central region has been the center of the country geographically, politically, and economically. The capital city, Bangkok, is located in the central region and is Thailand’s primary economic, trading, and administrative center. Most of the agricultural and manufacturing production takes place in the central region and the average income of residents in the central region is higher than elsewhere. A long history of economic and political centralization in favor of the central region, particularly Bangkok, has placed other regions in a peripheral position, with the northeast being the worst off economically of all Thailand’s geographical regions. Until the 1960s, Isan villages had been remote and only loosely connected to the administrative center in Bangkok due to the geographical distance and the lack of modern transportation. As will be illustrated later in this chapter, Bangkok centralism has resulted from colonial history in Southeast Asia and the formation of the modern Thai state in the

19th century (see also Loos 2006). Bangkok dominates the country's activity and output, not only economically but also culturally. Among various regional dialects, the Bangkok dialect has been established as the core of the official national language and the medium of instruction in the public and private education system. As a result, regional and urban-rural hierarchies have been translated into class, religious, and ethno-linguistic demarcations, in which Bangkok-centric urban culture and standard Thai language mark a person's level of education, cultural capital, and class standing. In the urban Thai context, Isan linguistic and ethnic markers (*Lao*) are largely associated with the unsophisticated rural class habitus (*ban nhok*) and "backwardness," which are subjects of ridicule or subtle discrimination in urban contexts.

What follows in the succeeding sections is a discussion of how the Northeast regional economic pattern interacts with the national and international political economy to produce unique local dynamics shaping the "Phua Farang" phenomenon. I first introduce the Isan region and village as geographic units undergoing agrarian transition from their pre-capitalist subsistence economy to the period of colonization and greater integration into the national Thai political economy. I then explain how the Cold War period, the presence of American military installations in the Isan region, and the post-war economic boom have set the stage for the growth of Thailand as a major destination for sex tourism and the migration of Isan women to work in manufacturing and service industries, including urban "rest and recreation" centres as sex workers. Focusing on Isan region and the two villages chosen as research sites, I examine how the rapid transformation of agrarian life, caused by inter-related factors – increased commercialization of agriculture, agrarian crises, gendered patterns of out migration,

changing employment patterns, and spread of consumerism and modern urban lifestyles – contribute to new imaginations and desires on the part of local women and foreign men implicated in the “Phua Farang” phenomenon.



Figure 1: Map of Thailand

Source: www.wikipedia.org



Figure 2: Northeast (Isan) Region

Source: www.wikipedia.org



Figure 3: Udonthani Province

Source: www.wikipedia.org

Introducing the Isan region and the Isan village

The northeast region of Thailand, or Isan, constitutes one third of the country's land area (170,218 square kilometers out of the total 513,115 square kilometers) and is home to approximately one third of Thailand's population. Geographically, long mountainous ranges divide the northeast region from the central and the northern regions. To the north, the Mekong River is the natural border between Thailand's northeastern region and Lao People's Democratic Republic. The northeast region is located on the flat, sloping Khorat plateau, which is 200 to 700 feet above sea level. (See Figure 1)

Among Thailand's geographic regions, the Northeast is the least fortunate in natural environmental endowments; the low-nutrient sandy soil in Isan's highlands cannot hold water and therefore the Northeast is prone to floods and droughts. Because farming in the Northeast relies mostly on rain water for irrigation, periodic floods and droughts often damage the rice fields that are cultivated once a year during the wet season. When this happens, Isan families are left with an insufficient food supply for the year and need to resort to borrowing rice or money. Average agricultural yields in the Northeast are lower than in other parts of Thailand, and the Northeast's economy has lagged behind the rest of the country due to its low farming production and one-crop season, for example, in 1998, the average income of Isan residents was slightly above half of the national average and only one-fourth that of Bangkok inhabitants (Ikemoto 2000). The Northeast (Isan) region has, amongst Thai regions, the highest percentage of residents living in rural areas and engaging in agricultural production. Table 1 shows that between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of people dependent on agriculture has declined from 85.4 per cent in 1990 to 78.8 per cent in 2000. However, these statistics do not reflect the full extent of income

diversification of households in rural areas. In light of rapid agrarian transition, most of the “agricultural households” have diversified their income sources such as non-farm work and remittances from urban wages, which have been crucial to the survival of rural households.

Table 1: National Data on “Percent Urban” and “Percent in Agriculture”

	Whole Kingdom		Northern Region		Central Region		Northeast Region		Southern Region	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
% urban	29.4	31.1	20.7	20.6	31.3	34.5	14.6	16.8	20.2	23
% in agriculture	66.8	56.2	75.4	63.1	54.5	36.7	85.4	78.8	70.4	57

Source: National Statistic Office, Thailand, 2000, cited in Pattravanich et al. (2005)

Until the turn of the 20th century, Isan peasants lived under a pre-capitalist economy. A tight-knit village community developed out of the Isan peasant way of life centered around labour and resource sharing which were crucial for the survival in the extremely challenging environment (Nidhi 1997, Chatthip 1999, Scott 1976). Occasional male migration to fish and trade in other villages was part of local livelihoods in Isan (Walker 1999, Khampoon 2000). Isan agrarian village life was strengthened collectively by shared kinship among members who were mostly related by blood or marriage. The Puta (paternal and maternal grandfather) ancestral spirit house and the rituals around it in many Isan villages were the embodiment of villagers’ collective identity marked by shared kinship (Suthep 2005, Chatthip 1999). As this thesis progresses, I will show that many of the characteristics of Isan’s pre-capitalist village communities have continued

into the transformed rural life under capitalist social relations, which circumscribe the growth of the Phua Farang phenomenon.

Isan, the Thai Nation, and Colonization

The majority of people in the Northeast Region are Lao speakers whose cultural and linguistic traits are more similar to those who live in the Lao PDR than to Thai people in the Central Region. Although the languages spoken in the Northeast and Central Thailand are sub groups of the Tai-Lao language, their differences are discernable. The linguistic and cultural proximity between Northeastern Thai people and Lao people in the Lao PDR today can be explained by the fact that the Northeast historically was a part of the ancient Lao kingdom “Lan Xang,” which occupied both sides of the Mekong River from the 15th to the 18th century. The Lao Kingdom was defeated by the Siamese in 1778 and in 1870 when French colonizers claimed Lao, the Siamese court had to relinquish its Lao territory to the French except for the part that is today Thailand’s Northeast Region. When the Lao kingdom was defeated, a big group of the Lao population was relocated to the now Northeast Region of Thailand by the Siamese to serve as labour supply (Evans 2002). This historical forced population mobility partly explains the high number of population living in this environmentally challenging region in the present. The Northeast was officially annexed to the modernized Siamese State after the 1890 reform period and it was more tightly connected to Bangkok upon the completion of the railroad system in 1900. Prior to the political and administrative reforms of the late nineteenth century, Northeastern provinces were ruled by local rulers and maintained considerable autonomy, although they submitted to Bangkok’s sending periodical levies. After the reform, the roles of local rulers were limited while Bangkok

sent its own officials to govern each province. The administrative reform was the attempt of the Siamese court to centralize political power in Bangkok for the sake of “national security” in light of the Western colonization threat. Siam was successful in that it was the only state among Southeast Asian nations that was not directly colonized by the West. The integration of Isan into the direct administrative power of the Bangkok-based ruling class in the late 19th and 20th centuries did not occur without resistance from local Isan people who felt a loss of self-determination. There were several movements led by Northeastern leaders to resist the power of Bangkok; one major one was the Holy Man Revolt in 1901–1902 when a Northeastern leader led peasants to revolt. The attempt was unsuccessful and the revolt was defeated. In 1932, Siam went through another major reform when the reigning absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional monarchy and the parliamentary system; in 1939, the name Siam was changed to Thailand. The Northeast has been a part of Thailand since then and the northeastern provinces have had representatives in the Thai Parliamentary House.

Although Thailand has never been directly colonized, it was pressured to participate in the world market by Western powers. In 1855, King Mongkut of Siam signed the Bowring Treaty with the British, opening up Siam’s market to the world. As a result of the Treaty, Thailand started growing rice for export, a majority of which went to feeding Western colonies in Asia. Since then, Thailand’s trade with the world has relied on the agricultural sector whose expansion depended on the cultivation of land frontiers. Rice growing for export was mostly limited to the central region because its river-area lowlands are more suitable for big scale rice growing and its proximity to the trade center in Bangkok. Although the regional Mekong River trade has been historically important,

the impact of Thailand's early global trade concentrated on rice export was limited in Isan which, until the beginning of the 20th century, was still remote and difficult to access.

Isan and the Cold War

A more recent world event that has had a significant impact on the Thai state and the Isan region and has contributed to the emergence of the “Phua Farang” phenomenon was the Cold War and expansion of US geo-political interests in Indochina. Thailand played its part in the Cold War as a major regional military installation when the Thai military government allied with the USA in fighting Communism in Southeast Asia. Thailand's military government agreed to allow the Americans to use military bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. Udonthani, one of the key commercial and urban centres in the Isan region, is home to one of the biggest American military bases in Thailand. During these two decades, Isan was the stronghold of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which was active and well connected to other communist parties in neighboring countries, particularly in Laos, Vietnam, and especially China. Because of Isan's economic marginalization, communism prospered in the region among poor farmers and local elites. To subdue the growing popularity of communism, the Thai government, using American financial aid, invested in various development projects in Isan. Developmental schemes such as the introduction of cash crops were launched while electricity and highways rushed in during the 1960s and 1970s. The Friendship Highway that connects the Northeastern provinces to the Central region and Bangkok was constructed with the assistance of USAID and was completed in 1969.

After the communist insurgencies were successfully eradicated, funding allocation from the government to the Northeast Region dropped noticeably. Some critics pointed out that development projects, funding, and infrastructure building in the Northeast during the Cold War aimed to promote the national government's popularity rather than effectively alleviate poverty and improve the living condition of people in the region (Dixon 1977, Suthep 2005).

Isan, Thailand's Tourism and Sex Tourism

American bases in Thailand boosted the local economy substantially, particularly after 1967 when the Thai government signed a treaty allowing US military men in the Vietnam War to spend their Rest and Recreation (R&R) leave in Thailand. Large-scale entertainment and service businesses emerged and grew to serve this clientele. In 1967 local investment in hotel construction went up by 80 percent (Truong 1990: 161). Among the businesses that prospered during this time were 'special service' and 'nightlife' entertainment—bars, massage parlours, and nightclubs—that explicitly and implicitly offered women for sexual services.

The arrival of the American troops on R&R leave marked the beginning of Thai international tourism. When American servicemen left at the end of the Vietnam War in 1976, successive Thai governments repackaged existing facilities and marketed Thai tourism to the world. This move was recommended and supported by the World Bank as a means for Thailand to earn foreign dollars and move forward in economic development. The Thai state bureaucracy took an active role in developing the tourism industry. The Tourism Promotion Organization of Thailand (TPOT) was founded in 1959 and in 1979

it was upgraded to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) government agency, responsible for promoting, regulating, and marketing Thai tourism worldwide. The “Visit Thailand Year” in 1987 and the “Amazing Thailand Year” in 1998 were among the government’s many projects to promote Thai tourism globally. Thanks to the presence of American troops, the support of international organizations, and the government’s active promotion strategy, tourism has been one of Thailand’s major sources of foreign income for the past four decades. Earnings from tourism rose from about 200 million baht in 1960 to over 37 billion baht in 1986 (Truong 1990). Tourism had been Thailand’s top foreign exchange earner between 1982 and 1996 and it is still vibrant, even after the Asian economic crisis of 1997. In 2003, international tourist arrivals generated an estimated total revenue of US\$ 7.7 billion or approximately 308 million baths (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2008).

Sex tourism has been a vital part of Thailand’s rigorous tourism industry from the beginning although no state officials want to admit it publicly. From the time of the Vietnam War, Thailand has been globally known as a major tourist destination for an affordable sexual adventure for male tourists. Tourist districts of Patpong and Soi Cowboy in Bangkok as well as Pattaya, Phuket, and Koh Samui coastal areas have gained an international reputation as the world’s sexual playground. Although sex tourism is not openly promoted and prostitution remains illegal in Thailand, quasi prostitution in the names of “nightlife” and “adult entertainment” remain major tourist attractions. Night entertainment facilities—beer bars, massage parlours, nightclubs, and karaoke clubs—are legally operated under the Entertainment Place Act. At these facilities, customers may ask out female attendants by paying a fee to the establishment and an unfixed price to the

women in exchange for sexual services and companionship. During the heyday of sex tourism in the 1970s and 1980s, organized package tours that openly incorporated sexual services were marketed to predominantly male tourists from Japan and European countries. Arranged sex package tours eventually faced public criticism both in Thailand and internationally and many operators were pressured to tone down their marketing gimmicks. Despite the decreased numbers of sex group tours since the 1990s, due in part to opposition from local and international women's movements, the substantial growth of the sex entertainment industry within tourist-sending countries, particularly Japan, and the subsequent importation of women "entertainers" into these countries, Thailand's night scene has remained upbeat and independent tourists seeking sexual adventure still mark Thailand as their destination. In 1986, 89 percent of visitors to Bangkok and 86 percent of tourists to the famous R&R beach Resort of Pattaya were male (Bishop and Robinson 1998, 67-68).

The "Phua Farang" phenomenon in Northeastern villages is closely linked to international tourism in Thailand because rural women from the Northeast, who had been participating in rural-to-urban migration, constitute a large portion of female labour in the tourist-oriented service sector at hotels, restaurants, and entertainment establishments. The majority of Northeastern Thai women who marry foreign men or are in relationships with foreign male partners met the men while working in tourist destinations. According to the National Economic and Social Development Board's (NESBD) survey conducted in 2003-2004, 38 percent of Northeastern women who are with foreign partners worked in Bangkok, 34 per cent worked in Pattaya, and 28 per cent worked in Phuket and Koh Samui—mostly in restaurants and entertainment places—prior to their marriages to or

relationships with foreign men (National Economic and Social Development Board 2004). The nationalities of foreign husbands of Northeastern Thai women, according to the same survey, correlate with the nationalities of male international tourists to Thailand. European countries and the USA, from which male international tourist arrivals in Thailand significantly outnumber female tourists, constitute the majority of countries from which foreign male partners of Isan women originate (See Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Surveyed Foreign Male Partners of Northeastern Thai women by Nationality

Nationality	Number	Percent
Germany	44	20.09
Switzerland	31	14.15
England	28	12.78
USA	16	7.3
Sweden	14	6.39
Japan	10	4.56
Australia	10	4.56
France	9	4.11
Holland	8	3.65
Denmark	6	2.74
Malaysia	6	2.74
Belgium	4	1.83
Scotland	4	1.83
Italy	4	1.83
Norway	3	1.38
Greece	1	0.45
Ireland	1	0.45
Israel	1	0.45
Laos	4	1.83
Singapore	4	1.83
Hong Kong	2	0.91
South Korea	1	0.45

Nationality	Number	Percent
Kuwait	1	0.45
China	1	0.45
New Zealand	1	0.45
Canada	1	0.45

Source: Adapted from National Economic and Social Development Board (2004).

**Table 3: International Tourist arrivals to Thailand (Selected Countries of Origin)
by Country of Residence, by sex, January to December 2006**

Country of Residence	Sex	
	Male	Female
East Asia	4,576,111	3,366,032
Malaysia	944,028	634,604
Singapore	505,409	312,753
China	574,216	459,089
Japan	857,812	435,501
Korea	544,286	557,239
Taiwan	269,298	203,553
Europe	2,005,749	1,316,046
Austria	45,879	30,819
Belgium	43,729	23,106
Denmark	70,836	53,315
Finland	64,294	47,712
France	209,726	110,184
Germany	313,186	194,756
Italy	93,659	49,684
Netherlands	103,457	70,809
Norway	60,001	41,919
Spain	44,735	29,085
Sweden	170,156	137,128
Switzerland	89,558	56,089
United Kingdom	464,005	281,520
The Americas	516,094	309,024
Argentina	2,309	1,505
Brazil	5,303	3,623
Canada	86,182	63,742
USA	409,968	230,706

Country of Residence	Sex	
	Male	Female
Oceania	359,662	267,584
Australia	307,807	230,683
New Zealand	50,305	36,398

Source: Adapted from Tourism Authority of Thailand (2008)

Isan Villages during Thailand's Industrialization and the Economic Miracle

The most fundamental changes to Northeastern rural villages have happened in the past four decades when Thailand's participation in global capitalism intensified, particularly during and after the economic boom from 1985 to 1995. From 1960 onwards, Thailand implemented series of five-year Economic Development Plans that aim to guide and direct the growth of the national economy. Thailand's economy experienced constant growth after the Cold War, and in the mid 1980s Thailand entered an economic boom period, experiencing double-digit growth rates in the manufacturing sector. During the boom, the Thai economy shifted to a different pace, owing to the expansion of the service and manufacturing sectors, and underwent rapid growth in foreign direct investments. Between 1985 and 1990, the flow of foreign investment into Thailand multiplied ten times and for a decade Thailand was the world's fastest-growing economy (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). The boom lasted roughly a decade and then the Thai economy stagnated and the growth came to a sudden halt as the 1997 economic crisis hit Asia and beyond.

Thailand's economic growth in this period of economic boom in the 1980s-early 1990s was marked by the shift away from agriculture and towards the service and manufacturing sectors. After the 1960s, Thailand started to experience the limitation of growth in agriculture, its main export since the 19th century. The land frontier finally

disappeared and there was no more uncultivated land for the growing population. At the same time the prices of agricultural products in the world market fell. To compete and survive in the global economy, Thailand resorted to tourism and manufacturing exports as its new sources of revenues. The shift away from agriculture was evident with the agricultural sector's annual growth at only 3.8 per cent from 1973 to 1983 compared to 7.6 per cent in the service sector and 8.9 per cent in the manufacturing sector (Parnwell 1986: 93). The declining role of agriculture and the rise of manufacturing in the Thai economy were even more drastic during the economic boom: in 1980, three-fifths of exports originated from agriculture, whereas by 1995, over four-fifths came from manufacturing (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998: 4). The above patterns of economic development, marked by the decline of agriculture, and the expansion of manufacturing and service sectors, shaped the further marginalization of the Isan economy relative to the central region, and the trends in out-migration from the Northeast provinces.

Isan Out-Migration

Rapid economic growth and the decline of agriculture have significantly transformed Thailand and its society in the course of merely four decades. One of the immediate results of the rapid economic growth due to industrialization is the unequal distribution of wealth among geographical regions. The rapid growth in manufacturing and the diminishing roles of agriculture mean that wealth has concentrated in the cities while the countryside is further marginalized. Factories cluster around Bangkok and the Eastern Seaboard industrial zone in Rayong and Maptaput, two hours east of Bangkok. By 1978, Bangkok and its immediate surrounding provinces accounted for 52 per cent of

Thailand's GDP in spite of having only 26 per cent of the total population and average per capita income in Bangkok metropolitan region was 2.7 times the national average (Glassman 2004). The gap between urban and rural income grew from around two and a half times in 1981 to four times in 1992 (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998: 284). Between 1981 and 1994, the average income of the top ten percent of the nation's households tripled while the incomes of the bottom ten percent barely changed causing the gap between the top and bottom to widen from seventeen times to thirty-seven times (Ikemoto cited in Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). Sharp disparity between the urban and rural areas is being felt and seen throughout the country, thus encouraging the mobility of people from the countryside to the city. Since the 1970s, a large proportion of the population from rural farming areas has moved to the cities to earn higher wages. The majority of rural to urban migrants are unskilled workers with minimal education who often supply poorly paid menial jobs in the service sector, in construction sites, and in factories, providing low cost labour that attracts investments from transnational corporations.

Isan is the main regional source for rural to urban migration because farming productivity and the average income is lowest in this region and because Isan farmers cannot work on the farm during the dry season; they are obliged to look for jobs elsewhere. Upon migration to the city, Isan women usually work in factories, restaurants, construction sites, or as domestic helpers and food vendors. Isan men find work such as taxi driving or take up construction jobs. Some of the women gradually drift from the earlier mentioned jobs into bar work and semi-prostitution employment catering to foreign tourists. Even before the peak of the economic boom, the 1980 Population and

Housing Census showed that 119,661 people aged five years and over had moved from provinces in the Northeast to Greater Bangkok between 1975 and 1980 (Parnwell 1986: 103). The 1981 Survey of Migration in the Bangkok Metropolis estimated that 43 percent of 122,875 individuals who moved to Bangkok during November 1978 to October 1980 came from the Northeast (Ibid).

International labour migration started in the 1970s with the migration of predominantly male contract workers to the Middle East during the oil industry boom. Destinations for Thai labour migration later shifted by the mid-1980s to East Asian and ASEAN countries particularly Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore, with more women joining the male migrant labour force, which still outnumber the new female entrants (Archavanitkul 1995, Angeles and Sunanta 2007). The majority of Thai labour migration originated from rural areas in the Northeast region, a pattern similar to the internal rural-to-urban migration, discussed earlier.

Migration cannot be viewed solely from an economic perspective. There are also non-economic reasons and benefits that may emerge from migration, such as the realization of individual freedom and autonomy far from the constraints of rural village life dominated by extended family and kin members. A modern (*Thansamay*) lifestyle in the city and freedom from parental monitoring are particularly appealing for Isan young village women who move to the cities for factory and other available jobs (Mills 1999). As will be reviewed later in this chapter, large-scale rural-to-urban migration has significantly changed traditional village courtship and marital practices, paving the way for the greater cultural and social acceptability of the Phua Farang in Isan.

The Transformation of Isan Agrarian Life

Greater integration of Northeastern villages into the nation's political economy in the last four decades has brought substantial changes to rural village life. Cash crops grown for export take rural farmers away from subsistence livelihoods and bind them to the national economy and the world market. Modern transportation connects the villages to urban centers, facilitating the mobility of people and goods. The arrival of electricity into the village and the wide coverage of mass media, particularly television, have brought images of urban lifestyle, middle-class consumption, and a sense of being a part of the Thai nation—albeit a marginalized one—to rural villagers. After their time away working in the city, returning migrants bring home ready cash as well as new ideas and tastes (Mills 1999, Parnwell 1986, Rigg 1998, 2001).

Long before the early 21st century, money became essential in day-to-day life in most Isan rural villages. To get the most out of limited farmland, farmers need money to buy fertilizer, farming equipments, and seeds. Farm mechanization, the breakdown of shared labour regime (*ao raeng*), and the spread of new agricultural technologies entailed the further commercialization of farming and reliance on cash or lines of credit to finance agricultural production. However, agricultural investment does not always yield good return, due to uncontrollable prices and unpredictable natural disasters such as floods and droughts that often leave farmers in debt. Providing higher education for children and commodity consumption of such items as TVs, motorcycles, electrical appliances also require money. This combination of factors leads to the increased significance of cash or hard currency in daily economic transactions in the rural village.

With the stall and decline of agriculture, attitudes towards farming are changing. Throughout the history of Isan, farming was not just an occupation but a part of life. At present, the younger generation in rural Isan often look forward to moving out of the agricultural sector because of the hard physical work required in farming, and this becomes even more unattractive in the face of the uncertain rewards it yields. Many villagers view regular paid jobs in the modern industrial and service economy as more reliable forms of employment. To the majority of rural villagers today, local official positions occupied by teachers, nurses, police officers, and military officers are more desirable occupations because of the regular income, good benefits for self and family, and the prestige of joining the elite class, although as minor officials. However, the majority of the villagers do not have the education required to secure government employment, and those who do earn higher education degrees often move out of the village to work in cities and other places that offer better prospects. Migration, particularly international migration, comes along as a new venue to earn good money for those who are not equipped with higher education. In some cases, transnational migrants' incomes have already surpassed that of minor state officials and employees like teachers, nurses and military officers.

Women and Gender in Changing Northeastern Villages

Rapid transformation in Northeastern rural villages due to urbanization, modernization, and the shift toward a cash-based economy disrupts some existing ideologies regarding gender relations, marriage and courtship, family and kinship, and inheritance patterns. In Thailand's traditional rice growing rural community, women

have significant roles in the community and household production and reproduction. Bilateral inheritance and matrilineal residence after marriage mark a relative high status of women in Thai subsistence-based peasant society (Keyes 1975). Whittaker (1999) argues that economic development and the capitalization of the village economy has negative impacts on women's traditional status in Thailand's Northeast rural villages. She points out that the changes associated with modernization disrupt complementary gender roles, particularly women's significant roles in the Northeast's traditional subsistence farming society. In Isan agrarian practice daughters inherited family farmland and married men contributed their labour to their wives' family-owned farm (Keyes 1975). Whittaker (1999) finds that the dwindling of farmland and today's shift away from a subsistence farming economy cause parents to divide their land among both sons and daughters but land ownership is often registered under men's names although women inherit it. However, given that land ownership no longer indicates a family's economic position in the village and that remittances account for a very significant part of the family revenue (Rigg 1998, 2001), the argument that village women are losing their status in the family may not hold. In the current situation, village women as well as men are free to move and seek non-farm employment outside the community. In fact, Thailand's vibrant service industry and export-led manufacturing provide more employment opportunities for women than men, particularly in female-dominated sectors such as garments, micro-electronics, handicrafts, hotel and entertainment.¹¹ Economic development and the urban economy also seem to have a positive effect on girls' education. In 2000 national

¹¹ For example, women constituted 74.2 per cent of the labour force in Thailand's Northern Region Industrial Estate in 1998. A 1995-1997 survey showed that in sampled manufacturing firms in the Northern Region women constituted 74.8 per cent of all employees--they made up 82.5 per cent of electronics employees and 91.3 per cent of textile employees (Glassman 2004: 136).

education statistics demonstrated that girls no longer lag behind boys in access to education in any region of Thailand (including Isan); girls in fact continue to upper secondary school even more often than their male counterparts (Pattravanich et al. 2005).

In the area of marriage and courtship, Northeastern village bachelors have experienced the escalation of “bride price”—normally cash and assets a groom offers to the bride’s parents to express his and his family’s gratitude for raising the bride (Lyttleton 1999, Whittaker 1999). In the agrarian past, bride price represented the groom’s contribution as he joined the bride in farming the land she inherited. Parental and kin monitoring in marriage and courtship of unmarried daughters has weakened as young men and women are exposed to urbanized courtship practices in their migration to the city (Mills 1999, Lyttleton 1999). Migration and urban experience affect migrant women’s marriage choice and decision making in particular. Rural-to-urban migration, and the consequent freedom and autonomy it brings, had been transforming women’s expectations and desires in marriage partners and, in some cases, women delay their marriage and motherhood to maintain their city jobs which often discriminate against married female workers (Mills 1999).

Introducing the Local: Villages of Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon

This study is based on my field research in two rural villages in Udonthani, a Northeastern province of Thailand that is ranked second in its number of cross national marriages and relationships between Thai women and foreign men. With a population of 1,527,500 on 11,730 square kilometers, Udonthani is a major province in the upper Northeast Region along the Northeast bound railway from Bangkok. Home to one of the

Royal Thai Air Force bases used by the US Air Force during the Vietnam War, Udonthani and its people had direct contact with American servicemen who were stationed at the air base from 1964 to 1975. The base and the American troops significantly boosted the local economy when small and large businesses such as restaurants, bars, travel companies, and rental houses emerged.

When I arrived in Udonthani for the first time in September 2006, I noticed that inter-racial couples—local women and foreign men—were highly visible in public places, particularly in shopping malls, restaurants, American chain fast food restaurants, and hotel areas. There were bars and pubs clustered in one part of downtown that specifically cater to foreign customers. The number of foreigners in Udonthani is surprisingly high considering that Udonthani itself is not a major tourist attraction compared to other beach towns and commercial cities of Thailand. Udonthani's household survey of 2005 showed that as many as 523 foreigners reside in the city; most of them are male and listed as the “in-law” or “husband” of the head of the household (Udonthani Provincial Administration 2006). A much higher number of foreign in-laws, husbands and boyfriends are not officially listed because they do not reside in Udonthani on a regular basis but travel back and forth between Udonthani and their countries of residence.

Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon (not their real names), the two villages where I did my field research, are major villages of district A in Udonthani Province. They are 39 kilometers, or 45 minutes drive, from the urban center of Udonthani. Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon were founded circa 1927, by families from Loei, Khon Kaen, and Ubon Ratchathani provinces who came on foot to settle and started farming. Over time,

the population grew, because of both high birthrates and immigration when more families moved in to the newly founded villages, expanding the village frontiers further. Starting from the 1970s, Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon have undergone rapid changes from the time when the highway first connected them to the urban center of Udonthani, reducing the traveling time between the city center and the village from two to three days to just 45 minutes. Dirt roads in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon have been gradually replaced with concrete ones. Along with the highway came electricity, which signified a huge step closer to the ‘modern lifestyle’ associated with light bulbs, street lights and the use of modern electrical appliances, particularly televisions and refrigerators. Cash crops, especially sugar and cassava, were introduced in the 1960s and 1970s and become the main crops, besides rice, grown by the villagers.

Ban Karawek is divided into 5 village neighborhoods: Karawek, South Karawek, Sri Sa ard, Phuka, and Non Tham. These 5 neighborhoods expanded from the original Ban Karawek and were divided up for administrative purposes as the population grew and the residential area spread out. Although divided into 5 neighbourhoods, each with its own headman, people have the sense of being a part of the Ban Karawek community because most of the villagers are descendants of the same group of Ban Karawek settlers. The 5 neighborhoods also share the elementary school—Ban Karawek School—and support the Ban Karawek temple. In a similar manner, Ban Sri Udon is divided into 4 neighborhoods—Sri Udon, South Sri Udon, Sri Kaew, and Nong Wa, all sharing Ban Sri Udon elementary school and Ban Sri Udon temple as well as the Puta or ancestral spirit shrine.

Table 4: Population of Ban Sri Udon as of September 30, 2006

Village	Male	Female	Total	Households
South Sri Udon	610	607	1,217	252
Sri Udon	333	314	647	150
Sri Kaew	710	721	1431	307
Nong Wa	442	458	900	199
Total	2,095	2,100	4,195	908

Source: Data taken from the computer database of Sri Udon-Karawek Municipality, September 2006.

Table 5: Population of Ban Karawek as of September 30, 2006

Village	Male	Female	Total	Households
Karawek	430	439	869	197
Phuka	610	625	1,235	303
South Karawek	388	380	768	242
Sri Sa ard	291	348	639	128
Non Tham	383	394	777	156
Total	2,102	2,186	4,288	1,026

Source: Data taken from the computer database of Sri Udon-Karawek Municipality, September 2006

Compared to other parts of Udonthani province, District A, where Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon are located, is more suitable for farming, due to better natural endowments in terms of water supply and soil quality. The villagers face less difficulty producing agricultural products year-round. However, uncertain prices of agricultural products and higher costs of farming sometimes cause farmers to lose their farm investments or go into debt. The average per capita household income for Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon in the year 2006 was 21,000 baht (540 US dollars).¹² Since the shift from a subsistence economy to a market economy, money has become essential in the day-to-day life of the villagers. At the same time, the pressure to keep up with “successful neighbours” and the desire for a “modern” lifestyle have grown stronger due to greater contact with the urban center.

¹² Sri Udon-Karawek Municipality 2006

Modernized Rural Villages

More “modernized” than other villages in District A, Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon gained municipality status in 2004 and are no longer considered “rural areas” by the Thai National Statistic definition. Yet although the technical line between urban and rural becomes more difficult to draw, Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon’s newfound municipality status has not immediately erased the rural characteristics of the community. Approximately 80 percent of households still work in the agricultural sector and the major crops grown continue to be rice, cassava, and sugarcane. In recent years, the villagers have also experimented with other plants, such as mangoes, corn (for animal food production), cashew, eucalyptus, and rubber. Residents continue to identify with their villages of original settlement, while the communities are still tightly-knit and it seems that everybody knows each other or is related in one way or another by kin networks. Isan Buddhist ceremonies, such as Boon Pawet and Boon Kathin, remain important collective religious celebrations. The live *Molam*, or Isan music performance, continues to be a popular form of village entertainment among the young and old alike, although villagers watch Bangkok-produced TV dramas at home on a daily basis. Like most people in the Northeast of Thailand, villagers in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon speak northeastern or Isan dialect to each other but the younger generations speak standard Thai fluently while most of the elderly only speak the Isan dialect.

The high percentage of households engaged in agriculture belies the qualitative changes taking place in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon and the extent of agrarian transformation. A closer examination of village trading patterns shows that most agricultural products do not go to family or household consumption but are produced for

the market. Along with the erosion of the subsistence economy came an increase in the number of households that are no longer dependent on agriculture, particularly rice farming. Not every household owns a rice field and those who do not grow rice have to buy rice for household consumption. While figures show that up to 80 percent of households are engaged in agriculture, almost every household has members working in trading and industrial centers in Thailand's central region—such as Bangkok, Chonburi, and Rayong—or overseas— Qatar, Brunei, Taiwan, Korea, and Germany, for example. With the growing Phua Farang phenomenon, the transnationalization of the two villages has reached new heights. In 2006, about half the 37 grade six students in an English class at Ban Karawek School raised their hands when I asked how many of them had relatives abroad. In the village, those who work on the farm engage in other economic activities at

Table 6: Ban Karawek Land Use and Income Sources

Village	Total village land (rai)	Land used for rice farming (rai)	Land used for crops (rai)	Land used for fruit and rubber tree plantation (rai)	Total village households	Number of households farming rice	Number of households planting crops	Number of households planting fruit and rubber trees	Number of households on wage labour	Annual per capita income
Karawek	1, 360	894	446	n.a.	182	166	40	n.a.	n.a.	43,200
South Karawek	2,501	1,300	1,500	n.a.	254	103	103	n.a.	n.a.	20,000
Phuka	n.a.	1,408	n.a.	n.a.	313	259	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	15,000
Sri Sa ard	1,872	420	850	93	120	22	23	11	70	20,000

Sources: Table developed from raw data supplied by the Ban Karawek Municipality based on their Community Development Plans for the year 2007.

the same time; some are vendors, waged silk weavers, and minor local government employees. Many of the villagers are returning migrants who have retired from their city or from overseas labour. These trends demonstrate the increased pressure and desire to take advantage of growing economic opportunities to increase consumption, improve lifestyles, or accumulate wealth.

More and more people from Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, especially the younger generations, are seeking alternatives to agricultural occupations, particularly paid jobs in the city. Many working-age women from the village find jobs as factory workers and housemaids while others are employed in the service industry. In some cases the whole family moves to the city to do construction work or food vending. Rural-to-urban migration and international migration have become significant sources of income for the villages in the past 30 years. Similar to national patterns, the out-migration of male villagers to the Middle East started in the late 1970s and has continued, although since the 1990's the destinations have shifted to East Asian countries such as Taiwan and South Korea. In both villages, school age children receive more years of schooling than their parents' generation did, and most of them aspire to do non-agricultural work beyond the village. Higher education for youth is supported in large part by non-agricultural incomes and remittances earned by working parents who themselves have only basic primary school education. The building of the District secondary school in 1975 and the upper secondary school in 1983 has also contributed to the greater accessibility of secondary education. Villagers who are above 45 years of age generally remain in the village or have returned from their migration, minding the house, farmland, and young children while receiving remittances from younger working-age

household members. Increased consumerism and the desire for urban lifestyles—accompanied by the spread of mass media, higher educational attainment, and migration—set the stage for the growth of the Phua Farang phenomenon in these Isan villages.



Figure 4: Grade 6 Class of Ban Karawek School 2006

Photo courtesy of Suda (pseudonym), a Ban Karawek School Teacher

Phua Farang phenomenon in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon

Cross-cultural/inter-racial marriages between village women and foreign men in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon are not a new phenomenon. They date back to the 1970s when local women became integrated into the labour force of nearby military bases and rest and recreation centres for American soldiers. Aunt Muang, one of the first women in Ban Karawek to marry a foreign man, met and married her American husband in 1972

while he was stationed in the US military air base in Udonthani. Larger numbers of village women have met foreign partners while working in entertainment and service businesses in tourist destinations such as Koh Samui, Phuket, and Bangkok. Today in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon women who are married to foreign men tend to be those who were in failed marriages or relationships with Thai men. Many of the women raise the children from previous relationships without the father's financial support. Village women married to foreign men have gained a visibly higher economic status, thus encouraging other women in the village to seek and marry foreign men. The women often use their money to build new houses, buy farmland, pay off parents' debts, pay parents' daily expenses, and take care of their children's, siblings' or nephews' and nieces' educations. Most of the women have only a basic education and the foreign men they marry tend to be older. However, in recent years, various groups of women—including professional women such as school teachers and government employees—have also started to participate in cross-border, inter-racial relationships with foreign men. The means through which the women meet their foreign partners has expanded to include informal introductions by friends and relatives, the use of the Internet, and the more commercialized services of local marriage agencies. The proliferation of on-line “friendships” and introduction-for-marriage agencies, as well as other websites promoting inter-racial marriages, has contributed to the increasing number of cross-border marriages. According to people in the community, the number of women marrying foreign men has significantly risen in the past 5 to 10 years. At present, there are approximately 80 women from Ban Karawek and 30 women from Ban Sri Udon who have foreign partners.

Table 7: Number of Ban Karawek’s Women Who Have Foreign Partners as of 2003

Country of origin of the male partners	Number
Germany	16
United Kingdom	8
Norway	7
Australia	6
Sweden	6
United States	6
Japan	4
Laos	4
Holland	3
Italy	2
Singapore	2
Denmark	2
Italy	2
Malaysia	1
Finland	1
Total	70

Source: Unpublished survey conducted by the Sri Udon-Karawek Municipality in 2003, provided by the Municipal Registrar’s Office.

The term “marry” and “marriage” may not accurately describe the relationships between a number of women in the villages and their foreign partners because they are not officially married, but live together as “husband and wife.” To the villagers, this makes little difference and the women with foreign male partners are all referred to as “Mia Farang,” meaning “foreigner’s wife” in Thai.

Community perceptions towards the Phua Farang phenomenon within the villages have significantly changed over the years. In the 1970s, when the first cases of inter-racial marriages emerged, the village community had a strong negative perception of village women who married foreign men. At a time when female migration was not a common practice and parental monitoring of daughters’ sexuality and choice of marital

partners was still powerful, young women's marriages to foreign men they had met in their workplaces in the cities, or worse, in the R & R nightclubs and bars, signified a break from the dominant village norms and expectations around morality and courtship practices. Additionally, women's conjugal relationships or co-habitation with foreign men—a racial and religious “other”—disrupted the notion of the Isan agrarian tight-knit community built around kinship and Theravada Buddhism.

Phrakru Nimit, 61 years old and a senior Buddhist monk of Ban Sri Udon District, gives a clear illustration of how Phua Farang was perceived in the community in the past and how that perception has changed over time amidst the rapid agrarian transition.

In the past, there were no cases (of Phua Farang). Parents in the past were against daughters marrying someone from outside.... Well, this is back to the past 50 years, not 30 years. In the past 50 years, people considered daughters who married foreigners to be outside of parental supervision and to be digressing from the norm in which parents oversaw children's marriage and family arrangement according to Buddhist tradition.

Phrakru Nimit further illustrates the strict control parents had over daughters and their sexuality:

In the past, responsibilities were with the parents. Daughters could not go beyond parents' sight. They were closely supervised day and night, sleeping and eating, going somewhere with someone. They were watched like prisoners by the police to keep them from running away. Parents needed to know where, when, with

whom and for what purposes daughters were away. Daughters reported to their parents when they came back.

According to Phrakru Nimit, tight parental supervision over daughters' marriages and sexuality has been relaxed as a result of changing livelihoods, lifestyle expectations, mobility and housing patterns, and the broadening of the village's world view.

Now the world has changed. It has become a borderless system with advanced communication, the Internet and so on. Now the worldview is broader and youth are more aware of the outside world. When young people are educated, their ideas go past this confinement. They are exposed to senses and images from outside. And our youth have high responsibility. They are given freedom to choose, to write, to think, to travel. They are given freedom in going out and coming in. They are no longer kept within the male-female confinement. This is how people see it these days. Now young people go out of the village (for work). They come back a year or two later. Once in a while they communicate with their parents through telephone and other communication channels. It is for a good life (*Kin Dee Yoo Dee*) and it's okay. They have money to nurture parents and parents are agreeable.

Embedded in fundamental changes in gender ideologies and practices around family and female sexuality, Phua Farang is no longer strongly opposed. In Phrakru Nimit's words, "Nowadays, it's the contrary. If you have one (foreign husband), it's good for you. Why is it good? Because it improves one's living and it doesn't hurt anybody (*Mai Sia Hai*)."

Phrakru Nimit's viewpoint sums up the thesis of this chapter around the broader transformation taking place in the Isan agrarian economy and culture that has rendered the Phua Farang phenomenon not only socially acceptable but also an imaginable and desirable pathway to upward social mobility and improving the well-being of one's self, family and community. In the following chapters, I elaborate the important points that Phrakru Nimit has made using a gender analysis to explore the complex processes in which the meaning and the practice of "Phua Farang" have changed over time. I illustrate how this phenomenon has been shaped by, and in turn is shaping and transforming local gender ideologies and power relations that traverse across and between the scales of the village/household/community, the nation/country/state, and the regional/global/international.

Chapter 3

From Factory Girl to Mia Farang :

Rural Women's Agency and Global Imagination in Northeast Thailand's Transnational Marriage Trend

In March 2008, a classy Bangkok hotel/restaurant on the 63rd floor of a tower building by the Chao Phraya River made news for its second anniversary grand plan. The restaurant planned to celebrate the occasion by offering its top 35 customers a US \$300,000 ten-course meal prepared by Michelin-star chefs. The meal was to be preceded by “a special emotional tourism” (see Figure 5 Emotional Tourism, page 69) where the customers flew on a private jet to a poor village in Thailand's Northeastern province. The rationale, according to the restaurant, was to give “hope” to society, as the view of the poor in the village would inspire the customers—bankers and corporate executives from Europe, America, and Asia—to make donations. The restaurant's distasteful charity project—the juxtaposition of the polarized worlds between the rich and the poor and the notion that the poor lay their hope on the good will of the rich—appalled a good number of people and stirred criticism, causing some of the international chefs to pull out from the project.

Just two months earlier, on a January night in 2008, I dined at this deluxe restaurant as a guest of a French national named Frank who I had befriended in Ban Karawek, a rural farming village in the Northeast Region of Thailand. Frank, a 59 year-old businessman, invited me, his Thai partner from Ban Karawek, and his daughter, a social worker who was visiting from the US to dine at the restaurant. A uniformed driver from a world-class five-star hotel in Bangkok delivered us to this luxury bar and

restaurant with a view of the gorgeous Bangkok skyline. A drink was followed by an Italian dinner and more wine at the restaurant attached to a five-star hotel. As a Thai graduate student from a provincial lower-middle class family, I was thrilled to experience this unfamiliar part of Bangkok. It is difficult to imagine what the experience was like for Frank's partner Noon, a 33 year-old woman from a farming family in Ban Karawek, whose life has taken her through an amazingly diverse path. With only an elementary education, she moved from farm work in the village to food vending and factory work in Bangkok, to working the bars in Phuket. She is now seen by her fellow villagers as the personified Thai version of *Pretty Woman*, a modern Cinderella-story.

In Ban Karawek village Noon and Frank own a newly built house and they recently bought a plot of farmland, tilled with hired labour. Frank also rents a residence in Phuket, a beach resort island in the south of Thailand. Fully supported by Frank, Noon's 15 year-old son from her previous marriage attends a Catholic school in the city. Since her relationship with Frank started in 2003, Noon's social, economic and physical mobility has by far surpassed the standard for an average person in Ban Karawek or even for young well-educated professionals in Thailand's cities. She speaks English and some French, embodies an urban look, and is familiar with the luxuries associated with air travel, five-star hotel service facilities, and international cuisine. Remarkably, amidst Thailand's and the world's social inequality, Noon raised her own standard of living without waiting for rich donors to fly in to her village on a private jet or accepting her marginalized position as a low-educated single mother from an Isan rural village. Noon is one of over a hundred women from Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon villages who have been able to imagine and experience different worlds in/through inter-racial/cross-

national relationships with foreign men. This is known as the Phua Farang phenomenon, a recent and constantly growing trend among village women in these two villages and in Thailand's Northeast region in general.

Marriage and Mobility within Global Inequality

In this chapter I analyze the Phua Farang phenomenon in Isan villages using the concepts of women's agency and "global imagination" in the context of globalization and transnationalism. Much of the literature on globalization emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of demonized global capitalism that leaves the people at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy the most vulnerable (Klein 2005, Shiva 2005). The worsening condition of poor people in Third World countries as a result of neo-liberal economic policies pursued by states and other agents of global capitalism is central to the critique of economic globalization. This critique although plausible, is based on a macro-level perspective that tends to give a one-dimensional picture of the "Third World poor" as a unified and homogenous, but passive, receptor of global economic forces. This dominant "view from above" tends to overlook agency, imagination, and aspiration of ordinary people who—as well as nation-states, transnational corporations, and international organizations—are actors and forces in modern global mobility. While inequality is widespread, people at the lowest social strata continue to struggle, evolve, adjust, and invent ways to cope with their immediate constraints. In this Chapter, I look at the intriguing Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Northeastern villages and explore the highly gendered ways in which "peasant"¹³ women from rural villages

¹³ Although Isan rural women are often called peasants, or daughters from peasant families, they are more often not pure peasant farmers who solely live off tilling the land. Patterns of agrarian social differentiation

strategize to circumvent their disadvantaged condition through marriages and relationships with foreign men. I explore the concept of agency, introduced in Chapter One, and how it is exercised strategically to transcend their limited worlds in the rural village and to construct alternative imaginations and realities within transnational spaces. I do this by discussing how women's agency has been understood in parallel studies on cross-border marriage in other contexts. I then explain how the Phua Farang phenomenon contributes to the production of a "global imagination" which has proven to be productive in intensifying the dream of upward social mobility, and to help drive the phenomenon itself. I highlight women's agency and the production of global imagination in the profiles of Isan women in transnational marriages, focusing on the partial biographies of three women, Kaew, Ploy and Duan. The lives of these three women demonstrate how Isan women exercise their agency in the pursuit of Phua Farangs, and in nurturing relationships with foreign men, using a combination of mechanisms, from social networks and folk beliefs to the use of modern communication technologies. I end this Chapter by demonstrating how the Phua Farang phenomenon contributes to local marital conflicts and the expansion of what Constable (2006) called "marriage-scapes" in a period of increased globalization and transnational linkages.

and peri-urbanization often create new sources of livelihood or economic diversification, making "peasant" families engage in various forms of entrepreneurship and rent-seeking activities. Furthermore, the category "peasant" used in explaining social oppression often belies the fact that these women and their rural families are complex human beings with inspiration and agency.

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we're giving the greatest gift of all - hope.*

*To our loyal customers,
we're giving the greatest meal in Bangkok.*

ME

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To thank those who have contributed to our success, we're giving back to the community by bringing inspiration to those who have the influence to help the most. Since their opening, Lebua and The Dunes have become the top names in hospitality by offering the truly exceptional over and over again. Now, we'd like to thank both our best customers and the great nation of Thailand with a very special "Emotional Tourism" event. On April 3, 2008, 50 of our top guests will be flown on a private jet to visit the elephant village of Saeta, to bear witness to the dignity of their humble lives and inspire future charitable actions. Followed by an elite dinner at Pambajika Grand Hall at Lebua, where Michelin-star chefs will prepare a menu-in-a-lifetime inspirational dinner.

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Figure 5: Emotional Tourism Project by Lebua Hotel
 Source: rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/03/29/emotional-tourism/

The Phua Farang trend in Isan villages is an example of “transnationalism from below”—the action of the ordinary, often marginalized, people to escape domination “from above” by capital and state (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). To women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon villages, marriages to foreign men open up possibilities that are not available to them otherwise. Having limited education and coming from low-income farming families, many women seek the economic security that can be provided by foreign husbands as a far more viable option than long hours of arduous but low-paid work in the farms, factories, or in household domestic employment. By marrying foreign men from wealthier countries, village women gain access to resources from overseas that enable them to transcend their constrained options for local livelihoods. In contrast to their mostly male co-villagers who have gone to work abroad temporarily under state-mediated international contract labour programs, women in Phua Farang relationships enjoy more freedom to travel, work, and reside overseas permanently. The exercise of agency, as a form conscious choice about who to marry and where to live and work, could lead to material benefits as well. As the evidence from Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon indicates, the families of Mia Farangs considered most successful in these villages have economically outperformed those families who gained their incomes from the more traditional overseas labour migration arranged by the state.

Third World women’s agency in the form of their intentional use of cross-border marriages to their advantage has been reflected in recent studies elsewhere. Freeman (2005: 80-100) argues that *Chosonjok* women—ethnic Korean women in China—use marrying into bride-shortened farming villages in South Korea as a channel to gain geographical mobility that neither their male counterparts in China nor their South

Korean husbands have experienced. Schein (2005: 53-79) contends that Miao minority women from a remote mountainous region in China marry lowland Han Chinese men, or Mhong-Miao American men in the USA, to get out of a life of hardship and cultivating the rough and rugged landscapes in their own community. Alexia Bloch (n.d.) writes about women from the former Soviet Union in Turkey who enter into relationships with Turkish men, as wives or mistresses, to ease their border-crossing, an activity strictly controlled by the state. As Constable (2005) argues, women's use of marriage for the purpose of gaining social and economic mobility is not new; the notion that women marry "up" to men who are of higher social and economic status than themselves has been a common practice in many societies. What is new, according to Constable, is the recent phenomenon of Third World women marrying "up" geographically to men from wealthier countries and considering the marriage a sensible choice on their own.

Local and Individual Perspective: Women's Agency

We have learned from the latest works on cross-border marriages between Third World women and First World men that the failure to account for women's voices has created a misconception of this particular transnational activity. In her groundbreaking book *Romance on a Global Stage*, Nicole Constable (2003) dispelled popular perceptions and myths around the so-called "mail-order brides" circulating in the public media, which have been heavily based on assumptions of women's victimization, their commodity status in the "global bride market," and their exploitation by Western men. Constable (2003, 2005) and Suzuki (2003, 2005) passionately argue that these descriptions do not match the women's self perception and completely ignore women's agency. They argue

that the victimization language in the “mail-order bride” and “women’s trafficking” discourses takes a patronizing, if not neo-imperialist, view of Third World women. The language disregards women’s active role in initiating and participating in transnational marriages and relationships. The problem with dichotomizing force and agency and with representing the women as passive and powerless is that “[i]nstead of asking what the women want, this line of anti-trafficking argument focuses on what the women are... The desires of these women are obscured by their victim identity” (Sea-Ling Cheng cited in Schein 2005: 59).

The following stories of three women in Ban Karawek who have become Mia Farangs, or foreigners’ wives, illustrate how women exercise agency and strategize to transcend their given limited conditions. In contrast to the stereotype of the “victimized foreign brides,” the women I talked to viewed transnational marriages and relationships with foreign men as an important choice they have made, while calculating their life chances and risks. For the three women, marriage to a Phua Farang is an option they resort to at a crucial point in life, notably after the breakdown of their previous relationships with Thai men. To Kaew, Ploy, and Duan, their Phua Farang relationship is literally a life-altering decision that requires strong determination, self transformation, and, in Ploy’s case, even sound financial investment. Far from the stereotype of passive victims, these women, and sometimes their parents, are very proactive in the pursuit of a suitable foreign husband. They make use of social networks, new communication technologies, and Thailand’s long established tourist-oriented night entertainment businesses in seeking potential foreign husbands.

To Mia Farang women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, economic security in marriages and relationships with foreign men not only provide them with the means to physical well being, but also to social status, and in some cases, emotional fulfillment. Some women regain their self esteem after being hurt by Thai men. As Duan's story below shows, securing a relationship with an older American man is proof to her Thai ex-husband, who had left her for another woman after 20 years of marriage, that she could survive and be successful without him. The women's material wealth earns them the status of "achievers" in the village community, and because the women often use their financial resources to support their natal families and to give back to the community in festive and fundraising events, they also acquire the identities of "good daughters" and "moral community members," roles which are both empowering and constraining to women at the same time (see Chapter Four).

Phua Farang Phenomenon and the Work of Global Imagination

The fact that marriage to Phua Farang has become a thinkable option for women from Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon (as well as some parents who prefer a foreign in-law to a local one) reveals the work of the "global imagination" and awareness of "the world out there" beyond the locality. Appadurai (1996) theorizes that mass media and the increasing mobility of populations have created the "modern world" in which boundaries are no longer containable, especially when it comes to people's imaginations.

More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before. One important source of this change is the mass media, which present a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives, some of which enter

the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others.

Important also are contacts with, news of, and rumors about others in one's social neighborhood who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds (Appadurai 1996:53).

Since the arrival of electricity and highway in the 1970s, news and images about other places have permeated Isan rural villages, which were once remote and primarily self-sustaining, subsistence-based economies. Unlike their grandparents a generation or two ago, villagers in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon today have been exposed to knowledge about the world beyond the village and even beyond the Thai nation. This knowledge of "the world out there," however, is unique to this particular group because it has been gained in a specific context by socially-situated persons. As discussed in full in Chapter Two, because of the limitation of agriculture and the marginalization of the Isan countryside within the Thai nation state, villagers have learned that opportunities to improve their lives lay outside the village, in the cities and abroad. One result is the flow of both domestic and international migration among Isan populations. Other than mass media such as newspapers, films and television, Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon villagers have been introduced to the "global" through the following activities: international labour migration of primarily male villagers, the presence of American military in Udonthani during the Vietnam War, employment of village women in Thailand's tourist-oriented service and entertainment businesses and, more recently, the Phua Farang phenomenon.

Global imagination is at work in the intensifying Phua Farang trend in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon. The spreading success stories of Mia Farang in Ban

Karawek and Ban Sri Udon allow other village women and their families to imagine the possibility that they too can participate in this transnational activity and become successful. Through exposure to Thailand's vibrant international tourism industry, new communication technologies, and social networks that expand across national borders, women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon are able to look outward to possibilities beyond their immediate locale. Such possibility and imagination is an important phenomenon given that throughout the history of the Thai modern state, members of the elite have controlled the future economic direction of the countryside and the Thai nation as a whole.

Not every woman in transnational marriages and relationships realizes the dream of upward mobility to the same extent, and not every village woman resorts to this option, but it is clear that the Phua Farang phenomenon has entered the local collective understanding of the world. The new kind of global imagination—the extension of “marriage-scape” (Constable 2003, 2005) for village women—is powerful enough to shake existing local gender relations and marital dynamics. It has given local women negotiating power in relationships with Thai men, while local men have started to fear losing their girlfriends or wives and some have even changed their behaviour to please their wives or relationship partners.

Mia Farang's Profiles: Isan Women in the Transforming Agrarian Society

The Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Northeast Region involves mostly low-income women from rural farming villages, some of whom occupy working-class status as transients or migrants in Bangkok or Thailand's other industrial and tourist

centers. Despite the stereotype of the “Asian bride” in Western countries as young, naïve women, the majority of Isan women who entered into the Phua Farang relationships are relatively mature, in their late twenties and older. Most of the women had been in relationships with Thai men and have children from previous relationships. Isan village women often experience married life or co-habitation at a younger age, given that in rural Isan villages women leave school early for work and generally marry young. This is particularly true for women who are now in their late twenties and older, the age group of the majority Mia Farangs. As explained in Chapter Two, the younger generation of women tends to be in school longer than their parents because investment in education is deemed essential in transformed rural livelihoods that have gradually moved away from agriculture. In Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, it is not unusual for a woman in her early thirties to have children entering their teens and by the time she is in her early forties, a woman could become a grandmother.¹⁴ Many women from Isan villages take on familial responsibilities as mothers to their own children and as daughters to their natal families, an ingrained practice in the matrilineal Thai-Isan agrarian society where daughters inherit family farmland and are expected to take care of parents in their old age. Many of the women have worked and engaged in rural-to-urban migration to contribute to their families.

An exploratory survey of Northeastern (Isan) women in marriages/relationships with foreign men conducted by the National Economic and Development Board in 2003-2004 showed that 53 percent of the women were divorced while 47 percent were single prior to their relationships with foreign men (National Economic and Social Development

¹⁴ A woman I interviewed became a grandmother at age 34 when her 19 year-old daughter gave birth to her first child.

Board 2004). However, the survey did not recognise a significant number of women who were legally single but had been in cohabitation arrangements with male relationship partners. According to the survey, the percentage of women who were divorced is slightly higher, and if we include women who had been in cohabitation status in this category, a much higher percentage of Mia Farangs had been in previous relationships with Thai men. The cohabitation rate between young Isan men and women is high, both in the village and during migration to the city, another aspect of the transforming village life in the past few decades. Older generations of Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon remark upon rapid changes in practices around marriage and courtship. A 60-year-old woman noted that young men and women nowadays casually live together, sometimes without parents' knowledge or consent, and that they sometimes quickly fall apart. The monetarization of the village economy has caused an inflation of bride-price¹⁵ (Whittaker 1999), which may discourage young couples from entering ritualistic and legal marriage. But more importantly, increased mobility and freedom of young men and women, both in the village and among those who move for work in the city, have weakened parental control and monitoring over courtship and sexuality of young singles (Whittaker 1999, Mills 1999). Some cohabiting couples subsequently legalize their marriage while others split before they enter a legal marriage. Among couples in cohabitation, many have children.

According to a national survey conducted by NESDB in 2003, the average age of Thai-Isan women in marriages/relationships with foreign men was 33 years old. As for educational background, 69 percent of those surveyed have elementary education, 24

¹⁵This takes the forms of cash and/or mobile assets such as cattle the groom gives to the bride's parents as gifts at the wedding. In the past, bride price served as a contribution from the groom when he joined the bride's family and worked in the wife's family farmland, according to Isan agrarian matri-local practice.

percent secondary education, and 7 percent a vocational certificate or bachelor degree. Occupations and residence of the 219 women prior to marriage/relationships with foreign men according to the same survey are as follows: 137 women or 63 percent worked in restaurants, factories, companies, and entertainment places in Thailand; 52 women or 24 percent were in agricultural production in Isan villages; and 14 percent were employed in factories and the service occupations overseas.

Table 8: Occupations and Place of Residence of Northeastern (Isan) Thai Women Prior to Marriages/Relationships with Foreign Men

Occupations	Place of employment				
	Bangkok	Pattaya	Phuket/ Koh Samui	Overseas	Villages
Employees (restaurants, factories, companies, entertainment places)	52	46	39	30	
Agriculture					52
Percentage of total	23.7	21	17.8	13.7	23.7
Average monthly income (baht)	4,620	4,900	4,000	4,100	2,900

N=219

Source: Adapted from data in National Economic and Social Development Board (2004).

The stories of three women from Ban Karawek who have become Mia Farangs will demonstrate that the occupational and residential categorizations in the survey are in reality overlapping because women move in and out between the village, employment in the city, and work in the entertainment business in tourist areas. The following stories of Kaew, Ploy, and Duan from Ban Karawek provide a qualitative account of the women's

experiences, expectations, and motivations in their involvement in the Phua Farang phenomenon. The stories detail the women's day to day life amidst the transformation of Thailand's economic structure, their global imagination, and agency within their social locations in embracing Phua Farang relationships.

Kaew: Finding an Alternative to an Unsatisfactory Marriage with a Thai Man

Kaew is a 30-year-old woman who has been married to Jim, a 47-year-old British man, for three years. She has been living in London and Leicester, UK, since September 2003, but comes back to Ban Karawek on a yearly basis. Kaew was born in Ban Karawek but moved with her parents to Pattaya, a tourist beach city south of Bangkok, after finishing the compulsory sixth grade education. In Pattaya, Kaew's parents – and Kaew – worked on a construction site; from age 13, Kaew helped out by carrying sand and dust. Her mother, Mae Wan, recalled that the first day Kaew started working in construction, she felt dizzy because she was too young and not used to the hard work. At 16, Kaew went to Bangkok and helped her aunt in a restaurant; at 19, she found a job as a cleaner in a hotel in Pattaya and later as a server in the hotel's coffee shop. Kaew married a Thai man of Chinese background who was a cook at the same hotel. After their marriage, she moved in with him and his mother. The couple had two children together.

Kaew and her British husband Jim visited Ban Karawek from December 2006 to March 2007, during which time I interviewed her. Kaew told me that she decided to seek a relationship with a foreign man when her first marriage began to deteriorate due to her difficult relationship with her then mother-in-law. Kaew described her relationship with her mother-in-law saying: "We never got along." She went on to describe the many

incidents in which her mother-in-law insulted her: “I always fought with my mother-in-law and my husband was not progressing well in his career.” As Kaew’s frustration grew, her ex-husband continuously refused to move out of his parental home to live on their own. Kaew described her ex-husband as a good person but lacking initiative and strong determination:

He never did what I asked him to do. I asked him to move out and live on our own—he didn’t. I asked him to go and borrow money (so we can invest)—he didn’t. Instead, he asked me to do that on his behalf although the people we wanted to borrow from were his own relatives. When I encouraged him to go to Germany to work along with his friends, his mother insisted that he send the money to her and not to me.¹⁶

Kaew broke up with her husband after eight years of marriage. She then traveled to Koh Samui, a foreign tourist destination on an island in the south of Thailand, to search of a foreign husband. Part of her motivation was that her close friend from Ban Karawek was already married to an Austrian man and living in Austria after her relationship with a Thai man broke down.

Working at a bar in Koh Samui, Kaew met several foreign men who were interested in her. Kaew met Jim in January 2003, six months after she started working in Koh Samui. They spent about a week and a half together before Jim went back to the UK. He then asked Kaew to stop working and return to Ban Karawek, where he would send her money; he also promised to marry her eventually. He kept his word, sending money regularly and visiting Ban Karawek every three months. Between Jim’s visits, while Kaew waited in Ban Karawek, she assessed the relationship and the prospect of

¹⁶ Kaew’s ex-husband did not go to Germany but instead went to Cambodia to work as a cook in a Casino.

marrying Jim: “If he sends money regularly and if he comes back, I would marry him. But if he doesn’t...well, it means he is not reliable. I just have to look elsewhere.”

Among the foreign men who were interested in her, Jim was preferred by Kaew because they got along well. She “liked him because he wasn’t picky about food and he wasn’t fussy about things.” In September 2003, Kaew got her visa and went to the UK. to join Jim.

Since moving to the UK, Kaew sends money regularly for her two children in Pattaya who are now living with her ex-husband’s sisters. She also sends some money to support her parents in Ban Karawek, and some additional sum for the construction of her own new house in the village.

Kaew’s narrative description of her Thai ex-husband as lacking self-determination contrasts sharply with her own self description. She describes him as too shy to borrow money, slow to make career advancement, and inefficient in solving the ongoing household conflicts between his mother and his wife. Kaew, on the other hand, took the matter into her own hands by ending the relationship and leaving for Koh Samui in search of a foreign husband. She decided to relocate to a place unknown to her and transform herself from a working mother to a bargirl. This was a bold decision, considering that she had no relatives or friends in Koh Samui and had only scant information about the bar from a female friend who used to work there. The idea of leaving her unhappy marriage to look for a foreign husband became conceivable to her because of the ongoing Phua Farang trend among women she knew, especially her best friend from Ban Karawek, who had already married a foreigner. Instead of accepting her

unsatisfactory household condition, she opted to take a chance in looking for a Phua Farang.

While on the job in Koh Samui, Kaew exercised agency in choosing among foreign customers who were interested in her. Waiting in Ban Karawek while Jim returned to his country, she carefully assessed her security in the relationship, asserting that she would “look elsewhere” and consider other foreign men if Jim failed to assure her that he was committed to her by sending her money regularly. Kaew set her goal clearly and consciously reflected upon it. She wanted to get out of her marriage and marry a farang in order to enjoy the accompanying security and material benefits she hoped the marriage would bring.

In the following story, Ploy, another single mother from Ban Karawek with only basic education, also turned to a relationship with a foreign man for her own financial security and that of her daughter after the break up with the child’s father.

Ploy: “Farang Men are More Responsible than Thai Men”

Ploy was encouraged to consider marriage to a farang by her parents, who had noticed the improvement in economic status of women in Ban Karawek who had secured relationships with foreign men. Ploy did not go to work in tourist areas to meet foreigners but was introduced to her Danish boyfriend by a female friend who had a family connection in Denmark. That introduction happened after her own unsuccessful search for a mate on international dating websites with the help of a paid agent.

Ploy first left her village when she finished the 6th grade at Ban Karawek School and went to work in Bangkok. She met and lived together with a Thai man in Bangkok

while she worked as an employee in a textile factory. In the fifth year of the relationship, when she became pregnant with their first child, Ploy discovered that her Thai partner had taken up a new relationship with another woman, which led to her breaking up with him. Ploy gave birth to a daughter, came back to Ban Karawek, and placed her baby in the care of her parents before she went back to work in Bangkok. Conflicts with some of her co-workers forced Ploy to quit her job and she returned to Ban Karawek a year later.

A year after their break up, the child's father called, trying to make amends, but Ploy rejected him: "I didn't believe in him. He wouldn't give up his habit." According to Ploy, since the first month of her pregnancy, the child's father has never provided any support and until now "hasn't even seen his daughter once." Ploy's father encouraged her to look for a foreign husband once she moved back to Ban Karawek and Ploy agreed: "I didn't have a job and I thought about my child's future." Ploy's father gave her money to enable her to go to an Internet Café in Ban Karawek where the owner helped women correspond with foreign men through Thai-Farang introduction websites. Ploy used their services for about seven months but did not see substantial results: "My English wasn't good and I didn't know how well the person did the job. Did she reply to the men for me? How well did she reply?"

Ultimately, Ploy met her 49 year-old Danish partner, Lars, through a good friend she knew from her time working in Bangkok. This friend knew that Ploy was interested in meeting a foreign man and introduced her to Lars without demanding fees, for which Ploy is very grateful. This friend's daughter was already married to Lars' friend. Ploy went with this friend to meet Lars for the first time at his hotel lobby in Udonthani in December 2003. They were together for a month before Lars returned to Denmark where

he worked as a carpenter. He made further trips to Thailand to be with Ploy and stayed two to four months each time. He sent her money regularly and built a new modern house in Ban Karawek in which Ploy, her parents, and her daughter live. The house is beautifully fenced and supplied with stylish furniture, appliances, computers, and gym equipment. Ploy's 6-year-old daughter goes to a private Catholic school in the city. Ploy has gone to Denmark with Lars twice. In December 2006, Ploy and Lars had a baby boy. At this time, Lars continues working in Denmark but takes time off to be with the family in Thailand. Ploy and Lars are considering moving to Denmark in the future for the children's schooling but the drawback is the high cost of living. While apart, Ploy stays in touch with Lars through the "MSN" program that allows a live chat plus live video image over the Internet. As Ploy explained, "We chat everyday, sometimes for two to three hours a day."

Ploy said some women in the village have consulted her about finding their own Phua Farang. According to Ploy, most of the women who have come to her have children and have been in unhappy relationships with Thai men. Ploy related her advice:

I would tell them that it's up to them to decide but from what I have seen, Farang men are more responsible than Thai men. Even in the cases that Farang men are not good or the relationships have ended, the men will still support the children. Thai men don't do that. Even when living together, Thai men do not support the family. They only take care of themselves. Like my ex-partner. Once I got pregnant I realized he had another woman and he never asked how I was doing. And it has been six years. He has given us nothing.

Ploy also noted that it is up to the women to decide if they think seeking a Phua Farang is morally acceptable for them and that women who want to pursue this venue have to be emotionally ready (*tam jai dai*) to meet a foreign man, and most likely engage in a sexual relationship with him. According to Ploy, she had been aware of the transnational marriage trend in the village before she moved to Bangkok, but at that time she had not been “brave” enough (*mai kla*) to embrace it. It was after her failed relationship with a Thai man and becoming an unemployed single mother that she decided to seriously seek a Phua Farang. She carefully thought out and even financially invested in this decision with her parents’ endorsement.

Now, as an experienced woman who has been in a relationship with a foreign man, Ploy is in a position to give advice to other village women who are considering finding a Phua Farang. Based on her transnational relationship experience, her being in the circle of Thai wives of foreign men, and her trips to Denmark, Ploy has claimed the status of a knowing subject capable of saying what a “Thai man” is like and what a “Farang man” is like. Ploy represents the female version of the working-class “global subject,” possessing what Werbner (1999) has called “working-class cosmopolitanism,” the notion that working-class migrants, like elite globe-trotters, are capable of creating a self identity that revolves around their being a member in a global community who has learned the way of other cultures. As shown in Ploy’s narrative, rural Thai women with limited education who had been in relationships with foreign men could now claim “cosmopolitan awareness” on an intimate subject most familiar to them, i.e., imagining desirable marriage and relationship partners according to the men’s nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Another woman from Ban Sri Udon who had worked in a bar in

Pattaya prior to her marriage to a British—and subsequently to a Swiss man—categorized foreign men according to their nationalities. According to her, “Americans are fun-loving but not so tending to their women. British men are self-centered and insincere. Swiss men are the best. They take the best care of their wives.”

The comparisons made by Ploy and some other Mia Farangs about Thai and farang men have to be considered in light of the different circumstances and nature of relationships they had with their Thai ex-boyfriends/husbands and with foreign men. The women met and “fell in love” with their Thai boyfriends/husbands when they were young and the Thai men were, in most cases, of a similar age. However, by the time the women had decided to seek a foreign husband, they had realized that “romantic love” relationships or marriages were disappointing or unsatisfactory. At this point, the women looked for a different quality in their relationships and partners—the ability to provide security for the women and their children. Hence, the foreign men the women decided to be with are older, mature, more financially secure, and able to take on financial responsibility. Importantly, foreign men’s incomes, even for those from a working-class background, are many times higher in real and purchasing power value than the average incomes of middle-class Thai men.

Ploy’s visible economic upward mobility—evident in her new modern house, trips in Thailand and overseas, and private education in the city for her daughter—marked her as another example of the success of Mia Farang. Global imagination around female mobility through marriages and relationships with foreign men has thus spread further in the community. Ploy, like other Mia Farangs I talked to, revealed that she has been asked by other village women, and sometimes their parents, to introduce women to

foreign men she knows. The Phua Farang phenomenon has been increasing in this manner and there is no sign that it will slow down in the near future.

While some women help other women enter Phua Farang relationships through friends and family networks, there is also competition and conflicts arising from such information exchanges. Foreign men are in demand. This demand is created partly by a new global awareness happening in the rural villages. At times this demand creates tensions and conflict among women in the community who compete with each other to acquire a Phua Farang. Such tensions and conflicts are illustrated in the story of Duan, a woman who claims to have found her Phua Farang “by accident” but who also imagines herself as part of an expanding global world.

Duan: The “Accidental Mia Farang” and the Production of the Global Imagination

Duan, 40 years old, is not originally from Ban Karawek. She married a man from the village 20 years ago and moved there after her marriage. At the time of my field research, Duan was in a relationship with an older American man, Tom, who worked in the US but traveled to Thailand to see her regularly. Duan had divorced her Thai school teacher husband two years earlier after he took up with another woman as his mistress, or “minor wife,” and lived with her openly. Duan’s relationship with Tom, a 67-year-old real estate developer from Texas, started from Tom’s Internet correspondence with another young woman in the village, Prae. According to Duan, Prae seemed to be attracted to women and was not really interested in Tom or any other men.¹⁷ It was

¹⁷ The alternative sexuality displayed by Prae as a “tomboy” or lesbian is interesting in itself to explore, but this exploration could not be given justice given the limited space and focus of this research. It is sufficient to stress that the gendered notions of Mia and Phua Farang are by definition based on heterosexual relationships. During my research, I was not aware of any Thai woman who had been supported or

Prae's mother who arranged the communication between Tom and Prae, to which Prae agreed, for money. The mother sometimes came to Duan, who had a 9th grade education and was capable of communicating in basic English, for help in writing and translating messages to Tom on Prae's behalf. "Prae's mother came to me and asked me to send Tom a birthday e-card on behalf of Prae. The mother said if the farang sent money, she would share it with me, and I thought, well, why not?" Duan communicated with Tom via instant messaging a few times, under Prae's name, until she could not answer Tom's questions and the pretense could no longer be maintained. She then revealed her identity but continued the communication.

After the divorce from her Thai husband, Duan had no source of income. At one point, she went to Bangkok and worked in a bar catering to farang customers. She served food and drinks but did not "go out with customers," which, according to Duan, was an unusual practice. As she explained, "Most bars require that we go out with farang customers but at this bar it was optional." "Going out with customers" in Thailand's tourist bar scene refers to the act of bargirls leaving the establishment with foreign male customers to engage in sexual relationships for which the women receive payment as a "gift."¹⁸ Duan, like Kaew, also went to Koh Samui where a female friend of hers worked at a bar catering to foreign men to see what it was like and assess the possibility of her working there. Duan left after just one day. As she described,

sponsored to live abroad by her lesbian foreign partner. In my urban Thai social circle, however, I have known many Thai gay men who have foreign male partners. See Ara Wilson (2004) on lesbian "tomboy" culture in Thailand.

¹⁸ This is what many refer to when mentioning tourist-oriented prostitution in Thailand. The money the women receive is not fixed and the nature of the relationships between the Thai bargirls and foreign male tourists are flexible and unstructured, and in some cases continue for a protracted period of time. Many bargirls and foreign tourists become "boyfriend-girlfriend" and some get married. See Cohen 1996, 2003 and Askew 1998.

I just couldn't take it. I thought it would be easy but it wasn't. I didn't think I could keep doing it. The women went out with farangs and who knows what they had to do for them? The women had to do anything that would satisfy the farang (sexually). How could I do those kinds of things when my Thai husband had left me for another woman?

In Duan's narration, her reason for leaving the bar in Koh Samui was because she could not ease her conscience to engage in sexual relationships with foreign male customers/strangers. Besides, Duan deemed her sexuality not stimulating enough to keep her Thai ex-husband; "going out with Farang," an act that, in her mind, requires special sexual services to attract foreign tourists therefore was out of the question for her.

Her relationship with Tom came along as an unexpected event. First, Tom came to Thailand to see Prae but realized he was interested in Duan. He broke away from Prae and pursued a relationship with Duan instead. The relationship between Duan and Prae's families turned sour and Prae's family blamed Duan for stealing "their" farang. Tom made more trips to Thailand to see Duan. He spent a few months each time while they stayed and traveled together. In early 2007, Tom started the Fiancée Visa application process for Duan and her youngest daughter to go to the USA. While apart, Tom and Duan stayed in contact by instant messaging and phone calls. Tom sent money to Duan regularly, and she and her youngest daughter depended on him for their expenses.¹⁹

Duan's Phua Farang relationship was encouraged by her family (and the family of her ex-husband in Ban Karawek) to serve as a "surprise" or a lesson to her ex-husband. It served as proof that she could succeed—indeed, prosper—without him. Duan added that her ex-husband's family also consoled her youngest daughter, a 15-year old, who was at

¹⁹ Duan's eldest daughter is now married and living with her husband.

first upset by the fact that Duan was dating a farang boyfriend: “One of my ex-husband’s relatives told my daughter, ‘If mom has a Phua Farang, she will have money to buy you things.’” Duan told me that her daughter is now happy with the farang surrogate father: “She’s just a child. If somebody is good to her, she loves it. When Tom came here he took us out to eat pizza and he bought her things. And she loves that.” Duan said her daughter is excited to explore her extended world further and is looking forward to living in the USA.

Among the three women, Duan was probably the least proactive in her move towards a relationship with a foreign man. She was not “brave” enough to “go out” with foreign customers in the bar. She described the development of her relationship with Tom as somewhat “accidental.” The first time Duan and Tom traveled together, she brought along a chaperone and they did not have a sexual relationship until after they had an opportunity to know each other well. Nevertheless, she made a willful decision to eventually take a sexual relationship, partly for economic stability, partly to prove her ability to do well after being abandoned and hurt by the Thai ex-husband, and partly to reciprocate Tom’s good will.

Although Duan describes her relationship with Tom as “accidental” and “not in the plan,” it is undeniable that her actions, by design or accident, have been shaped by the extension and expansion of her once-limited world due to the increasing visibility and circulation of the Phua Farang phenomenon in her village. Duan’s daughter, too, has acquired a new global imagination through the increasing Phua Farang phenomenon in her immediate social circle: her mother, her aunts and other Mia Farangs in the village, and a classmate who has just left to join her mother and foreign stepfather abroad. Duan

shares with her daughter the global imagination of other Ban Karawek villagers who see Phua Farang as a channel for women to gain economic security and social mobility. She had investigated this way of life by visiting her female friend at the bar in Koh Samui before deciding it was not for her. She had been encouraged by people around her to take on a Phua Farang to “surprise” her Thai ex-husband. And when the opportunity that she was not expecting arose, she accepted and embraced it.

Kaew, Ploy, and Duan represent lives of three ordinary Northeast village women in the rapidly changing agrarian and village life under the strong grip of global capitalism. All three women have only basic education, have worked in the city, and have had relationships with Thai men that produced children. From a political economy perspective, these women are marginalized at multiple levels because of their gender, ethnicity, class, and/or nationality. Yet the women’s narratives express that they are the subjects of their own actions and decisions, not sexual objects or victims of some circumstances beyond their control. While the inter-subjective truth might be operating in this dialectical interplay of agency and structure, these women exercise their structurally-mediated agency and see transnational relationships with foreign men as an option and an important choice they have made based on opportunities available to them. They learn and make use of world sexual geography, in which Thailand is known as the “site of desire” for men from other countries. The women work to use their situation, marginalized as it is, to their advantage. They also make use of social networks and modern communication technologies in finding and communicating with foreign men. They acknowledge using emotions, care work, and emotional care work to nurture their relationships with potential and actual Phua Farangs. Mia Farangs I have come to know

prove to be versatile, adjusting to the situation and new experiences by picking up language skills, experiencing international travel, familiarizing themselves with Western style dining, and using computer programs for long distance communications.

Mia Farang: Troubling the “Wife” and “Prostitute” Divide

The Phua Farang phenomenon among Thai-Isan women prompts the rethinking of the problematic divide between “wife/girlfriend/mistress”, “wife/prostitute” and “good girl/bad girl.” The fact that the Phua Farang phenomenon in Northeastern Thai villages originated from Thailand’s sex tourism explains the overlapping categories of “wife” and “prostitute” in some Mia Thai-Phua Farang relationships. The term Mia Farang (foreign wife) used in the two villages includes women whose relationships with foreign men range from lawfully married wife or common-law partner to girlfriend or mistress. As far as the villagers are concerned, these categories are blurred. Women are referred to as Mia Farang once they secure a relationship with a foreign man, bring him to the village occasionally, and receive consistent financial support from him. At the time of my study, I encountered women in various stages of *becoming* a Mia Farang. Some are stuck in Internet correspondence with foreign men. Others have already found boyfriends and dated them a number of times, but have not been engaged or given verbal promise of marriage by their boyfriends. Still others are awaiting decisions over the immigration application to join their foreign partners abroad. Thus, the village women are not equally successful in establishing relationships with foreign men. Some move from one farang to another if the first relationship does not work out; at times women have to try two or more times before they find the right Phua Farang.

The “Phua Farang” phenomenon thus contributes to the blurring of the wife/prostitute dichotomy. When an (ex) bargirl goes out with a farang boyfriend as his “date,” her (self) identity is not only that of a prostitute but a girlfriend and potential Mia Farang. The co-existence and continuity of these categories – bargirl/girlfriend or wife/prostitute -- over the life cycle of the Mia Farangs constitute a complex identity (re)formation. Their sometimes confusing roles are further complicated by other identities of Mia Farangs who are not only (ex)wives and (ex) prostitutes, but also mothers, daughters, Buddhists, and community members performing multiple roles and responsibilities (see Chapter Four). In a study of Thai women/German men marriages based in Germany, Mix and Piper (2003) addressed cases in which Thai women move in and out between marriage and prostitution. The women in their study worked as prostitutes in Germany and married their German customers; during the marriage the women either continue the profession or stop working temporarily but go back to it after the marriage breaks down. Some Thai women in my research have gone to work in tourist destinations, mainly in bars, in search of a Phua Farang. Women working in bars establish relationships with their foreign male customers, and may have technically worked as prostitutes when defined as women who provide sex in exchange for money and/or gifts.

Eric Cohen (1996) wrote about the far from clear-cut distinction between “girlfriend” and “prostitute” in relationships between Thai bargirls (most of whom came from Isan villages) and their foreign male tourist customers. He described partly mercantile and partly personal/emotional relationships between the two parties, which sometimes continue over a protracted period of time, even after the departure of the

tourists, as “open-ended prostitution.”²⁰ As indicated in the women’s narratives I collected, in recent years, women who are otherwise housewives, farm or factory workers, or unemployed set out for the bars to meet a potential Phua Farang. Most of the women are mothers. From the perspective of this group of women, the bar is a transit to more established relationships and possible marriages. This process further problematizes “prostitution” as a category given the complexity of the situation and the multiple identities that women live and perform over different places and times.

The Pursuit of Phua Farangs: Combining Folk Beliefs and Modern Technology

Because of their rapid economic and social mobility, women who are *Mia Farang* are looked upon as success stories by many other members of the community, which has resulted in the escalation of transnational marriages in the villages. According to District A’s civil registration records from October 2005 to February 2007, 12 women from Ban Sri Udon and ten women from Ban Karawek requested marital status certificates from authorities for the purpose of marrying foreign men, which means there are potentially 22 more *Mia Farangs* in the two villages after a period of only 16 months.

Local intermarriage agencies in the villages have become a profitable business. The service is in demand because the majority of the village women need help to navigate the Internet and communicate in written English. The women are charged about 600 baht (US \$20) for posting their profiles and photos on an intermarriage website with the help of an agent. In addition, the women pay for each visit to the agent to use the Internet and exchange emails with the men. Some women who have already been

²⁰ Cohen recognized that the women do not identify themselves as prostitutes and find it offensive to be so called.

married to foreign men also set themselves up as mediators, introducing other women to foreign men for a financial return. Agents and mediators take up to 50 per cent of the “bride price” if they successfully facilitate a marriage between the women and foreign men. The known amount of money paid to the agent or the go-between is about 200,000 baht (US \$ 6,660). Some women and their families view the “investment” as worthwhile.

Other women turn to the supernatural for help in finding foreign husbands. Puta, or the ancestor spirit of Ban Sri Udon, is known to the villagers for being generous with women seeking foreign husbands. Many women who asked Puta for a foreign husband had their wish realized. The ancestor spirit house now has an intricately decorated concrete fence around it, a reward from women who found foreign husbands. Built around the period of early settlement of the village circa 1927, the ancestor spirit house of Ban Sri Udon still holds villagers together as part of a collective community and kin group. In Isan folk belief, Puta (Pu for paternal grandfather and Ta for paternal grandmother) is the guarding spirit who protects the villagers from harm and grants them help with their daily life upon appeals (Suthep 2005). In the past, Puta was consulted with problems related to farming, such as diseases in farming animals, floods and droughts, and agricultural yield, as well as other daily problems, such as lost items and illness in the family. The fact that village women are now asking Puta for foreign husbands reflects new concerns in the day-to-day life being transformed in this agrarian society. Yet amidst new ideas and practices in the present day, beliefs and customs from the past continue to inform the perceived world order and kin-based collective identity of Isan rural villagers.

For the women and their parents from farming backgrounds, the ancestor spirit is a common source of spiritual guidance in finding a Phua Farang. The younger set who have more education pin their hopes not on the Puta but on the large fishing net created by the World Wide Web. Within the community, the Phua Farang practice is spreading in a bottom-up manner, as women with higher education who are professionally employed have joined the trend and use the Internet as a new means to meet foreign men. Younger and single women also consider this channel for marriage and upward social mobility.



Figure 6: Ancestral Spirit (Putu) Shrine, Ban Sri Udon

Photo: Sirijit Sunanta, 2006

Local Marital Dynamics

At the local level, the popularity of the Phua Farang trend and the availability of new options for women have already affected local marital dynamics. Women are less

likely to put up with what they consider unhappy or unsatisfactory marriages or relationships with Thai men. Local men, on the contrary, have started to lose ground in their marriages with local women. During my stay in the villages I heard commentary such as: “The men do not even dare to raise their voice. They are afraid that their wives will leave them for a foreign man.” I have seen young married women teased about looking for a Phua Farang in front of their Thai husbands. In the current situation in the villages, there is not much Thai men can do. Marrying “up,” after all, is a strategy generally available for women, but not for men. In Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, there is no known instance of village men who are married to or dating foreign women.²¹ The Phua Farang possibilities are, at the moment, boosting women’s negotiating power in their relationships with Thai men.

Conclusion: Phua Farang Trend, Global imagination, and the Widening of Marriage-scape for Thai Isan Women

The Phua Farang phenomenon in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon epitomizes the globalization of what Constable (2005) called the “marriage-scape” at a time when a rising number of women in the two rural farming villages look beyond racial and national borders for marriage partners. The decision to use marriage as an “escape” is motivated primarily by economic security concerns and desire for social upward mobility among the women and their families. It may also include other motivations such as leaving unsatisfactory relationships with Thai men, or regaining self-esteem after being hurt by

²¹ Relationships between Thai men in the tourist industry and female tourists exist, although in a much smaller scale. Linda Malam (2008) argues that in the setting of tourist bars in a Thai southern island, Thai male bar workers have possible sexual encounter with middle-class, educated female tourists, contesting the men’s marginalized position in the wider Thai society. The majority of the men, however, are not from Isan Region. I believe this is so because Isan men are channeled to blue-collar jobs in the cities and overseas by the established sex-segregated Isan social-networks in those areas.

Thai husbands or boyfriends. It may also be driven by the desire to learn foreign languages and cultures, and the opportunity to move and travel. This phenomenon can be seen in parallel with feminist studies on migration and transnationalism that highlight women's exercise of agency in regard to their marital choices. Women refuse or delay marriage, or consider marrying foreigners in reaction to local codes of marriageability (Thai 2005, Constable 2005). A good case study in this regard is Singapore, home of transnational border crossing activities, such as the mobility of domestic workers, wives of expatriate workers, and upwardly mobile professional women who work abroad (Yeoh and Chang 2001; Yeoh, Huang and Willis. 2000; Willis and Yeoh 2003a). Singaporean professional female workers prolong their overseas positioning knowing the negative marriage prospects, induced by their social status and economic independence (Willis and Yeoh 2003).

As described in Chapter Two, the Phua Farang phenomenon has developed out of Thailand's sex tourism, which is embedded in a particular context of national and global inequality. Thai-Isan women from rural villages, most of them poorly educated, are at the bottom of the national and global social hierarchy because of their positions and identities based on class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Yet the stories told by Mia Farangs and "would be" Mia Farangs from the two villages demonstrate that women make strategic use of the situation—exercising their structurally mediated agency—and in cases such as Noon's, they have gained physical and economic mobility that surpasses the ability of an average middle-class Thai professional. Thai-Isan women's spatial and social mobility in the Phua Farang phenomenon is summed up by a male Ban Karawek community leader:

The women (who are Mia Farang) cannot choose the place and social location they were born into but they can choose where they want to be (physically and socially), and as long as their choice makes them and their families happy and secure, I have nothing against it.

Contrary to the widespread assumption in Western countries, as well as urban dwellers in Bangkok, that Thai brides of farangs are young naïve women who fall prey to the international bride trade, many of the women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, and also their families, take an active role in participating in transnational marriages. In fact, among the women in the villages, those who decide to take part in relationships with foreign men are considered *kla*, which can be roughly translated into English as “brave.” And the women who are “brave” enough to take on the Phua Farang phenomenon make careful and strategic decisions. Women’s choices and exercise of agency, however, are constrained because these seemingly strategic decisions still operate to perpetuate dominant practices that value women for their sexuality and feminine identities, hence reinscribing naturalized gender roles and expectations.

While village women see marriages to foreigners as a new possibility, local Thai men, on the other hand, are facing greater constraints in local marriage prospects. Married Thai men, in particular, feel that their place in their marriages and families is compromised by the Phua Farang phenomenon. As shown in this Chapter, men’s position and masculine identities are threatened, especially when marital and family conflicts arise because of this phenomenon. Partly driven by the circulation of the new “global imagination,” the Phua Farang phenomenon enhances the villagers’ dreams of a “better world out there,” a world which Thai-Isan men can no longer provide on their own merits

and assets. Furthermore, as will be shown in the next Chapter, the Phua Farang phenomenon provides new avenues and opportunities for women to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of family and community provider with new panache, thus further undermining men's place in this matrilineal Isan society.

Chapter 4

Global Wife, Local Daughter:

Gender, Family, and Community in Isan's Transnational Marriage Trend

On December 31st, 2006, Ban Karawek's villagers had a special occasion to celebrate. At Ban Karawek Elementary School, teachers, students and villagers gathered for the Pha-pa—or Buddhist—celebratory fundraising event. This particular Pha-pa event was special in that the money came from abroad, through three Ban Karawek women who have married foreign men and live abroad with their husbands. The three women donors studied as young children at Ban Karawek Elementary School. Before noon, three trucks with money trees arrived at Ban Karawek Elementary School and the formal opening ceremony started. The school principal gave a speech and invited the guest of honor, the former Udonthani MP, to open the ceremony. The day's events were followed by a night celebration with banquets, stage performances and music. It was a joyful moment for the villagers of Ban Karawek and their guests, including several foreign guests, mostly husbands of the village women.

Rituals such as the above public display of philanthropy in a community-based school in this Thai village are, simultaneously, moments of ceremonial celebration and moments of memorializing Thai rural women in their new position as well-off donors by virtue of their marriage to a Phua Farang. In this Thai village, many “once-poor-just-like-us” women have now found new identities as Mia Farangs, family providers, landowners, entrepreneurs, and now community philanthropists, thus reviving old insecurities and creating new anxieties around the ideology of the family, gender roles and idealized marital relations in a rural setting. Against this background of celebration

and memory creation of new desires, identities and subjectivities, this chapter examines how local gendered ideologies within the Isan family get reinscribed and transformed in the social and cultural processes associated with the transnational marriage phenomenon that is becoming in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon. Because transnational migration is often believed to have the potential to destabilize existing social structures in both sending and receiving communities, this chapter follows feminist scholarship on transnationalism which seeks to investigate whether or not—and in what way—transnational migration undermines established gender relations in sending and/or receiving localities.

Case studies in various locations among groups of women who take part in transnational migration reveal that women's transnational mobility and their increased economic power have both transformed and reified existing social structures, including gender relations, in complex ways. Gender and migration studies in the Philippines have demonstrated how migration has, on the one hand, ruptured "the fabled closeness of the Filipino family", and on the other, created transnational linkages of kin support and exchange (Asis 1994: 21). In Gamburd (2000) and Tadeo-Pingol's (1999) respective studies—of a Sri Lankan village where a high number of women migrate for work as domestic helpers in the Middle East, and of an Ilocos community in the northern Philippines—women's overseas employment and their absence from their families and villages have been accompanied by shifts in men's and women's roles within the family. In her research on househusbands temporarily left by their wives working abroad, Tadeo-Pingol (1999) argues that Filipino masculine identity is redefined as a consequence of migration. Paradoxical trends in men's psychological adjustments -- from resistance to

or embracing of “female tasks,” sublimation of their sexual desires, engagements in sexual liaisons, and financial negotiations -- show conflicting tendencies and feelings when dealing with their wives’ absence from home (Tadeo-Pingol 1999: 40-44). Likewise, in Gamburd’s study, men have slowly started to do domestic chores such as taking care of children and household work while women have taken up the role of breadwinner, remitting money from overseas for household consumption. Gamburd (2000) emphasizes that the changes are slow and are met with resistance. Men turn to drinking to reaffirm their masculine identity, while in many cases female kin take up child rearing responsibilities in the mother’s absence. As Gamburd (2000) points out, the increased economic power that enables migrant women to enjoy non-traditional independence and power in the family does not destabilize existing gender ideologies with ease. On the contrary, she found that Sri Lankan women migrants continue to define themselves in accordance with the existing ideal femininity and struggle to use their new economic power to come to terms with existing gendered expectations. Similarly, Filipino migrant wives still regard their husbands as dominant even if they are empowered in the home, where new forms of men’s self-worth are now redefined in relation to realizing family’s ambitions, such as children’s success in schools (Tadeo-Pingol 1999: 40-44). As Angeles (2003) argues in her study of the importance of considering men and masculinities in migration and development studies:

Migration affects not just the family as a whole, nor does it affect all family members equally... There is no reason to expect that old forms of masculinities may erode, decline or decompose automatically as a result of market forces and women’s economic independence from men. What we

may see in fact are even more destabilizing and destructive expressions of masculinities as a way of men's reassertion of their former place in society.

Similarly, Fouron and Glick Schiller's (2001) study of Haitian immigrants in the U.S. illustrates that although migrant women acquire economic power, they use it to support hierarchical class systems in the homeland and perpetuate women's marginalized role in the public sphere. The role of women migrants' remittances in women's overall status may thus be unique to each locality and culture, in that overseas migrants' remittances may be spent in different ways, including on the education of girls or the entry of female family members in new enterprises, both of which could destabilize gender relations and identities.

What is unique about the Filipino and the Thai cases, however, is the significance of daughters in the social reproduction of the family and household. In the Filipino context, Asis (1994: 20) cites studies documenting how Filipino parents perceive daughters to be more reliable than sons in remitting their income to the natal family. The significance of daughters in Thai Isan villages, however, as I argue below, is to be found not only in family or household-level reproduction, but also in meeting village or community social reproduction needs that accompany rural transformation. The conception of family in the Isan situation differs from the nuclear and natal family contexts often talked about in the above case studies. Given the dominant practice of matrilocality and female inheritance of farmland in kin-based Isan villages, the boundaries between the family and the village community are blurred and the role of women in the agrarian community is crucial. Thus, the starting point of analyzing what

gets destabilized or reinforced in this context would have to consider these culturally-specific and spatially-configured practices, as well as the wider political economy of ongoing agrarian transition or rural transformation.

In the case of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, I found that Isan gender roles regarding familial obligations are reaffirmed as women work to maintain their transnational ties to families and villages. Women with foreign husbands often use their acquired wealth to fulfill Isan familial values and expectations of daughters taking care of their parents and natal families. They also extend their support to the village and the community-as-family in the forms of donations and sponsorship of festive events. The Phua Farang phenomenon connects rural families and the local village community to the global, through remittances from Mia Farang daughters, bypassing the nation state's institutions and agencies which have been inadequate in addressing Isan's disadvantageous position within the growing Thai regional and national economies. The "transnationalization" of the two Isan villages depends on Mia Farangs' "daughter duty"-- women's commitment to their role as the nurturers of the natal family, religion, and community, which in this matrilineal society, is seen as an extension of the family.

Continuing to explain the Phua Farang phenomenon in the language of daughters' familial responsibility is part of the women's and their rural families' negotiation of their moral position within and beyond the village community. This needs to be understood in the context of moral scrutiny directed at Mia Farangs with regards to their sexuality, consumption and marital practices. At the moment, this contestation has gained power at the village level where the Phua Farang phenomenon has recently been generally

accepted in contrast to the strong community opposition 30 years ago. This increased social acceptance, in turn, further drives the growth of transnational marriages in the village communities.

Unlike some of the literature reviewed above, which focuses on the effects of women's transnational migration on existing local social structures and gender ideologies, this chapter expands on Chapter Two's discussion of the agrarian transition taking place because of transnational marriages. Specifically, I discuss how the ongoing agrarian transformation has set in motion the growth of transnational marriages and their effects on Isan families, households and communities. Regardless of the growth of the Phua Farang phenomenon, values and practices around family and gender in Isan rural families have been changing remarkably in the past four decades due to Thailand's rapid economic development and the integration of once remote and self-reliant peasant villages into the national and global capitalist economy. Thus, the Phua Farang phenomenon is not an independent agent of change, but is in part an extension of an ongoing wider transformation that relates to the rural industrialization and agrarian transition in Thailand's rural countryside (Rigg 2001, Phongpaichit and Baker 1998).

Ceremony, Community and Commitment

I now return to the Pha-pa event in Ban Karawek with which I opened this chapter to illustrate my arguments. Pha-pa, a religious fundraising event, is the occasion for the villagers to *Tam boon* (make merit) together and celebrate. This year's Pha-pa at Ban Karawek School was specifically organized by Mia Farang – not only the three women who initiated it but also other foreigners' wives in the village—who met for planning and

preparation before the event and made generous donations to it.

The story began with two women from Ban Karawek who asked their relatives in the village to approach the Ban Karawek School's principal and tell him about their intention to organize a Pha-pa to raise money for the school. The two women were students at Ban Karawek School and had been close friends and classmates since grade school. Nid, who is 30 years old, has been married to her Austrian husband and living in Austria for seven years while Kaew, who is the same age, has been married to her British husband and living in the UK for three years. Pawadee, who was one grade below Nid and Kaew at Ban Karewek School, also took part in organizing this event. Pawadee is married to a Singaporean. The three women had about two months to raise money, mostly within the expatriate Thai communities in their respective countries of residence. Kaew, Nid, and Pawadee returned to Ban Karawek village for their yearly visit from December 2006 to January 2007. At the Pha-pa held at Ban Karawek School on December 31, 2006, the three women donated the money they had raised abroad, about 140,000 baht (US \$4,375) in total, and were received with a reception and a ceremony at the school. Other villagers joined the ceremony and brought donations. Nid, Kaew, and Pawadee were publicly thanked and honored for their contribution to the school and the community. The event was presided over by the former Udonthani Member of Parliament. Kaew and Nid, like many villagers who attended the event, were in yellow shirts, indicating their love and loyalty to the King on the occasion of his 60th anniversary of accession to the throne.

During the Pha-pa event, Kaew's husband and Kaew's sister's husband, who is also from the UK, attended with their wives. They acted as the representatives of foreign

husbands and in-laws of the women of Ban Karawek. The former Member of Parliament thanked the husbands and in-laws for making the event happen, and said, “You are not merely visitors to this village, you are our family.” At night, there was an outdoor banquet celebrating the Pha-pa as well as the New Year’s Eve. Stage, sound equipment, and music were handled by a *Molam* (Isan folk music) band that was hired by a neighboring village’s residents—a German husband with a Thai wife. The guests at the banquet included respected figures in the village, as well as the former Member of Parliament. He gave a speech on stage, in Lao dialect as well as English because many of the guests that night were foreign husbands married to Ban Karawek women. The former MP, with a PhD from the UK, expressed his warm welcome to the foreign husbands. On stage, the spokesman introduced the German husband to the guests as: “Mr. Franz, Por Yai Thong’s son-in-law. He loves Isan music.” Mr. Franz has lived in Thailand for many years and his mother has recently joined him and his wife at their home in a village next to Ban Karawek. Mr. Franz and his wife just had a new baby boy, Thana, whose name the band adopted as its own. The event was indeed an “international” Pha-pa because the money was raised in three foreign countries through the three village women, while the guests represented various nationalities. The languages of communication switched between Isan dialect, standard Thai, and English.

For three consecutive years (2004-2007), Ban Karawek School has received funds from Pha-Pa events initiated by former female students who have married foreign men and lived abroad with their husbands. The school principal recounted the women’s enthusiasm in giving back to the school: “We have never asked them for money, they came to us and asked for the permission to raise money for the school.” The principal

showed me a school guestbook which former female students who are now Mia Farang signed when they visited the school on various occasions, bringing with them gifts or donations for the school or the students, such as free lunch, ice-cream, or money. So far, the money raised in the Pha-Pa events has been used to build a metal fence around the school and a garage. The villagers also plan to replace the dirt driveway inside the school yard with a concrete one.



Figure 7: Pha-paa Event at Ban Karawek School, December 2006
Photo: Sirijit Sunanta, 2006

Mae Dee, a 60-year old former District Head of Ban Karawek and a committee member of the local Red Cross Association, expressed positive views about the women's generosity towards the community. She particularly admired the women's cooperation when asked for help in organizing community activities such as fairs and festive events. She said:

The women and their husbands help our community. For example, when we organize our local fair we hold a beauty contest and the women and their foreign husbands help sponsor the event. We have lucky draws to raise fund for the local Red Cross and the women donate various winning prizes.

Phor Toon, the Mayor of local District Organization Administration, describes how Thai women and their foreign husbands help the community financially in local ceremonies, merit making, and public facility building, easing the financial burden that would otherwise fall on other villagers.

For example, in a village merit-making ceremony, the villagers wish to have a Molam band perform. Women with foreign husbands accept the idea of funding it. In the past, the villagers had to pool the money, maybe 400 – 500 hundred baht or 1,000 - 2,000 baht each in order to hire a band. Now, foreigners' wives can just take it up and sponsor it. It's the same as when we raised funds for public facility building. Villagers used to contribute 100 – 200 baht each but now Farangs donate tens or even hundreds of thousands baht each time for public facilities.

The evidence of foreigners' wives' generosity towards the community is visible everywhere, from schools and temples to local government offices. For instance, when I visited the District Office for civil statistics and information regarding Ban Karawek's and Ban Sri Udon's population, I noticed that the registrar's office, the most public section in the building, is furnished by wooden table sets donated by a Thai woman with a foreign last name.

The above story of a public ceremony and vignettes of long-term commitment of

the Mia Farangs to their communities of origin demonstrate the reproduction of new transnational forms of exchange and cross-cultural familial and community relations. It is not only Thai wives and their families, but also foreign husbands, foreign in-laws and expatriate Thai communities in the destination countries of these brides who participate in this transnational pattern of philanthropy and community-building. In this collective endeavor, it is not only the marriage and immediate family of these women that encounter the transnational imaginary, but their entire villages and rural economies spanning different spaces, places, and cultures.

There are perhaps no better “marketers” of the transnational marriage phenomenon and the popular view around the immense opportunities such marriage opens up for the women, their families and communities than the women like Nid, Kaew, and Pawadee who are involved in transnational marital relations. The repeated return of these visiting migrants to their villages with money to feed their families, donations to temples and schools, fancy clothes, and beautiful children become “real life” advertisements. Unlike the first generation of older women, now in their 50s and 60s, who met their husbands in “Rest and Recreation” centres around US military bases in Udonthani, these younger women in their 30s who marry foreigners have not met much disapproval, but rather some degree of acceptance, if not enthusiasm, from their families and communities. They are still the subject of occasional gossip and some element of subtle disapproval, but regardless, this transnational marriage phenomenon is still growing due to the ongoing transition in Thai rural villages.

Transnational Marriages and the Rural Village in Transition

As discussed in Chapter Two, Isan rural villages are undergoing profound transformations due to Thailand's rapid but unequal economic growth and the integration of the village into the national and global economy. Rural Isan village social life and livelihoods have changed significantly as agrarian-based subsistence livelihoods have shifted to a cash-based economy over the past four decades.

In the “modernizing/developing Isan village,” money, material wealth, and an urban middle-class lifestyle have been sought after as a status marker among villagers. Observing a Thai Isan village in the 1980s and 1990s, Mary Beth Mills (1999) illustrates that commodity consumption has become prevalent in the social life of rural villagers in which cash and commodity “represented powerful standards of material success against which village residents judged their own and their neighbors’ claims to *thansamay* (modernity) status” (Mills 1999: 47-48). In my study conducted ten years later, cash exchange and commodity consumption are even more pervasive in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon. Almost every household owns a TV set and a motorcycle. New houses have been built and a number of villagers own a car, a motorcycle, or truck. Local-owned shops, restaurants, mini marts, and Internet cafés and game stations have emerged. Contemporary residents of Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon have embraced the spirit of entrepreneurship and the accompanying aspiration for consumption and the “modern” lifestyle, which were almost non-existent in these two villages 40 years ago. Cash incomes from migration, wage labour, and businesses of various scales have raised the villagers’ standard of living but also living expenses. Por Poom, the 60 year-old former head of Ban Sri Udon District, noted the increasing importance of cash and

commodities, the changing village livelihoods, and the new attitudes towards investment:

Life has changed so much. Now people are modern. In the past the villagers collected food from the forest and the mountains. Now, they have to go to the market and get food in plastic bags. And now the expenses..., people started to earn money but the expenses have become higher. People in the past, twenty – thirty years ago, did not dare to invest. Nowadays every household has a motorcycle. They dare to take out loans and take risk. Some people earn it from their own labour and their own assets. In some households, the parents stay at home while children go out for work in the cities or overseas.

Por Ta, the 60 year-old head of Karawek District Administrative Organization, noted that the prevalence of money in the life of villagers and the diminishing interest in farming are reflected in the perception towards the desired form of inheritance:

Nowadays, in heritage management, older people still consider farmland as the most important asset. But to younger people it has changed from farmland to money. When older people give farmland as heritage, children and grandchildren will prefer money. Assets used to be in the forms of the house, farmland, and cattle. Now it's money that people want. In the past when children inherited farmland from their parents, they would work on it. There was no struggle because the economy was not so tight. It's not like that anymore. People are interested in how much money they will get from their parents. And money can be used up. When money is finished, people have to struggle to find more.

In Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, conspicuous consumption and economic success as status markers are an observable phenomenon. New houses being built, in

contrast to old-style rural homes, are now bigger, modern, and fenced – a sign of wealth and urban, middle class living with symbols of Western lifestyles, such as convenient modern appliances and upholstered furnishings. One well-to-do family in Ban Sri Udon whose members work in government services, was considering building a new garage in their new house. The owner of the house wanted the garage to be in a location where it would be “visible, so people can see (what models and how many cars we have).”

Agricultural income alone does not allow conspicuous consumption of this extent. The rural families who are in the position to acquire greater material wealth are primarily those employed in government services with access to low-interest financial loans, or those receiving overseas remittances. Among the higher-income families are those which have daughters married to well-to-do foreign husbands who immediately raise the family’s economic status. Others take out loans, either from banks, other financial institutions, or local creditors who lend out money with high interest. At the beginning of the 21st century, Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon’s villagers live more comfortably but are burdened with debt and the pressure to “make it” and not be left behind when others in the community gain a comfortable modern lifestyle. At a time when conspicuous consumption equates to social status, Mia Farangs’ material wealth marks them as successful individuals who are able to live up to the aspired lifestyle and enable their family back home to live comfortably and to gain *Nata*, or “face” in the community.

The Phua Farang phenomenon has been accompanied by transformation at the community level, but I do not consider the transnational marriage phenomenon as merely an agent of change. Rather, I see rural change or agrarian transition and transnational marriages as mutually constitutive social phenomena whose visibility become all the

more conspicuous and translocal in character because of the addition of new actors – such as foreign husbands and in-laws –and new symbols of material wealth and cultural capital – cars, houses, literacy, and new linguistic abilities. In fact, rural village life in Thailand has been undergoing significant changes regardless of the Phua Farang phenomenon and the increase in transnational marriages in the villages is a part of this ongoing transformation. Surges of rural-to-urban migration and remittances have fed the need for cash when agricultural incomes are uncertain. International migration among young Thai village males, mostly blue-collar contract workers, has been happening for over 30 years and is a source of disposable income for many families (Jones 2003, Chamrathirong et al 1995). And after 30 years of intensive rural-to-urban migration in Northeastern peasant villages, many young women who have joined the transnational marriage trend today are the second generation, children of return migrants. Most importantly, the transnational marriage phenomenon in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon started with women's out migration for work in cities, particularly to international tourist destinations. The importance of economic status and commodity consumption, if anything, are the causes and not the results of the transnational marriage trend among village women, although they have both increased due to transnational marriages.

Transnational Marriages and the Dutiful Daughters' Family Responsibility

Within Isan agrarian practice of predominantly matrilineal residence and female land inheritance, women/daughters are more attached to their natal families than are men/sons and are endowed with greater responsibility towards the natal families. The ideas and practices around a daughter's duty to the natal family have been supported by

village Theravada Buddhist ideologies that emphasize the role of women in nurturing the family and religion (Keyes 1984). Theravada Buddhism ascribes different relationships to women and men, in terms of their kin and their roles in the village society; sons repay their parents by being ordained into monkhood before they get married and joining the wife's family; women, not being able to become monks, have a responsibility to take care of their parents' physical well being (Keyes 1975, Kirsch 1975).

Although some familial inheritance practices have changed over the years now that dwindling family farmland is divided up and passed down to sons as well as to daughters, overall gender roles and expectations are slow to change. Village women's commitment to filial obligations has been documented prior to the emergence of the Phua Farang phenomenon. As with similar studies in the Philippine context cited above (i.e., Asis 1994), studies on Thailand's rural-to-urban migration find that women migrants send more remittances back to their families than their male counterparts even though women earn smaller hourly wages in the cities (Curran 2005, Osaki 1999, Phongpaichit 1993, Tantiwiarmanond and Pandey 1991).

The concept of the "dutiful daughter" in Isan's familial ideology plays a significant role in the (re)production of transnational relationships between Thai women and foreign men because it serves as an increasingly important mechanism for the maintenance of communities qua families. Most village women who marry foreign men send regular remittances to their families, particularly to their parents, who in turn use a portion of it to maintain extended family members, temples and community functions. Within these transnational marriages, the women usually adhere to existing gendered expectations within a Northeastern Thai family – that of daughters taking care of aging

parents. Village women with foreign husbands are often approached by family members who are in financial need. By helping family members financially, the women follow the Isan agrarian value of sharing their resources with their family. In the eyes of community members, these women are “good” if they adhere to gendered familial expectations of sharing wealth and taking care of family members. In the kin-based community of rural Northeastern Thailand, the village is by and large an extension of the family and the women’s giving back to the village community in the forms of religious donation or financial support for social events and festivities has a similar effect as helping out and nurturing one’s own family.

Local village voices capture the dynamics of this “dutiful daughter” role. A female shopkeeper in Ban Karawek shares her opinion about family duty in transnational marriages: “Foreigners are good and their wives are good too. The women send money back to their family.” Noon, a Ban Karawek woman with a French partner, told me in an interview: “I think marrying a foreigner is good. Foreign husbands are a big help to the Thai wives’ families (financially).” Oi, a 26-year-old woman from Ban Sri Udon, married a German man and migrated to Germany 5 years ago. Oi sends a monthly remittance of 15,000 baht (US \$430) to her parents, which has enabled them to retire in their late 40s and early 50s. Oi’s parents live in a newly built house and own a car. Bua, a 34 year-old-woman from Ban Sri Udon, migrated to Switzerland to be with her Swiss husband in March 2006. I met her when she came back to the village for a visit in January-February 2007, at which time her father was very ill. Like many village women with foreign husbands, Bua sends remittances home regularly. In her case, she has been sending over 20,000 baht (US \$575) a month, which increased to over 30,000 baht

(US\$860) a month since her father has been sick. The money is used to support a family of thirteen, consisting of her parents, her three children from previous relationships, her sister, brother, nieces and nephews, her eldest daughter's partner and their newborn baby, and her maternal grandfather. The money Bua sends is spent on food, the monthly installation payment for the pick-up truck they own, gas for their motorcycle and pick-up truck, medicine for the father, and the land that Bua has just bought in Ban Sri Udon. Bua's mother is the youngest child in her family, all of whom live in the house of Bua's maternal grandparents. The family is large when compared to others in the villages because Bua's two siblings and all their children are living in the same household. Bua's eldest daughter, who is now 19 years old, her partner, and their newborn baby are also living in the same household. Bua's mother sells goods in fairs and festive events and the family grows rice on their own farm, but the expenses in the household are mostly taken care of by the money that Bua sends home. Bua earns most of the money she sends and has no savings of her own in Switzerland.²² She anticipates that after she pays off the installation payment for the car and the land, she will be able to save some money.

James Scott (1976) wrote that peasant societies in Southeast Asia usually have a moral obligation for the financially better off to share and be generous toward others as a mechanism to ensure the subsistence of the resource poor in the precarious condition of the peasant's life. Despite rapid changes, Isan rural villages seem to remain a "moral community" for its members, including the long distance members such as women who have married out and live overseas. Once the women assume the identity of a well-to-do Mia Farang, they are expected to share their wealth. Women's economic contribution to

²² From being a farmer's daughter in Isan, Bua has become an overseas service sector worker, now working as a part-time staff in a Thai restaurant in Switzerland on top of her roles as wife, mother and homemaker.

their family and community have, in turn, gained them moral status and community acceptance. As the international Pha-pa at Ban Karawek School demonstrated, Thai wives of foreigners have gained social acceptance and prestige from their economic success and their generosity towards the families and the community.

When I asked Mae Dee, 60-years old, and her friend, Mae Thong, age 61, about their views towards women in the community who have married foreign men, they responded:

Dee: From what I have seen, of all the women who have foreign husbands, the higher percentage of them are good.

Thong: Those who are not good account for only about 30 percent while 70 percent are good.

Dee: There are more good cases than bad cases.

Sirijit: And those cases that are bad—they are bad in what way?

Dee: Some women come across foreign men who are a bit poor.

Thong: Poor foreign men, and as women...

Dee: The foreign men might lure them (into prostitution).

Thong: And in good cases, the (Thai wives') families are more financially secure.

It should be noted that Mae Thong's daughter is married to a Swedish man and is now living in Sweden with her husband. Mae Thong's daughter has built a new house for her parents in the neighboring village of Ban Karawek.

The conversation above suggests how local villagers privilege women's economic mobility and the use of economic wealth towards the fulfillment of "daughter duty" roles in improving the well being of the parents and natal family. Mae Dee is aware of the risk

that women may meet foreign men who are “a bit poor” in which case the women would not achieve the economic security they hoped to attain from a Phua Farang. According to Mae Dee, the hardship the women might face in marrying the wrong man includes being lured and sold into prostitution. Mae Thong, however, is quick to defend transnational marriages, adding that in most cases, marrying foreign men improves the economic security of the women’s families.

Grandma Juta of Ban Sri Udon had expressed ambivalent views towards the Phua Farang trend in general. She explained that while some families benefit from it, there are some women who are not “good” because they just play around (*Pai tiaw pai len*) with foreign men and do not really help improve their families’ well being:

For the parents it’s good because the daughter (who has a foreign husband) brings in money. Some cases are not so good. The women get some money (from foreign men) but do not give it to the parents. Instead, they use the money for their own pleasure and on playing around. While some women use the money to buy the house and other things for their parents, some do not get so much money (from farang) no matter how hard they try. It seemed to be better in the past. The women used the money to buy houses and things for the parents but nowadays some women are satisfied in just being taken out to play around. Foreign men just give them a one-time lump sum and then stop giving any more money.

Again, in the above passages, the fulfillment of the Isan daughter’s role becomes the main criterion of evaluating the benefits of being married to a farang. Grandma Juta has two unmarried daughters and she has no wish for them marry foreigners. Both of her daughters work for the government, one as a nurse and the other as a public librarian.

Grandma Juta's family is considered successful in Ban Sri Udon. The family used to own a local rice mill and they now own a family's silk weaving industry.

Among the villagers, the success of the women who have foreign partners is measured by visible economic upward mobility, displayed in the form of new modern houses, increased farmland size, gold jewelry, and new vehicles. The women are judged by their adherence to gendered familial expectation and filial roles, and in particular by the extent to which daughters support the parents and take care of them physically, which, in the era of "modernizing" and monetarized Isan rural life, has meant taking care of them "financially." It is the material wealth they gain from marriages and relationships with foreign men, and, in some cases, these women's wages in the husbands' countries, that enable the women to fulfill daughterly duties. As Mae Dee commented, daughters who have foreign husbands are in a better position to fulfill their daughterly role: "Those who have not gone (to marry foreign men) have no resources to help their parents out. But once they have foreign husbands, they have money to pay for their parents' expenses and to help their parents out in a rough time." In Isan villages today, "rough times" are often caused by a shortage of cash and agricultural debts.

The women I talked to are proud of their contributions, especially contributions for community or temple maintenance or religious purposes, which earn them public recognition and much symbolic and cultural capital in the eyes of the locals. Kaew, one of the initiators of the Ban Karawek Pha-Pa event, was very eager to discuss her role in putting together the Pha-pa event at Ban Karawek School. She recounted vividly how she raised money from the Thai community in the U.K. and made the event happen. She expressed how happy she was to "*Tam boon*," or "make merit", and help the village

community: “This is our school so I would like to see it developed.”

Aunt Muang, 59 years old, returned to live in Ban Karawek after her American husband died. She is considered one of the wealthiest people in the village as well as a regular merit-maker and generous donor. When I visited her, she showed me a collection of her certificates from schools and temples in Ban Karawek and neighboring villages in honor of her donations and support. At the Pha-pa event at New Year’s Eve, Aunt Muang was one of the honorable figures who was asked to give a speech.

Like Meucke’s (1992) analysis of the prostitution revenue remitted by “dutiful daughters” to Thailand’s Northern villages, Mia Farangs’ economic contribution in Northeast (Isan) villages helps, in part, to maintain social institutions such as families, temples and schools, as well as the collective village community. Mia Farangs deploy the wealth they have gained from marrying foreigners to reconstitute existing agrarian social values and practices, including women’s filial obligations.

In Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, women in transnational relationships continue to embrace the “dutiful daughter” and “good community member” identities because these values are well ingrained and because these two “positive” identities allow the women and their families to contest negative perceptions of Mia Farang. It is the women’s commitment to their families and their generosity to their communities—not their history of working the bar in tourist districts—that the women and those close to them choose to emphasize. Mia Farangs’ past stigma, once in place because of their perceived uncontrolled sexuality and conjugal relationships to the racial and religious others, has over the years been alleviated by the women’s proof of economic mobility and their commitment to use their acquired material success in service of their families

and the community.

This evolving community perception of Mia Farang has paralleled rapidly changing opinions around female migration for non-farm work in the cities, where earlier moral concerns of young women's unmonitored sexuality gave way to economic practicality in the context of changing Isan rural livelihoods (Mills 1999). The shifting community opinions towards the Phua Farang phenomenon can be seen as an adjustment for rural families to survive new challenges and to maximize their options.

The shifting public perception of Mia Farang and the continuation of the "dutiful daughter" role in these two Isan villages epitomize the mutual dynamics of "change" and "continuation" in social concepts. People as social agents continue to engage in the contestation of meanings that could potentially lead to changes in the collective thinking system. Changes, however, will never be complete because people are themselves social beings and their actions are always socially mediated (Ortner 1994: 393-394). As Mia Farangs and their families work to contest negative community perceptions of women's transnational marriages, they do so by reconfiguring existing gendered filial roles and the old community moral obligation, as well as reproducing the newly embraced domination of global capitalism in social life.

While women's commitment to natal families and community enhance their moral status and their social standing, it comes with a cost. Keeping up with the community expectation of the "successful and generous Mia Farang" adds pressure on the women whose overseas financial conditions are limited. In some cases, it strains marriages and relationships between the women and their foreign husbands who may raise objections to the Thai wives' "endless family giving."

Thai Wives of Foreign Men as Transmigrants

Transnationalism, a recently coined term to describe experiences and practices among migrants, highlights multiple connections that people develop and maintain across two or more national borders--between their homeland and a new place of settlement-- as opposed to the assumed assimilation and abandonment of homeland after relocation (Basch et al 1994). Most Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon's women who married foreigners and migrated to their husbands' countries may be considered transnational migrants because of their continuous efforts to maintain linkages with their places and societies of origin. Isan's transmigrant women maintain close ties with their families in the villages through regular visits, phone calls, money remittances, and religious donations, as in the Pha-Pa event at Ban Karawek School. Some women, although fewer in number, remain in the village while their foreign partners travel back and forth between Thailand and their own countries. For those women who have migrated, many wish to return to live in their home villages in the future. The women buy land and build houses in the villages for their family who stay behind and for their own possible return in the future. Although it is too early to know how many of the women will realize their wish of coming back to live in the village permanently, the close ties the women have towards their villages and families are clear, not only in terms of their participation in community life through long-distance exchanges, but also by oscillating between Thai and foreign spaces of temporary residence. While absent, the women keep in close contact with their families and continue to participate in important decision-making and family affairs, often using new forms of information and communication technologies

such as telephones or cellphones. At the other end, family members at home who receive regular money remittances from the women help take care of the women's business in the villages by supervising the construction of the women's new houses, taking care of the women's properties and, in some cases, taking care of the women's young children while the mothers are away. Having left the village for Switzerland a year ago, Bua says she calls home almost every day for almost an hour each time. "I call to see how they are doing, if they have any problems, and if the money I sent is enough."

Most of the women I talked to feel that their life abroad is temporary and the "home" they are looking forward to returning to are the Isan villages that they have left behind. Bua describes Switzerland as "a nice place" but plans to move back to Thailand after she saves enough money and after her husband retires. Bua told me that she does not want to live in Switzerland permanently, "even if it is as nice as heaven." Her main reason for being in Switzerland is to make money to send back home. Bua left all three of her children in the village, noting that having the children with her in Switzerland would make it less convenient to work. Bua sent most of her money back to the family in Ban Sri Udon to pay for a piece of land. Kaew, who has been living in the UK with her British husband, also expresses her wish to come back to live in Ban Karawek. Kaew says she does not want to live in the UK, especially when the weather is cold. She is building a new house in Ban Karawek in preparation for the time when she returns to live in the village permanently. In the meantime, Kaew and Bua visit their families in the villages regularly. At the time of my research, they had been back home for more than two months. Grant, Kaew's husband, took time off from work to accompany Kaew during one of her regular visits home in late 2006 and early 2007. He also helped with

the construction of the new house that is being built in Ban Karawek. Bua returned home because her father was very sick. Her husband did not accompany her but according to Bua, he called her several times a day: “He calls just every time he eats.”

As discussed earlier, Isan peasant women historically have strong ties to their kin and the village where their kin concentrate due to the predominantly matrilineal practice where women live among their natal families after marriage and inherit family farmland. Women’s marrying out of their own community and living abroad is far removed from this Isan agrarian practice and many of the women struggle to maintain familial ties across distance and national borders. The cases of women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon who married foreign men and migrated overseas demonstrate the changing marital and residential patterns that now span national borders, patterns based on decisions that are often made using economic considerations and sophisticated cost-benefit analysis. The women join their foreign partners abroad often because of the opportunity to earn and save more money, that when sent back home, increases in value.²³ At the same time, I heard of a case where a woman was thinking of moving back to the village because of the high living expenses in Germany. It remains to be seen if the emotional and economic ties the women have towards their natal families and the villages will continue through time, but at the moment, the transnational linkages between the women and the villages remain strong, and the women maintain their active membership in the village and the family in Thailand, partly due to the ease of communication and travel and partly due to the way that Isan peasant women have historically anchored kinship and

²³ In the fall of 2008, for instance, one Canadian dollar is worth 32 Thai baht, and one Euro is worth 49 Thai baht. An average monthly remittance of \$500 Canadian (or US) easily gets translated into 15,000 baht, which amounts to the monthly salary of a beginning instructor, armed with a PhD, employed in a city-based University.

responsibility in their natal families and community.

The women's and their husbands' personal situations, work, previous marital relations and current living arrangements largely determine how they maintain or nurture transnational connections with those they have left behind in the villages. This is reflected in the experience of Bua and her classmates, the two women donors of the Ban Karawek Elementary School. While Kaew and Nid are both married to foreign men and live abroad, Kaew spends more time in the village for each visit and comes back more regularly than Nid. Nid has brought her child from a previous relationship to live with her and her husband in Austria while she is raising another child born to her Austrian husband. Kaew's two children from her Thai ex-husband are living in Thailand with the ex-husband's sister. The generous vacation leave enjoyed by Kaew's British husband allows him to take a few months off from his job to accompany her to Thailand each year. Nid, on the other hand, has bought her family an orchard on which her parents are living so that she does not have to send so much money back.

The wave of village women marrying foreigners and moving abroad started no more than ten years ago. Whether or not women's transnational linkages will continue in the long term remains to be seen. Positioned at one end of the transnational circuit, my general observation is that most women maintain regular connections with their families in the villages and cases of women who abandon their ties to the villages are almost unheard of. At the other end of migration, existing studies have noted that many of the Thai wives of foreigners invest more of their emotional and financial resources in their families back in Thailand than in their integration into their host societies abroad. Mix and Piper (2003: 61-62) observed that most Thai wives of German men in their study

were not interested in integrating into German society, but instead focused their attention and energy on sending remittances to their family back home, supporting their children's education in Thailand, or raising the offspring born to German men inside the domestic realm in Germany. While the lack of higher education and language skills might have prevented some of the women from fully integrating into the host society, the attachments towards communities of origin and the possibilities to maintain these through communication, remittances, and regular visits home enable the women to remain "transmigrants" who live "here" yet continue their life "there" from a distance (Basch et al 1994). Thai communities abroad, consisting of Thai women who are married to foreign husbands, enable women migrants to remain inside the Thai, and, in some cases, Thai-Isan speaking environment.

Speaking about the vibrant Thai Isan community in Switzerland of which she is a part, Bua laughed and said, "There are so many people from Udonthani in Switzerland that they are saying Udon people are taking over the country." Bua noted that her own group in Switzerland consists of about 50 Thais, mostly Isan women. From Bua's narrative, it appears that Thai Isan women migrants in Switzerland have formed a network that supports its members. One of the members, a female Thai restaurant owner from Udonthani, hires Bua as the restaurant's part-time staff. In turn, Bua introduced a female friend in Ban Sri Udon to a Swiss man she knows. The couple is now married and the woman lives in a nearby town with her husband and has close contact with Bua. According to Bua, Thai women migrants meet regularly at any one of the members' homes where they party together and enjoy Isan home cooked food. Kaew is also active in the Thai community in the UK, particularly through the Thai temple. Thai temple

goers in Kaew's community in the UK made contributions to the Pha-pa event at Ban Karawek School mentioned earlier in this chapter. Kaew herself has made donations for religious fundraising initiated by other Thai community members on other occasions.

Mia Farang and the Creation of the Transnational Isan Village

Transnationalism, as explained earlier, highlights the multiple connections that people develop and maintain between their homelands and new places of settlement (Basch et al 1994). In this sense, transnational migration overlaps with "diaspora," in emphasizing on-going connections to homeland, multiple belongings and multiple locations that people inhabit, although diaspora stresses the emotional and psychological attachments. To James Clifford, "Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (Clifford 1994: 311). I prefer to anchor my analysis on transnationalism rather than on diaspora studies, calling Thai-Isan women "transmigrants" rather than members of a diaspora. I do this because I want to emphasize not so much the emotional and the psychological dimensions of women's narratives, but rather the social and cultural character. The role of the family, community and village culture left behind, in particular, is important in the process of navigating between the places of origin and resettlement.

Because homeland politics travel with migrants across national borders, some scholars argue that the nation state is not "withering away" in a time of massive global flows and border crossing but has become flexible, mobile and permeating. Basch et al (1996) proposed the term "deteritorialized nation state," meaning the extension of nation

state politics outside their geographical border into a new place where its nationals move to (Basch et al 1996). Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001) coined the idea of “long distance nationalism” among migrants, to describe a claim to membership in a political community that stretches beyond the territorial borders of a homeland. Kearney (1995: 549) stresses the persistence of the nation state and its role as a hegemonic institution within which transnational activities are carried out.

The evidence that rural villages extend their social, familial and economic connections into transnational space suggests that the nation state is not necessarily the only actor or institution that survives, succumbs to, takes advantage of, or adjusts to the accelerating transnational border crossing. The Thai-Isan village, a social unit that existed long before the invention of modern nation states, also participates in transnational mobility. While we are accustomed to studies that examine the rural in relation to urban centers, and the nation-state in relation to the global, the fact that rural villages forge linkages and connections to the global, with or without the mediation of the nation state, has not been fully examined. As the “Foreign Husband” trend in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon demonstrates, transnational connections through marriage are one of the mechanisms that individuals, families, and communities deploy as they seek to improve their lot in the context of inequitable access to power within the nation state and regional/national economies.

In a similar way, Louisa Schein (2005) writes that Hmong-Miao people, an ethnic minority group in China, make use of transnational connections with their co-ethnics in the US as a strategy to compensate for their disadvantages in the Chinese state. Lagging behind in China’s phenomenal economic growth, the Hmong-Miao minority in China has

reached out to the Hmong community in the US, established when Hmong refugees from Laos arrived in the US after the war in Indo-China. Transnational marriages between Hmong-Miao women from the homeland in China to Hmong American men are part of the connection between homeland and diaspora. Hmong American men look to their homeland for women while Hmong-Miao families in China view marriages and migration to join their co-ethnic in the US as a desired spatial and social mobility.

Because of region, class, and ethnicity, all of which can divide people within a nation, belonging to a nation-state or national citizenship may not be the hegemonic identity that transmigrants take up and carry with them in transnational migration. Instead, the sense of belonging may lie more with the family, kin, and ethnic group. Because their language and culture are distinct from formal standard Thai in the central region, and because they are economically marginalized, Thai-Isan people from rural Isan villages have historically forged regionalist sentiments, using ethnicity, dialect, village and province of origin as markers of group identity within the Thai state (Suthep 2005, Keyes 1966). During the surge of out migration from Isan villages to the cities, Isan migrants have maintained strong ties to their villages. They have also forged village social networks in the cities, and these have provided support for newcomers from the villages. As shown by Bua's social networks in Switzerland, Isan village-based, provincial, and regional social networks are formed in transnational migration as well, allowing Isan migrants within the broader Thai community abroad to embrace situational identity rather than simply a Thai national identity.

Transnational connections and the continuation of homeland membership go hand in hand with the preservation of homeland culture, which requires women's prominent

role in family and cultural reproduction. As homeland culture and politics are preserved in transnational space, existing expectations about gender roles in the family and the community are as well. In the case of Haitian immigrants in the US described by Fouron and Glick Schiller (2001), migrant women's remittances are used to support traditional beliefs and practices that perpetuate class and gender hierarchies in their homeland:

Women free themselves individually from the gendered constraints that the status system places on their personal activities by migrating; but often they then deploy the wealth they obtain to fulfill obligations and obtain social status back home. In so doing, these women contribute to the values that sustain the gender and class hierarchies in Haiti. And these hierarchies sustain a vision of the nation that is based on male power (Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001: 559).

In this Chapter I illustrated that as long distance members of the village, Isan village women in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon who are transnationally married participate in village affairs in the forms of donations, sponsoring religious ceremonies, supporting temples, and maintaining the community-as-family, and the family-as-community. They do so by actively participating in the traditional women's domain of the family and committing to women's traditional role as nurturers and reproducers of the larger community group. By maintaining transnational ties between their home villages and their new countries of residence, the women reproduce and reconfigure existing gendered roles and practices within the family and the community rather than transforming or modifying them to their advantage. It is still the daughters who go abroad and the women left behind who do much of the household and community maintenance and care work. And while some women have indeed moved semi-

permanently to their husbands' countries, the preference for matrilocality is still strong, given the desires of these women to "return home" regularly or permanently. I conclude this chapter by noting that amidst the profound transformation in many aspects of rural village life, some established social values are resistant to change. Gendered roles and expectations in families, which underlie Isan kin based-village communities, are still powerful. It is the very act of migration, whether within the Thai state or transnationally, that perpetuates women's filial roles from the past. Mia Farangs' daughter duty, in particular, "transnationalizes" the village community, and this indirectly benefits the nation-state by obscuring its failure to equally re-distribute wealth and resources among its populations.

Chapter Five

Gendered Nation and Classed Modernity:

The Perception of Mia Farangs (Foreigners' Wives) in Thai Society

In Chapters Three and Four, I have examined the Phua Farang phenomenon from the perspectives of rural Mia Farangs and their local community. I argued that at the individual and the village community levels, the Phua Farang phenomenon represents the global imagination of marginalized people who, under their structural circumstances, strategize and exercise agency to transcend their local limitation. Over time and after continuous negotiation of meanings around “family,” “female sexuality,” and “morality” in the context of transforming agrarian life, community perception of transnational marriages has gradually changed from that of disapproval to acceptance of this phenomenon. This chapter will shift the focus of analysis and examine the perceptions of the Phua Farang phenomenon in the wider Thai society. Arguments in this chapter are made using Social Constructionism, the theoretical contention that social “reality” is a product of a specific social and historical context under given relations of power. Drawing on post-structuralism’s concept of “discourse” or the “truth making process,” in which some partial and interested versions of truth gain validation over others, this chapter explores the power underlying current ways in which different groups in the Thai society make sense of the Phua Farang phenomenon at different geographical scales.

Rural aspiration for social and economic mobility through the Phua Farang phenomenon, although generally sympathized with and accepted by the women’s own rural communities, is often met with overt and sometimes hostile moral resistance from the wider Thai society. While subtle and sporadic in the rural community, negative

comments about the Phua Farang phenomenon are prevalent in the urban settings of Udonthani, as well as in the national media with headquarters in metropolitan Bangkok. For a significant part of the general public, certain academics, and some central and provincial government representatives, the Phua Farang phenomenon in rural Isan signifies a moral problem caused by “rampaging materialism/consumerism” which threatens to degrade the “Thai traditional culture.” The notion of saving “national tradition” from “foreign immoral values” has gained more strength with the revival of nationalism in Thai politics surrounding the September 2006 military coup that overthrew former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thai nationalist discourses are gendered as well as classed. Women and rural populations are endowed with the ascribed role and responsibility for national social reproduction and cultural preservation. I argue that the nationalist construction of rural Mia Farangs as “immoral materialists” is a product of discursive power of the urban elite Thais who monopolize the definitions of “modernity” and “morality,” while rural Mia Farangs’ definition of the same terms are invalidated. Critically examining Thai nationalist discourses, I point out the manipulation of the concepts “tradition” and “modernity” in support of the urban elite’s continued domination over the rural countryside.

While all discourses are partial, the more powerful ones (or ones supported by the more powerful groups) have better chances to shape the material world. I demonstrate that the construction of Mia Farangs as “immoral materialist yet ignorant victims” has shaped recent national initiatives, policy, and approaches to the Phua Farang phenomenon. I criticize current top-down initiatives and policies grounded on the moral

and victimization discourses as doing more harm than good to women and the Thai nation by widening the ideological distance between the village and the nation, and thus further stigmatizing rural Mia Farangs.

Class and Gender in the Thai Nationalism Discourse of “Immoral Materialism”

In the past three to four decades, Thailand’s social and economic conditions have changed rapidly and fundamentally. From an agricultural-based economy and a largely rural society in the 1960s, after the renowned Economic Miracle of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Thailand bears little resemblance to its old economy. Remarkable changes can be seen both in Bangkok and in villages, and most Thais welcome the changes that modernity has brought—a convenient life, more advanced communication and transportation technologies, more sophisticated stores and entertainment for cities, electricity, running water, TV, and more capital for the countryside. Yet Thais appear to have “love/hate” feelings towards modernity, especially when it comes to the requisite preservation of Thai culture; modernity that brings comfort and progress also threatens the “traditional Thai ways of life” and corrupts the “moral Thai society” with lavish material consumerism.

Discourses around the “precious and unique” Thai culture have been produced in large part by 40 years of the state-promoted Thai tourism industry, which has been packaged for foreign visitors as well as domestic consumption. The success of the Thai tourism industry in the global arena has created cultural nationalism among Thais who are now proud of the self-exoticized images they invented for others to see (Reynolds

2002, Sunanta 2005). Thai cultural nationalism discourses have been, and are still, constantly reproduced by the popular media as well as institutionalized by the state, such as in the founding of the Thai National Identity Board and the Ministry of Culture. Along with cultural nationalism, “anxiety” discourses around the loss of the Thai tradition amidst the encroachment of globalization and heavy consumerism have been circulating. The following section will illustrate that Thai nationalist discourses are classed as well as gendered because they expect two (partially overlapping) groups—women and rural people—to be responsible for the preservation of the Thai tradition on behalf of the whole nation (for parallel arguments, see also Jeffrey 2002).

Feminists have long been aware of gendered nationalist discourses in which women bear the burden of reproducing the nation and embodying national identity so that women’s dress code, sexual behaviours, and “values” around marriage and family become matters of moral and national interests (McClintock 1995, Bannerji 2000, Sinha 2004). Because the urban (read Bangkok) elite’s notion of tradition represents the national tradition (Sunanta 2005), the construction of ideal Thai femininity portrays the traits of upper-class women --delicate, fair-skinned bodies, and gentle, subtle, and sexually reserved gestures (Van Esterik 2000). While all Thai women are measured against this idealized “Thai femininity” that pertains largely to well-educated middle-and upper-class urban women, poor working-class women and rural Isan women who constitute the majority of Mia Farangs are distant from the classed, stereotyped conception of the traditional Thai woman because of their peasant background, low education, dark complexion, bold manner, and, in some cases, past employment in tourist red-light businesses.

While gender is classed in Thai nationalist discourses, the countryside is gendered when invoked in Thai national imagery. “The rural” bears feminine symbols of pristine landscape that yields and feeds the nation, akin to the nurturing lactating mother. The countryside represents the idealized past, the authentic Thai, the peasant roots, and simple agrarian livelihoods before the rampaging foreign influence in the name of global capitalism and modernization (see also Jeffrey 2002, Walker 2008). The modest, contented farmer in Thai elementary school textbooks I studied as a young girl is what most Thais have in mind for an authentic Thai countryside, or the authentic Thailand for that matter. The ruralized nationalist imagery appeals to the growing number of urban middle-class Thais who themselves enjoy the privilege of modern comfort, yet can rest assured that the comfortable and familiar Thai tradition is being preserved in the countryside. The aspiration of the rural people to embrace modernity and a more comfortable life is therefore an alarming thought for many urban middle-class citizens.

Several literary and social science writers such as Raymond Williams (1973), Michael Painter (1991), Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2001) have already explored the poetics and problems in this romanticization of the “traditional” or the “past” way of life (Craib 2004). Williams’ classic work *The Country and the City* (1973) discussed how such nostalgic visions are often put forward by the urban bourgeoisie, eager to critique the consequences of the urban social order. The social construction of the “traditional rural life” is often made by referring to so-called “traditional” agrarian social organizations and practices that are in fact quite modern outcomes of, rather than, precursors to capitalist transformations in the rural countrysides (Painter 1991). As will be shown below, it is often the well-educated, urban-based Thai professionals who are

quite nostalgic about the disappearing “traditional Isan life.” Moreover, lacking in reflexivity, they often talk of Isan people as their “opposite Other” and speak of Isan “traditional” rural practices to be the polar opposite of their “modern” urban society. This implies the discursive power of the urban educated elite over Isan rural villagers.

In contrast to the idealized imaginary, small-scale farming in Thailand’s countryside is tremendously hard work that pays a modest income and often puts farmers in debt. The romanticized depiction of Isan agrarian life in popular media conjures images of the contented peasant family, but not the harsh reality of marginal livelihoods in rural areas. With the increased commercialization of the village economy, new opportunities to participate in the local cash economy have emerged for peasant families, who may be in debt but no longer have to go hungry.

Having grown up in an urban (though small town) setting, I found the six months of my stay in a relatively modernized Isan village in 2006-2007 inconvenient. Although I had running water, electricity, and a motorcycle, I found choices of food, commodities, and basic office facilities very limited (for example no easy Internet access or quality fax/phocopying/printing services). This reaction might qualify me as a “materialist girl”; during my ethnographic field research, periodic trips to urban Udonthani relieved my food and commodity craving. At the end of my stay, I left twelve pounds short of my original weight. My point here is not to highlight my self-absorption, but to exemplify that the concept of necessity is both relative and relational and that we all live under the condition of modernity operated by global capitalism. It is clearly inaccurate to say that one vaguely-defined group alone is guilty of materialism.

“Immoral Materialism” Discourses in the Current Thai context

At this particular moment in Thai history, from the economic crisis in 1997 to the period preceding the latest military coup on September 19, 2006, up to the current on-going political unrest, nationalist discourses romanticizing rural life are gaining new strength. When the economic crisis in 1997 marked the abrupt and painful break from one-and-a-half decades of the Thai economic miracle, the notion that Thailand had gone down the wrong path and that global capitalism was a destructive external force became even more powerful. As foreign investors pulled out and the fallout from the sagging economy hit hard, His Majesty the King gave a speech pronouncing his invented “Sufficiency Economy” (*Settakit Porpiang*) philosophy. “Sufficiency Economy” has a rather broad and open definition, emphasizing self-sufficiency and a balanced and moderate approach to the economy, following the Buddhist “Middle Path” concept as opposed to a pro-growth economy. A guide for the national macro-economy as well as for daily life, the Sufficiency Economy sets a moral guide for Thais to live “a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom, and prudence,” living and spending according to one’s economic power (National Economic and Social Development Board 2008). The Sufficiency Economy’s broad definition, grounded on highly relational concepts, is problematic when translated into practice. Despite its inherent limitations, it was wholeheartedly adopted and promoted by the military-appointed government under General Surayud Chulanont after the coup in September 2006. The Sufficiency Economy philosophy is not only reactionary in the era of global capitalism, but also a response to the Thaksin government’s policies. The Sufficiency Economy presents the opposite approach to Thaksin’s rural policy and his village mega-projects that gained him strong

rural-based popularity (Glassman 2007). The nation-wide popularization of the Sufficiency Economy through various campaigns, especially in the post-Thaksin era, has strengthened the notion of “immoral materialism” with which Mia Farangs and their rural families/community are associated.

The Sufficiency Economy philosophy is a perfect fit for the revival of the nationalist politics in Thailand’s post-Thaksin era because it represents all the right nationalist elements—an anti-globalization tone, Buddhist morality, and reverence for the monarchy. During the rigorous Thai nationalism campaign in the 1930s and 1940s, the military regime accentuated the “Nation-Religion-King” emblem as the symbol of the Thai Nation, represented by each colour on the Thai flag. This nationalist construct has been continuously reproduced and institutionalized through education and rituals, as well as in popular media, over the period of on-again, off-again military rule during the 76-year history of Thai democracy. The concept remains powerful and thriving in the contemporary Thai national imagination. The King is a highly revered father figure in Thailand; the military overthrow of Thaksin’s administration in September 2006 was deemed rightful by some Thais due in significant part to the monarch’s endorsement of the coup and the portrayal of Thaksin as defying the King (Ungpakorn 2007). Highly nationalist politics have continued after Thaksin’s nominee, Samak Sundaravej, was elected into office in December 2007. Almost immediately, Thaksin’s opposition, the People Alliance for Democracy (PAD), resumed a large-scale protest. In the nationalistic discourses reproduced during this time “rampant immoral materialism” is directed at Thaksin’s supporters, mostly Isan rural voters, as well as Thaksin himself who is facing corruption charges.

Mia Farangs, Materialist Women, and the Degradation of Culture

The following excerpts from a Thai news article offer a perspective on transnational marriage trends among Thai women, particularly those from Isan Region. The article has been reproduced in online discussions and blogs since July 2007 and has generated much discussion. The article focuses on the notion of declining morality as a result of materialist values in young girls.

The Nongkhai²⁴ Education District Director reported that he was petrified hearing a kindergarten school girl saying “I want to be a Mia Farang when I grow up” following the belief that a foreign husband translates into a big house and wealth. The Director commented that the girl’s outlook demonstrates that people in the present prioritize the material before the mind. The Secretary of the Ministry of Culture remarked, upon the same incident, that young children have learned that Mia Farangs have a comfortable life. This (aspiration of young children to become Mia Farangs follows the example of grown ups) is a problem that all involved parties need to help solve (www.talkstory.com, accessed July 28, 2007).

Regarding the same news item, a researcher who conducted a study on transnational marriages in Thailand’s Northeastern provinces noted that the “problem” is not only limited to uneducated rural women but has now expanded to young college students who have fallen for materialism, consumerism, and the desire for quick economic gain.

²⁴ Nongkhai is a province in Thailand’s Northeast Region

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suppawanakorn Wongtanawas, a lecturer for the College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University, commented that in the present, teenagers cannot find opportunities to advance in their careers. Even those who have university degrees are unemployed or are earning incomes that do not cover their expenses. When asked about their views on transnational marriages, some of the (female) college/university students who already have Thai boyfriends said, “If I could turn back time, I would like to have a foreign boyfriend.” This is because the material changes are visible--the acquisition of houses, cars, and money. This signals that the attitudes of the people are now more attached to material gain and are driven by an urgent desire. They are less patient, not waiting and saving money but rather opting for the Mia Farang strategy (www.talkstory.com, accessed July 28, 2007).

Analyzing this article in the context of Thai cultural nationalism discourses, the purported influence of the Mia Farang trend which drives materialism in young girls and women in Isan region are of grave concern based on four assumptions. First, that Isan is a rural society where the authentic Thai peasant identity exists. Second, that women have the responsibility to represent and preserve the identity of the nation. Third, that women need to uphold the right values of preserving marriage and family for the traditions to endure and for the nation to reproduce. Fourth, that young women in particular, should not digress from tradition so that the Thai Nation as we understand it continues into the future. Morality is always in place for women to sacrifice for the collective group and young college students in the news article are deemed lacking the “Good Woman”

quality because they show signs of abandoning the concept of selfless wives (to Thai men) for personal material gain.

Mia Farangs, especially from poor rural backgrounds, tend to receive a disproportionate share of moral criticism and scorn from urban Thais. This moral criticism, which stems from the pervasive class bias and urban-rural divide in Thai society, easily leads to stigmatization. Kamonchanok Pawinpon, the owner of Kamonchanok Matchmaking Company, discusses her business in a news article on the transnational marriage trend among Thai women: “Most of the women who use our service are educated professional women so you don’t have to worry about poor uneducated women from the provinces who hope to fish for a foreign man (using our services).”²⁵ In this remark, Kamonchanok clearly disassociates herself and her business from lower-class rural women whom she describes as eager to use foreign men for upward economic mobility. The perception that uneducated rural women are shamelessly pursuing foreign men for a quick and easy path to wealth is widely shared among Thai people outside the women’s rural community. This perception has gained more momentum with the current national popularization of the Sufficiency Economy and the branding of rural materialism.

Demystifying the “Traditional Marriage and Family”

Insofar as marriage and family institutions carry the stakes of collective group reproduction, the Phua Farang phenomenon in rural Isan is concerned with two overlapping collective groups—that of the village and the nation. The role of Mia Farangs in reproducing the village was discussed in Chapter Three. I focus on Isan Mia Farangs and

²⁵ Daily News June 4, 2006.

the reproduction of the nation here. The following excerpt from a Thai newspaper article entitled “Phua Farang is Changing Isan Society – Wives Eating Husbands’ Western Food and Forgetting *Som Tam*”²⁶ represents a view that prioritizes the preservation of the national culture through rural values around marriage and family. In a morally alarmist tone, Dr. Suppawanakorn Wongtanawasu reported her research findings that the Phua Farang phenomenon brings negative changes to the Isan family, connoting that these changes negatively affect the Thai national tradition. She was quoted saying:

This research also finds that the Isan family institution has completely changed in regards to ideologies and practices around marriage and the choice of marital partners, especially in families with Khei Farangs (foreign in-laws). In the traditional Isan society, parents usually chose marital partners for their children. Marriages were arranged by parents, often without children’s input. But in the present, Isan social values around marriage have changed, giving less importance to love but focusing more on economic security. This is why some Thai (Isan) women decide to marry foreign husbands even if they have not met the men prior to their weddings. The Isan women think that if their foreign husbands have money, people in the community will consequentially accept them for that (Khom Chat Luek November 16, 2006).

The above paragraph, if taken at face value and read in isolation from the rest of the article, may seem innocuous. It may even seemingly support some of my own findings – choice of marriage patterns have changed, along with rural values, as Isan

²⁶ *Som Tam* is a typical Isan dish, which is similar to the Green Papaya Salad served at most Thai restaurants. The article was downloaded from the website of *Kom Chad Luek* national newspaper, July 26, 2008.

women become more astute in their marital choices. However, if the above paragraph is read in the context of the entire article's purpose and core message, it does sound like a harsh indictment of the increasingly permissive and corrupt Isan society. What came ahead of this paragraph are Dr. Suppawanakorn's research findings that the Khei Farang [phenomenon] is changing Isan society from that of collectivism to increasing individualism. The women married to farangs are not interested in, or excited about important Thai religious holidays as much as Christmas or Valentine's Days [that are] from the husband's culture. Regarding food and eating, Isan women prefer pizza or KFC, which signify their assimilation into Western culture. The average age of farang husbands is 50 years old and one-fourth of them are above 60 years old, retired men who live off their old age pension, and cared for by Thai wives in their old age. The women are only interested in whether or not the men have enough to provide them economic stability.

As puzzling as it sounds, the excerpt about the changing Isan marital practice earlier quoted contains complex layers of connecting and conflicting discourses around rural and national reproduction. The following is a close reading of the text, revealing hidden messages necessary for this text to make sense.²⁷

1. This research also finds that the Isan family institution has completely changed in regards to ideologies and practices around marriage and the choice of marital partners, especially in families with Khei Farangs (foreign in-laws). The rural reproduces the nation. Changes in rural values around marriage and family have

²⁷ The excerpt is a translation from the Thai language. The original Thai text sounds smoother and the between-the-lines messages are less obvious. I have inevitably done some of the interpretations in the translation process.

potential negative affects on the national tradition. Rural changes are caused by modernity. Verdict: Modernity is bad.

2. In the traditional Isan society, parents usually chose marital partners for their children. Marriages were arranged by parents, often without children’s input.

Women reproduce family. Parents know best and choose well for their children.

Children, especially daughters, sacrifice for parents. Marrying without love is a daughter’s dutiful sacrifice for the parents. Verdict: Marrying without love is good. This verdict however will be contradicted in the next passages.

3. But in the present, Isan social values around marriage have changed, giving less importance to love but focusing more on economic security. This is why some Thai (Isan) women decide to marry foreign husbands even if they have not met the men prior to their weddings. A good marriage is marriage for love. Marriage for money is greed. Greed is selfish and good women cannot be selfish. A loving marriage is associated with modernity. Modernity belongs to the urban middle-class. Rural women are less “good women” because they marry without love and therefore lack modernity. Rural women are bad because they do anything for money, even marrying a stranger without love. Verdict: Marrying without love but only for money is bad.

Modernity of urban middle-class is good (“progress” in the form of love marriage). Modernity of rural women is bad (“greed,” and marriage without love).

Modernity of urban middle-class is good (“progress” in the form of love marriage).

Modernity of rural women is bad (“greed,” and marriage without love).

4. Isan women think that if their foreign husbands have money, people in the community will consequentially accept them for that. Isan women are greedy,

marrying for money without love. Their agency is predatory and their intentions are

suspect. The Isan rural community is greedy; not only that, but it is now sanctioning the greedy people with money. Rural women and the rural community are greedy. This is dangerous for the nation because rural people will stop sacrificing to preserve the national tradition. Verdict: Morality has now been replaced by immoral monetized social relations.

While Dr. Suppawanakorn acknowledges that Isan “traditional” marriages were arranged by parents, she does not see the lack of “love” in those marriages as an indicator of immorality or greed with which she associated Phua Farang marriages today. Dr. Suppawanakorn’s argument ignores the fact that arranged marriages in the past were as much about economic consideration as the Phua Farang marriages are in the present. When livelihoods were mostly dependent on the land and daughters inherited it, who the daughters married and what the grooms had to contribute mattered to the parents; hence the rationale for higher bride-price for daughters of land rich families or the preference for industrious son-in-laws to work on the farm. Taking economic security into consideration when marrying is not new, but it takes different forms in different times and is practiced by rural farmers as well as the urban upper-class. In the news article, Dr. Suppawankorn continued with a comment about how surprised she was to learn that even the elderly—“the generation that is supposed to preserve the tradition from the past”—also approved of the Phua Farang trend in their community. Worrying that morality has disappeared from the village, Dr. Supawanakorn does not seem to realize that the rural people are doing the same thing they did in the past, but in new ways.

Although Dr. Supawanakorn’s empirical research findings are in fact similar to mine, her largely negative interpretation of the same phenomenon, framed within an

alarmist-moralist-nationalist tone, is diametrically opposed to my own analysis. The changes in courtship and marital practices in Isan villages, as I discussed in earlier chapters, are mainly about the weakening of parental authority over children's marriages and courtship when young men and women leave for work away from the village. Rural villagers have gradually accepted this change as a part of a bigger transformation of village life in which remittances constitute a significant part of rural families' livelihoods. Most of the time, young people use freedom from parental monitoring to marry or cohabit with another Thai out of "love." Parental sanction and encouragement for daughters' Phua Farang marriages in the present, if anything, is closer to the "traditional" Isan marriage that Dr. Supawanakorn set out to defend. Dr. Supawanakorn's criticism that Isan women marry foreign men "without love" is in fact to criticize Isan women for not being modern enough. A love marriage, as opposed to a traditional arranged marriage, is associated with modernity, but this modernity is somehow moral because it is approved and has been taken up by the urban-middle class to mark their progress. In the middle of criticizing modernity, Dr. Supawanakorn turned and used the lack of modernity to stigmatize rural Isan women and their community. This move exemplifies the manipulation of meanings by the powerful and the educated, often the urban elite in the Thai context. When associated with urban-upper class practices, modernity signifies progress, but when used against rural people modernity translates into greed and immorality. The perceived lack of modernity and progress in rural people, in turn, validates the power of the urban elite in leading and controlling the rural. A similar manipulation of discourses around "modernity" applies to current Thai politics in which Isan rural people are portrayed in PAD's nationalist-royalist discourses as being lured by

Thaksin's vote-buying strategy out of "ignorance"—lacking modernity and the understanding of democracy—and "greed"; that is, corrupted by too much modernity (See also Callahan 2005).

The above analysis is at the discursive level only. I realize that not all Isan marriages in the past were arranged and not all Mia Farangs marry without love. In fact, the notion that "love" and "practicality" do not co-exist in a marriage is a highly debatable one (Constable 2003). Based on what I saw in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, no woman in the villages marries a foreign man she meets for the first time on the wedding day.

Women and Rural Families as Victims of Violence and Deception

Another discourse around the Phua Farang phenomenon that has been widely circulated in Thai society is that of women as victims of violence. The murders of Thai women by foreign male dates or boyfriends have made the news (I have seen two cases since 2006). News about the tragedies of Thai women at the hands of foreign men is addressed as a warning message to the increasing number of Thai women who are "dreaming of having foreign boyfriends" for economic stability. A headline of the news article about the brutal murder of a Thai woman by a foreign man she met on the internet reads: "Like Foreign men? Beware! A Warning for Thai Women; Victim of Deadly Love!" (*Delinews* June 4, 2006). The article warns women about danger and unfortunate incidents concerning Thai women in Phua Farang marriages or relationships. Thanawadi Tajeen, the director of Friends of Women Foundation, warns: "Some women are forced to work as housemaids, physically abused, forced into unnatural sex, or sold into

prostitution.” Aiming to raise the awareness of Thai women during the intensifying Phua Farang trend, the “victim of violence” message, when read along the “immoral materialist” discourse, gets easily translated into “greedy yet ignorant women get into trouble because of their greed.”

The discourse around “ignorant victims” does not only apply to the women but also to rural families who desire Khei Farangs (foreign in-laws). The headline of a news report about mothers of women from Udonthani Province accusing a dating company of deception reads: “Seeking Khei Farangs, Mothers end up badly deceived” (*Khao Sod* November 25, 2006). According to the news article, a group of about 10 mothers from a village in Udonthani province reported that they hired an agent from Khonkaen Province who promised to help them find Khei Farangs through the Internet. The mothers paid 5,000 baht each to register their daughters with the company and a separate lump sum of 50,000 baht as a group processing fee. The company got back to the mothers regularly during the first three months, sending photos and messages of foreign men who were interested in their daughters, for which the company charged 2,000 baht each time for translation. However, after a year, none of the daughters had secured a marriage with a foreign man and the mothers felt deceived by the company, bringing the case to the police. While this story is a warning example to rural families and women who pay high fees for transnational marriage services, it also sends a moral message to a wider audience that greedy materialist rural people who hope for a shortcut to wealth are destined to suffer from their ignorance and greed.

Discourses and Policy

While discourses are not true or false and all discourses are partial, they generate a “truth” effects and shape materiality. Against the discourses of Mia Farang as both materialist rural women and ignorant victims, recent policy and actions initiated at the national level have taken shape. In July 2008, the head of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSO), Mr. Pallop Ploytabtim, expressed his concern about the link between the Phua Farang phenomenon in the Isan Region and trafficking in women. Noting that a higher number of women in Isan provinces who are in Phua Farang relationships are not in legal marriages, Mr. Pallop asserted that these women are prone to becoming victims of human trafficking. He also pointed out that some women are drawn into human trafficking by foreign men who use marriage as a front to bring women into prostitution in European countries. In other words, Isan women in Phua Farang relationships are vulnerable to human trafficking regardless of their marital status, according Mr. Pallop’s statement. Mr. Nakorn Imboriboon, Udonthani MSO officer, raised the example of twenty women in a village in Udonthani Province who were lured by an agency into paying for unsuccessful Phua Farang arrangements as a case of failed human trafficking (the same village as the one above). As a measure to crack down on human trafficking, and in addition to the Human Trafficking Act 2008, the MSO has proceeded to raise public awareness of the issue. One of the efforts was a conference event, “Khei Farang, the Path to Paradise or Misery,” at Rajphat Udonthani University on July 25, 2008. The event emphasized raising awareness and teaching morality. The day’s schedule consisted of discussions led by Mr. Nakorn Imborinboon, Udonthani MSO officer, Assoc Prof. Dr. Supawanakorn Wongtanawasuwat of Khonkaen University,

Ms. Prakaikaew Ratananaka, the wife of the former Udonthani governor and the Chair of the Women's Society for Community Development, and Dr. Kritika Saenpote, Consultant to the Dean of Rajphat Udonthani University. The discussions were accompanied by the screening of the film *Sawanbiang (The Twisted Paradise)* and a Buddhist teaching entitled "Is This Really Love" by a Buddhist monk, Phrakhru Winaitorachat.

In the context of my study, there are two problems with MSO's initiative. First, MSO's rationale for linking the Phua Farang phenomenon to human trafficking is weak. The high number of women not in legal marriages with foreign men does not determine their status of victims of human trafficking. In fact, the actual number of legal marriages is higher than the number cited by MSO which only reflects couples who entered their marriage registrations with the Thai authority and those who voluntarily reported their marriages overseas to the Thai officials. Some Thai women do not enter a legal marriage with foreign men by choice or do not report their marriages with foreign nationals overseas because of the understanding that Thai women will lose their rights in buying property in Thailand if married to foreigners. Some women are indeed in the position of girlfriends/former prostitutes or mistresses of foreign men, who travel back and forth between Thailand and their countries, but this does not mean the women are victims of human trafficking, especially if they remain in Thailand while their foreign partners travel. Many women still have not come to terms with the long term prospect of their transnational relationships and this does not have a direct correlation with human trafficking. Again, being overcharged by a matchmaking company without getting the desired result does not indicate that the women almost fell into human traffickers' hands.

While it is true that women are not equally successful in their relationships with foreign men and some women do find themselves in difficult situations, the extremely traumatic cases are rarely reported.

The fact that some Mia Farangs are unhappy with their foreign relationship partners suggests the limits to the “spatial hypergamy” thesis of Constable (2005), explained in Chapter Three. The causes of unhappiness among some women may include Farangs who are “too old,” “too poor,” or “stingy with their money.” But even in the face of constraints and limited choices, the unhappy Mia Farangs still have room to exercise their agency by ending their relationship with farangs who do not fulfill their expectations. The unhappy ones do not easily give up searching for a more suitable foreign partner for a marriage, even if this means moving from one Phua Farang relationship to another. As argued in chapter three, women deciding to engage in a Phua Farang relationships usually know the risks, and the money they put into it is seen as an investment. A Mia Farang from Ban Karawek who remains in Thailand after meeting her French partner explained how Isan local/transnational networks help women find Phua Farangs. Her statement shows that villagers are aware of the mixed results of a Phua Farang quest.

Isan people help each other find jobs such as taxi driving (in Bangkok) to support our families. Women who have already married a foreigner and lived abroad, like in Europe, arrange for other women from home to go and introduce them to foreign men. The women go to Europe, staying with the men there for..., like

three months, *Pai Tiaw*.²⁸ Sometimes, the women come back and the foreign men don't agree to marry them. In some other cases, the men do agree to marry the women. If the foreign men agree to marry, they will arrange for a marriage.

(Interview with Noon: November 2006)

The second problem with MSO's approach to the Phua Farang phenomenon is that of discursive power. The "victim of human trafficking" discourse adopted by MSO represents the discursive power of the elite in portraying rural women as unaware victims who need to be saved by the savvy and more moral people; i.e. highly educated upper-class women and local and national officials. The ethical question around the condescending objectification of the "oppressed women" in feminist discourse has been raised since Chandra Mohanty's (1986) highly influential essay "Under Western Eyes." In this essay, Mohanty criticized "discursive colonization" in First World feminist scholarship in constructing Third World women as a homogeneous group of victims of oppression, who need to be rescued by "liberated" First World feminists. MSO's top-down effort in awareness-raising through didactic methods directed at rural women appears patronizing. It is based on the social class hierarchy and rural/urban divide in which the urban upper-class set moral standards for rural people and told them what is good for them. This approach perpetuates the stigmatization of rural women (and their families) as ignorant and morally inferior. MSO's approach to the Phua Farang phenomenon raised a central question in feminist debate—that of "gender as the primary category of analysis" given differences and power relations among women and the constitution of gender along other axes of power such as class and race (ethnicity in the

²⁸ Traveling/Going away for pleasure. Before the big wave of rural-urban migration, Pai-Tiaw was commonly related to men's activities, going to new places for experience.

Thai context). Without incorporating women's views, the awareness-raising effort of the MSO is likely to be ineffective in addressing women's needs.

On transnational marriages in other contexts, Constable (2003), Suzuki (2005), and Schien (2005) argue that victimization discourses miss the point by ignoring women's agency and volition. Along this line, I argue that the victimization discourse adopted in the Thai context by the locally privileged is a mechanism that curbs "too much aspiration" and "misguided agency" on the part of rural women in the increasing Phua Farang trend. The didactic awareness raising and anti-trafficking effort, such as the MSO's event in Udonthani, is missing an important point. By focusing on danger and oppression from the outside (foreign men, transnational human traffickers) this event erased the issue of internal social hierarchy and the local structural limitations that working-class rural women try to transcend through the Phua Farang strategy.

Discourses and Women's Experience

The conflicting rural and national discourses around the Phua Farang phenomenon signify divergent interests between the village and the nation, which, in turn, shape the experience of Isan Mia Farangs. The stigmatization of Mia Farangs outside the village community is disempowering for the women themselves. It shows that the "good daughter" identity that gains women community acceptance does little to raise their morality status outside their own rural community. Noon, a 33-year-old single mother from Ban Karawek, who met her French partner while working in the bar in Phuket, commented on perceptions of Mia Farangs and how she feels about them.

Some people think it's a good thing. With a farang boyfriend you can help the family and help your parents out. But people in the Thai society are different. Some people see us with farangs and (only) think that we sell our bodies and that we are prostitutes (*Phuying Khai Dua*). In a way I am ashamed of it but in another way I'm not. I'm not ashamed of working (in the bar) because I have a family to take care of. If I don't work, nobody will take care of my family. But I'm ashamed when people look at me walking with a farang and I am ashamed of being seen (as a mia farang).

Noon feels ashamed of her identity as “the shrewd woman who uses her sexuality to fish for a farang for financial gain,” the only dimension strangers often see in her in an urban setting. While face-to-face relations in the close-knit and kin-based rural community create the space where Mia Farangs are able to contest their “negative” portrayals (sexualized women who marry the racial and religious Others) with more “positive” ones (good daughters, generous community members, and achievers), this is not possible outside the community. Beyond the community, class bias is dominant and rural Mia Farangs have little power in presenting their version of the story and their multiple identities.

Further Discussion

By identifying conflicts between the urban and rural discourses around the Phua Farang phenomenon, I do not intend to portray either the urban or rural community as homogeneous. There are urbanites, both males and females, who look at rural women's Phua Farang choice as an individual's right to serve her own best interest and there are

academic works by Thai scholars who study the Phua Farang phenomenon in terms other than those of human trafficking and moralist discourses. For example, Buaphan Phrompakping (2006) compares Western-Thai and Asian-Thai transnational marriages, and Ratana Boonmathya (2006) sees transnational marriages as a space for rural Isan women to renegotiate conventional Thai norms and practices of gender roles and relations, marriage and sexuality. At the rural end, the acceptance of Mia Farangs is by no means complete. Although the Phua Farang phenomenon has been generally accepted in the village, comments such as “She dresses like a Mia Farang” are used to describe a woman who is dressed in form-fitting, more revealing clothes. To some degree, Mia Farangs are still conflated with bargirls and a stereotypical bold, loud, and over-sexualized style. While hypergamy is not a major moral concern for the villagers, polygamy is. There is circulating gossip and rumors about Mia Farangs who take up lovers or juggle between more than one farang at the same time.

Using the master’s tool to destroy the master’s house, Mia Farangs’ economic mobility perpetuates rather than hinders the system in which global capitalism dominates. While addressing rural-urban inequality, by inflating village economy the practice has also created new inequality where land prices, in particular, are much higher. At present, the going price for land in areas surrounding Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon is almost twice as much as its official assessed value. For business corporations, everything from real-estate, private hospitals, home hardware stores, and transnational supermarket chains, to car dealers, Mia Farangs, and their families are important commercial players. Some businesses are aggressively tracking down Mia Farangs and their families, seeking

their information from provincial and district registrars (I myself got a phone call from a business representative asking for the Mia Farang information I had).

Then again, when we are all affected by modernity, the stigmatization of Mia Farangs, grounded in class and rural-urban divides within Thai society, widens rather than bridges the existing distance between the nation and the village. This trend further encourages Isan regionalism (Suthep 2005, Keyes 1966), which has now scale-jumped to the transnational space through Mia Farangs and Khei Farangs as well as other Isan transnational migrants. As a nation within a nation, the village collectivity benefits from its women, not so much as wives but as daughters, who nurture and further reproduce the village under the market economy. The daughter responsibilities expected of Isan Mia Farangs have mixed effects on women's experiences, both empowering and restraining them.

This chapter has explored the broader significance and impacts of the Mia-Phua Farang in terms of the public discourses it has generated. As the Phua Farang trend continues to grow, the question remains: how well will the old "moral economy" work at distributing the new gain within the village community? At the moment it seems to be working, with Mia Farangs distributing their newfound resources towards their families and their community, helping to find Phua Farangs for other village women, bringing relatives abroad for work or study, and sponsoring their own children's and other relatives' educations. What will happen to Isan men when more villagers welcome Khei Farangs and are eager to incorporate foreign in-laws into the families and the community? Isan men have lost their ability to rely solely on their physical strength needed in farming to produce for their families. No longer competitive as Khei Farangs

in the modernizing Isan village, they have also lost the entitlement to “power” they once had in the old agrarian family. Answering these questions requires time, as change continues and people constantly try to make sense of their lives and the society they live in.

Chapter 6

Conclusion:

And Who Says Marriage is About Two People?

Most people curious about transnational marriages are interested in finding more details about the “how” and “why” of relationships between “First World men” and “Third World women,” asking who gains what in these marital arrangements. Within the scope of this thesis, I have touched little on the intimate and complex relationships between Phua Farangs and their Isan wives/girlfriends which, as argued in earlier Chapters, are quite diverse and because of this diversity, defy generalization. Rather, this dissertation has tried to demonstrate that marriage is not only about the two people and that much more is at stake in the Phua Farang transnational marriage phenomenon in Thailand’s Isan region.

As a study of a transnational phenomenon, this research is located in Thailand and focuses on “Thai issues.” The social context in Thailand —regional economic disparity, rapid urbanization, class and ethnic relations, as well as local gender and family relations—shapes the formation of the Thai diaspora and the experiences of Thai migrants overseas. In addition, life in Thailand is increasingly shaped by greater contact between Thai citizens and foreign tourists, expatriates, and sojourners. Furthermore, Thai national policies, such as state promotion of the tourism industry, have shaped the direction of transnational flows and contacts.

This dissertation has offered an explanation of the emergence of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand’s Isan region, using an inter-scale analysis that emphasizes the inter-connections between the individual, family, community, nation-state and the global.

Exploring both macro and micro scales, I highlight the mutually constitutive spheres of social structures and human agency, in which structural power from above shape, and in turn are shaped by, challenging forces from below – from ordinary people. As evident in dominant Thai nationalist and urban discourses critical of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Isan, resistance from below that aims to challenge the status quo is not easily accomplished and struggles among groups to (re)define truth and morality are constantly evolving.

In the following, I revisit the central arguments in my analysis of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Isan region. First, I emphasize the importance of the agency, particularly in the form of everyday resistance (Scott 1985), of ordinary people who “subtly” challenge their disadvantaged social positioning through inter-scale dynamics, for example, scale-jumping from the village to the global, and back. Then, I revisit the potential and shortfalls of collective action and identity-based politics with regards to the resistance and globalization debate.

Mia Farang Phenomenon: Everyday Resistance from Below

Since the intensive integration of Isan villages into the national and global economy in the 1960s, Isan farmers were squeezed by the market and state-led development that favoured the rich. The condition led scholars in the 1970s to predict major uprisings that would change Thailand's political economic structure (Turton 1978). This prediction was not realized as social uprisings did not lead to structural changes and the Communist Party of Thailand, based in the Isan region, was eventually eradicated by the state's military apparatus. Soon after, Thailand entered its decade of economic

“boom.” Rather than mobilizing large-scale social movements, children of land-poor peasants left the village in droves for employment in urban industries, construction, and service sectors. The emergence of a market economy, modernization, and development have fundamentally transformed agrarian life and most people in the rural countryside have embraced state-led development and the comfort that modernity offers, such as convenient transportation, street lights, electricity, and the electrical appliances which signify a “good life.” Politicians and local leaders who bring in development (*Kwam Charoen*) are eagerly supported by villagers. In a sense, the rush of modernity and the market economy into the countryside from the 1960s to the 1970s, and the phenomenal economic growth of the 1980s, gave even those at the bottom socio-economic strata a sense of progress (Ockey 1999). Their general satisfaction with developmentalist regimes successfully prevented fundamental changes in the Thai political structure. Regional inequality continued however and the income gap has widened during and after the economic boom from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Grassroots movements do exist and continue to represent the voices of the marginalized, such as groups of farmers and local villagers affected by state-initiated dam building and other infrastructure projects. From my analysis of the Phua Farang phenomenon, I argue that resistance does not always come in the obvious form of collective action or social movements demanding fundamental changes. Marginalized people in their everyday lives constantly negotiate their position within unequal power relations through more subtle means that more typically go along with, rather than openly challenge, systems of domination. As Dirks et al. put it:

There is the sense that everyday life and culture, in which people implicitly “conform to” or “accept” their situation, should not always be contrasted with dramatic “social movements,” in which people question and challenge the status quo. Instead, while organized social movements remain enormously important in understanding large-scale transformations, much can be learned by attending to “everyday forms of resistance” as well (Dirks et al. 1994: 5).

Throughout this thesis, I urge that everyday resistance and agency should be recognized rather than branded, at times by experts and academics, as the internalization of one’s own oppression, ignorance, or false consciousness. The exercise of agency by Mia Farangs through everyday resistance in the form of strategic choices and decisions out of their limited resources is neither evidence of internalized oppression nor demonstration of false consciousness. Feminist writings on women’s agency (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1990, Constable 1997) argue that women are not simply oppressed by institutionalized power, I too understand women’s struggle to both contest and create their own social realities out of what is available to them.

Unlike the then anticipated Thai social revolution amidst the rising communist insurgency and the Cold War, no one predicted the Phua Farang phenomenon in rural Isan back in the 1970s; nevertheless, this classed and gendered social phenomenon has emerged as rural Isan women and their families continue to challenge their constrained situation within the new order of market economy. Rather than protesting global capitalism, rural Isan’s Mia Farangs exercise their limited agency to maximize their opportunities within their immediate social context by engaging in marriages and intimate relationships with foreign men. Given that a large share of the massive revenue

generated by the Thai tourism industry goes to transnational corporations such as hotel chains and airlines, leaving the locals, especially the working class poor, with meager wage proportions (Truong 1990), the Phua Farang phenomenon channels a significant share of benefits of the Thai tourism benefit directly into Isan villages. The material gain of the Phua Farang phenomenon is evident in rural villages such as Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, where the village economy is growing significantly due in large part to the transnational marriage phenomenon.

The Phua Farang phenomenon is perhaps not the most desirable vehicle for class mobility or equality for Thai women; I am aware that women are not always successful in gaining social and economic mobility through this strategy. Even when some of the women do become successful, they still face other constraints and “negative” outcomes, such as social stigmatization outside the village community, tensions arising from differences in understanding of financial and familial obligation between their natal families and foreign husbands, and the pressure to meet community and familial expectations. Still, I argue for the recognition of women’s dignity and agency and I urge for policies oriented towards a more realistic approach to addressing women’s problems within and outside their marriages rather than policies that are vague, alienating, and morally condescending.

Phua Farang Phenomenon and Isan Agrarian Transformation: Changes and Continuities

In the course of the rapid shift towards the market economy, Isan agrarian life has fundamentally changed. Yet much is resistant to change and in most aspects of the

“modernized village life,” the old and the new ways are closely intertwined. The growth of both the market economy and capitalism, although prevalent, has not completely eradicated Isan’s agrarian social fabric. At the village level, community members, including Mia Farangs and their families, continue to use the language of familial and moral commitments towards kin and community to validate the Phua Farang phenomenon in the community. In so doing, they perpetuate rather than disrupt Isan agrarian expectations of daughters to nurture parents and natal families, including the community and religious institutions. The difference is that much of the care work and nurturing is now done through daughters’ material and financial contributions. Agrarian resource pooling among kin and village community members contributes to the practice of information sharing and the formation of translocal/ transnational networking for migration and work opportunities outside the village, including the search for Phua Farangs. At the same time, village money lenders and transnational marriage facilitators emerged out of the demand and new desire for cash, investment, entrepreneurship, and Phua Farangs.²⁹

Village collectivity and regionalist sentiments have remained important for Isan people at home and in migration because Isan people still rely on group support in light of their relative marginalization both in Thailand and overseas. Later in this chapter, I demonstrate that another collectivity or form of collective consciousness -- that of the Thai national identity -- is more problematic for Thai citizens. Thai national identity unites as much as it divides members and social classes within the Thai nation. Thais’ identification with the Thai nation has been put to the test with the history of insurgencies

²⁹ For a parallel study on the emergent role of village money lender in a Sri Lankan context, see Gamburd (2000).

(i.e. communist, Muslim separatist) and the current political divide between those who support former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and those who oppose him.

Phua Farang Phenomenon and the Politics of Scale

The Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Isan region shapes and is shaped by inter-scale dynamics between the village, the nation, and the global. Hence, studying this phenomenon requires thinking outside the naturalization of the nation-state and paying attention to activities on other scales. As Mahon (2006), Marston (2000), Marston & Smith (2001), and Nagar et al. (2000) have written, the rethinking of scales allows for the visibility of gender, family, and reproduction that are embedded in localized global relations today. The rural village in Isan, the most economically repressed Thai region, has reached out to the global through cross-border marriages/relationships of rural Isan daughters who, following local gender and familial practices, remain an important part of their natal families even after marriage. Extending into the global through their mobile and transnationally-married daughters and newly incorporated foreign son-in-laws, the rural Isan village community scale-jumps in order to circumvent their marginalization at the nation-state level.

As discussed in Chapter Five, the politics of scale also plays out discursively as the same actions are perceived differently at different geographical scales. While the Phua Farang phenomenon is generally accepted within the Isan rural village community, it is tainted with moral criticisms based on gender and class prejudices operating outside the village community – in the urban context and at the provincial and national levels. Moral criticisms of the Phua Farang phenomenon are the product of the imagined

national collectivity, which although important for political mobilization against external threats is internally exclusive.

The Phua Farang Phenomenon and the Problem of Nation and Identity

Critics of globalization depict global capitalism as the source of oppression for the Third World poor, especially women (see for example Vandana Shiva 2005, Naomi Klein 2000). Traditionalist and nationalist groups also use anti-globalization sentiments to strengthen their position, which is not necessarily more beneficial to women and those from the lower social strata. The branding of the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thai nationalist discourses as a case of moral and cultural degradation epitomizes complex relations of power in which Thai rural women face multiple forms of oppressions, besides those wrought by global capitalism. An identity-based politics, constructed out of Bangkok-based urban elite domination, Thai national identity unites people for social, political and even military mobilization against external threats (e.g. border conflicts with Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, influx of Burmese illegal immigrants, and southern Muslim militants), but does so at the expense of some groups within the Thai nation. Religious and ethnic minorities are excluded from this mobilization process, while women and the rural population are endowed with the heavier responsibility to live the idealized Thai culture. As the bearers of the “Thai way of life,” the rural population and women are disciplined by the ruling urban elites that work to perpetuate the status quo, mechanisms described in Chapter Five.

Thailand's Globalization Question: The Reflexive "Middle Path"

In response to the globalization question and the current debate on alternative political economic approaches in Thailand, I argue for a Thai Buddhist concept, not that of the "Middle Path," but that of "reflexivity." We are already, and always, in the "Middle Path"; the economic approaches governments take (and are forced to take) out of necessity lie between liberalism and regulation (Glassman 2008a). Therefore it is only repetitive and stating the obvious to argue for moderation. What should matter more to local and national governments is the need to rethink their measures, plans and projects, and their material results on the ground, not the brand and ideology of political economic approaches and moral values attached to these particulars. By rejecting a complete closedown on the global market (which, in itself, is not a viable choice), the new discourse on "Sufficiency Economy" shows signs of favoring a two-tier economy for urban industrialization and rural peasantry among some of its proponents, while the seeming moral tone does not clearly address how to resolve the inequality this approach has caused. More importantly, one needs to be aware of the problematic nature of the "Middle Path" and be able to discern who is benefiting at whose cost from a specific approach or action. Along with this, I argue for the reflexivity of one's own complicity in the intricate webs of power and the ability to put oneself in another's shoes in order to develop respect, tolerance, and compassion for others. For "Sufficiency Economy" to work at the local, regional and national levels, there need to be concrete measures or a system beyond moral idealization that ensure equal distribution of resources, wealth, power and public welfare.

Greed and Sufficiency

The 2007 Community Development Plans of Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon, made in collaboration with villagers and local development officials, list the encroachment of Foreign Culture (*Wattanatham Tangchat*) and villagers' lack of understanding of "Sufficiency Economy" as problems that need to be solved. Putting aside the dominating voice of officials in these documents, I am not at all surprised that villagers do not understand the tenets of "Sufficiency Economy." Since the time of the Cold War, Isan villagers have been lavished with state-led developments to dissuade them from Communism; villagers have thus embraced development, modernity, market economy and consumption as markers of improvement. All of a sudden, they are told by the State and the Monarchy to be moderate and prudent. Apart from rural villagers, many others, including officials who promote it, have some problems understanding the "Sufficiency Economy." Nevertheless, they feel the need to take it up in order to appear on the right side of the "greed" vs. "sufficiency" split. For example, a local official director ordered that large, old trees behind his office be cut down to prepare for a vegetable garden which would be called "Sufficiency Economy Garden." The ability to appear in line with the "right" and "moral" doctrine is more important than tree preservation in a cultural context in which hierarchy and public appearance form part of the norm that operates in society.

Public Appearance and Formal Language

Penny Van Esterik (2000) notes the importance of the concept *Kalatesa* (the intersection of time and space) in Thai culture, wherein one's ability to behave properly

according to time and spatial context is valued. This ability is crucial in a society where hierarchy organizes social interactions. In the everyday reception of the “Sufficiency Economy,” as in many other everyday interactions in Thailand, people say and do things differently at different times and in different places. Most people reiterate and preach Sufficiency Economy, at least in public, whether or not they believe in it or practice it in their personal lives. As a Thai who has been distant from Thailand and spent a significant amount of time in my adulthood in North America, I have come to see Thai society in a different light. Adopting the “outsider within” perspective towards Thai society, I realized that Thais across social classes learn to carefully navigate socio-political hierarchies and well-entrenched patronage systems for their own benefit. Because we are socialized to be proper and deferential, we learn to follow our teachers and bosses whether or not we fundamentally believe in them. And because openly questioning the order is not the way things work, we learn to speak the formal language, to give the “right” answer and to take up the proper gesture in a public setting, even while things could be different behind closed doors. I, for one, learned as a child growing up in Thailand in the 1980s to recite the Children’s Day’s motto given by the Prime Minister; it went “Love the Nation, Religion, and King; Behave in Honesty and Morality.” As a third grader, I vaguely knew that it meant something “great,” but more importantly, I knew that I would be rewarded for reciting it “right” in the Children’s Day competition.

The same can be said about the handling of the Phua Farang phenomenon. Higher-level officials and some academics are worried about human trafficking and the corruption of the morality of rural villagers by Western consumerism. On the contrary, local officials at the district and village levels I know in person are adamant in their views

that women are not duped into human trafficking. They consider Phua Farang relationships to be a desirable choice and possibility. In fact, some of the local officials, who are themselves children of the villagers or have known villagers well enough to think like them, are somewhat irritated by external elites who come to them with the assumption that women are lured into abusive Phua Farang relationships. On the part of higher-level officials, I cannot say on their behalf whether or not they really believe that women are unknowingly duped into human trafficking and that everybody should live prudently and self-sufficiently. These officials may simply be reiterating received morality. In any case, their actions contribute to the reproduction of the moral discourse around gender, family, and national identity.

Limitations of Research and Suggestions for Future Research

As with any knowledge, the understanding of the Phua Farang phenomenon offered in this dissertation is partial. Because research findings are product of how and by whom research is undertaken, this dissertation has its own limitations embedded in its methodology and my own mediation in research process. In the following, I delineate limitations of this dissertation and suggest possible future research that could further expand understandings of the Phua Farang relationships between Thai women and foreign men.

My time limitation in the field combined with the relatively recent growth of the Phua Farang phenomenon in the villages leave some of my original research questions unanswered. My six-month field research in the villages only allows a glimpse of local social transformations caused by the growing Phua Farang phenomenon. Profound

ethnographical analyses of shifting village social stratifications, gender relations, and familial/marital arrangements are still needed. I am particularly interested in whether new substantial economic gain from the Phua Farang phenomenon improves or worsens economic inequality at the village level. While I have demonstrated that the Phua Farang phenomenon is perceived by local villagers as a viable and desirable path to upward social mobility, future research is necessary to assess how effective the old agrarian moral economy works in assuring resource redistribution in the more complex Isan rural society.

My other original research question that is left unanswered is that of the long-term prospect of Mia Farangs and how successful the women are in strategizing to turn transnational marriages to their own advantage. Six month time is not long enough to monitor and evaluate women's long-term prospects. Most of Mia Farangs in Ban Karawek and Ban Sri Udon were in relatively new relationships with foreign men at the time of study. Moreover, women's "success" is difficult to assess when research is set in the villages where success stories are loudly and widely pronounced, but tales of hardships and difficulties are mostly silenced. Defending their own choice against existing local and external moral judgments, Mia Farangs struggle to appear successful in the space of the village. Therefore, they hardly share difficult experiences with people back home, including people within their own circle of their friends, kin and social networks. Contrary to my "insider" perspective from the village, outside researchers have more advantage to access these stories of hardships compared to their fellow villagers, although they might encounter more limitations in other aspects of research. Follow up research in the Isan villages and future research on Mia Farangs in other settings, such as

their marital home overseas or their continuing gravitation around tourist space in Thailand will expand understandings of Mia Farangs' lives.

Other than the methodological limitations mentioned above, my limited knowledge of Mia Farangs' lives also derives from ethical considerations. Although the women I studied generously share their live and personal experiences with me, I realize that there are deeper complexities and stories that are left untold. Depending on the context of the interviews and my relationship with each woman, selective stories were told. I do not lament my failure to solicit and access the deepest thoughts and feelings of the Mia Farangs I interviewed; rather I am most appreciative and respectful for the women's decision of what they want to let me know and what they do not. After all, I am also selective about what I want others to know about my personal life and my own intimate relationship. I shy away from pressing questions on the women's sexuality, whether or not they take up lovers, and whether or not they are attracted to their foreign boyfriends who in some cases are old enough to be their father. I understand that these are the intimate details that some people are probably most curious about in Mia Thai-Phua Farang relationships. But I left up to the Mia Farangs themselves to disclose, or not, these personal matters.

Focusing on Isan Mia Farangs and their families in the context of transforming rural Isan villages, the voices of foreign and local men are under-represented in this thesis. I incorporated foreign husbands in my field study but did not adequately represent them in this dissertation due to time constraint in the writing process. Foreign men's perspectives on their relationships with their Isan wives/girlfriends, their Isan in-laws, and the expat communities in the villages and beyond are fascinating to explore. I hope

to closely analyze Khei Farangs' perspectives from my existing data and present them in the future. Thai men are indeed under-studied in this research, mainly due to my status in the field as a relatively young unmarried woman who was new to the community and living with a prominent local family. Under the circumstance, I was confined within Thai cultural expectations of "the proper place" for young unmarried women, defined in the field by my host's supervision as well as my own understanding of Thai conducts around the proper interactions between males and females. As a result, I was quite removed from local men's spaces and I was not able to fully observe village men or build relationships with them. More systematic research on local Isan men and how their masculinities are implicated in the Phua Farang phenomenon stands out as an important subject for future research.

Finally, the increasing number of second generation children who are raised by cross-cultural parents and grow up in Isan village or as part of the Thai diaspora overseas constitute a compelling topic for future research. Both the biological children of transnational couples and the step children in the household (the majority of Mia Farangs already have children from previous marriages) embody and intimately experience transnationalism, racial, and cultural hybridity.

Postscript: Beyond Narrow Understandings of the Phua Farang

Phenomenon

In this dissertation I have argued that the Phua Farang phenomenon in Thailand's Isan region is implicated in complex relations that organize the personal and informal spheres of the family and community as well as the nation and the global. As the title of

this chapter suggests, Phua Farang marriages are not about only two people coming together for a life of intimacy, romance and parenthood. They are also about the imaginations of new possible lives and the production of new desires and identities. This line of analysis thus rejects simplistic depictions of Mia Farangs as “innocent and ignorant victims,” Phua Farangs as “sexual predators,” and their relationships as “marriages of convenience.”

As this and the previous chapters demonstrate, the material, ideological, personal forces and the political economy driving this phenomenon are much more complex than what the above rigid representations allow. Surely, there must have been well-documented cases of Thai women victimized by preying farangs, as shown in the newspaper reports documented in the introductory Chapter. And I do not deny that these cases have occurred and would not ever occur in the future. Amidst popular understandings of Isan women’s global hypergamy practice, what this thesis argues for is a more nuanced and complicated analysis of the Phua Farang phenomenon in light of (1) the continuities and changes in the on-going agrarian transformation in Isan region; (2) the possibilities for scale-jumping from the village to the global to circumvent constraints occurring at the nation-state level, made possible by opportunities opened up by the tourism industry and advance communication technologies; (3) the increased social acceptability of the phenomenon at the village level, given the new material and non-material rewards accorded to women, their families and communities; and most importantly (4) the strategic exercise of agency by women and their families who combine their limited resources with available opportunities to expand their choices in life.

My plea for a more nuanced analysis comes with an urging to incorporate more reflexive and inclusive acknowledgement that will give way to tolerance, if not respect, to Mia Farangs, their families, and rural community. The media, as well as academic scholarship and government research and policy, cognizant of this reflexive acknowledgement and tolerance, will have to consider alternative depictions and lines of inquiry into the Phua Farang phenomenon. For starters, the patronizing, condescending and moralistic undertones of current media representations of Mia Farangs will have to give way to a more sympathetic understanding and examination of their lived experiences, available resources, visions, and aspiration. Moreover, the Phua Farang phenomenon in Isan signals the need to reconsider Thailand's regional income gap and persistent inequalities and hierarchical power relations between the urban and the rural.

As suggested in the dissertation, the Phua Farang phenomenon offers an interesting vantage point with which to analyze the on-going economic and political restructuring and the cracks in the socio-cultural orders in Thailand. The women, foreign men, communities and villagers implicated in this phenomenon are creating this unique vantage point for this and other related research to come.

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The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services and Administration
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Angeles, L.	DEPARTMENT Women's Studies & Gender Rel	NUMBER B06-0771
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT UBC Campus ,		
CO-INVESTIGATORS: Sunanta, Sirijit,		
SPONSORING AGENCIES		
TITLE: Public Discourses on the Mai Thai (Thai Wife) and Ph'ua Far'ang (Foreign Husband): Gender, Transnational Marriages, and the Transformation of Rural Life in Northeastern Thailand		
APPROVAL DATE DEC 19 2006	TERM (YEARS) 1	DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL: Sept. 1, 2006, Consent form / Questionnaires
CERTIFICATION: The application for ethical review of the above-named project has been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects. <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Approved on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:</i> Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair, Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair Dr. Arminee Kazanjian, Associate Chair Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Associate Chair</p> This Certificate-of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures		