Informal Northern Thai Group Bulletin
10 February 2019

1. LAST MEETING (442nd): Tuesday, 29 January 2019: “Not just about money! Thai-Farang marriages and intimate relationships”. A talk by Patcharin Lapanun (พัชรินทร์ ลาภานันท์).


3. March MEETING (444th): Tuesday, 12 March 2019, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai “Cross National and Cross Cultural Education at Payap University”. A talk by Tony Waters.

4. FUTURE MEETINGS.

5. INTG CONTACTS: CONVENOR - SECRETARY - WEBSITE.

1. LAST MEETING (442nd)
Tuesday, 29 January 2018, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai
“Not Just About Money: Thai-Farang Marriages and Intimate Relationships”
A talk by Patcharin Lapanun (พัชรินทร์ ลาภานันท์)


1.2. The Talk:

Transnational marriages of village women in Isan (the Northeastern region of Thailand) are a growing and striking phenomenon. The talk today is based on fieldwork in an Isan village called “Na Dokmai” and in Pattaya beach resort, a contact zone where women met and made connection with their husband to be. In addition, I kept contact with two Thai-Dutch couples in the Netherlands while I was there during 2007-2012.
In searching for insights in these marriages beyond the commonly held normative view, based on a perspective highlighting financial motivations, I reveal historical diversity and the current complexity of such marriages. While most of the studies on Thai woman-Farang man marriages are marked by the presence of American troops in Thailand in the 1960s-1970s during the Vietnam War, my research shows that this interracial marriage was first documented in the early sixteenth century along with the arrival of Westerners in Siam. Such conjugal relations, from historical perspectives, were shaped by the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity; simultaneously their societal and individual significances presented an accepted utilitarian dimension, which nevertheless did not exclude an emotional factor. Today’s transnational marriages are context-specific, showing different forms of conjugal unions as compared to those of the past. The regularity of contact between women under transnational marriage (and their husbands) and their families in rural communities is the most prevalent characteristic which in turn shaped perceptions and expectations concerning mixed couples and complicate social relationships between these women, their husbands and local people in the women’s natal communities.

Motivations propelling local women (and Western men) to engage in transnational marriages are diverse and complex, transcending both economic reasons and intimate relationships. These motivations are informed by local and Western norms and practices regarding gender and marriage as well as images about Western societies and lifestyles on the one hand and ‘social locations’ of women in the global hierarchy on the other. The findings particularly underpin the idea of ‘irresponsible local men’ as a part of the logics of desire facilitating and legitimatizing women’s engagement in transnational marriage.

Similarly, the ‘negotiation processes’ to became a wife in which bar girls and freelancers working in Pattaya were involved present diverse strategies and tactics extending beyond a mere exchange of money for sex experiences. From women’s accounts, their desire for a long-term relationship always came into play. These women perceived their work as a vehicle to meet and make connections with Western men that would result in a serious relationship. This is a path that changes the lives of a number of women, keeping in mind that others working in Pattaya have not succeeded in this endeavor. Based on the findings, I suggest looking at the position of sex work in a transnational marriage trajectory rather than considering this profession exclusively from a pure sexual slavery-oriented or economic perspective. This approach might serve as a useful tool to capture the realities of women’s lives and to understand how they make sense of their own lives on their own terms.

The experiences and sentiments of women engaging in transnational marriage reveal that they continuously weigh up such factors as economic opportunities, local constraints, global possibilities/imaginations and individual desires. These factors mingle and shape their marriage decision and conjugal relationships. Fulfilling filial obligations determined by the Thai cultural norm of bun khun (debt of gratitude to the parent) and contributing to their natal village allow women to earn merit/social recognition. Simultaneously, such obligations and contributions become important tools in the mitigation of ambivalent attitudes toward mia farang associated with economic achievement and new roles as community benefactors on the one hand and social stigma produced through the discourse of mia chao (a ‘rented/hired wife’ – a woman who provides sexual service and do domestic work for her partner for a price) on the other.

On another score, contributions and close ties with women’s natal family and community reflect the importance given to economic resources with their meanings extended beyond economic value to social and symbolic meanings including gratefulness as a dutiful daughter and belonging as a community member. Likewise, material support provided by a Western partner to his wife, her parents, children and relatives represents expressions of ‘love’, care and commitment. The insights into how economic opportunities, intimate relationships, and social and symbolic dimensions of economic resources combine and compel women to engage in transnational marriage, and complicate their relationships and practices, offer another way to conceptualizing this type of marital relations. Thus far, most studies on inter- and transnational marriages both in Thai and Asian contexts are examined in relation to colonial culture, militarization, gendered imaginations and the discourses of modernity and tradition.

Another theme pertaining to transnational marriages is local dynamics and complexity. The findings reflect that women’s choice for a marital relationship outside of marrying locally challenges gendered power
relations around the discourses of marriage and sexuality, thus placing local men in a vulnerable position. Drawn on the image of ‘irresponsible local men,’ the notion of desired marriage partners implies a dismissal of local men as unfit and thus legitimizing women’s engagement in transnational marriage. Additionally, a new social category – representing a new ‘class’ determined by consumptions and lifestyles – constituted by women married to Farang men also challenges the existing village socio-economic hierarchy, making inroads into the ranks of villagers in privileged positions. This change runs parallel with Charles Keyes’s view on ‘cosmopolitan villagers’ underpinning the relative waning of the ‘rooted’ old village elite, who increasingly experiences a decline of their prominence. Such dynamics impose tensions onto the village social order.

The diverse motivations revealing the complicated logics of desire facilitating the current transnational marriages in Isan and Thai society emphasize the fact that in attempting to understand these marriages, we need to go beyond material relations. On the whole, transnational marriages are far more complex than a short cut to wealth. Rather, they are situated in the processes of social transition and reproduction in the face of local and global encounters, in which norms and practices relating to marriage and family, as well as gender and class are put to severe test, along with imaginations about a better life for all concerned.


3. Next Meeting (443rd)
Tuesday, 12 February 2019, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai

Life in Sansai Mahawong:
Elders Reflect on Their Lives in the Village
and Young People Consider Options for the Future
A talk by Kay and Mike Calavan

The Talk: This presentation is based on “semi-structured” interviews with 20 village residents older than 50 years and 20 younger than 30 years. Their individual experiences and views provide rich insights into the dramatic social, economic, and cultural changes that have transformed Thailand over the last several decades and continue in the present. Despite frequent academic observations on growing socioeconomic inequality in Thailand, it is important to understand that residents of villages like Sansai Mahawong are strikingly better off than they were 50 years ago. They are better fed, better dressed, better housed, better educated, healthier, and longer-lived than they were when the Calavans first studied Sansai in 1969-70. Many insights are emerging from the interviews. A few interesting observations:
- Patterns of courtship and marriage have changed. Among elders it was usual for young men to “aeo sao” [“visit the girls”] in a stylized manner. These days it is more common for young people to meet through education or work.
- Investment strategies have changed. Within the past 20-30 years there has probably been no more effective family investment strategy than financing post-secondary education for children.
- Physical mobility [e.g. visits to Chiang Mai, travel to Bangkok and beyond] and knowledge of the outside world [e.g. through TV and the internet] have increased exponentially.
- The HIV/AIDS epidemic struck Sansai Mahawong a few decades back, but doesn’t seem to pose a significant threat at present.
- A youth group/performing ensemble that was very important to young people 40-50 years ago no longer exists, and in some ways the current generation seem more isolated from their village peers..
The Speakers: Kay and Mike Calavan no longer undertake paid work, but expect to observe the world as professional anthropologists until they die. Their Ph.D. research in Sansai Mahawong was carried out in 1969-70. Mike studied small farmer decision-making and how Sansai farmers adopted Green Revolution rice varieties. Kay observed governance and social organization and how some features of the traditional system of aristocrats, commoners, and slaves persisted into the 1960s. Subsequently, the Calavans switched professional roles. Kay earned a post-doctoral masters’ degree in agronomy, and planned and evaluated agricultural programs for USAID and other development groups. Mike focused much of his career in USAID on planning and implementing programs to strengthen governance and democracy and in the first 12 years of retirement planned, assessed, and initiated dozens of similar programs.

The Calavans initiated “50 years after” research in Sansai in 2016-17, and presented that research [and an anthropological film from 1976] to the INTG in February, 2017. Their presentation this year is based on 40 semi-structured interviews. Their plans for 2019-20 include a major survey of all Sansai households that will provide rich quantitative data on social, economic, and cultural trends. If they can muster the energy, they will seek to publish a small book or series of articles on Sansai, and are exploring the possibility of producing a follow-up film with a friend.

3. March 2019 MEETING (444th)  
Tuesday, 12 March 2019, 7:30 pm at the Alliance Française, Chiang Mai  
Cross National and Cross Cultural Education at Payap University  
A talk by Tony Waters

The Talk: Chiang Mai is quickly becoming known as an international city in Thailand. Payap University is part of this movement and has begun recruiting students internationally. In doing this, beginning in 2004, they have developed an English-language curriculum (BA, MA, and PhD), leading to the enrollment of large numbers of Chinese students in 2017. This is in addition to the substantial enrolment of Thai students in a Thai curriculum, which began in 1974.

In this context, Payap in 2017-2019 funded a study of how both English and Chinese speaking students are adapting to life at Payap University. Students were surveyed in order to understand issues of student engagement, language abilities, friendship patterns, and cultural orientation. Preliminary indications are that students from different cultural backgrounds approach the experience at Payap University differently, and take away different values from their educational experiences. This data is being developed in a fashion that policy makers can develop the best cross-cultural education experience possible.

This talk will report on the preliminary results of the surveys, and describe the issues, problems, and advantages of international education at Payap University.

The Speaker: Dr. Tony Waters is on the faculty of the PhD program in Peacebuilding at Payap University in Chiang Mai. He is also Professor of Sociology at California State University, Chico. His international career began in Phrae, Thailand, where he was an American Peace Corps Volunteer in the Malaria Zone Office in 1980–1982. After that he worked for NGOs serving refugees in Thailand and Tanzania, before returning to graduate school. He was also a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania in 2003-2004. He has published books including Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan (2001), When Killing is a Crime (2007), Max Weber’s Rationalism (2015) and others. He has research interests in refugees, culture, language, the nature of violence, and other subjects.
4. Future Meetings


- **12 March 2019**: (444th Meeting): “Cross National and Cross Cultural Education at Payap University” - A talk by Tony Waters.

- **To be scheduled**: Talks by: Francis Engelmann (June), Paul Carter, Michel Bauwens, Vanina Bouté.

6. INTG Contacts: Convenor - Secretary - Website

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Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)
1984-2019 = 35 years of Talks!

LIFE IN SANSAI MAHAWONG:

ELDERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE REFLECTIONS

A Talk by Kay and Mike Calavan
Tuesday, 12 February 2019, 7:30 pm
At the Alliance Française - Chiang Mai
138 Charoen Prathet Road (Opposite EFEO)
Informal Northern Thai Group (INTG)
1984-2019 = 35 years of Talks!

CROSS NATIONAL AND CROSS CULTURAL EDUCATION AT PAYAP UNIVERSITY

A Talk by Tony Waters

Tuesday, 12 March 2019, 7:30 pm

At the Alliance Française - Chiang Mai
138 Charoen Prathet Road (Opposite EFEO)