

# Transnational Intimacies and Marriages: Gender and Social Class Complexities in two Northeastern Thai Villages

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Studies of transnational intimacies and marriages thus far reveal how these relationships are stimulated and constrained by global and local circumstances, cultures, ideas, and practices relating to gender, marriage, and family as well as class and ethnicity. This paper provides insights into the other side of the global process by exploring how these intimate relations generate tensions and challenge cultural ideas and practices regarding gender and social class at the 'local end' of the transnational connections. Drawing on three ethnographic studies in two northeastern Thai villages, my research argues that these marital relationships present a form of women's agency and bring new challenges to masculine identities and subjectivities that place local men in vulnerable positions. Women with Western partners also constitute a new class determined by both their consumption and their lifestyle – which set them apart from other villagers – and their increased ownership of both farm and residential land. Thus, these women form a new class in both Bourdieusian and Marxist senses, although land in this case has less to do with production but rather wellbeing, security, and prosperity. In this light, transnational marriages/intimacies induce the reconfiguring of gender and class in women's natal villages.

**Keywords:** Gender; Social Class; Thailand; Transnational Intimacy, Transnational Marriage



## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, transnational intimacies and marriages have become more common in many Asian countries, yet intimate liaisons and marriages between people of different countries or ethnicities have a long history (Andaya, 1998). The investigations in the contexts of Southeast Asia reveal the dynamic perspectives in conceptualizing these relationships, moving from structural explanations – explaining these intimacies in relation to international politics/relations and trade, militarization, and transnational tourism (Cohen, 2003; Enloe, 2000) – toward agency approaches focusing on individual choices and agency (Brennan, 2004; Faier, 2009). This transformation also reflects the changing contexts in which such intimacies have been embedded (Lapanun,

2018). Interracial unions between people of French Indochina and the Netherlands Indies revealed, for example, the connections between sexuality, gender, and race with rules and politics of colonialism, which influenced individuals and their family lives (Stoler, 1992). In militarization contexts, sexual desires and interracial relations were stimulated through gender imaginations and fantasies regarding traditional roles of women as ideal wives and mothers who embraced traditional familial values (Constable, 2011). Others draw on the notion of *Orientalism* that has inspired the desires of transnational encounters and facilitated transnational tourism (Said, 1978). Asia is often depicted as a reflection of Western men's sexual fantasies; this representation has drawn Western male tourists to Asia to consume the eroticized Orient (Dahles, 2009; Manderson & Jolly, 1997).

Recent works have explored how these intimate relationships are stimulated and constrained by the global and local circumstances, cultures and practices relating to gender, marriage and family; as well as how women and men from different parts of the world have materialized their desire to meet and maintain the relationships (Constable, 2011; Ishii, 2016; Lapanun, 2019). Some studies explore encounters in the *contact zones* – either physical sites like the transnational tourist towns of Sosua in the Dominican Republic (Brennan, 2004) and Pattaya in Thailand (Garrick, 2005) or online spaces (Pananakhonsab, 2016) – where the transnational relationships were initiated and developed. Thus far, most studies on transnational intimacies discuss how these relationships are shaped by gender, class, local constraints and global opportunities and how women and men under these associations manage and negotiate their relationships (Cabezas, 2009; Cheng, 2010; Faier, 2009; Spanger, 2013). The present paper takes the opposite approach and discusses how transnational marriages between Thai women and Western men have affected and shaped gender power relations and class divisions in rural communities in Thailand where these intimacies are embedded. The discussions contribute to insights on the complexity and reconfiguration of gender relations and class divisions at the *local end* of the transnational connections generated by transnational marriages.

The paper draws on three research studies conducted during 2008-2018 in two Isan (Northeast Thailand) villages that are home to large numbers of *mia farang* (Thai wives of Western men). In exploring gender complexity, I focus on experiences of both Thai women and men who are either engaged in or are affected by transnational marriages as they live in the same *transnational social field* (Basch et al., 2003). I examine the shifts in gender power relations through discussing the discourse of a desired marriage partner constructed in the villages and local men's anxiety over being seen as unqualified marriage partners. It appears that gender dynamics are connected to the improved economic and social status of women in transnational marriages. Thus, I also discuss class complexity through exploring the increased ownership of land among *mia farang* and how it has complicated class division in the village. This analysis adds another layer to the existing studies on transnational marriage and class that have conceptualized class in relation to consumption and lifestyle (Lapanun, 2019; Sunanta, 2013). Overall, this paper highlights both gender and class complexities in relation to transnational marriages.

## GENDER, CLASS, AND TRANSNATIONAL INTIMATE RELATIONS

Literature on transnational intimacies/marriages addresses gender and class in two different ways: first, the influences of gender/class on these intimate relationships and, second, the dynamics of gender/class resulting from these intimacies. These two-way relationships emphasize strong connections between these intimate relations with gender and class, which are discussed at length below.

### The influences of gender/class on transnational intimate relationships

Studies in this group focus on how gender/class – apart from constraints at home, global opportunities and the restrictive state migration regimes – have shaped motivations, desires, and practices of women and men involved in or seeking transnational intimacies (Constable, 2011; Ishii, 2016; Statham et al., 2021). The images of women in Asia as being more traditional, embracing traditional familial values, and less modern than women in the West have motivated Western men to look for Asian spouses (Constable, 2011; Enloe, 2000). For Asian women, the gender norms of *dutiful daughter* and *good mother* as well as poverty at home and opportunities abroad are among the key factors encouraging them to engage in transnational marriages (Angeles & Sunanta, 2009; Bélanger et al., 2014; Cheng, 2010). These diverse motivations combine and constitute the *logics of desire*, shaping marriage choices and practices of women and men under transnational marriages (Lapanun, 2019).

Some researchers view these marriages in connection with the commodification of women's reproductive labor in which the brides depart from less-developed countries to sustain social reproduction in middle-class families and uphold economic competitiveness in wealthier societies (Lauser, 2008). In such contexts, women actively use different economic and socio-cultural situations across transnational space to redefine themselves and enhance opportunities for crafting their better future (Ishii, 2016; Lauser, 2008). In the binational unions between Filipino women and French men, for example, gender and class have shaped the way migrant Filipinas maintained transnational ties with their natal families. Gender norms in the Philippines compel women to support their parents and/or children; yet, this obligation is carried out in different ways. Women of modest social classes whose children from previous relationships were left under the care of their natal families feel obliged to conform to this obligation, whereas women of privileged classes neither feel compelled nor do they ask to do so (Fresnoza-Flot, 2017). The ways in which gender and class become the key elements shaping the *social location* of women, which in turn, influences their practices as well as social relations and ties to their natal families are elaborated in other studies (for example Butratana & Trupp, 2021).

Class background is also an important factor in coping with the negative stereotype of *mia farang*<sup>1</sup> living in the United States. Through the processes of *intraethnic othering*, the class-privileged *mia farang* distance themselves from less-privileged

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1 This negative stereotype drew on the associations between local women working in the sex and entertainment businesses and American servicemen that occurred during the Vietnam War. Such associations are reinforced by the routes some women take to enter transnational marriages, though the channels through which they make this transnational connection are quite varied.

ones. In such contexts, women's coping strategies present the intersection of class, gender, race, and ethnicity in deflecting the negative stereotypes, while at the same time perpetuating such stereotypes (Suppatkul, 2020). In addition, the relationships between young Thai women and older Western men living in Thailand reveal a form of negotiated exchanges through which women obtain significant material gains while experiencing pressure to adapt to their husbands' cultural needs. These women feel distant from their natal families emotionally, socially, and culturally, as they have experienced *imported assimilationism* (Statham, 2020). These studies show how gender, class, and race have shaped the lives of women and men under transnational intimate relationships.

In the destination countries where women live with their partners and where their gender and class backgrounds pressured them into a subordinated position, women turn love and the intimate dimensions of their relationships into a source of power for negotiation in daily lives. Filipina entertainer liaisons with U.S. soldiers in South Korea, for example, drew on the rhetoric of love in negotiating the stereotype of *victims of sex trafficking* and in constructing a better future (Cheng, 2010). Also, Filipina working in the hostess bars in rural Japan constructed and nourished new identities and gender subjectivities through performing *emotional labor* – a practice of affection, caretaking, and careful attention to convince male customers that they care for them. Whereas this practice is vulnerable to coercive labor conditions, it illuminates the agency exercised by these women (Parreñas, 2011), which enables them to craft their lives and selves both in Japan and the Philippines (Faier, 2009). Female Thai migrants working in the sex industry in Denmark also performed multiple subject positions as sex workers, wives, and female migrants. These women enacted and negotiated love by destabilizing binary categories of sex work and love. Love is articulated with emotions, money, gifts, care, and the notions of *the good husband* (Spanger, 2013). The women's experiences challenge the idea of clear boundaries between sex work and intimate relationships (Cabezas, 2009; Cohen, 1996). These studies highlight not only women's agency, but also how women's tactics and strategies in transnational contexts are predicated on ambivalent conditions.

The studies on men/masculinities and transnational marriages also present how gender has shaped these relationships even though the factors influencing these intimacies are diverse. Singaporean men who have married Vietnamese women are portrayed as *failures* in local marriage markets (Cheng, 2012). In negotiating such images, Singaporean men emphasize their role as providers for both their own and their wife's native family, which allows them to sustain their masculine subjectivity and validate their self-identity as *real men* (Cheng et al., 2014). Western men who settled with their Thai wives in Isan also perform *hegemonic masculinity* by conforming to the cultural ideals of breadwinning. Drawing on their provider roles and neo-colonial imaginary, these men position themselves as *real white men*, a place-bound identity within Thailand that is subject to contradiction in the long term. Financial and social obstacles limit their ability to return home, except for those with ties to transnational capital (Maher & Lafferty, 2014). Another study reveals that retired Western men married to Thai wives enjoy their privilege by securing a *good life* in Thailand. These men practice a form of new-found masculinity and sexuality with their self-gratification and perception of being morally superior to local people

(Husa et al., 2014; Scuzzarello, 2020). Scholars also suggest that men's subjective experiences of masculinity are different from masculine identities, which are socially constructed, economically-politically facilitated, and culturally shared. The changing of subjective experiences of the individual (transient subjectivity) is not evidence of shifting masculine identities at a society level (Thompson et al., 2016). While most studies explored experiences of men engaged in transnational intimacies, this paper focuses on local men who are not engaged in, but are involved with or affected by such relationships.

### **The dynamics of gender/class resulting from transnational intimate relationships**

Compared to the strand of literature discussed above, there is much less literature exploring the dynamics of gender/class by transnational intimacies even though studies on labor migration and its effects on gender alteration are substantial. Exploring marriages of Vietnamese women married to men from South Korea, Bélanger et al. (2014) reveal that such relationships led to the reconfiguration of gender power relations in women's natal families and communities. Remittances significantly increase women's status and power in their natal households. Though living overseas, these women are involved in family decision-making and control over the use of remittances. Transnational marriages also enhanced women's upward socio-economic mobility and bargaining power in local marriage markets. By contrast, these marriages resulted in negative changes for young men. Yet, it could be argued that women's strong commitment to their natal families manifested through regular remittances reproduce gender inequalities and women's subordination. Bélanger and her colleagues focus on women's involvement in decision making and control over resources as a source of power in altering gender relations. This paper explores the shift of gender power relations through the discourse of a desired marriage partner that has legitimated women's involvement in transnational marriage and led to masculine anxiety.

Changes in lifestyle, living conditions, and material possessions among women in transnational marriages and their natal families can be easily observed. Yet, *mia farang*, especially those from poor rural backgrounds, are perceived as *materialist women* in the Thai nationalist discourse of *immoral materialism* (Sunanta, 2013) or as *nouveaux riches* considering their highly visible forms of consumption (Lapanun, 2019). Despite the moral criticism, these authors point out that economic advancement and the more comfortable life these women enjoy impose tensions onto the existing class divisions in women's natal villages and convey a sense of unease for many in the urban, middle class. In this light, these studies reveal the dynamics of class in women's native societies resulting from transnational intimacies, ideally or virtually. Yet, class is conceptualized in relation to consumption practices and lifestyles, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). This paper approaches class by focussing on rights of land ownership. In Marxist analysis, class is defined in relation to ownership of means of production – land in this case (Wright, 2005). Thus, the paper discusses how the increased ownership of land among *mia farang* has complicated class divisions in the village, in addition to the distinctive lifestyles of *mia farang* that I argued in the earlier work (Lapanun, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This paper draws on three studies conducted in two rural Isan villages over a decade. In 2008-2009, I did extensive fieldwork in Na Dokmai village, Udon Thani province, that involved 86 informants: 25 men and 61 women (including 26 *mia farang* and 11 *farang*, foreign partners). This research explored experiences and negotiations of women under transnational marriage relations and it complicates conventional views about materiality and intimacy in these settings (Lapanun, 2019). In 2018, I again gathered data in Na Dokmai for a project exploring migration and women's land tenure rights and security, funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This study includes 50 respondents as representatives of their households, consisting of households of *mia farang*, international labor migrant households, domestic labor migrant households, and non-migrant households. In 2016-2017, I conducted research in Na Charoen village, Khon Kaen province to explore perceptions, experiences, and reactions of local men regarding the ongoing changes resulting from transnational marriages of village women. This study includes 25 informants, 13 males (age 20-63), and 12 females (age 23-57). All informants lived in the village during the fieldwork period; those who left the village for work and study were not included.

The studies on transnational marriages and local men's experiences in relation to such marriages employed the ethnographic approach of using interviews and observations as the major data collecting methods. Interviews were open but semi-structured in a way that allowed informants to recount their experiences, perceptions, daily lives and social relations. The migration and women's land rights research applied both surveys and interviews. The survey provides background information about the respondents' households and such quantified data as land holding size, land inheritance system, remittances, and consumption. Interviews were arranged to obtain in-depth information with some respondents and to make sense of data from the survey. Each study applied data triangulation by crisscrossing the interviews with different key informants along with secondary sources of information. Data analysis used the descriptive approach following the theoretical concepts applied in each study. In this paper, I focus on how transnational intimacies have complicated gender relations and class structure in women's natal villages.

## RESEARCH SETTINGS

Na Dokmai and Na Charoen are located in Udon Thani and Khon Kaen provinces – the top provinces in Northeast Thailand in terms of numbers of *mia farang*. Na Dokmai encompasses five *muban*<sup>2</sup> with a population of 3,539 (920 households). Na Charoen includes two *muban* with a population of 1,378 (298 households). The female-to-male ratio in both villages is nearly equal. 63% of residents in Na Dokmai and 50% of those in Na Charoen completed four to six years of schooling depending on their age.<sup>3</sup> These villages are relatively well-developed, though the infrastructure

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2 *Muban* is the smallest unit in the local administration system.

3 Most women older than 45 had four years of schooling while those younger had six years or more. Thailand applied a four-year compulsory education in the 1930s. This was raised to six years in 1977.

and house conditions in Na Dokmai are better than those of Na Charoen. In both communities, there are large, new houses designed in an urban-style architecture, distinctive from other houses. Such houses belong to women with *farang* husbands. Most households in these two villages are engaged in farming; some carry out non-farm activities. Yet, many families rely on remittances from children engaged in wage work elsewhere or daughters living overseas with their husbands. International labor migration in Na Dokmai is quite common, whereas residents of Na Charoen engage in domestic migration. From my observations, Na Dokmai is considered better than Na Charoen in terms of economic status and consumption power.

Transnational marriages in both villages came to a peak in the early 2000s, but the facilitating agents of this phenomenon are different. In Na Dokmai, the key agents were local schoolteachers who provided match-making services and a village man who ran a recruiting business, taking women to work at bars in Pattaya. In Na Charoen, interest in contacting Western men was facilitated by a village woman and her German husband who ran a match-making service that had facilitated transnational marriages of some women. In addition to this facilitating mechanism, women in both villages also materialized their desire to enter into transnational marriages through internet connections, networks of relatives and friends who are in such relationships as well as through working in the entertainment and sex industry.

#### CHALLENGING GENDER POWER RELATIONS: THE DISCOURSE OF DESIRED MARRIAGE PARTNER

Thus far, studies on the impacts of transnational marriage on gender relations explored women's involvement in decision-making and control over resources in the family and community contexts (Bélanger et al., 2014). Taking a different approach, this section discusses how the process by which women materialized their desire for transnational marriage has challenged gender power relations in the women's natal villages.

In 2008-2009, there were 159 women in Na Dokmai married to men from 21 countries. Of these men 81% were European and the rest were from the United States, Australia, and Asia. The majority of women had married local men before engaging in transnational unions; many of these women had children from that previous relationship. Marriage and family crises often came up in the life stories of *mia farang* as a part of the complex set of factors motivating them to seek connections with foreign men. Nisa (33),<sup>4</sup> a divorced mother who lives with her Danish partner answered my question, what kind of man she was looking for:

I want a good man who is generous and warm-hearted, who is responsible for his family, accepts and supports my children and cares for my parents as well. My previous relationship [with a local man] taught me how life would be if the man doesn't take his family seriously (also cited in: Lapanun, 2019, p. 82).

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4 The figure after a person's name indicates her/his age at the time of the interviews. I first met Nisa on 16 February 2008 at her house in Na Dokmai and interviewed her several times from February to May 2008.

Nisa's answer is based on her experience with her Thai ex-partner whom she lived with while working in Bangkok. With a vocational education, Nisa headed to Bangkok and worked at a textile factory; there she met a mechanic, the father of her daughter who she had lived with for five years until she found out that he was seeing another woman. While she became pregnant, he did not take care of her, thus she left him and her job and returned to the village to live with her parents. Nisa struggled and brought up her daughter without any support from her partner. He failed to fulfil the role of family provider, and his promiscuity was intolerable to her. Nisa's account of having a partner while being away from home and going through a difficult time in her marriage and eventually breaking up was shared by many village women<sup>5</sup>. Some women blamed their marital crises on their husbands' gambling and alcohol addictions. More often than not, the women have to raise their children without support from the father. These women's experiences conveyed an image of *irresponsible* local men who do not take their family seriously. It is this image that the discourse of desired marriage partner has drawn and rooted in the minds of local people. This discourse highlights characteristics of a desirable marriage partner who is a reliable provider and good family man who allows a woman to fulfil filial obligations as a dutiful daughter through supporting their parents. Such characteristics imply a dismissal of local men as unfit, therefore legitimating women's engagement in transnational intimacy.

The discourse of a desired marriage partner is a powerful one. It has motivated both women who directly experienced marriage crises and young single women to opt for marrying Western partners. In addition, it has also stimulated women's parents to manage and support their daughters to engage in transnational marriage. Bua (58), a woman in Na Dokmai, is a case in point; she searched for a match-making agent and paid THB 120,000 (USD 4,000) to get Nuan (34), her divorced daughter with a son, to marry a German man. Nuan separated from her ex-husband who had been seeing another woman. The man wanted to maintain relationships with both women, but Nuan could not accept this idea and ended the relationship. Bua believed that if her daughter married a Thai man, she would face family problems and suffer again. Then, Bua persuaded Nuan to marry a *farang* man, hoping for a better future for her daughter and grandson. Bua was successful, as Nuan departed for Germany in 2003 and now lives there with her husband. Having a job with regular income, Nuan managed for her son to join her in Germany, and she also conformed with female filial obligations by sending remittances to her parents regularly.

Drawing on this discourse, some village women took the route of connecting with Western men by engaging in the entertainment and sex industry, especially in transnational tourist destinations. While this practice is stigmatized, it allows women to materialize their desire to opt for transnational marriage and to manage their own lives, as I discussed in detail with examples in my book (Lapanun, 2019). These women's practices reveal their agency and highlight the dynamic of gender power relations, which at the same time put local men in a vulnerable position.

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<sup>5</sup> In the study, I interviewed 26 *mia farang*; more than half of them related accounts similar to that of Nisa.

## MASCULINE ANXIETIES AND PRACTICES

Local men's experiences of anxiety from being seen as unsuitable marriage partners is another aspect of the dynamic of gender power relations in the villages. Although these men did not engage in transnational marriages, they were affected by such relationships. In exploring masculinity, the cultural ideal of breadwinner/provider has served as the key concept. Breadwinning is a practice that arises from specific gender relations and is enmeshed in historical processes and economic structures. It "serves as a powerful ideological device in forming individuals' self-identity and in producing and reproducing gender behavior and activities in everyday life" (Zuo, 2004, p. 814). The breadwinner concept emerged in industrial societies with a clear division of tasks between men and women regarding production and reproduction. This gender division of labor is common in Isan agrarian and matrilineal society where men, after marriage, move into the house of their wife's parents and take responsibility in household production, although women also engage in production activities while they take major roles in reproduction work (Lapanun, 2019; Mills, 1999). This practice represents men's breadwinner role, though it is not the man alone who provides economic support to his family.

Breadwinning roles are central to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity embodied the "most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity can be constructed in specific social contexts and may not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men, but this cultural ideal expresses desires and fantasies that men, in all societies, have negotiated and articulated in sustaining their masculine identity (Connell, 1995). Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity concept is criticized for its Eurocentric tendency, and its singularity, homogeneity, and inability to incorporate other hegemonic forms of masculinity. Thus, some scholars reject this concept (Osella & Osella, 2006). Others do not dismiss it but seek to elaborate and expand the analysis of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, overall, this concept is extremely influential in studying men and masculinities (Ford & Lyons, 2012). My work reveals that it is the breadwinning ideal that village men have articulated and negotiated, yet it is not the sole factor contributing to women's motivation to seek transnational marriage.

In real life, breadwinning is complex and often intertwined with *masculine culture* practices that are reinforced through gender cultures and norms in Thai society including such activities as drinking alcohol, getting together, visiting entertainment sites, gambling, and seeking out sexual experiences and prostitutes. Kitiarsa's study (2008) provides a good example of breadwinning roles entangled with the practices of masculine culture in the daily life of Thai migrants in Singapore. Thai migrant workers – many of whom are Isan villagers – engaged in sexual encounters as a strategic way of negotiating their intimate identity and subjectivity in their transient life away from home. Such sexual acts are a major part of temporary life in a foreign land. My data from Na Dokmai show that many village men who left their wives and children behind at home could or would not fulfil their provider responsibility, leaving the wives to take on the household burden alone. Experiencing stress

and loneliness in overseas countries, some men spent their earnings for their own pleasure; others became involved in relationships with other women. Situations like these tend to paint local men as irresponsible family heads. In addition, the narratives of women in the studied villages repeatedly reveal involvement of local men in gambling, drinking alcohol, and promiscuity. Other studies also disclose such local behaviors (Jongwiliawan & Thompson, 2013; Ten Brummelhuis, 1994). These stories have reinforced the image of irresponsible local men who do not care for their family. Drawing on my fieldwork in Na Charoen, I discuss local men's anxieties and how they have articulated and negotiated the on-going changes resulting from the transnational marriages.

During my fieldwork in Na Charoen, I often saw groups of young men getting together in front of a game shop that also sells drinks and snacks. These men were in their twenties and early thirties. In the afternoon of 9 May 2016, I joined the group of five young men: two daily wage laborers, a laid-off man, a high school student and Dan (29), the owner of the game shop. The conversations reflected the experiences and stresses of these men in relation to opportunities and constraints in their lives. Tom (25), a daily wage worker, recounted that he neither has a regular job nor earns enough to make ends meet. It is difficult to get a job with good pay for those like him and his friends who have only limited education and work experience. He had a job only when his employer needed more labor and he earned a minimum daily wage. However, Tom and his friends met at Dan's shop almost every day; they chatted, drank and sometimes went to restaurants or cafés in town. Tom said, "it's good to meet and talk to friends who are in a similar situation [insecure/no job]."

Like Tom, young village men often talked about their experiences of having no or insecure jobs and their practice of going out, seeking thrills and drinking, which they considered common as it is a part of *masculine culture* even though they were aware that such behavior would make them unqualified as potential marriage partners. These young men's perceptions and experiences are different from those of older men in their fifties and sixties, who engaged in agriculture, or non-agricultural paid labor in the neighborhoods and urban centers to fulfil breadwinner responsibilities. Realizing the differences between their generation and later ones, the older village men did not appreciate the young men's financial irresponsibility, involvement in gambling, and propensity to overindulge in alcohol<sup>6</sup>.

Dan, the owner of the game shop who had also struggled to embrace his breadwinner role in the past, agreed that such young men images are common in Na Charoen. He admitted that he had engaged in *masculine culture* activities in his teenage life. Dan is from a relatively well-to-do family and after marriage he sold his car and motorbike to invest in a game shop that has generated enough income to support his wife and son. Dan said,

My life changed totally; now I have a different lifestyle than most of young men in the village who enjoy going out, drinking, gambling, and philandering. They think that nothing is wrong, these are men's things, they just enjoy life... Finding a job is difficult; running a business is not easy and involves risk of failure;

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<sup>6</sup> The experiences and opinions of village men of different generations regarding transnational marriage are discussed in further detail elsewhere (Lapanun & Thompson, 2018b).

farming is hard work. Young men don't want to think about these things as they make them feel stressed. I understand them; in the past I thought the same and I did enjoy going out with friends very much... I changed, if I hadn't, I would not have a future; my wife and my son would have no future neither<sup>7</sup>.

Dan was aware of the breadwinner ideal and embraced it. He changed his lifestyle. Other young men, like Tom and other friends, often cited the limited economic opportunities as the root of their inability to make ends meet and embrace breadwinner masculinity, thereby limiting their possibilities of marriage. These men claimed that *masculine culture* practices provide them a space in coping with the anxieties stemming from limited economic opportunities, which make them seen as unsuitable partners. For these local men, it is hard to compete with the greater financial capital that *farang* men tend to be able to provide. Interestingly, while men related their limited marriage possibilities to financial responsibility, women and their parents, like Nisa, Bua, and others in Na Charoen, considered practices like promiscuity, hard drinking, and gambling as criteria for not choosing a partner, apart from economic dimensions.

Indeed, local men are aware of the shift in gender power relations and their vulnerable position posed by transnational marriage. Frequently, this awareness results in anxieties and profound pressure. However, most village men cannot change their practices. The disjuncture between anxiety – resulting from the emergence of *mia farang* as a new social class and its implications for gender power relations – and action shares with Zuo's suggestion that the alteration of breadwinner ideology does not necessarily lead to behavioral changes. Zuo relates this disconnection to the contradictions between egalitarian beliefs and non-egalitarian behavior (Zuo, 2004). In an earlier work, my colleague and I (Lapanun & Thompson, 2018a) also argue that the discontinuations between the awareness and practices as manifested in Na Charoen have evolved around the dissonance between breadwinner roles and the 'praise-orientation' status of men in matrilineal society, which is different from the 'status-oriented' masculinity in patrilineal society (Bao, 1998). This disconnection underlines masculine practices and identities that Isan men have had to articulate and negotiate. This on-going process contributes to the dynamic of gender power relations in Isan villages.

### CLASS COMPLEXITY

I argued elsewhere that *mia farang* make up a new 'class' determined by their consumption patterns (Lapanun, 2019), drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Here I further discuss the issue of class through exploring women's land ownership. Thus, this section conceptualizes class in both Bourdieuan and Marxist senses.

In Na Dokmai and Na Charoen lifestyles and consumption patterns, symbolizing middle-class ideals are amply manifested in the living standards of *mia farang*

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<sup>7</sup> I met Dan on 9 May 2016 at his house in Na Charoen and we had a few conversations during May - June 2016.

and their families. These women own new, urban-style houses; some regularly go to town for shopping and dining. They also travel to different tourist destinations in Thailand and overseas. Their houses are equipped with expensive furniture, a living room with a sofa set, and a modern kitchen with a dining-table set. However, such furniture and spaces were rarely used. One woman said that the dining table and modern kitchen were used by her husband during his stay. She usually cooked in an old kitchen outside the house. Such enhanced material consumption is oftentimes perceived as conspicuous consumption. For Bourdieu, consumption as the manifestation of taste is a cultural and symbolic marker for class; he noted:

[Taste] functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466).

Following Bourdieu’s analysis, urban-style houses, luxurious furniture, and distinctive lifestyles serve to indicate the status of the women and their households and symbolize the distinction from other families. Thus, such consumption constitutes an index of class mobility<sup>8</sup> (Lapanun, 2019).

Apart from examining class in relation to consumption, data from FAO research reveals how transnational marriages enable women to acquire land and secure women’s rights over land. The data in Table 1 present patterns of remittance use of three types of households: households with women under transnational marriage (TMH), households with international labor migrant (IMH), and households with domestic labor migrant (DMH). For all households, remittances were an important source of daily expense. About half of TMH and IMH were able to purchase land and only 15% of DMH earned enough to buy land. Interestingly, the number of TMH invested in building/renovating houses is more than twice higher than those of IMH and DMH. There are also such expenses as buying a car or fertilizer, and paying debt, which DMH could not afford due to their relatively lower earnings.

	TMH (11 households)	IMH (13 households)	DMH (13 households)
Daily expense	11 (100%)	13 (100%)	13 (100%)
<b>Buying farm land</b>	<b>6 (55%)</b>	<b>7 (53%)</b>	<b>2 (15%)</b>
<b>Building/renovating houses</b>	<b>8 (72%)</b>	<b>3 (23%)</b>	<b>4 (31%)</b>
Buying a motorbike	10 (91%)	11 (85%)	2 (15%)
Buying a car	7 (63%)	8 (61%)	0
Buying fertilizer	0	4 (31 %)	0
Repaying debt	2 (18%)	4 (31 %)	0

**Table 1.** Patterns of remittance use

<sup>8</sup> For more in-depth analysis on this emerging new class and its consequence on the village hierarchical structure, please see Lapanun (2019).

Despite the limited samples, the in-depth interviews elaborate the data in Table 1. In Na Dokmai, it is common and the foremost choice for TMH to build/renovate houses; *mia farang* explained that they wanted to improve the living conditions of their natal families. Some planned to resettle in the village after retirement; thus they invested in a house for their future. Moreover, new, urban-style houses are a symbol of 'being successful' and an important marker in claiming social status and prestige.

The interviews with women in Na Dokmai also elaborate the connections between transnational marriage and land acquisition; Pang and Amphai's sister are cases in point. Pang (53), a woman selling cooked foods and drinks who has lived with a Belgian man, recounted that her partner invested in building a two-story house where they have lived and where Pang has operated her food trade. Pang acquired the piece of land where the house was built by her late partner, an English man who was relatively well-off. He bought three pieces of residential land in the village and a house where Pang's son (from a local father) and his family live. Without support from her partners, it would not have been possible for Pang to own land and houses as she was born to a poor, landless family. Also, Amphai (51), the sister of two women married to German husbands who resettled in Germany, recounted that a few years after marriage, one of her sisters purchased a 10 rai of sugarcane field<sup>9</sup>; later she also bought a 10 rai of rubber plot where Ampai's and her family has lived. The sister and her German partner have visited Na Dokmai regularly, but they have not yet decided whether they will return and resettle in Thailand after retirement. Yet, in 2017 she bought an eight rai of paddy field. Amphai and her family work on her sister's land, and income is shared between the two sisters. With an uncertain future, Amphai does not know why her sister kept buying land. Due to the fact that the perception of land as capital ensuring future security and prosperity was prevalent in Na Dokmai, it is possible that Amphai's sister had bought land based on this idea.

Boon's family presents a successful migrant household able to acquire land from remittances. Boon (59), a village headman with two grown-up sons, recounted that his older son had worked in Israel for five years (2005-2010). After paying for the migration contract, Boon and his wife managed to buy a five rai of paddy field from his remittances with a portion of the parents' savings. Boon put his son's name on the land document as a large portion of the money was from him. His younger, divorced son with two children has worked in Korea for two years. He regularly sends money to care for his daughter and son left in the village under the care of Boon and his wife. Boon's wife, who managed family resources, wanted to save remittances from her younger son for education of his children, instead of buying land as she planned to give a portion of her farmland to him.

Overseas labor migration, like transnational marriage, allows successful migrants to acquire land. Yet, these two types of migration present different patterns of gender corresponding to land ownership. In transnational marriage cases, women's names were put on the land documents; thus the women are the legal owners of the land. By law, foreigners are not allowed to own land in Thailand. Foreign men can purchase and build a house in cooperation with their spouses, but the property has to be in the women's family name. This signifies legal rights of women over the property. But in

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9 1 acre = 2.5 rai

most labor migration cases, male names are on land documents, as men are the ones who earned income and dominated overseas migration, although women are also involved in these activities. If remittances are from women, their names are on the documents. Having one's name on land documents not only secures one's legal rights over land, but it is also a source of social power for women that allows them to be relatively independent of their *farang* partners in case of failed marriages.

One may ask why *mia farangs* are more advantaged than women (and men) engaged in international labor migration. To answer this question, it is important to note that, although labor migration and marriage migration are a part of the same global processes, the social relations that women as wives and workers encounter are different. Migrant wives have been supported by their husbands, economically and socially, both during migration processes and while living in the destination countries. Most *mai farang* received financial support from their husband for traveling, housing and living costs, apart from other benefits. By contrast, male and female labor migrants have to take care of all migration costs themselves. Migrant workers often struggle with high costs of migration contracts, international travel and brokerage in some cases. Such differences relate to the social relations that *mia farang* and migrant workers have been involved in, which have affected their lives and ability to own land.

In any case, the complex ways in which types of migration, gender and land ownership are related reveal that transnational marriages allow women to own land and women's land rights are secure. In a Marxist sense, holding more land means increased ownership of means of production. However, land in this case has less to do with productive relations as in Marxist analysis; rather it ensures future security, prosperity, and women's status. For Bourdieu, land as economic capital can be converted to cultural capital, and it influences consumption patterns. In this light, women with Western husbands make up a new class in both a Bourdieusian and a Marxist sense as these women do not solely change their consumption patterns (Lapanun, 2019), but also own more land – a means of production – although how their land is actually producing added value needs further investigation. The dynamics of land ownership and consumption contribute to the emergence of *mia farang* as a new social class. This development has imposed tensions on the existing class divisions in the village, causing the village elites to increasingly experience a decline or a perceived decline in their prominence and impact.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of how transnational marriages/intimacies shape gender and class at the “local end” of these transnational connections demonstrates the dynamics of gender power relations and the emergence of a new class defined by both an increase in land ownership and distinct consumption patterns. In fact, the complexity of class resulting from transnational marriages, its influence on the existing class structure in rural villages and the alarm it instills in the urban, middle-class are documented (Lapanun, 2019; Sunanta, 2013). Conceptualizing class in relation to land ownership rights, this paper shows that transnational marriages allow *mia farang* to acquire land, thereby generating even more tension within the village and in Thai society in

general. This on-going change is a part of a social transformation that Thai people have to deal with. Apart from class complexities, transnational marriages can be a powerful element in altering gender power relations in the women's natal communities. Yet, living in intimate proximity with a foreign partner can create psychological stress for women as they face pressure to accommodate their husbands' cultural needs (Statham, 2020). Gender relations in the contexts of these unions become more complex when considering local men's experiences. While local men are aware of the shift in gender power relations, their practices of *masculine culture* and their incompetence in embracing breadwinner roles reproduce patriarchal gender privilege.

One may wonder whether these marriages are a liberating choice for *mia farang*. The answer may not be simple; we need to look at how gender, class, and race intersect and influence life choices and practices of women and men in specific contexts of their lives. As important as such intersections are, the phenomenon has to be explored in ways that do not lose sight of how women and men in these relationships make sense of their lives on their own terms.

I have demonstrated that focusing on gender and class dynamics resulting from transnational marriages allows us to better understand subtle and profound changes that such relationships have on local communities apart from material improvements. Since this paper draws on studies conducted before the Covid pandemic, the questions of how the pandemic shaped these transnational relationships as well as gender and class complexities could be the focal point of future studies.



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