

Book Review: Lapanun, P. (2019). *Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village*

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Transnational marriage between women from Thailand's rural Northeastern region (*Isan*) and the so-called *farang* (Western man) is a remarkable social phenomenon in contemporary Thailand, which Patcharin Lapanun explores in detail in her book. An original aspect of this book is the analysis of how transnational marriages transform the local Thai village into a "transnational village", and how they shape the lives of married women and their community.

Conducting her ethnographic fieldwork in a village in *Isan*, Lapanun spent four months there in 2008 and undertook follow-up fieldwork multiple times between 2012 and 2014. She did observations in public spaces where the couples are visible, as well as in their domestic spaces. She also conducted interviews with different actors: the Western husbands, the women married to *farang*, their parents and siblings, the villagers (including the local men) and representatives of the local government. Furthermore, Lapanun chose the city of Pattaya as the second main site for her ethnography to bring out the trajectory of transnational marriages. The Thai community in the Netherlands is her supplementary fieldwork.

In chapter one, the author points out that intimate relations between Thai women and Western men have started to emerge after the start of the Vietnam War. Around the mid-1960s, US military camps set up in the *Isan* region, which included many entertainment sites for soldiers for "Rest and Recreation" (R&R). The relationships between US soldiers and local women took place under the *mia chao* agreement (literally translated as 'rented wife'), which means these relationships happened outside of the marriage. The emergence of sex tourism in Thailand in the 1980s generated a second wave of intimate relationships between local women and Western men. Those relationships became an important trajectory in these women's lives, but also caused the stigma that links these marriages to sex work. In chapter four, Lapanun mentions a different perception of transnational marriages in contemporary Thai society. The government as well as the public media on a national level communicate about the negative dynamics

related to these relationships. They associate them with human trafficking and the diminishing importance of the local family institution as well as traditional practices. On the other hand, perspectives on a more local level consider these marriages as a social prestige and see in them an opportunity to boost the economic development of the village as well as increase financial contributions to the community.

In chapter three, the book analyzes the complex motivations and desires of Thai women and Western men to engage in a transnational marriage. Their motivations have multiple dimensions: economy, gender, sexuality, and class. The author highlights that the motivations of these women depend on their “social location”, a notion defined by Mahler and Pessar (2001). The women from a lower class feel a desire to escape poverty. Women who are single and educated belong to the middle or upper class; their motivations are more related to the gender limitation norm in their community. The majority of the women married to *farang* had a relationship with local men in the past. According to local sexuality and gender norms, these women become “less desirable” for local men. They feel more accepted by *farang* men to be remarried. Furthermore, the common desire among the women in different social positions is to find a “responsible man” to be their husband and the father of their children. This is defined by the way that the man can fulfill the Thai gender ideology referring to the sexual division of labor within the household. The husband is expected to be the main provider to the family and to share monogamy ideas. Western men are recognized as “responsible men” because they can better fulfill these desired gender norms compared to local men. The book focuses on the motivation of Thai women. In regard to Western men, the author only underlines the gender dimension related to the feminist movement in Western societies, which enhances the equality of gender roles within the household. Western men who valorize the traditional gender roles tend to look at the Asian matrimonial market (including Thailand) to find a spouse.

Based on the “special money” concept of Zelizer (1989), Lapanun discusses in chapter five the stereotypes of transnational marriage regarding the feeling of love versus money. She analyzes the cultural and social signification of money in Thai society and their impact on transnational marriage. Interpreting the different meanings of money among Thai-Western couples can reveal certain tensions. For example, the Thai cultural practice of *sinsot* (bride price) aims at evaluating the financial capabilities of the groom and his ability as a husband to be the family’s provider and to show gratitude to the bride’s parents. Western men perceive this practice as purchasing a wife. The Thai notion of “*bunkhun*” (p. 122) explains the reason why the women should provide the financial support to their parents and their need to be supported by their Western husband. Moreover, most of the women married to *farang* are single mothers. They have children to be taken care of with less support from their Thai father. The Thai kinship cultural norm as “dutiful daughters” (p. 140) and single mother generate pressure on these women. The support of the Western partner has helped the Thai partner to fulfill these roles. Lapanun notes that Thai spouses define love by “care”, “responsibility”, and “reciprocal support” including financial support from their Western husband (p. 134).

The author analyzes the trajectory of transnational marriages and the women’s strategies to get in relationships with Western men in chapter four. Many Thai rural women feel inspired by the success stories showing how the life of local women can

improve in case of a mixed marriage. The city of Pattaya is known as a sex tourism destination in Thailand. Lapanun describes it as the “space of opportunity and hope” (p. 96) because it is the main way for rural Thai women to find a Western husband. The women start by working in the sex industry and plan to develop a long-term relationship with their Western clients. Being a sex worker, they launch some strategies in order for men to desire them. They develop a worker-client relation by offering services to their Western clients that go beyond money and sex: for example, to accompany them as a local tourist guide, going shopping together and so forth. These activities are akin to dating during which women see if the Western man is the right person to commit to. Thai women also practice their spiritual beliefs by praying at local sacred places in order to find the ‘right’ Western husband. The author also highlights the “agency” of the ones “left behind” in the process of a transnational marriage (p. 149). The women’s parents are likewise important actors who support and help their daughter to get in this relationship.

In chapter six, the book discusses the transformation of local practice by transnational marriage. In terms of economy, the community witnesses the emergence of businesses related to transnational marriage like internet shops, English and Western culture courses and so forth. Regarding the gender dimension, Lapanun reveals the “vulnerability” (p. 145) of the local men by explaining that transnational marriages would reduce their power over Thai women. In the kinship relation, parents have less decisional power regarding their daughter’s marital choice and couple life. Once their life improves on an economic basis, the Thai spouses become the main provider for their parents. This gives them power over their natal family. Relating to social class dynamics, Lapanun refers to Bourdieu’s concept of “class distinction” (1984) to analyze the way that transnational marriage transforms the social hierarchy in the village. She highlights the “emergent class” (p. 155) that consists of women married to Western men. Their marriage enables them to move up from a lower to middle class position in society. It also enables them to make financial and material contributions to their community and offers them social prestige. Nonetheless, they would still be facing discrimination based on their original social position in the lower class and as a sex worker.

Being Thai herself and familiar to the *Isan* region helped the author to conduct a rich ethnography. On the other side, the author has focused less on the perspectives of Western men. It might be interesting to incorporate these views in order to understand their interpretations of participating in the social transformation of their Thai partner’s community. Note that the author mainly highlights successful transnational married couples that receive the social prestige within their community. It would also be interesting to know more about conjugal dynamics and to question how a successful marriage has been achieved. How is conjugal failure perceived in the local community?

Before closing this review, let us keep the book’s main subject in mind, which is the impact of transnational marriages on local communities. I highly recommend this book to postgraduate students and researchers interested in transnational marriage, migration, gender, and Asian studies. The book has a clear structure and contributes to understanding the dynamics of transnational relationships on a micro scale known as the sending community.



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