



Summary Report on
“Farang’s Wife: Relationship between Thai Women and Foreigners”

On May 3rd, 2005, from 1.30 to 4 p.m., the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization) launched a Thai seminar on ‘Farang’s Wife: Relationship between Thai Women and Foreign Men.’ This seminar is conducted by Dr. Rattana Bunmattaya, a lecturer at the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University.

As part of her research, Dr. Rattana looks at the cross-cultural marriage made by Thai women and foreigners as an interesting social phenomenon which has recently increased in a considerable number. In some villages of the Northeastern Thailand, 1 out of 3 families reportedly has a member that marries a foreigner.



Instead of focusing on the marriage for economic benefit or presenting some Northeastern women as the ‘goods for export’ like what the media regularly does, Dr. Rattana’s research emphasizes on life experiences of those women who get married to foreigners and live in foreign countries. It sees the bond made between the women and their family in the motherland, as well as the adjustment to social and cultural foreign contexts, knowledge, understanding and practices regarding the role of male and female, marriage and sexuality under change.



- Area and Study Methods

This research primarily earns information from the study of Ban Chan, the village of the Northeastern Thailand, where 84 out of 330 females marry foreigners. Dr. Rattana said that she knows this village from a newspaper’s article in Thai and English, which tells her the account of the ‘Cinderella’ village girls. She then had a five-month field research from August, 2004, to January, 2005.

The study methods include an in-depth interview with some women who have married foreigners during their homeland visit. Additional information is gained in terms of talking with their family members, relatives and friends there as well as more details from other villages in the nearby area.

From the field research, it is found that Ban Chan enjoys similar general condition to several villages; that is, drought which causes infertile agriculture. Consequently, the local have to work outside the village. In doing so, some of the local women have a chance to meet ‘Farangs’ and become their wife. The transnational marriage of Ban Chan started 20 years ago with ‘Mae Nang’, a woman marrying to a Swiss. Then, the network of ‘Farang’s wives’ has become extensive from Mae Nang’s relatives to other 84 women in the village.

- Northeastern Women and Transnational Emigration

‘Mae Nang’, the first Ban Chan woman who marries a foreigner

Mae Nang is the first woman of Ban Chan who gets married with a male foreigner and leaves Thailand for a foreign country. Now, 59, she has been for 22 years married to a Swiss. Mae Nang was born to a poor family. Her parents have only 5-Rai land while they have to take care of 9 children. Since her parents could not afford any advanced studies, Mae Nang only completed the primary level.

Poverty-stricken, Mae Nang decided to leave her family and worked for a furniture shop outside the village when she was only 10 years old. At the time, she met her first husband, a Chinese from Nakornsawan province who worked as a carpenter at the shop. When she reached 30, Mae Nang married the man and gave birth to 2 daughters. Sadly, when their children completed the primary level, Mae Nang got divorced and had to take care of her daughters by herself.

Despite struggling very hard to survive, Mae Nang could not make ends meet. Then, her friends suggested that she should work in Pattaya. There, she met her current Swiss husband who is 10 years older than she is. Both of them decided to try living together in Switzerland for 3 months to see if they could get along well or not. After the period, Mae Nang returned to Thailand and picked up her daughters to live with her in Switzerland.

While staying in Switzerland, Mae Nang did not want to depend only on her husband. She thus found a job and, after she earned some money, she opened a small grocery of various Thai ingredients. Then, the woman owned a Thai restaurant of which the business runs well thanks to her hard work and strict savings.

When her life is stable, Mae Nang returns to Thailand and picks up over 10 of her relatives to Switzerland. All of them work in the restaurant and most, no later than 3 months, get married with foreigners there. As a result, the ‘network’ of Thai women getting married with foreigners is extended. Now, there are around 84 female villagers from Ban Chan who live with ‘Farang’ husbands.

The story of Mae Nang inspires a lot of young girls and women in the village. They said that they wanted to marry ‘Farang’ because it brings to them money, social security and life stability.

Network Building in the Western World

According to a research conducted in 2004 by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), out of 219 northeastern women who marry a foreigner, 54% meet their future husband at their office, especially the entertainment venue, 20% know their future husband through their friends and relatives, over 20% meet their husband during a trip, and around 1 or 2% use a matchmaking company through the internet to work it out. For the case of Ban Chan, most of the Thai women marry a foreigner because of the network of their relatives and friends. Only few find their husband at office or by a matchmaking company.



Female villagers from Ban Chan can relate themselves to the western world through their family, relatives and friends. After they immigrate into the foreign country, their family or friends will help them out in terms of visa application, plane tickets, work and temporary residences during the first 3 months. Sometimes, these married women bring with them their husband’s family or friends when they visit the village. In doing so, other women there will be introduced to the foreigners. Consequently, this village’s network in Switzerland becomes gradually extensive until it is called, ‘Swiss Village’ or ‘Ban Chan Swiss.’

‘East’ Meets ‘West’: Cultural Interaction and Adjustment

Dr. Rattana considers that the cross-cultural



marriage made by northeastern women and foreigners under the cultural interaction context should be viewed creatively and resourcefully rather than the status of cash commodities, which brings economic profits to the country, as stated in the report of NESDB.

Therefore, the emphasis of this research is changed from economic profit to life experiences of the northeastern women who live in a foreign country due to the marriage with foreigners. Dr. Rattana’s research will explore the emotion, feeling, imagination, value, behavior and lifestyle of the couple resulted from cultural interaction.

The research provides some in-depth case studies of the life of 4 women: Chaba, Om, Ta and Rat. Their story, despite different in details, can be summarized to the fact that those women marry foreigners because they want to run away from repeated poverty and to act with gratitude as Thais believe that good daughters have to take care of their parents. However, the women explained that money is not the mere factor that encourages them to such marriage. Moreover, foreigners do not pay attention to the past and the female virginity. They seem more respectful and responsible than Thai male. Some women who have got married before said marrying foreigners is like ‘a miracle’ because their body remains valuable and returns powerful.

However, the couple of cross-cultural marriage usually faces problems on different language, religion, value and opinion against which both the wife and the husband have to cooperatively go if they want to sustain their relationship. Some couples spend 3 months together without saying anything to each other but using sign languages and drawing pictures. Normally, the husband will send his wife to attend a language class after which the wife will be fluent in speaking only.

The foreigner who marries a Thai woman is mostly an old man who experienced a divorce or lost his wife. He then feels lonely but, after getting married again with a Thai woman, turns fulfilled in life and impressed with Thai culture.

Theoretical Examination: Relations of the World and the Local

The trans-national and trans-regional migration by the modern people brings about cultural space that can be internationalized and localized. Although the telecommunication technology links different communities of this world, the local identity is not disappeared or faded in the current of globalization.

In analyzing the connection and interrelation between the local and the world, from the cross-cultural marriage by Thai women and foreigners, it is found that the local emerges itself in the world. Women from Ban Chan or others in the Northeastern Thailand who marry foreigners have re-made the Thai-Lao community in the world context. No matter where the women live, they still retain their relationship with their homeland under the value of daughters of gratitude. After they settle down firmly, they help the relatives who face hardship.

The researcher, nevertheless, finds that, while local identities can struggle in globalization, discourses, thinking, and norms in the world level are still influential. The experience of cross-national migration of the northeastern women exposes them to the western idea and tradition, particularly those concerning male-female relationship, marriage and sexuality. Such experience will more or less cause stress and conflict to the people involved in terms of individual identity and daily social interaction.

Conclusion

The study about cross-cultural marriage phenomenon between northeastern Thai women and foreigners under relationship of the local and the world will enable us to understand the culture of the modern world. Such culture is no longer static as we see ‘Thailand’ in the area that is not Thai.

The women who marry foreigners still foster their strong relations with their homeland on the one hand; on the other, experiences they gain from this marriage and migration provide them with social space where thinking and traditional norms regarding the meaning of sexuality and marriage is examined and negotiated.

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