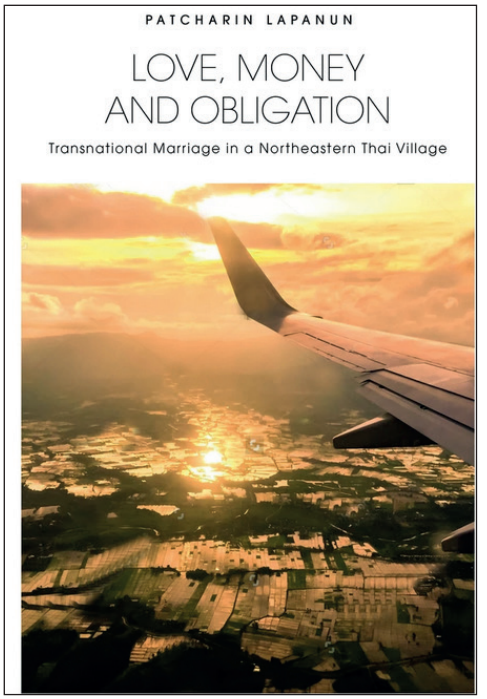
Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village by Patcharin Lapanun. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019. ISBN: 9789814722919 (paperback). SG$42.00, 936 Baht.



There are many books about love, money, and *farang* to be found in Thailand's English language bookstores. Many are focused on describing the bar scenes of Patpong, Pattaya, and Phuket for a voyeuristic English-reading audience. Other treatments are more academic, but the scholarly literature wobbles somewhere between the idea that work within the sex industry is freely chosen by the women and a form of liberation, and the idea that sex work is exploitative of women, and organized for the profit and pleasure of men. Patcharin refreshingly takes a different view, by describing the lives of village women navigating Western-style dating, sex work, and *farang* tourist culture. Doing this, she writes, they create a new life trajectory and perhaps a transnational family that stretches from Europe or North America, and back to the home village in Thailand. Patcharin describes these types of marriage and family as "transnational," a fusion of Thai and Western values regarding love, money and family obligations.

International marriage is an old story in Thailand as Patcharin emphasizes in the opening pages of *Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village*. But until recently, this meant that the couple chose one country or the other. Thai nobility brought wives from other countries for centuries. Chinese merchants also have a long history of moving to Thailand permanently, where they established new families. Such traditions, she points out, continued after the Second World War when Dutch prisoners of war took Thai wives abroad, with few ever returning to Thailand despite being abandoned in Indonesia, and elsewhere.

The arrival of American GIs in Thailand during the Vietnam War, Patcharin writes, resulted in a yet new type of relationship involving companionate American style "boyfriend/girlfriend" relations. These relationships often began with a cash transaction in a bar, but turned into an emotional commitment and temporary exclusivity known as a "rent-a-wife" arrangement (*mia chao*). Such relationships carried an assumption of temporary exclusivity lubricated with gifts of cash, shopping sprees, and companionship. These relationships often ended with some emotional wreckage at the conclusion of the military enlistment. Less typically the relationship ended with the permanent emigration of the wife to the United States.

Patcharin's book is about a more recent phenomenon emerging after the American

military left in 1975, that of the "*mia farang*." Typically, she writes, this relationship had its origin in bars or Internet dating forums mediated by matchmakers. Either way cash transactions are at the beginning of the relationship. But, from the perspective of the Thai women Patcharin interviewed, such transactions often contained a hope of establishing a permanent marriage, including the payment of a bride price (*sin sot*), wedding ceremony, and recognition of responsibilities back in the rural village Patcharin studied, Na Dokmai in Udon Thani province. A period working the bars as a sex workers sometimes happens, she points out, but is fairly brief in the longer trajectory of what becomes a transnational marriage, something she sees as distinct from "mixed marriage," "intermarriage," or "cross-cultural marriage." Transnational marriage means relationships are maintained in both the husband's home country and Na Dokmai in Thailand.

Out of the 159 transnational marriages in Na Dokmai, Patcharin identified twenty-five couples settled primarily in Na Dokmai itself at the time of her fieldwork (2008), while there were another 123 abroad, most of whom maintained contact and relationships with Na Dokmai. There were another eleven living in other parts of Thailand. To understand this phenomenon, Patcharin lived in Na Dokmai where she conducted interviews with the women, the natal families, and their husbands. She also travelled to Pattaya where she conducted interviews with women from Na Dokmai and elsewhere who arrived specifically to seek *farang* husbands.

Patcharin's surprising conclusion is that such transnational marriage actually seems to work out well for many, including the *farang* husband, Thai wife, mother-in-law, and step-children. To work out well though, they invent new assumptions about the marriage relationship drawing on obligations and passions derived from two countries. The fusion frequently results in what Patcharin says is love not only between the couple, but also for Thai step-children, and Thai parents-in-law. The results in Na Dokmai are marriages that acknowledge the emotional content of a companionate marriage, while being part of the importance of the extended Thai family, yet producing new transnational families in which hybrid understanding emerges. It is true that the financial benefits raise the status of the family, Patcharin writes. But more importantly there is often a shared *emotional* commitment to raising children, supporting parents and preserving the continuing communal Thai life of Na Dokmai.

Getting to love

Patcharin's point is that the Na Dokmai girl going to a matchmaker, (or to Pattaya) is pursuing security, love, and companionship, which are closely intertwined in her mind. First comes love of both her child and parents, and second a dream of having a *farang* husband to provide security and companionship. Potential *mia farang* from Na Dokmai were typically previously married to a Thai man, and often have a child from him. For that matter many of the *farang* men had failed relationships in their own country, and come as "sex tourists" to Thailand with or without hopes of marriage.

The Na Dokmai woman is single typically because she was betrayed by a husband who sought out other women, or simply disappeared. The potential *mia farang* racializes this situation, and refuses to seek another Thai man—in the belief that Thai men are

quicker to betray their wives, and will never accept step-parenthood. The woman seeks a *farang* who is presumably different, by consulting personal networks in Na Dokmai, cultivating relationships online, or quietly slipping off to Pattaya to work the tourist bars and massage scene. There she commodifies her body, to attract the gaze of the male *farang* tourist—cosmetics, hair, and a revealing dress are part of this—strategies which would be viewed as scandalous in Na Dokmai. It is of course a strategy designed to appeal to a *farang* male tourist with his own racialized ideas about a beautiful, sexual, and submissive Thai girl.

Attracting the *farang* male gaze is only the beginning. The goal is to become a girlfriend first to a tourist who is in Pattaya on vacation. There is of course a financial element to this—the money from sex work is needed to support her family in Na Dokmai. The goal though is to have a relationship that is more open-ended, then the "fee for service" found in prostitution. The open-ended relationship is partly in the tradition of older *mia chao* relationships rooted in gifts of clothing, cosmetics, and cash in what is only implicitly an exchange for sex and companionship. For the woman, and perhaps for some of the men too, the goal is the "longer term emotional security which extends beyond sex for money" (p. 109). This is consistent, Patcharin writes, with broader Thai norms regarding brideprice (*sin sot*), and payments for weddings which often reflect capacity to pay, and not simply market advantage.

Explaining the bar girl: it's not simply about victimization or agency

At the heart to the argument in *Love, Money and Obligation* is a rethink of the stereotype of the bar girl and her "customer." Patcharin's informants point out that the relationship is not simply transactional, neither before nor after marriage. The Pattaya period was typically brief, sandwiched between a failed relationship (and often a child) with a Thai man, perhaps factory work in Udon or Bangkok, and the drama of the intense search for a new husband among the idealized *farang* in which there may be shorter term *mia chao*-like relationships. It is indeed true that this is about women taking agency over this situation—but it is in pursuit not solely of financial profit, but of love for their children and parents first, and eventually for their new husband. This is a process of evolving and change—and goes, as Patcharin points out, far beyond the simple transactional nature of a stereotypical (and stigmatized) bar girl-customer relationship.

Embedded in this too is the evolution of the bargirl-*farang* relationship. In effect it is a Thai-ification of the boyfriend-girlfriend relationship first contrived by the American GIs, which morphed into first the *mia-chao* relationship of the 1960s-1970s, but since changed into the *mia-farang* relationships in villages like Na Dokmai. Such relationships are not really *farang* or Thai—they are a fusion of norms related to responsibility for Thai parents, *farang* ideas about companionate marriage, and perhaps uniquely, the relationship between *farang* step-fathers and their Thai children, which is neither typically Thai nor *farang*.

Rethinking the stereotypes of at least some farang sex tourists

Patcharin's second goal is to rethink the role of the male *farang* tourist who marries

the bar girl, settling down with her in Thailand and/or abroad. The men are commonly "blue collar" workers in their home countries (with a good proportion of pensioners, too). Many are substantially older than their new wives. Patcharin admires the men she interviewed. She acknowledges that they often have had unsuccessful relationships in their home countries, and arrive in Thailand perhaps seeking the racialized and stereotypical submissive Thai wife. But, as Patcharin shows, the men who actually marry into Na Dokmai families find something more complicated; with "Thai female submissiveness" comes an obligation to care financially and emotionally for his new wife, and her extended family. This includes parenting of his new step-children, and the obligations she has to her parents and extended family. In this, too, Patcharin resists the simplicity of a rational choice model rooted in Western concepts, which reduces the Thai-*farang* marriage simply to an economic transaction. She points to the broader context of relationship and obligations. While money is involved, so is love.

This gets back to Patcharin's main theoretical point—that the descriptions of Thai sex work which focus solely on the agency of the bar girl, or victimization by *farang* tourists, miss a bigger picture. The new *farang* husband financing a home in Na Dokmai, paying *sin sot*, financing temple festivals, and paying school fees may seem like a simple financial transaction. But Patcharin writes that they find not only a husband, but also as a step-father, and son-in-law. And thus a new transnational relationship between his home country and the rural Thai Village of Na Dokmai emerged.

But what do the men think?

Patcharin's book relies heavily on interviews with the Thai women involved, and their natal families. The interviews are enchanting. But less central are the *farang* husbands. They are presented as generous and contented. The views of the *farang* husbands of what it means to be integrated into a rural Thai village, or their own reasoning about why they have decided to commit so deeply to Na Dokmai whether as residents, or frequent visitors, are mostly missing.

Really missing though are the attitudes of the Thai men of the village, including the Thai fathers of the children of the *mia farang*. What do these men think about their situation, their ex-wives, and especially their children? Is it really true, as their ex-wives complain, that Thai men are unwilling to play a role in the lives of their children? And is it really true that Thai men are such reluctant step-parents as so blithely assumed by the women interviewed, and perhaps Patcharin herself?

Perhaps related to this would be an understanding of what the men's families in Europe, including ex-wives and children, think of the step-family from Thailand; after all they too are part of this transnational arrangement. But alas, I am afraid that that must be a separate book someday for Dr. Patcharin.

The uniqueness of the transnational Thai family

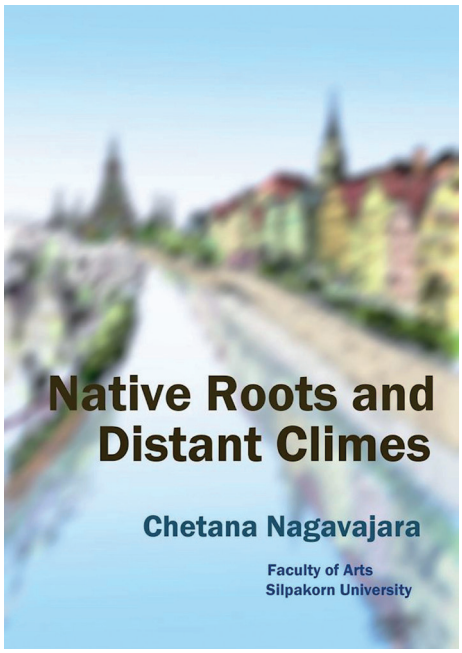
Still, what strikes me as being most unusual about the transnational family of Na Dokmai is the success of *farang* step-fathers. Step-parenthood is difficult in the West, as it is in Thailand. But somehow Thai women and their children charm step-fathering skills out of their new husbands, which I doubt they brought from their own

failed marriages in Germany, Sweden, or the UK. In fact, I think this paradox is what attracts me most to Patcharin's book. Reading *Love, Money and Obligation* helped me to understand the lives of my students at Payap University, a few of whom have *farang* step-fathers. Without exception students talking privately to me honor their step-fathers, deeply appreciating their kindness and the opportunities extended them through their mother's marriage. Some of these opportunities were financial and helped them pay school fees and travel. But most importantly they appreciate the love and affection of a father. This is quite different than the Western stereotypical step-parent, who is resented by their step-children.

The gist of Patcharin's story is that Thailand has somehow created room for a transnational family form in a remote rural village like Na Dokmai. Indeed such relationships may perhaps start as a transaction in a bar. But, as Patcharin points out, the story goes beyond a financial transaction, or "fee for service." The longings of the human heart are much more complicated. And it is nice that a rural village like Na Dokmai reminds us of this.

Tony Waters

Native Roots and Distant Climes: Collected Essays and Reviews in English and German (2014-2020) by Chetana Nagavajara. Nakhon Pathom: Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, 2020. ISBN: 978-616-572-756-3. 350 Baht.



Chetana Nagavajara, Professor emeritus of Silpakorn University, Bangkok/Nakhon Pathom, is an eminent comparatist, who has articulated intercultural hermeneutics using introspection coupled with capacity for objective assessment, supplemented by philosophical reflections of current affairs and trends through reflexive anthropology.

This review is focused on five of the six essays about "Native Roots" that portray aspects of Thailand's culture and history to reaffirm the open-mindedness of these hedonistic people inhabiting the "Land of Smiles" who do not look upon "others" as "aliens", but in the Buddhist way of perceiving them as "being of this world" (Pali: *satta-loka*).

In the essay entitled "The Others as Our Betters: Case Studies from Thailand" the point is stressed that Buddhism rejects racial distinction. The Thai have learned to benefit from the cultural heritage of "others" such as through the coexistence of Buddhist and