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## <Book Review>

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**Patcharin Lapanun. *Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2019.**

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***Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village***

PATCHARIN LAPANUN

Singapore: NUS Press, 2019.

**Making Sense of Transnational Marriage through the Eyes of *Mia Farang***

The northeastern region of Thailand, known as Isan, is a geographic nexus of complex issues subject to political, economic, environmental, cultural, and social investigations. This “problem” region is a source of academic fascination to many scholars. *Love, Money and Obligation: Transnational Marriage in a Northeastern Thai Village* is one of the latest contributions to the bulk of knowledge on Isan society.

The topic of discussion in this book is *mia farang*—Thai women married to Western men. The term carries negative connotations in certain contexts of use and often occurs in spoken language. Before reading the book, I had my own background knowledge and firsthand experience being friends with several *mia farang* or former *mia farang*. I myself was called this at times. These experiences shaped my expectations of this book. So, on the one hand I read the book as a person directly involved in the discourses of *mia farang*, but on the other hand I read it as a student of Isan studies with a background in Thai sociopolitical knowledge. However, I claim no expertise on either transnational or endogamic marriage in Isan but expect to learn from the book like anyone interested in the topic would do.

The book is based on the author’s ethnographic research carried out between 2009 and 2012 at multiple research sites but primarily in a village and its neighboring communities in the Isan province of Udon Thani, where 159 women of different ages were married to foreign husbands (p. 47). The majority of them were from humble socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of them were settled in the village, while others spent most of their time in their husband’s country. Trans-

national marriage in this village began during the Vietnam War and has continued until today. To explore the complexity of this phenomenon, the author asked several questions to tease out how social and cultural beliefs and practices interacted with the life choices that these women made before and after marrying Western men.

The book is organized into seven chapters. The most important point in the introduction is the author's discussion of her research methods. I find her detailed description of the research methods to be one of the most important strengths of this book. Because the majority of her *mia farang* informants were former sex workers whose life experiences were not always pleasant, I appreciate the author's recognition of her own limitations in delving into the thoughts and experiences of these women given how intimate or sensitive the issues could be. Thus, she does not pretend to be fully objective or claim to be an authoritative voice representing the emic views of her informants. Patcharin Lapanun's humbleness in this regard turns out to be a powerful and honest analytic tool. In addition to the methodological notes, the introduction augments the importance of the study by stressing the author's intention to examine not only *mia farang* but also other people living in *mia farang*'s native communities, in order to gain an understanding of how they play a part in the women's decisions (p. 16). It is the latter point that I look forward to reading in later chapters. In short, I think Patcharin gives a powerful and interesting introduction to her book.

The first chapter gives a historical background to transnational marriage in Thailand (and Siam). The author does an excellent job of placing the current trend of transnational marriage between Thai women and Western (or any foreign) men in its historical perspective. The section on Isan female sex workers during the Cold War helps to explain the origin of the widely held negative stereotypes and discrimination against Isan *mia farang* in general today. It also helps to explain why it appears to be more socially acceptable for members of the rich elite than for women of the lowest social stratum to marry Westerners.

The second chapter is about Na Dokmai, the main research site. The sharp contrast between the village's long agriculture-based economic struggles and its current materially developed, urbanized condition helps to explain the motivations of young women and men to leave their homes to seek a better life elsewhere—to cater to the needs and desires of US servicemen in the provincial capital of nearby Udon Thani during the Vietnam War, to migrate to the Central Plains for factory jobs, or to move overseas as laborers. It shows the economic inequalities that have plagued Isan until today. In the author's description of Na Dokmai, the village stands as a witness not only to the fact that this region is still on the receiving end of inequality in Thai society, but also to the fact that the ever-present inequality is the main driver for Isan people's aspirations of upward social mobility.

The third chapter is on motivations for transnational marriage. The author juxtaposes the "classic Western assumptions about romantic love and its extrication from financial motives" (p. 76) and her informants' motivations to seek Western husbands among both women with failed previous

marriages and younger, single women. I find it unnecessary to resort to a Western, romantic view on love and marriage as a point of comparison and departure. This is because it has already been well documented that marriage in the West is motivated by different reasons, not romantic love alone. Thus, prioritizing the traditional view of romantic love as the main factor for marriage, such as in the “for love or money” dichotomy, does not help to understand these *mia farang*’s motivations for marrying Western men. Doing so gives me the impression that the book aims to speak to and challenge those with conservative views. I personally think it would have been more helpful to compare typical reasons for endogamous unions among Na Dokmai villagers and the informants’ reasons for transnational marriage in order to see similarities or differences in a range of factors that individuals consider before deciding to get married (or to stay married).

Patcharin also outlines different reasons for divorced, former sex workers to marry Western men and contrasts them with those that drive younger, unmarried, educated women from well-to-do backgrounds to seek Western husbands. Some of the reasons for the union are the expected roles and responsibilities of male spouses, the negative image of local men, the shortage of local men with an attractive profile, the women’s social locations, and positive (perceived or real) attributes of Western men. To me these reasons are no different from those that any random woman considers in marrying any man (regardless of his ethnicity or nationality).

In the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters, conceptual discussions of reasons and dynamics for transnational marriage in the previous chapters are fleshed out through examples of life stories of *mia farang*. The author does a fine job of bringing out subtle details of their lives to support her theoretical claims. The main theme that recurs throughout the discussions is the women’s sense of responsibility toward their parents, relatives, or children from previous marriages. Their obligations are one of the main forces behind the women’s decision to seek a Western husband. But why a Western husband? Patcharin explains that the women see these men as more financially established, responsible, and accepting of them. Among those with previously failed marriages and/or backgrounds in the sex industry, they do not see themselves as desirable spouse candidates for Thai men (who in their experience are not good spouse candidates either). The author goes on to argue that as *mia farang*, they reinvent their identity by engaging in community activities as good members of society—organizing merit-making as good Buddhists and donating to various local causes.

Being associated with the West, materially well off, and benevolent, *mia farang* have earned a place in a distinct social category in village society that the author characterizes as a distinct “class” in Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of the word. However, I would have liked for the author to clarify this point. I believe this so-called class is marked with contestedness, which should be explored in detail. In addition to this, I was hoping the author would have more thorough discussions of the role of those left behind in the sending community in encouraging women to marry Western or other foreign men. I was hoping to hear voices of family members of the majority of *mia farang* from the village rather than a few parents of younger, often more educated village

women, who actively sought Western husbands for their daughters. To me these parents are not in the majority. It would have been more helpful to learn about the thoughts and feelings of parents or relatives of *mia farang* who endured struggles before meeting their spouses and whether and how these relatives supported or disapproved of these women's decisions regarding marriage. By focusing on this particular group of people, the book would likely tease out many issues related to inequality, which is one of the most persistent problems in Isan. Also missing were voices of the women's former spouses. Stories about these men are told largely through the perspective of *mia farang* or their relatives. I was also hoping to learn about these women's self-reflections on their decisions to leave home at a young age to work in the sex industry, on their work-related struggles, on their outlook in life and, more important, their self-esteem.

The picture of a typical *mia farang* that emerges in the book is of a woman who engages in sex work because of life hardships; she hopes for a better life so she can take care of her family back home. And to have a better life she makes the rational decision to marry a Western man who loves and takes good care of her despite her background that makes her undesirable to Thai men. She continues to maintain ties with the community by being a good Buddhist and member of the community. In this regard, the woman is not different from many other Thai women in striving to live up to traditional expectations. Note, however, that I make no claim about images of *mia farang* beyond the descriptions in this book.

As much as I enjoyed reading the book, I do not think I learned much as someone from the region who was already familiar with the subject matter. I am sure that many *mia farang* themselves would find much of the book to be common knowledge. But the great value of the book, which I am grateful for, is that this common knowledge may not be so common among many in the socially and politically divided society of Thailand, where stereotypes and prejudices are dominant and often accepted as norms and where people tend to see things as either black or white and good or bad. The book contains useful knowledge to help educate these people about the lived realities of contemporary Thailand. For those who are not familiar with Isan, this is a highly valuable book that sheds light on transnational marriage and its complex nature, with regional inequality in the background.

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