

MIGRATION FOR LOVE? LIFEWORLDS OF WHITE MEN IN BURIRAM



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In the following article I present the research project which I conducted on white men in Buriram, Northern Thailand, who either are or have been in long term relationships with Thai women. It is a subject which touches upon various delicate discourses such as class, gender, sex- and emotional care work – which are not only conflated in Thailand – and, in addition, entangled in local as well as global processes. As it was part of the seminar “Everyday Lifeworlds in Buriram” coordinated by Benjamin Baumann, I was primarily concerned with the everyday lives of these men. I focused on men rather than women because there is significantly less academic research about the former. Additionally, my subject position as a male researcher facilitated access to this particular field. During the research, I found an interplay of a Lebenswelt-approach which has its roots in Husserl’s phenomenology with the habitus concept of Bourdieu to be a promising theoretical approach. While the former aims to provide a better understanding of the “inside” of the men, the latter makes it possible to integrate these subjectivities into the process of their social and cultural production (Schneickert 2013, Prechtl 2017, Fellmann 2016, Schütz 1971). I embrace a relational understanding of culture instead of a substantializing or essentializing one.

Throughout the research process, I met various men discussing openly their distrust of women or making derogatory comments about “Thai culture” and “their greed for money.” Why is it that so many men feel this way about their (self-chosen) context?

To answer this question, I focused on the social constructions of love apparent in the context of my study. These men, as Nicole Constable states, contrast “true” love with a financial, pragmatic notion of relationships.¹ Just to make clear, neither do I follow their distinction of romantic concepts nor do I think that “in the West” relationships are practically separated from (pragmatic) interests other than “selfless” or “pure” love. It is rather a theoretical distinction between “romance” and pragmatism which can be explained by the history of “romantic love” as a specific Western concept that has evolved in the 18th century and includes – contrary to locally specific marriage strategies – among other qualities the mutual planning of life trajectories with an imagined complementary other, not another that was chosen by the family or out of financial reasons.² The idea of romantic love blurs the implicit pragmatic interests or, in accordance with Bourdieu, the uninterested calculus.³ In addition, various studies assert that certain gender specific obligations to which Angeles and Sunanta refer as “daughter duties”, have a strong impact on these relationships.⁴ They are interconnected with the matrilocality in this region and imply along with the (financial) care for the parents the active support of the local community.

1 CONSTABLE, N. (2003). *ROMANCE ON A GLOBAL STAGE: PEN PALS, VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY, AND 'MAIL ORDER' MARRIAGES*. BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS.

2 THIS IS THE DISTINCTION ANTHONY GIDDENS MAKES IN: GIDDENS, A. (2013). *THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTIMACY: SEXUALITY, LOVE AND EROTICISM IN MODERN SOCIETIES*. CAMBRIDGE: JOHN WILEY & SONS.

3 BOURDIEU, P. (1977). *OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF PRACTICE*. VOL. 16. CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 179f.

4 ANGELES, L.C. & SUNANTA, S. (2009). DEMANDING DAUGHTER DUTY: GENDER, COMMUNITY, VILLAGE TRANSFORMATION, AND TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES IN NORTHEAST THAILAND. *CRITICAL ASIAN STUDIES* 41(4), 549-574.

The relationships to foreign men may be one strategy to gain access to economic capital through which these duties can be fulfilled. On top of that, the economic capital serves as a way to renegotiate these obligations through having the opportunity of passing them on to a third person. Just because there is a culturally transmitted “rule” this does not mean that there are not plenty of ways to negotiate this “rule” which makes it rather a strategy in the sense of Bourdieu. This perspective opens up a way of thinking about the transnational relationships in which the women are not solely victims being exploited by white covetous men. While this does not necessarily imply turning a blind eye to a global capital gradient which makes sex tourism⁵ possible in the first place, it grants the women engaging in these relationships agency.

And the men? Their habituated perceptions as the theoretical distinction of the “hostile worlds” of romance and financial needs, as Viviana Zelizer calls them, may be an explanation for the frustration and hate some men feel.⁶ That being said, not everyone ends up frustrated. When romance is not theoretically placed opposite to financial and pragmatic aspects of relationships, “connected lives”⁷ can evolve.

5 MOST OF THE RELATIONSHIPS EMERGE FROM AND AROUND THE SEX TOURISM INDUSTRY.

6 ZELIZER, V. (2000). THE PURCHASE OF INTIMACY. *LAW & SOCIAL INQUIRY* 25(3), 817-848.

7 PARREÑAS, R. (2011). *ILLICIT FLIRTATIONS: LABOR, MIGRATION, AND SEX TRAFFICKING IN TOKYO*. STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

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