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Last year, almost 9,500 Thai women were living in the Netherlands, many married to Dutch men. Rather than assimilating and transferring their loyalty exclusively to Dutch society these Thai women still maintain strong social linkages with their families and local communities in Thailand, in particular through material contribution.

# Remittances and 'social remittances': *Their impact on cross-cultural marriage and social transformation.*

PANITEE SUKSOMBOON

Thai women have increasingly participated in international migration, particularly to Western European countries such as Germany, Denmark and Switzerland. In the Netherlands, it is estimated that there were about 13,112 Thai migrants in 2006 and of these, 9,483 were women. The number of Thai women living in the Netherlands has steadily increased and has, in fact, now exceeded that of their male counterparts (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2007; this statistic excludes Thais already possessing Dutch citizenship and those who live illegally in the Netherlands). Instead of transferring their loyalty exclusively to Dutch society and becoming completely assimilated, Thai women still uphold social linkages with their family and local community in Thailand. Apparently, an intense contact exists in the form of material contributions. The Thai women I interviewed sent either regular or irregular remittances back to their family in Thailand, ranging from € 100 to € 700 a month. Occasionally, they may remit extra money for medical expenses and for a special family occasion or life passage event such as a wedding or an ordination. The overseas income the women send home not only improves the family's financial security and well-being, but it is also used to support development projects within the local community. However, these remittances also generate a socio-economic disparity between those families with migrating women and those without. Moreover, they lead to economic competition and, as a result tensions among female villagers who have managed to realise cross-cultural marriage-cum-international migration to Europe.

## False impressions

The migrant women receive regular requests for remittances. Their families have high expectations in this regard, assuming that because they have a new life in Europe, and they are successful and continue to achieve upward economic mobility. However, the reality is that the women are in unskilled jobs that do not offer them a well-paid income. The cost of living in the Netherlands is also expensive. Therefore, most of the women only have a small amount of savings, or even no savings at all. Although the reality of their situation is that they do not experience the achievements of the 'successful' pioneer models who left Thailand before them, to some extent, they manage such pressure by applying 'impression management'. During their visits home, (usually

once or twice a year), many of the women arrive in their village in a fashionable outfit, wear golden jewellery and have designer shoes or handbags. They offer brand name products, chocolate and souvenirs from the Netherlands as gifts for their family. During their stay, the women arrange all-expenses paid trips to other provinces in Thailand for their family members. Nit, for instance, spent nearly 300,000 baht (around € 6000) when she and her husband visited her family and sons in Thailand in 2005. She bought lot of clothes for her sons and took them out to many restaurants. She arranged a trip to Pattaya, a city located at the Gulf of Thailand, for her parents, sons, an older sister and a brother-in-law. She paid all the expenses such as accommodation, the hire of a van with a driver, and food. Since her savings were not enough to cover all these costs, she borrowed € 3000 from a Thai female private lender in the Netherlands. On her return, she had to pay back this debt.

It is not just the women themselves, but also their Dutch husbands who, intentionally or unintentionally, are involved in creating an exaggerated impression of success. The Thai parents anticipate that their European son-in-law is well-off and able to provide a monthly allowance to their daughter, which will include remittances to them. Such expectations lead the women to remit money to their parents from their own income, while letting their parents believe that the money is provided by their Dutch husband. Without realising the truth, the parents praise their foreign son-in-law for his generosity and readily share their appreciation of him with their relatives and neighbours.

The women's construction of their material success can lead to conflicts with their Dutch partners. The husband can accept that his Thai wife must take gifts for her parents and children, but he does not comprehend why she needs to spend large sums of money on buying presents for the wider family, or even for close neighbours in the village. Because of the perception of wealth in European society, the parents of the women misconceive the socio-economic status of their foreign son-in-law. They fantasise that he must be affluent. As a consequence he is obliged to pay for all expenses when the women's parents and other relatives accompany him and his Thai wife on a trip. Some of the Dutch men I interviewed reported their unease with, and dislike for, this state of affairs. They believe it is unfair

and unreasonable for them always to have to pay for all their Thai wife's relatives whenever they have outings together. Nevertheless, if they refuse to do so, they know it can cause their wife to be unhappy. Tensions between Thai-Dutch couples arise easily because the refusal of the Dutch husband to pay causes loss of face for the women and suggests financial failure to their parents and relatives. Some women simply have to explain this to their husband, while others find a solution by letting their husband pay first and then reimbursing him later.

## 'Social remittances'

Transnational practices involve not only the geographical movement of people, but also multiple transactions of monetary resources, goods, symbols, and political and cultural practices (Faist 2000; Guarnizo and Smith 2002). The term 'social remittances' is suggested by Levitt (2001: 54-60) to refer to the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from the host society to the sending country. They are the social and cultural resources that migrants bring with them to the receiving country. Equally, 'social remittances' are ideas and practices that are transformed in the host country and transmitted back to original communities, generating new cultural products that emerge and challenge the lives of those who are left behind. These social remittances are intentionally and unintentionally transferred by migrants when they return, when non-migrants visit migrants in the receiving country, or through the exchanges of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails and telephone calls. With regard to the Thai migrant women in the Netherlands and the non-migrants who remain behind in Thailand, the 'social remittances' clearly influence shifts in attitude, cultural practices and social values regarding international migration in the community where the women originally come from. The image of economic success from overseas income that the women present through their contact with or visits home serves only to strengthen the already high opinion non-migrants in Thai society have of living abroad. Instead of overthrowing the misconception of affluent Europe, the migrant women consciously or unconsciously conform to it by displaying the trappings of financial success. To save face, the women generally do not tell their parents and relatives in Thailand about the reality and the hardship of their life in the Netherlands. Rather, they prefer to let their family members believe that they are doing well by sending regular remittances. This 'deception' means the cycle is destined

to be repeated by the many non-migrant women who come to think of international migration and living overseas as a dream, and something they wish to experience, at least once in their life.

Significantly, the migrant women almost never share the difficulties they have encountered - such as adapting to a marriage relationship with a partner from a different culture, the hardship of adjusting to a new society and the experience of ethnical and occupational discrimination - with potential immigrants. These valuable experiences could be useful orientation and preparation tools before women depart to the receiving country. As long as the financial advantages of living abroad are exaggerated, and the physical hardship and emotional costs played down, it is unsurprising that so many newcomers experience an uncomfortable clash between their dream and reality after arriving in the Netherlands.

## Marrying 'up'

Cross-cultural marriages of Thai-Dutch couples result in a transformation of marriage choice in the rural community. The representation of financial success, increased social status and successful international marriage stimulate many young female rural villagers to follow this 'successful' model by undertaking intermarriage and migration. Compared with a foreign man, marrying a local one is seen as less preferable. It gives less opportunity for upward social and economic mobility, (Ideally, women in Thai society tend to marry a man who is socially and financially better off than they are). Moreover, the image of Thai men is often a negative one because many migrant women have bad experiences with a Thai former husband. As a result the Thai man is often reconstructed as somebody who abandons his wife and children, is financially irresponsible, has a mistress, and is addicted to gambling or alcohol. A study on cross-cultural marriage of Thai women in the North-eastern Thailand (The National Culture Commission Office cited by The Nation, August 28, 2006) reveals the preference of parents to have a foreign son-in-law, since he is seen as better able to support the family financially than a local man. Because of the popularity of cross-cultural marriage-cum-international migration among the village women, informal matchmaking - through kinship- and friendship-based social networks - between a potential bride and a foreign man, and giving assistance in the migration procedures, has become a lucrative business for pioneer migrants.

If the foreign man finally agrees to marry a Thai woman and brings his bride to the Netherlands, the informal matchmaker will receive a payment from either the foreign man or the Thai woman. According to the data from fieldwork, this payment ranges from € 1000 to € 3000, depending on the agreement that was made and the level of assistance, (for example, whether it is only establishing the contact or arranging plane tickets and visa application). Some Dutch men, who witness the cross-cultural marriage of a male friend with a Thai wife, might also like to follow this route. They request the Thai wife of their friend to introduce a woman to them. Others make contact with a Thai woman when they accompany their married friend to Thailand. Through the social networks of family and friends, and the preference of some Dutch men to marry Thai women, several migrant women from the same local community in Thailand can end up migrating and settling in the same city in the host country. It can be predicted that within a few decades, specific villages of returned migrant women will be noticed in Thailand. ■

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\* This article is a part of a paper 'Remittances and 'Social Remittances': Their Impact on Lived Experiences of Thai Women in the Netherlands and Non-Migrants in Thailand', presented at the conference on International Migration, Multi-Local Livelihoods and Human Security, The Hague, the Netherlands, 30-31 August 2007.