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Thai migrant women in the Netherlands : cross-cultural marriages and families

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Summary

This thesis examines the marriage migration of Thai migrant women to the Netherlands and the ups-and-downs of their everyday life of creating and maintaining their cross-cultural and/or long distance relationships with their Dutch husband, Dutch in-laws, Thai relatives and friends in the Netherlands as well as family and non-migrant neighbours in Thailand. The objective of this research is to study four main questions: 1) What factors influence the Thai women to marry and to move? 2) What are the underlying family values in Thai and Dutch societies which shape the marital relationship of the Thai-Dutch couples and their interaction with natal and in-law families? 3) How do the Thai migrant women form, sustain and renew their relationships with kin and friends in the Netherlands? 4) What are the consequences of migration and transnationalism on the women's and their families' life transition and on daily experiences of non-migrants in the sending community? I have applied a qualitative approach and such ethnographic research methods as a review of relevant literature, in-depth interviews and participant observation to the data collection and its analysis.

Cross-cultural marriages of Thai migrant women to the Netherlands may not constitute a high figure, but such marriages form some specific features. First, it is a novel phenomenon and links to the process of globalisation, transnationalism and the improvement of transport and communication, which generate contact between the Thai women and Dutch men and allow them to maintain a long-distance relationship in an initial stage. Second, such intermarriage is a particular way Thai women use to move to the Netherlands. By marrying a Dutch husband, the women form a majority of Thai migrants in the Netherlands. In 2008, the total number of Thai migrants was 14,281 and 10,225 of them were women. Among first generation migrants, the women make up of 8,260 persons (81 per cent).

Chapter One argues that economic gain and the opportunity for migration are not the only stimuli which drive the Thai brides to marry and to move. Other historical and socio-cultural determinants as well as gender enter the picture. The chapter also deconstructs the Euro-centric idea of modern marriage which is based on an individual's own choice and 'romantic love'. Family on both sides does engage in the decision to enter a cross-cultural marriage, although in

different ways and degrees. The socio-economic status and life-courses of the Thai-Dutch couples also shape their marriage motivation and the extent of family involvement in such marriage. By delving into the cultural and practical dimensions of marriage in Thai and Dutch societies, this chapter challenges the idea that 'love' is the only basis for marriage and illustrates that marriage preference and rituals form a cultural specificity, which is defined differently in a given society.

Another important fact pertaining to cross-cultural marriage concerns the confrontation between the two different sets of family responsibilities of the two spouses, which are analysed in Chapter Two. The Thai family scripts define both natal and affinal relatives as members of *khrop khrua* (family) and place a high value on adult children's gratitude towards their parents. On the Dutch side, there are two clear-cut family concepts: *gezin* (two spouses and their young children) and *familie* (extended bilateral relatives), which rarely share residence and household economy with each other. As a result, it is a priority for the Thai migrant wife to contribute to her parents' well-being and sometimes to extend this help to the entire family. Often this can be a problem as a Dutch husband does not expect his new bride to have financial commitments to her family at home. As the women are socialised to the Thai idea of reciprocity between relatives and in-laws, they also have difficulty in making sense of situations in which the Dutch in-laws undertake fewer obligations and when these in-laws fail to provide them with daily assistance and care. The last part of this chapter illustrates that the couples negotiate and compromise about different family norms and this is reflected by the various arrangements of their household economy.

As mentioned earlier, I pointed out that marriage, 'love', intimacy and family are subjected to the different cultural meanings and perceptions, varying according to society. This awareness allows me to become acquainted with how the different forms of kinship and how 'families' are conceptualised and given shape. It also provides me with the knowledge from anthropological studies of kinship and new insights in this field, which has moved away from the predominant orientation towards formal 'form' of kinship into a more nuanced understanding of meanings and individual's space to reshape/recreate their relationship. In Chapter Three, the concept 'relatedness' (Carsten 1995; 2000; Strathern 1992), for example, is applied to investigate the more open meanings as well as the social and emotional aspects of the ways of being relatives

and friends among Thai migrant women in the Netherlands. Instead of assuming kinship to be one of the most special relationships and something self-perpetuating, this chapter suggests that sharing blood alone does not have to guarantee constant assistance between pioneer migrants and their newly arrived relatives. Being each other's relatives is a situation which also has to be nurtured through sharing material help, mutual assistance and emotional support over time. These qualities mark the continuation or the breakdown of their ties. Furthermore, I underscore the dynamic features of friendship among the Thai migrant women by illustrating that they define, select and establish various forms of acquaintanceship and friendship with their female expatriates, which are reflected by a range of Thai words used to describe them. This chapter also presents the fact that disparate ideas and practices of Thai and Dutch friendship result in misinterpretations and sometimes marital conflicts among the couples.

Chapter Four indicates that marriage migration influences not only the women's geographical movement, it also affects the transition in their life-courses and family care. The women do not define their experiences of relocation, career change and disruption and social mobility in the Netherlands in the same way. Instead, their perceptions are determined by their social position, socio-economic backgrounds of their natal families and the Thai imagination of overseas affluence. To cope with great distance and change in family life-cycles caused by marriage migration, the women adopt various arrangements for the upbringing of children. This chapter reveals that the ideas of motherhood and the practices of mothering are socially and culturally influenced. The biological mother may be viewed as an exclusive source of child care, particularly among middle classes, in Dutch society. By contrast, child-rearing is performed by both the mother and a wider cycle of relatives in Thai society. This chapter finally points out that the women's economic contributions to their natal families should not be perceived as simply a way to fulfil filial obligations; they are also an exchange for family care with their family members.

Marriage migration and transnationalism shape the women's linkages with the families they have left behind and unavoidably affect the livelihood of non-migrants in the origin community, which is discussed in Chapter Five. The women form multi-dimensional and changeable feelings of community and 'home' to deal with the geographical separation from their

natal families and the situations they face daily. The remittances the women send home have ambivalent consequences; they improve the welfare of the women's families, but also generate socio-economic inequality between families with migrants and non-migrants. Not only cash, but also 'social remittances'—ideas, symbols and practices which flow from the receiving to sending countries (Levit 2000)—are combined with the Thai perception, which views Europe as a wealthy region, instigating the female villagers' preference for marriage migration. This chapter proposes the term 'reversal of social remittances' to demonstrate that values, ideas and practices are also transmitted back to the receiving area and to some extent challenge attitudes and lifestyles of the hosts who contact immigrants. In this case, a group of Dutch men who witness the 'successful' marriage of Thai-Dutch couples and later wish to follow such a route are an example of the 'reversal of social remittances'. This chapter ends with an analysis of the reverse flow of the retired Dutch men and their Thai wives to Thailand and their adaptation to resettlement in Thailand.