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WOMEN IN THE CITY OF CONSUMPTION:
MARKETS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN BANGKOK, THAILAND

by

ARA WILSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of
New York

1997

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Abstract

WOMEN IN THE CITY OF CONSUMPTION:
MARKETS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN BANGKOK, THAILAND

by

Ara Wilson

Advisor: Professor Shirley Lindenbaum

This dissertation is an historic and ethnographic study of the relation between changing forms of markets and the construction of femininity in Thai society, based on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork, library research, and textual analysis. Contemporary Bangkok is comprised of an array of markets which involve women as sellers, consumers, and also as symbols. Noting that women's engagement with markets is long-standing or even "traditional," I argue that in fact Thai female identities are, and have been, defined by and through market relations. The thesis explores varying ways through which the identities of Thai women are expressed and revised -- or constructed -- within six different "modern" venues for buying and selling in Bangkok. These venues are: Chinatown

and Sino-Thai shophouses, department stores, malls, the sex industry for foreign tourists, marketing and telecommunications industries, and direct sales. Overall, these distinct but overlapping markets illustrate the ways that gender ideals and behaviors have transformed in relation to Bangkok's development from a royal entrepot to a world city intersected by transnational flows of commerce, capital, tourism, and mass media.

Through the history of the Sino-Thai merchant class and the innovative department store, I explore the relationships between ethnicity, gender, and economy in the development of Bangkok as a "city of consumption." Thailand's modernization project involved a contrast between female- and family-based markets and professional retail which shapes contemporary understandings about women's economic roles. Next, I examine the "economies of intimacy" involved as young women negotiate intimate relationships in sites of commercial leisure markets, exploring the cases of women enacting a tom (lesbian or transgendered) identity in malls and of workers in the sex industry of Patpong. Turning to transnational markets, I examine the ways upwardly-mobile or elite Thais navigate the gender and class constraints of their local changing social worlds by using the international knowledge and symbols derived from work at a cable television company and in direct sales (e.g., Avon, Amway).

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The theme of this dissertation is social exchange, which perhaps offers one way to look at the rather one-sided exchanges, material and otherwise, which went into producing it. In a time of dire budget cuts all over -- but hitting no university more severely than the City University of New York -- it is important to acknowledge the irreplaceable importance of those few financial resources that exist. To begin with, let me gratefully acknowledge the diverse sources for the substantial expense that underwrote years of graduate study and many months of fieldwork. My study of the Thai language was facilitated by a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) award and a City University of New York Women's Faculty and Staff Development Fund (which I received in my capacity as adjunct instructor). Grants from the Department of Anthropology fund and from Sigma Xi underwrote a three-month preliminary fieldwork excursion in 1988. Assisting the costs of fieldwork were generous awards from the Kenneth B. and Mamie Phipps Clark Dissertation Award and the Southeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies (which at that time so helpfully targeted students at schools lacking Southeast Asian resources). A timely gift from William S. Wilson, Jr., also allowed the research to

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Other individuals, friends and family and that mixture of both, have stepped up to fill in the large gaps between this institutional support and my needs. At various times, William Wilson, Janet Baus, Suzanna Walters, and Rachel Pfeffer have offered important loans or gifts. Through the good-humored and ever-helpful office of Educational Resources at the Graduate Center I was able to borrow such equipment as a video recorder, camera and lens, and tape recorder, at great risk, for fieldwork.

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INTRODUCTION

WOMEN IN THE CITY OF CONSUMPTION

A poster advertising Thailand to potential visitors from other countries features a Thai girl sitting gracefully amidst a splendorous variety of fruits. The caption at the bottom reads, "Thai fruits," as if the female figure were one among the array of natural, edible wonders of this Southeast Asian kingdom. One of the staples in representations of Thailand internationally is a young, attractive, and (presumably) alluring woman. Whether explicitly sexual, as in the many discussions of the sex industry, or more suggestive of enchanting availability, as with the fruit poster, representations oriented towards foreign audiences personify the appeal of the Thai nation through young, feminine bodies.

In foreign as well as Thailand's own representations, Thai women are often signified in relation to consumption and commodification, most dramatically in the prominent and extensive industry of sexual services and trafficking of women. An array of popular and commercial narratives about 'Oriental' or Asian women presents them as consumable for Western men (e.g., Matthaei and Amott 1990;

Trinh T. Min-ha 1989; Wilson 1988), an enduring tradition well-represented in the Thai tourist imagery (Manderson 1995; Truong 1990).¹ These representations of Thailand offer "a veritable bordello for the Western erotic imaginary" (Morris 1994: 15) but also for viewers in industrialized East Asia (e.g., Asian Women 1980). Yet within Thailand, symbolic regimes also link women with male consumption, notably in notions of sexually taking, tasting, or using women (Bao 1994). Beauty pageants provide ubiquitous and perpetual spectacles of similarly attired young women, from the annual village contest to the televised Miss Thailand extravaganza in Bangkok (Reynolds 1994: 75; Van Esterik 1996). Thus, a prevailing image of Thai women (and other Asian women) presents them as commodities. Conversely -- or by extension -- another related trope is woman-as-hyper-consumer, or even as the incarnation of excess consumption itself. Western depictions of certain forms of Asian femininity present a vision of female as an insatiable and illegitimate consumer, memorably of Imelda Marcos the shoe fanatic or 'Dragon Lady' (Goldstein 1987). Within Thai folk culture and mass media, for example, many ghosts take the form of predatory females, some versions of which sexually consume males (Mills 1995). Prominent local and international representations of Thai

¹ In the case of gay or male-to-male appeals, representations revolve around the young male body. Other critics have analyzed Western representation of Asian men as alternately despots or eunuchs (e.g., Wong 1978).

and Asian femininity position the female gender as both objects and agents of consumption.²

Even amid the instrumental depictions of the tourist industry there are alternate renditions of women's link to commodity exchange. A standard feature in tourist fare is the "floating market," a canal where in the early morning women sell durian, rambutan, or other indigenous produce from small canoes. The organized bus tours and the picture postcards of the floating markets signal a quaint Thai tradition, presenting the historical form of trade as a cultural survival in the face of capitalist development.³ Nostalgic images of female merchants in the floating market or other "traditional" outdoor markets point to another significant dimension of women and commercial exchange: a long-standing history of Thai women predominating in local-level, small scale selling. Local markets are associated with women in Thailand as elsewhere in "traditional" and contemporary Southeast Asia: Indonesia (e.g., Brenner 1995), Malaysia (e.g., Firth 1966; Laderman 1982), Burma (e.g., Khiong 1984), Cambodia (e.g., Ebiyara 1974) and the

² This formulation captures the dualistic images of Thai women in popular culture, described by Darunee and Shashi (1988: 124), for example, "as either being usually progressive and emancipated...urban female executives and business women, or being oppressed, victims of prostitution."

³ While some floating markets continue their conventional functions in the hinterlands and vendors in motorized craft sell snacks to guests at riverside restaurant-bars in Bangkok, the floating market of the tours is designed expressly for tourists (i.e., a 'tourist trap').

Philippines (e.g., Boserup 1970; Blanc-Szanton 1990). In this Southeast Asian region, peasant women bring extra produce and crafts to markets in the hamlets or district and some of these specialize in marketing produce, prepared foods, petty goods, or contraband. Women vendors fill the small-scale markets and the family shops (where they are mainly unpaid workers) in all regions of Thailand. In several parts of the world, such as East Africa and much of Southeast Asia, trade is handled by local women and foreign men (Boserup 1970: 92).

In Thailand, selling is appropriate work particularly for Thai women and the ethnic Chinese men and women (e.g., Kirsch 1975), not only in now-old-fashioned outdoor markets but also in modern retail venues, even real-estate, a tendency reflected in the disproportionate numbers of women in the service sector as a whole. Paradoxically, even as such activity is regularly noted in scholarly, popular, and commercial representations, the same marketing and entrepreneurial efforts are neglected, marginalized, or even obscured in Thai and foreign official discussions of "Thai society," most obviously in Western discussions of the traditional "Thai" aversion to business, commerce, or entrepreneurship (e.g., Ingram 1954; Kirsch 1975).

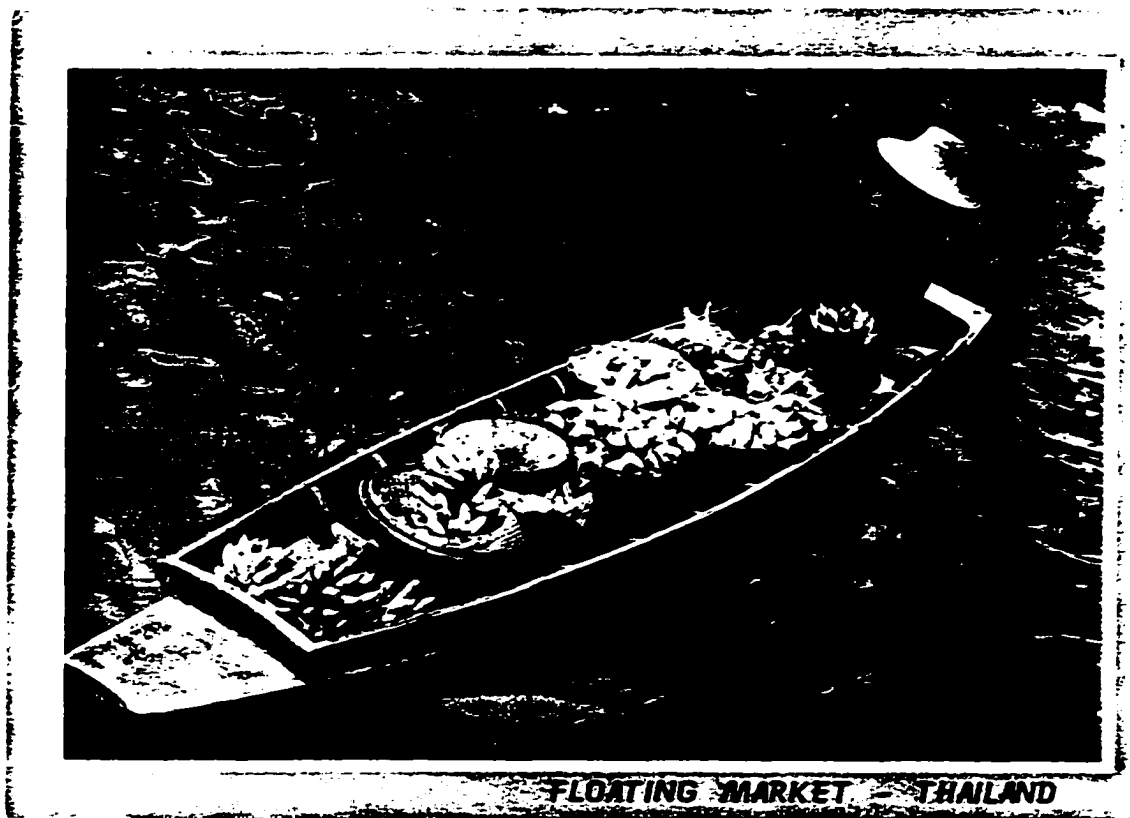


Figure 1. Floating Market. This tourist postcard depicts not the collective floating market but a solo vender in her sampan.

Within Thai cultural imagery and practice (more than within foreign imagery), then, women are associated with both ends of the commodity exchange: buyer and seller, distributor and consumer, and also in a 'symbolic economy' both agent and symbol. In the famous words of Claude Levi-Strauss, referring to the symbolic and human exchanges of the marriage 'market,' "woman could never become a sign and nothing more... since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs" (1969: 496).⁴ Yet an important dimension suggested by Levi-Strauss' work and theorized by Gayle Rubin in her classic reformulation of these questions (1975) is the asymmetry of women's positions as objects and agents of exchange. That is, women's circumscribed abilities to exchange signs, cowrie shells, or sexuality does not change the fact that they do not control cultural and transnational trafficking in female images, bodies, and persons. And when commodity exchange engulfs, transforms, or mingles with other forms of social and cultural exchange -- as is certainly the case with Bangkok -- the question of women's participation in a symbolic and material economy in which she is a sign becomes perhaps more complicated.

In this thesis, I explore the tensions between Thai women's position as exchangers, consumers, and signs in relation to market exchange. Fortunately, Bangkok offers an

⁴ And as Amara (1996: 3) reminds us, in Elementary Structures of Kinship Levi-Strauss drew heavily on Edmund Leach's depictions of the Kachin in neighboring Burma.

abundant selection of retail forms, as a city comprised of an overwhelming array of markets, a city whose very development derived from the profound expansion of a market economy since at least the early 19th century but intensifying during the last several decades. Streets, canals, and public spaces -- including Buddhist temples -- are often lined with vendors hawking food or goods from a sheet of plastic on a sidewalk, from baskets carried on a brace, or from mobile stalls. Every part of the city has a market area providing household goods and produce, and many now house a department store branch or shopping mall, and some quarters are especially known for certain goods. For example, a person who wants to buy monks bowls, robes, candles, and other offerings for the Buddhist monastic order, or potent Buddhist amulets and sacred Hindu, Chinese, or Thai icons, could go to a long-standing market area in the old city (where nearby they could also buy roast chicken from a street seller or Kentucky Fried chain, or other vended snacks in a well-known market area slated for eradication). There is an area between the old city and Chinatown that sells moist flowers wholesale. There are specific zones selling sexual services to predominantly male customers (Thai or foreign), but smaller massage parlors and brothels pervade the city. Maps of the city are mottled with the pastel color that keys "shopping areas" and these areas by and large, as I show, are key sites for the work, leisure, and symbolism of women.

This thesis explores varying ways through which the identities of Thai women are expressed and revised -- or constructed -- within six different, "modern" venues for buying and selling in Bangkok, Thailand: Chinatown; department stores; a downtown shopping mall; a commercial sex zone; a telecommunications marketing office; and the direct-sales industry (see map). Chinatown is a congested, colorful zone which comprises an array of wholesale and retail markets. The people who inhabit this neighborhood are "Chinese" -- a complicated term which includes Thais and Sino-Thais -- as well as Indians and Thais, and overwhelmingly their livelihoods are devoted to commerce, but such concerns overlap with other aspects of life -- with the many temples and shrines, public offerings of ducks and votive papers, and every day life in extended households. This area consists of narrow streets lined by two-to-four-storey shophouses, in which many families continue to live and work, often running a shop which opens onto the ground-floor front. Traces of the areas long-term centrality in the Thai economy remain, as it remains a key distribution point for produce by the river, and for paper goods, plastics, and fabrics on the cramped lane called Sampeng.

Second, I consider department stores, of which there are several dozen in the greater metropolitan area, staffed by educated, uniformed workers and subcontracted maintenance staff. The elite shop at the Sino-Thai Central and Robinson, or the Japanese Isetarn and Sogo, but lower-middle or

working class Thais also frequent such the Indian-Thai ATM chain, among others. Bangkok residents regularly head for these large, modern-styled buildings to buy foreign-label clothes and perfumes, stylish or routine housewares, and groceries in the well-stocked supermarkets. Perhaps more significantly, a common pastime of huge numbers of Bangkok inhabitants with any means to speak of are visits to air-conditioned department stores or increasingly shopping complexes -- the third market form I study -- where they can watch movies, have their hair cut, or eat in the many fast-food chains or Japanese restaurants.

The next "market" I consider is a more well-known form of commercial leisure I have already alluded to, that of commercial sex for foreigners. The go-go bars and sex establishments catering to Western, East Asian, and Middle Eastern men employ mostly young women migrants from the northeast of Thailand, and are found in specific, rather prominent areas (but these by no means exhaust the array of tea houses, brothels, nightclubs, escort agencies, and such). The most famous of these is Patpong, located in a downtown area across from office buildings and shopping complexes. It consists of a couple of lanes with two-storeys of neon-bedecked bars, the first floor opening out with the sounds of pop music, the solicitations of touts, and the sight of women in bikinis dancing on bars; the upper storey featuring more extravagant displays of nude dancing and "sex shows."

Multinational or transnational forms of marketing are well represented in Bangkok, although perhaps less visible in the architecture and infrastructure of the city. It seems that nearly every surface in Bangkok is susceptible to advertising in Bangkok: the top and back of motorized rickshaws -- even the drivers' helmets bear commercial stickers, floats in a parade, as well as boats, buildings, and storefronts. Television is by now a pervasive part of Thai life, found in homes of poor and wealthy, in restaurants, long-distance buses, and even Patpong bars. Such a commodified media adds not only commercials on television but also advertising about television, which is the subject of my fifth chapter. I discuss a marketing office of a new cable television company which was part of a growing telecommunications empire (which also provided the mobile phones and pagers that were rapidly becoming necessities to the well-to-do classes). Within all of this high-tech business, face-to-face selling continues, or even thrives, as is the case with vendors using catalogues to sell from a company, or direct sales, which is the transnational method of the American companies Amway and Avon, among others. These sellers, mostly women, bring their colorful catalogues into the factories or offices where they work, into their dorms or neighborhoods, or even into villages when they return home, and the talcum powder, deodorant, or face creams of direct sales brands can be found in local market stalls.

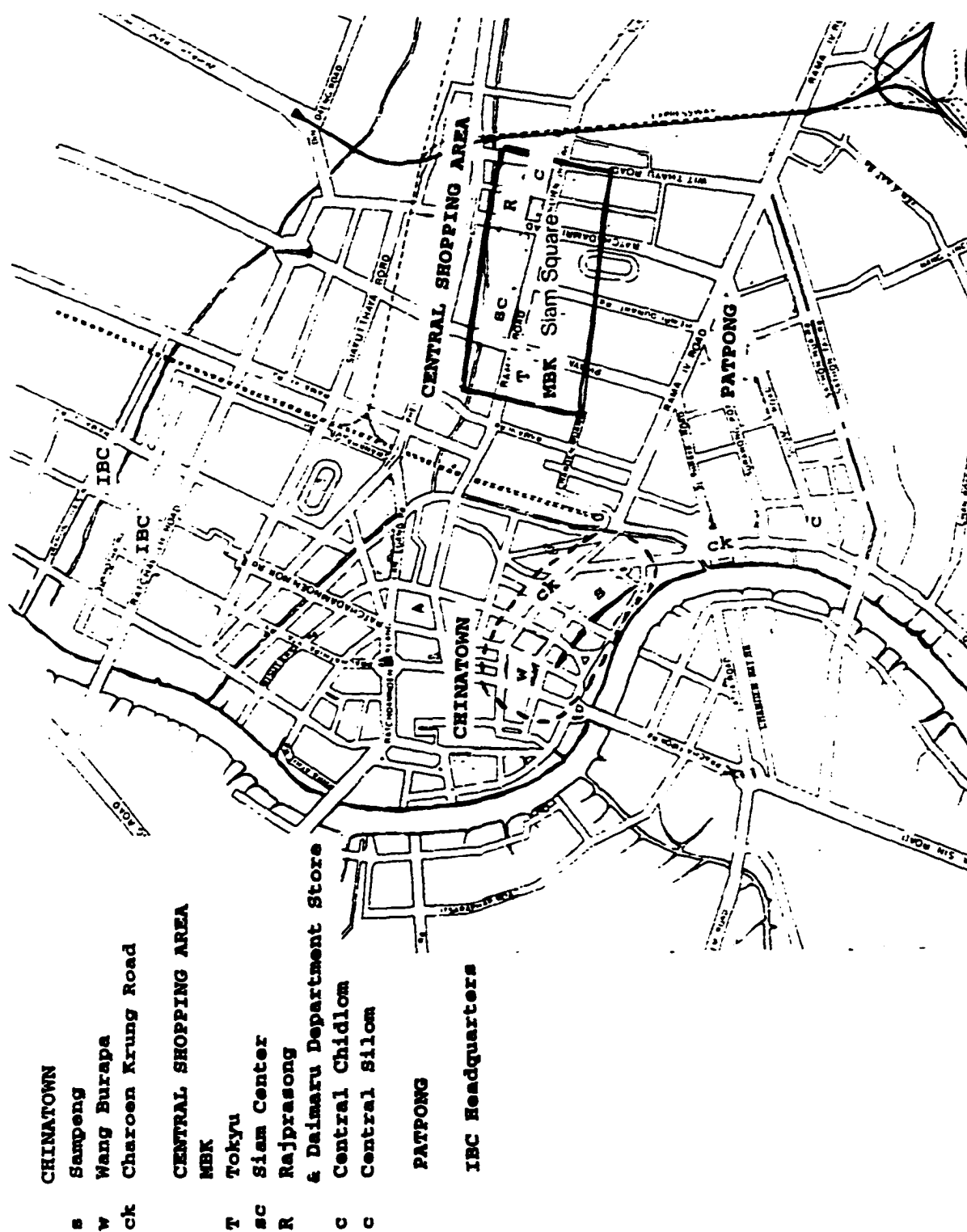


Figure 2. Map of Market Areas of Bangkok.

These divergent six commercial arenas, ranging from wholesale merchants to transnational industries, are 'modern' in that they are contemporary and also associated with 'modernization' in Thailand -- which they helped produce. Yet I refer to them as "markets," meaning a venue for commodity exchange, in order to widen the field of investigation by encompassing the juxtapositions of vending, merchandising, hawking, haggling, marketing, and retailing which pervades the capital city and to a great extent defines its character. In this thesis, I show how markets in general are especially significant for gender meanings in Thailand. Markets capture the multiple gender dimensions of commodity exchange, as the sites where Thai women and womanhood are constructed as buyers and sellers, consumers and consumed. Markets offer ethnographic and historical sites to observe where women's lives interact with gender meanings, at different intersections of "tradition" and "modernity," global and local. By placing village produce stalls on a continuum with shopping malls, I hope to transcend a neat opposition between capitalist modernity and a traditional "natural economy" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Roseberry 1989) while still allowing for discontinuities between specific historical, economic, and social settings. Furthermore, the significance of commercial exchange for gender is not new: indeed, my investigation of modern gender through contemporary urban markets will also illuminate features of gender in the 'feudal' Thai past.

These six markets display a rich mixture of influences on Bangkok residents' work, daily life, popular culture and -- ergo -- social identities. In the markets discussed here, large-scale economies of the Thai nation or transnational capital co-mingle with local, vernacular forms of material exchange; overarching national and cosmopolitan Thai public culture, rooted in Bangkok, engages community interpretations of meanings; and male-dominated business concerns confront local, female-preponderant bazaar economies. Bangkok markets, located in the domineering capital of the nation, further broker the links between the modern (whether foreign or Thai elite) and the provinces of the country. These markets, therefore, allow us to observe how gender is realized at a juncture of national and transnational phenomenon with everyday culture and life.

In this thesis, I take the topic of women's marketing work in new directions suggested by recent feminist theory which in some sense are fulfilling Rubin's (1975) call for "a political economy of sex." My approach follows the example of work in feminist anthropology, and in critical theory more generally, which combines historical or material approaches with a committed attention to the "symbolic" dimensions of representation, discourse, or meaning. This synthetic approach is well-represented in work on Southeast Asia, for example in studies of contested gender meanings in Malaysian factories (Ong 1987, 1991) and Southeast Asian regimes of empire (Stoler 1989, 1992), among

others.⁵ Much of this work, like studies of the cultural dimensions of capitalist developments more generally (e.g., Pred and Watts 1992), looks at work (production) within agricultural or factory production and consumption within markets and communities:⁶ my project combines these two dimensions of work and consumption by way of markets. Markets are important places of work for many Thai women, providing occasional or long term sources of income. Moreover, they are significant economic, social, and cultural sites, which, I argue, affect gender and sexuality in multiple ways. The chapters in this thesis explore ways that markets (and economic exchange) in Thailand are relevant for the construction and reproduction of Thai gender identities. First, markets and retail are commercial forms which include -- and foster -- public discourses that are relevant to gender: discourses about female workers, family consumption, or female beauty, among others. In other words, they traffic in signs of and about women. Second, markets are social settings or stages which affect the living out, or enactment, of Thai female gender identities in particular: places where women act as agents of exchange,

⁵ See also Tsing (1993), Bao (1994), Manderson (1996), and articles in Atkinson and Errington (1990) and Ong and Peletz (1995).

⁶ There are also interesting studies of the complex interconnection of production and consumption on the part of factory, particularly in terms of the ways women workers define their identities to negotiate the tensions between family and work, 'tradition' and modernity -- (e.g., Kondo 1990, Mills 1994) -- efforts which can be seen as "cultural struggles" (Ong 1991).

significantly as workers, but also as consumers. For anthropology, markets provide complex ethnographic sites within which we can locate women's significant activity in defining the female gender and at the same time can account for the affects of commercial structures (and capitalist regimes) on the gender that women live out. Studying a succession of market forms allows me to sketch the development of modernization narratives which obscure or contain women's long-standing involvement in economic exchange. Furthermore, gender and markets seem to code each other in the realm of public commentary and popular culture: discussions about consumption at markets are often linked with, or signified through, discourses about gender and sexuality, particularly when the excesses or unruliness of markets become a source of social (elite) concern.

Gender in Thailand

As I show here through a critical survey of the literature of gender in Thailand, the significance of economic practice and market exchange in particular for the female gender is not a new product of modernity, but in fact a long-standing feature of Thai gender.

The rubric of gender considers the construction of social identities predicated on sexed male and female bodies, and includes symbols, practices, discourses, identities, and importantly, relations between people. An important quality of gender regimes is that they are not

unitary wholes but internally differentiated and intersected with other kinds of social difference, a theme which resounds in scholarship and political discussions about the crucial race, ethnic, and class diversities of gendered experience within the United States (e.g., Mohanty, Russo, Torres 1991) and which resonates with post-structuralist, deconstructionist, or performative theories.⁷ Similarly, in Thailand, gender meanings intersect with other vectors of identification, notably those of ethnicity, region, and status. All social identities are in some ways situational while in other ways more long-term: one feature of Thai social positions is the emphasis on identifying and indexing relative status and identity within specific social interactions. Depending on whom one is addressing or in which situation, one employs particular linguistic codes (pronouns and markers establishing gender, relative age, status, and also role, such as teacher) as well as paralinguistic signals (the depth of the greeting and respect gesture [wai], the relative height of the head).⁸ In Thai daily interactions (and according to folk theory), then, social identities are achieved through performance. In

⁷ The full range of this literature is impossible to list here, but some relevant feminist scholars include: Judith Butler (1990), Linda J. Nicholson (1987), Barrett (1985); de Lauretis (1987); Morris (1988). See reviews by Rosalind Morris (1995) and Walters (1995).

⁸ The relative weakness of firmly established and coherent positions in a social hierarchy is one reason Thai society earned the characterization as a "loosely structured social system" (e.g., Embree 1950; Evers 1969).

these calculations of how to greet, speak, and sit, gender presents only one axis -- although a significant one -- which orients relative prestige (e.g., Eberhardt 1988; Kemp 1982; Phillips 1966). Male-female differences are frequently evaluated against and alongside other axes of identification.

Yet alongside such contingency is fixity: an overarching social hierarchy places people in fairly well-mapped strata within which are governing gender meanings and sexual possibilities. That is, not all dimensions of gender or social identity are situational and many are quite delimited by one's social world. Until this century, official Thai society was delineated by clear status marks, usually affixed to men, in a sakdina ranking system symbolically rendered as landholdings but signifying control of people (men) (Akin 1969, 1975). The elite society of nobles and royalty, based on revised Brahman Hindu culture, included a clear sexual division prevailed organized by patrilineal, patrimonial, and polygynous principles. Women represented trophies and tokens in the harems or exchanges of elite men, but were significant as such in alliances between powerful families.⁹ Later, elite nationalist

⁹ There is no full-scale study of the women of the "inner palace" but see Amara 1996: 2; Pasuk 1980; Reynolds 1994; and Wyatt 1968. For a contemporary account, see Anna Leonowens' original memoir (1988), The English Governess at the Siamese Court or her more sensationalist and codified revision, The Romance of the Harem (the latter forming the basis for Margaret Landon's 1944 novel "Anna and the King of Siam").

conceptions of the Siamese and Thai state from the early 20th century on, while contested, often revolved around and imposed definitions of a masculine citizen, whether the disciplined British subject or the macho Thai gangster (nakleng) (e.g., Reynolds 1994). King Rama VI (r. 1910-1925), known for his anglophile brand of Thai nationalism, also imposed family surnames on subjects in 1913-16, an innovation which, unlike the inheritance patterns of Thai peasantry, would be transmitted patrilineally.¹⁰ Scholars have posited that Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian worldviews, with their more patriarchal arrangements, superseded an indigenous complementary gender system, especially in official public culture and elite society (e.g., Amara 1996; Darunee and Sashi 1988). This elite gender schema, in combination with Western discourses, was important to defining women in relation to consumption rather than production (and thus to the notion that women entering the workforce represented a new development).

Because there has been a tendency to generalize about Thai society or Thai peasantry from the communities in the central plains near Bangkok, it is also important to acknowledge the important regional variations. The Kingdom of Thailand is divided into four regions, somewhat

¹⁰ Unlike much of commoner society, this elite world discouraged male homosexual practice (Reynolds 1994:81) and prohibited female-to-female sex within the harem. Such elite sanctions, perhaps merging with upper-class Chinese attitudes, continue to inform greater restrictions on upper-class people's expression of same-sex desire (Jackson 1989; 1995).

culturally distinct, although all dominated by the center, which is largely comprised of ethnic Tai people, and specifically by the Bangkok elite. The north is the region of Lan Na, which resisted central Thai rule until joined by the railroad and is favored by foreign anthropologists because of its self-consciously distinct cultural history. Lan Na is noted in particular for the centrality of women to family (Gray 1990; Potter 1977) and community life, for example in matrilineally based ritual groups ("matrilineal spirit cults") and female mediums (e.g., Irvine 1984, Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). In addition, the north is home to the hill tribe minorities, with histories and practices that diverge from -- and often conflict with -- Thai state rule (see Eberhardt 1988; Jones 1968). The south of Thailand includes large numbers of ethnic Malay Thais, whose Muslim faith makes them a political and religious minority but whose gender arrangements follow Malay local custom, or adat, which resembles that of the Tai Thai. The northeast, known as Isan, shares language, cultural, and ethnic affiliations with neighboring Lao people (Keyes 1989; Mills 1993). The ethnic Chinese -- Chinese immigrants and their Sino-Thai descendants -- comprise the largest minority in Thailand, and have reformulated aspects of a Confucian, Chinese gender system, but vary according to language group, migration period, and class (Bao 1994, 1997).

When scholars speak about Thai gender generally, almost all Thai and foreign scholarship focuses on the two

normative identities of male and female. Yet not only is there significant variation in 'normative' sexual identities -- for example, a range of acceptable sexual practice for Thai men generally wider than that found in most Western societies -- there is also third gender 'option,' the transgender identity which is known as kathoey. Classical Buddhist and Thai texts define kathoey as hermaphrodites, transgendered people, or homosexual: people who have deviated or transposed sexual and gender identities (Jackson 1989; 1993; 1995). In this Thai schema, which could be described as the "traditional" sex/gender system, sexuality is not an identity established by object choice. Rather, sexual practice is assumed to follow from gender identity (Jackson 1993; Morris 1994). The Buddhist definition of kathoey is more encompassing than the lived role: with few exceptions, only male-to-female transgendered people count as kathoey (including feminine homosexual men, transvestites, and increasingly, with available technology, transsexuals). The historian Peter Jackson (1989; 1993) and anthropologist Rosalind C. Morris (1994) both interpret the kathoey role in relation to underlying, and encompassing, gender binaries: the kathoey is sometimes called "the second kind of woman." Morris in particular argues that the enacted (rather than textual) kathoey role, while it expands a binary gender scheme, extends male prerogatives to female worlds within patriarchy more than it provides a liberatory challenge to the gender system (contra Butler 1990). Born-

females do not share the possibility of becoming a "second kind of man" or a kathoey.

Metropolitan Thailand, since the 1980s (but with origins in the 1960s), has seen growing public recognition of distinct sexual identities of gay men (called gay), female homosexuals, understood as butch-fem roles (tom, from 'tomboy' and dee from 'lady'), and even heterosexuals (see chapter three). The worlds of male-to-male sexuality, which are not confined to self-identified gay men, are prominent in Bangkok and other cities, such that a gay columnist dispenses advice to letter-writers from many sectors of Thai society about their loves, sex, and identity -- whether they are gay or kathoey or bisexual (Jackson 1989, 1995). The relative 'openness' towards male-to-male sex and towards gay men is well-known in international gay male culture (e.g., Altman 1996). With Thailand's HIV/AIDS crisis, there have been numerous studies on male-to-male sex, as well as on sexual attitudes and practices in general. (In Thailand, male-to-female sex is the major mode of HIV transmission.) Female-to-female sexual desire or practice has been much less studied, and aside from a flurry of articles in the Thai popular press in 1994, far less acknowledged or legitimated than Thai gay male worlds.¹¹ Such a gendered disparity in attention and resources points to the enduring power of gender to shape sexual identities and

¹¹ For work on Thai 'lesbians,' or 'women who love women,' see Kanokwan 1995 and Took Took 1994.

possibilities, as well the resistance and transgression of "alterior" sexualities (Morris 1994).

This brief sketch outlines the significant variation and contingency of gender and sexual meanings in Thailand. Such multiplicity notwithstanding, scholars have traced common threads to gender roles, statuses, and symbols which seem to comprise a shared culture particularly for farming communities in the countryside, that is, the majority of households who subsist from wet-rice farming. One key characteristic described in much work on Southeast Asia as a whole as well as Thailand in particular is the complementarity of male-female roles.¹² In terms of the vexed discussions of women's status, commentators have alternately described Thai women's relatively high status vis-a-vis men (implicitly compared with South and East Asia) and documented the ways their low status manifests in deferent behaviors (especially in public), sexual double standards, pollution beliefs, and so forth. Complementarity and high-status often refers to women's relative economic equality in terms of inheritance and the division of labor (e.g., Napat 1991). The dualism of male and female also furnish key symbols for imaging the world, for example, gendering parts of a house (Turton 1978), but such symbolism forms an asymmetrical, if complementary, dyad. Whatever the

¹² For complementarity as a general trait in Southeast Asia, see Ong (1989), Van Esterik (1982), and Winzeler (1982). For Thailand, see Hanks and Hanks (1963), and Eberhardt (1988) for Hill Tribe minorities; for Cambodia, see Ebihara (1974).

complementarity between male and female, spiritual and political power -- that is, public authority -- is associated with, and nearly monopolized by, men. Even as Thai peasant men faced exacting obligations to state and master under the historic sakdina formal hierarchy, they occupied a position in the formal chain of power that constituted public Thai society (Darunee and Sashi 1988: 234).

A key feature in discussions of Thai gender (especially in foreign discussions) is Buddhism, the prevailing religion on mainland Southeast Asia (notably Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos but less so in Vietnam). Ninety percent of the Thai population profess Buddhism (Thailand 1992) and much of the cultural references derive from a folk-Buddhist matrix. The official religion is Theravada Buddhism, a branch of the Hinayana Buddhism that differs from that better known, northern branch of Mahayana Buddhism which produced Zen. Theravada Buddhism (the name means "teaching of the elders") relies on faithfulness to early Buddhist doctrine, especially to its emphasis on the all-male monastic order and the codes for living or dharma, rather than a stress on enlightenment or nirvana (Tambiah 1977, 1984). Materially and symbolically the religion is structured along gender lines. Far more women than men provide on-going support for temples and make regular offerings of rice and food to monks who walk the rounds collecting their alms. Yet only men can ordain as monks.

Pious laywomen¹³ who enter a religious life (mae chi) are not organized into lineages and do not share any of the status of monkhood, the highest status available in Thai society, and an avenue to literacy, education, and prestige. Officially they follow only 8 precepts as opposed to the monk's 227 vows (although in practice, living ascetically alongside monks, they follow many more). In the Thai Buddhist framework, women are associated with the material attachments of families and desires, and a threat, tempting men away from the monastic life: in historic Siam, "women were pollutants to the monastic order" (Darunee and Sashi 1988: 140; see Khin Thitsa 1980). A powerful taboo against monks touching women (or receiving an object directly from their female hands) in effect acts to circumscribe women's and even girl infants' behaviors, not only in temples but on public transportation and in streets and markets. English-language anthropological work in particular has emphasized the role of official and folk Buddhism (understood to be the dominant framework for Thai life) in defining gender meanings and practices.¹⁴

¹³ The mae chi is described in English as a nun, a term which might suggest greater authority and legitimacy than is the case (e.g., Khin Thitsa 1983). Indeed, most people in Thailand view mae chi as quasi-paupers who have adopted the white-robos, bald head, and ascetic routine because of romantic disappointments.

¹⁴ On gender and Thai Buddhism, see for example Kirsch (1975, 1982, 1985), Keyes (1984, 1986), Khin Thitsa (1983), Morris (1994), Muecke (1992), Van Esterik (1982). Most authors find that Thai Buddhism ascribes women to a lower status than men, despite potential equality in terms of Buddhist conceptions of an individual path to enlightenment.

To understand the powers and authority which women do hold in Thai peasant society, we can look to a widespread pattern in Southeast Asian societies, which is the matrilineal 'bias' or female-centeredness (matrifocality) of kinship systems.¹⁵ Much of the region is characterized by bilateral cognatic kinship with uxori-local (matrilocal) residence (e.g., Ong 1989; Potter 1977; Van Esterik 1982). Formally, in village Thailand, male and female children inherit equally, but conventionally brothers, marrying out, would often relinquish their claims to land and the junior daughter (sometimes son) remaining in the compound would inherit the house (e.g., Amara 1996; Keyes 1975; Bencha et al 1992). Land, spiritual affiliation with the place, the house, and community identity thus typically passes through the female line. While control of people (men) is considered to have been key to Thai elites in historic times, control

Kirsch (1986) argues, contra Khin Thitsa (1983) and others, that Thai Buddhism interprets both men and women as attached to the material world, but in different (complementary) ways. Morris (1994: 19) agrees with a criticism of "the exclusive reliance on Buddhist texts, whose aim is the production of orthodoxy," yet also returns to a canonical northern Thai Buddhist text to authorize the Thai system of three genders. Among Thai scholars, Amara (1991), for example, proposes that spirit cults (which are not formally Buddhist) might be relevant to historic patterns of gender.

¹⁵ This matrilineal tendency appears in much writing about the Southeast Asian region (e.g., Ong 1989). For Thailand, see for example, Amara (1996), Hanks and Hanks (1963), Muecke (1981), Potter (1977). Nancy Tanner (1974) compares matrifocality in Indonesia and the United States. Recent discussions of women's power within the matrilineal society of the Indonesian Minangkabao include Evelyn Blackwood (1995) and Jennifer Krier (1995) and for the related Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, Michael Peletz (1995).

of land resources remains critical to local kinship ties, control of labor, and community status. Thus, local sources of power were in part figured through women, if under the formal authority of senior men (e.g., Amara 1996:6; Potter 1977).

Such kinship arrangements, however "loosely structured" (e.g., Embree 1950), have interesting implications for the female gender (and the male gender, but this has been less analyzed). Studies of Thai gender agree that, at least among rice-farming peasant communities, women's primary gender identity has been that of mother. Charles Keyes (1984: 33) writes that the maternal image presented in folk and Buddhist texts has a positive religious cast (but cf., Khin Thitsa 1980):

This image is of the mother who nurtures the religion by bearing sons who will one day enter the Sangha and by providing sustenance on a regular basis to those whose membership in the Buddhist order [i.e., male monks] makes them a "field of merit."

In other words, motherhood means the support and reproduction of the masculine religious order.

In rural conventions, motherhood represents a woman's passage into adulthood which is not traditionally marked by leaving home nor even fully by a wedding, although matrimony is more significant a marker for women than for men. Weddings were not customarily marked with a large ceremony, because marriage conventionally was viewed as "a beginning, a possibility, or likelihood, until or unless it produces a live child" (Benchana 1992: 27). The birth of the

first child officially marked the girl's entry into adulthood (and was followed by a maturation procedure of 'lying by the fire' for a month). While Keyes emphasizes the Buddhist values in defining motherhood, there are other perhaps equally significant evaluations informing the role. For example, it is after motherhood that women are entitled to own property and viewed capable of managing their households and providing for others (i.e., not only their infant but their husbands) (Bencha 1992: 28).

However, as some anthropologists point out, the maternal role can be recast more generally to mean that of "nurturer." Women are expected to nurture -- to sustain and materially provide for -- not only their offspring, husbands, and the monastic order: the nurturing role seems to apply quite strongly to daughters' filial obligation (bun khun) to repay parental care with on-going support (Keyes 1984; Muecke 1984). For example, typically the youngest daughter remains at home to care for her parents, and if she marries, her husband joins this household. Thus, the obligation emerges from kinship tendencies, the gendered division of labor, and conceptions of familial exchange, including the indebtedness of children. While conventional bourgeois American culture views women's nurturing obligations as an obstacle to economic work, the reverse holds for Thailand. The prescription to nurture materially either as mothers to their children or as daughters fulfilling obligations to their parents may explain women's

exceptionally high rates of involvement in the economic workforce, including in the prostitution industry (Keyes 1984; Manderson 1992: 469, Muecke 1984; Thitsa 1983). In "traditional" Thai society before the late 19th century, according to Darunee and Sashi (1988: 139), "economic responsibility was part of a daughter's moral obligation to her parents" such that failure to fulfil this duty was considered a serious sin or demerit (1988: 141). Marjorie Muecke (1984: 470) finds that in the north, a daughter's obligation increasingly is measured in terms of financial, material support: "[t]he strategies clearly are to make money, not babies." It is possible, as informants suggested to me, that the mark of adulthood -- of the assumption of adult responsibilities -- may be conveyed as much by work for wages as by marriage or maternity.

International discussions about Thai women in scholarly and "development" fields take particular interest in the high rates of their paid or productive work, long among the highest in the world (e.g., Boserup 1970; Heyzer 1986).¹⁶ In rice farming (which remains the occupation of over half of the population), Thai women perform a good share of the work planting, weeding, transplanting, and harvesting the rice and processing the grain (described as the "light" work), while men tend to plow and transport the

¹⁶ According to the government's 1983 Labor Force Survey, out of a total population of 49 million, 63.5 percent of women participated in the labor force, representing a trend on the rise. One-half of these women workers were unpaid family workers (Manisri 1986: 130).

rice (but even this division is not rigid).¹⁷ In addition, they often grow vegetables, raise pigs, ducks, or chickens, process food, and produce some household goods. As I have already suggested, and will explore further below, Thai women have also long been well-known for their activity in local trade. The question is, what does this industrious economic activity have to do with gender? How do such economic practices and their corresponding discourses fit into Thai gender identities or sex/gender systems? Generally women are portrayed as being more or less compelled to work out of financial necessity, or even "as an opportunity to expand their networks and relationships with the intent of finding a husband" (Benchana et al 1992: 81). Many scholars and activists discussing the impact of multinational capitalist developments on Thailand in particular have taken women's economic activities quite seriously (e.g., Mills 1994; Skrobanek 1985): yet most read economic patterns as an effect of long-established gender norms and few have asked how economic practice and discourse might construct gender.

¹⁷ Labor-force and census statistics from 1960-1980 report that outside of the Central region (dominated by Bangkok), 80 percent of female workers were involved in agriculture (Benchana et al. 1992: 85). According to one summary (Manisri 1986: 131) "females work as hard as males" but "it appears that female laborers are still not effectively utilizing technology in agriculture." One recent survey found that rural women spend fewer hours than men on farming per year (1644 as opposed to men's 2294) (National Commission 1995) but this figure excluded the broad category of housework and many women underreport their farming activities (Benchana et al. 1992: 81). Earlier, Boserup (1970: 28) calculated that women working on family farms comprised one half of agricultural labor, with male family labor 47 percent and hired help the final 3 percent.

It might be useful to ask how women's responsibility for family solvency, their recourse to marketing, and their labor practices and experiences in farms, factories, and various markets (as well as offices, private homes, and government) might condition, reproduce, or transform the female gender identities themselves (cf., Kondo 1990; Ong 1991).

In her important and suggestive article applying the work of Judith Butler (1990) and Michel Foucault to Thai society, Rosalind C. Morris (1994) analyzes Thai categories for sexual and gender identities. She posits two co-existing sex/gender systems in Thailand, emphasizing that there are both "multiple systems and intersystemic contradictions" in such categorizations (1994: 19). One system (the older), is a scheme of three genders: male, female, and the third kathoey gender. The other sex-gender system identifies people based on their sexual object choice, as heterosexual, gay, or tom-dee. Morris notes that the later systems of sexual as opposed to gender identity is structured by a "politico-economic order" associated with capitalist production because, in that "sexual relations are abstracted and reified through the logic of commodity exchange as forms of consumption and, hence, of object choice" (1994: 17). Her article points the importance of economic arrangements for sex/gender categorizations, and opens the way for more particularistic investigations of these associations. This dissertation speaks to women and the female gender rather

than categories of gender difference per se. While this focus risks reifying rather than deconstructing a binary gender schema (e.g., Sedgwick 1990), it allows me to explore the realization (or 'performance') of multiple sex/gender systems in concrete settings located within broader historical and economic contexts (e.g., Lindenbaum 1995).

Markets and the Construction of Gender

Writing of the northern capital of Chiang Mai in the 19th century, the European traveller Bock (1884 [1986]: 229-230) reiterated a common observation by foreigners of women's prevalence in the markets of Thailand:

Along the main streets, on both sides, is one long file of women, who have come from the suburbs or neighbouring villages to sell their produce. As in the island of Bali, the women do all the selling....Behind this line of women are fixed sheds or bazaars, where a few Chinese and a good sprinkling of Burmese sit and sell cotton goods, calico prints, palais, brass and wooden trays, and a varied assortment of Burmese lacquer-ware.

The inclination to trade has characterized women across classes, even as the conditions and products differed. When Anna Leonowens (the original "Anna" whose stories formed the basis for "The King and I") reports on the auctions of such rare products as elephant tusks, she notes that, "strange to say, the auctioneers are women of the royal harem, the favorite concubines of the first King" (1870 [1988]: 292). In the time before Leonowens resided in Siam, a king's supreme wife conducted foreign trade and maintained a storehouse and a treasury (Darunee and Sashi 1988: 136).

In the 19th century, thousands of Thai women married foreign merchants from China (many of whom had wives in China as well) before Chinese women entered Thailand in sizable numbers following World War I. With this intermarriage, Thai women entered as working partners in the shophouses and small firms that have characterized commerce in Thailand. A pattern of women's prevalence in local-level marketing and merchant family firms persists in the present. In any given neighborhood market for produce, most petty commodities, or prepared foods, women predominate as vendors (e.g., Napat and Szanton 1986; Preecha 1980). The question is, what does this preponderance of women in markets have to do with gender? That is, with the construction of ideals for female bodies and behavior, and with the enactment of female identities? Another question is, why have women's marketing capacities not registered as socially and culturally powerful?

Within Thailand, the propensity to market is explained by Thai women's difference from men: women are said to excel in money and property concerns. The real-estate market is rumored to rest in large part in their hands. The sociologist Mi Mi Kiang describes positively Burmese women's affinity for the rapid commodified exchange of the bazaar: "There is something about dealing in straight cash payments that seems to accord better with a woman's

liking for direct, swift, practical systems" (1984: 179).¹⁸ Therefore markets and money are seen as a basic part of male-female difference.

The Cornell anthropologist, Thomas Kirsch (1975, 1982), provides a now-classic formulation about Thailand's sexual division of labor, based on his observation that women predominate in trade and markets while men predominate in administration. Much subsequent anthropological work has invoked this divide, looking in particular to folk-Buddhism to explain this sex division. Women's active economic roles, Kirsch (1982) and others explain, result from their exclusion from ordaining as Buddhist monks, an act which repays filial bun khun obligations by ensuring the parents' -- especially the mothers' -- passage to heaven (in Thai Buddhism, a transitory though possibly long state before eventual rebirth). That is, women's economic participation derives from women's low status (although also, and somewhat conversely, women's economic participation has been invoked to explain women's relatively high status in relation to men). Another author relates religious exclusion to market freedom: because women denied the ascetic, purportedly other-worldly experience of ordination, "[W]oman's freedom to be materialistic results in her exercising more than an

¹⁸ The positive evaluation of women's economic skills can be found in an inscription from the time of the first Thai kingdom, Sukhothai, in the 13th century: "Women, especially intelligent women, should control expenditure of money; men who are husbands should listen" (cited in UNESCO 1990: 3).

equal share in the control of family finances" (Anderson 1970: 61). Women's economic work typically appears as a default position, a by-product of a Thai value system understood to be male-dominant. The economic realm itself is not considered to be an integral part of constructing female identities.

It is clear that women's monetary engagement might be understood within Buddhist discourse, yet that particular religious framework does not explain what is in fact a widespread pattern in Southeast Asia. Southern Thailand, for example, inhabited largely by Malay Muslims, shares a similar gender-pattern in local vending, with twice as many married women as men marketing baskets, batik sarongs, and other goods in local markets and also as middlemen (Chavivun 1986). Similarly, women predominate in many Muslim communities in Island Southeast Asia, such as Java (e.g., Brenner 1995). It makes more sense to view women's vending as part of a long-standing, "traditional" division of labor among commoner Thai families, but a convention which is understood through and informed by particular national, religious, and economic discourses. To propose another kind of 'complementary' division of labor, I suggest that women's financial management may parallel men's spiritual and political efforts on behalf of the family. The phrasing of an American economist is perhaps telling: "In rural Thailand, households exchange their surpluses by sending a woman of the family to a centrally located market to barter

or sell for cash" (Anderson 1970: 74, emphasis added). As with so many authors, both Thai and foreign, this observer erases the enterprising quality of women's marketing as well as their family duties -- households here are the agents. Another Western observer reported that "every household with an able-bodied woman was represented at the market" (cited in Anderson 1970: 74). However, I think that the perception of women merchants as representatives of their households is productive. It suggests that women's marketing work can be seen as an extension of their responsibility for the solvency of their family: marketing and selling have long provided an important recourse for women to fulfil their social obligations, and often provides much of the family's cash income (e.g., Anderson 1970). As Muecke (1984: 464) points out, "women's economic control was managerial, with the household rather than the individual as the basic economic unit."

In the prevalence of Thai women in local markets, I see implications for understanding the process by which the female gender is defined, and transformed, by women's practices and by public culture, in contemporary Bangkok as well as in "traditional" Thai society. Women's work in markets can be understood not only as supplemental work "outside" the home but as a means of achieving their social identities which takes place in a socially mapped realm. Indeed, I propose that markets and market exchange is an important yet neglected site for the construction of the

female identity in particular in contemporary and "traditional" Thailand. Markets enter into the construction of gender in two ways: by reinforcing or producing public conceptions of gender; and by providing a space for women to achieve, enact, and possibly upset different aspects of female identities -- through practices which in turn influence public cultural conceptions of gender. Especially because women remain more circumscribed in their movement and travel than men, particularly when living at home, markets offer an important public space beyond the household and a version, however limited, of mobility (see Mills 1994). Markets, and commodity exchange, are a vital but overlooked part of the discourse and practice of gender in Thailand. While not denying that Buddhism remains critical to forming Thai identities, I propose that the realm of economic practice, and the specific sites of markets, may also generate, not merely accommodate, definitions of the Thai female gender.

Markets involve exchanges of buyer and seller, either through the complex dialogic negotiations of barter and bargaining (cf. Kapchan 1996 on Morocco), or through more standardized transactions based on abstract monetary values. In other words, markets represent a variegated cluster of forms of exchange. In this thesis, I situate these barter or commodified exchanges on a continuum with other forms of social exchanges, drawing on an anthropological tradition which has linked, for example,

disparate spheres of marriage -- or exchange in rights in persons -- with circuits of gift-giving and even barter (Bohannon 1959; Kapchan 1996; Levi-Strauss 1969; Mauss 1967; Strathern 1988). The idiom and mechanism for many, if not most, relationships in Thailand is exchange. Prominently, the relationship between the monastic order and the laity is depicted as one of exchange, a dynamic arrangement thoroughly explored in the trilogy of monographs by Stanley Tambiah (1976, 1977, 1984): householders (mainly women) provide the daily sustenance to monks, who act as "fields of merit," providing the opportunity to accumulate merit (which is calculated quite materially in terms of a store or amount of substance) (e.g., Ingersoll 1975; Phillips 1966). Furthermore, the mother's 'gift' of her son secures her place in heaven (Keyes 1984). The enactment and definition of many Thai social identities, such as women's position as 'nurturer' or the relations of seniors (phi) to juniors (nong) can also be understood in this light, as an orientation framed in terms of debt and exchange. Anyone incurs debt to a guardian or one who has offered significant aid and instruction (e.g., teachers), and all children are born indebted, but male and female children have different prospects for repaying that debt.¹⁹

¹⁹ One further arena of exchanges beyond my scope is the spoken and behavioral -- "dialogic" -- transactions between people (or people and spirits [Crapanzano 1980]). Is there any affinity between the 'calculations' of interactions (pace the game theory of Erving Goffman) and material exchanges? Are Thai speakers' dialogical exchanges with interlocutors evaluated according to economic idioms or

Markets and Margins

Just as it is important to attend to the culturally specific and divergent forms of gender definitions, it is also relevant to explore the ways that markets and commodity exchange involve particular meanings, forms, and interpretations in Thai society (e.g., Taussig 1980; Pred and Watts 1992). With Buddhism the state religion and a powerful force in popular life, markets and monetary matters have historically occupied a contradictory position, devalued yet at the same time necessary to the monastic order and the state. Furthermore, commercial markets have played a distinctly critical role in shaping the range of norms, institutions and practices associated with modernization, notably by forging and integrating a national economy and also a national culture.

Trading, money matters, and even the abstract "economy" have been inflected with ethnicity, gender, and class resonances in Thai society. Historically, Chinese male migrants and immigrants provided the links between the ruling class and the rural subjects in their role as traders and tax collectors. Interregional traders were mainly foreign men: Chinese (joined in the 20th century by Chinese women), South Asians (Sikhs, Gujaratis, Bengalis, Makassarese, Ceylonese), the Theravada Mon, and after 1855, Europeans: at the local, intra-village level, some of these merchants traded with Thai women. "Traditional" Thai culture

values (Crapanzano 1992; Kapchan 1996)?

positioned trade and the traders as outsiders to sanctioned power, authority, and worth. It has been suggested particularly by Clifford Geertz for Indonesia that values were not measured by a scale of money, wealth, even if they were conveyed through them (1980). As Benedict Anderson (1972) argues about Indonesia, Thailand scholars have suggested that culturally recognized power was not customarily derived from wealth (e.g., land) but from control of people and symbolic display (e.g., Akin 1969) (although this changed in the Bangkok period -- Nithi 1994). Such positions of authority in the monastic order and in state rule were confined to men. Furthermore, Theravada Buddhism, while supported by money and wealth, in doctrine and sermons devalues the attachment to worldly pursuits involved (Tambiah 1984). A researcher on the ethnic Mon traders notes that commerce is viewed as antagonistic, non-social, and selfish: that "selling at a profit was lumped together with short changing, giving short measure, and giving poor quality" (Foster 1982: 54). Market exchange is seen as contrasted to the Thai social order, which is predicated on face-to-face interactions governed by elaborate etiquette and established relationships (1982: 55). As one Thai proverb has it, "ten merchants aren't worth one powerful patron." Conceptually if not literally, low-status market transactions were demarcated from superior spiritual and political exchanges. This dominant framework left Chinese men and Chinese and Thai women with only those

paths to money, power or autonomy which were devalued or outside sanctioned forms of power. In academic discussions, economic affairs and entrepreneurial concerns are typically portrayed as outside (or on top of) Thai society and the Thai people (e.g., Ingram 1954; Wyatt 1983).

Therefore, in "traditional" Thai society, both rural and elite, markets and monetary exchange are linked symbolically and practically to female and foreign male: "others" to the Thai male. Excluded from the formal avenues to authority, women, and until well into this century many Chinese men, undertook work which was considered somewhat lowly. Such margins -- particularly the lower status street markets and especially prostitution -- have also be tinged with the possibilities of pollution, threats or danger to the social order (e.g., Douglas 1966; Kapchan 1996; Pheterson 1987). I found Thai people commonly express ambivalence about selling, profit, and money -- even some vendors, and especially socially conscious activists. Such anxiety can also be expressed in relation to sexuality as well. As Khin Thitsa writes of Thailand (1980: 23), "[I]n prostitution, the two 'evils' come together: the all-consuming female sucks up not only a man's vitality but also his money." The specter of over-consumption, for example on the part of youths, is another anxiety produced by the successful expanse of markets that is reflected in frequent

references to growing materialism in public discourse and media reports.²⁰

The six markets of this dissertation show how women's links to markets transform as monetary exchange and trade became more powerful in the Buddhist Kingdom following the mid-19th century. To what extent have women capitalized on their customary recourse to markets in navigating the rapidly changing new world? How did "Thai" come to be identified as non-entrepreneurial or anti-commerce, given women's historic roles? Which narratives inform the construction of women's new and traditional economic roles? Perhaps important are the ample Thai and foreign discourses which present women's economic livelihoods as threatening or by contrast irrelevant to the nation. In analyzing the prospects for "modern" marketing in Thailand, for example, one American economist writes,

Undoubtedly substantial qualities of goods change hands among rural households throughout the Kingdom, although it is not a matter of particular interest to us in marketing development even though the exchanges increasingly are for money. The traders are Thai women; it is unspecialized and part time....Persistence of this trading is not inconsistent with progress in the development of a market economy; much of it is probably similar to a housewife's borrowing a cup of flour from her next-door neighbor. (Anderson 1970: 74)

This foreign consultant provides one example of the simultaneous recognition and erasure of Thai women's economic vitality, in a powerful discourse which undoubtedly

²⁰ For concerns about women factory workers' consumption, see for example Mills (1994) and Ubonrat (1989) for Thailand and Ong (1990) for Malaysia.

contributes to the underdevelopment of rural and poor Thai women's 'underdevelopment. Thai women's relations to commodifying markets changed within the context of such discourses, which consolidated and intensified throughout this century. For example, I see affinities between on-going official and state attempts to regulate markets and women, particularly in Bangkok, such as the 1960s efforts to contain both the proliferation of small-scale vendors and the population of the capital.

Modernization

The six markets of this dissertation, while they illustrate some of the contemporary variety of retail forms in Bangkok, also provide a window onto the on-going modernization project begun in the 19th century in Siam but intensifying particularly since the 1960s in Thailand. The first part of the dissertation, "BANGKOK AS A CITY OF CONSUMPTION," explores the development of consumer culture in the capital and primate city of Thailand. The Kingdom of Siam-Thailand was never colonized by a European power (the only Asian country besides Japan to avoid such domination, and hence not easily encompassed by 'post-colonial' rubrics). Rather than foreign rule or anti-colonial struggles, a major vehicle integrating the populace with the state regimes and with the international economy was consumer goods and services and monetary exchange, distributed largely by the ethnic Chinese or Sino-Thai

minority. In the century and a half since the Kingdom of Siam (as the country was known until 1939) opened its trade to Western business, a market economy has come to define life in the capital and pervades into the provinces.

In chapter one, I chronicle the practices and images of these merchants, and the long-standing market area of "Chinatown" where many immigrants lived, suggesting that the collaboration of Thai and Chinese women in this group recasts the conventional gender stratification of the Chinese commercial class (e.g., Bao 1994). The Chinatown area is walled by shophouses -- the buildings in which Sino-Thai families combined production, sales, consumption, and daily life, and which prevailed as the major retail form until the 1960s but came to be viewed by authorities as part of the 'problem' of a Sino-Thai family-based economies. The second chapter explores department stores which emerged from such Sino-Thai shophouses and capital. I consider the role of the department store as symbol and symbol-maker, in a period when commercial representations have increasingly informed public discourses about modern identities which influence directly or indirectly much of the country's inhabitants. Shopping complexes have become increasingly pivotal -- yet still culturally problematic -- in defining social identities -- especially gender. The sophisticated spaces of 1960s and 1970s department stores offered a spectacular icon of Thailand's cosmopolitanism. The retail form signaled the symbolic and material separation of

kinship (family) from production (work), and charged well-to-do Thai women with the job of enacting this modernity through domestic and personal consumption. In the development of Bangkok as a city organized, at least symbolically, around consumption, the market work and entrepreneurial potential of Thai women has been displaced by a well-financed discourse which, I suggest, recasts commerce as a site of male professional labor and female consumption.

Part Two of the dissertation, "GLOBAL CAPITAL, LOCAL SEXUALITIES," turns to the topic of desire and sexuality as they are configured in relation to consumption and consumerism in Bangkok. Two chapters explore the commoditization of leisure and the increasing role of commodity exchange in social relations for two different groups of young Thai women. In chapter three, I consider middle-class young women's romantic relations in malls -- the commercial symbol of Western post-modernity par excellence. Thai leisure conventionally is homosocial, and young people are expected to socialize with the same sex or in mixed sex groups more than dating. Men have a wide array of commercial leisure available to them, including sexual entertainment while women are confined to a narrower range of public arenas for leisure -- shopping being a major outlet. Nonetheless, as I suggest in the case of MBK, the reproduction of gender and sexual norms through commerce can help produce non-normative effects.

The economic developments associated with Thailand's modernization have depended upon and transformed women's work. Many authors have pointed out that capitalist development in Asia has relied heavily on women's labor, for example in the off-shore manufacturing industries or "global factories" (e.g., Heyzer 1986; Lim 1978; Ong 1989; 1991). This is true for Thailand, where women migrate in numbers often exceeding male migrants to work in industrial sectors (light manufacturing) and even more so in commerce and services in industrialized areas or the capital (e.g., Amara 1991). In addition, in the 1960s to 1970s, U.S. military bases drew large numbers of village women into service work on bases and in rest and relaxation areas, a situation that led to an enormous foreign sex trade.

The most obvious link between commerce, leisure, and sexuality is prostitution, a connection for which Thailand is famous. In the fourth chapter, "PATPONG," I explore this relation in the industry providing sexual services for Westerners, but in a way that attempts to avoid the overexposure of the sex workers and the commoditization of sex itself. In Thailand as elsewhere, the prostitute represents the entire prostitution industry, and serves as a metaphor for the corrupting nature of commerce, commoditization, or profit-making (Parissara 1996; cf., Pheterson 1987; McClintock 1993). However, the sex trade is part of a "semiotic chain" linking the exchange and signification of women's bodies (Reynolds 1994: 76; see also

Manderson 1992; Van Esterik 1990, 1995) and can be viewed in terms of women's negotiations of multiple "economies of intimacy."

Part three, "TRAVERSING MARKETS", explores local-level gender meanings in dizzying forces of globalization and telecommunications, where commodity exchange is expanding across political, social, and spatial forms. Among the elite of Thailand, 'globalization' and the 'information highway' are well-established topics. These final ethnographic chapters look at workers in companies designed to profit from transnational trends. In theory and politics, the question of identity has emerged within this economic milieu, connected to a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon: as the infrastructure for a global, shared American-style consumer culture is more powerful and pervasive, local-level and differentiated identities seem to adopt increasing importance in people's lives, political struggles, and consumption, providing novelty and niche marketing for sophisticated consumers (e.g., Miller 1995). My work asks how women and men in these industries envision and enact their gendered identities and relations in terms of corporate and conventional expectations. In chapter five, I draw on my experience working in the marketing office of a cable TV company, IBC, part of a large telecommunications empire. The final ethnographic chapter looks at a form of selling which is at once old and new: direct sales. This sixth chapter, "THE AVON LADY," explores how the American-

based method of direct sales is reinterpreted by Thai "distributors" in terms of the motivations and constraints of their social worlds, in ways that differentiate the distributors from traditional market hawkers.

Approach and Questions

This dissertation uses six different markets as sites for the ethnographic and historic examination of the construction of female identities, which I understand to involve practices, institutions, and representations. The specific chapters suggest ways that the Thai female gender involves ethnicity (chiefly in terms of Chinese or Thai), nationality, and class. By "markets," I am referring to venues for commodity exchange, not all of which are spatially fixed. I have selected different markets as instances of different versions of commercial exchange, each associated with patterns of capital accumulation strategies, labor relations, spatial arrangements, representational technologies, and gender imagery.

Each market serves as a social site involving social codes, places, interactions, and patterned behavior. These sites provide a base from which to explore the interplay of economics, cultural meanings, and social relations in constructing gender. As residents move throughout the sprawling capital, they criss-cross different market forms; hence, these markets, although presented in discrete chapters, overlap and intertwine in interesting ways that

make up the web of city life. (Indeed, this migratory quality of urban life in part prompted the unconventional structure of this thesis.) Such interconnectedness aside, each market form offers its own distinctness. The specificity of Amway exchanges, sex work, or the mall, allows each chapter to focus on particular facets of gender (e.g., on courtship).

My approach to the markets was loosely empirical, by which I mean that taking a specific market venue, I attempted to discern the dimensions which were more relevant for understanding the construction of gender through exchange. Three sets of analytical questions underpin the overall investigation, but are realized differently in particular chapters. The first concerns women as agents of exchange. How do women use commodity exchange and these markets in fulfilling their gender? In the work of performing gender, what degree of control do women hold over their presentations and the definitions of womanhood?

Second, viewing markets as sites with influential discourses and structures, I ask, how much do markets themselves shape public gender meanings? What technologies of gender, to use de Lauretis' (1987) phrase, are deployed? And, how are gender definitions used by businesses in accumulating capital? These questions address the possibility of women as an object, sign, or even commodity in exchange.

The final question concerns the interplay of women's practices with markets forms in the reproduction of gender: where are the contradictions here? Does fulfilling some aspects of gender (like beauty) contradict others definitions? Does the commodity form of exchange produce gender expressions that conflict with local values? With the expanded liberties of capitalist exchange, will women's control over the creation of gender definitions expand, decrease, or transform?

Methods

In some sense this dissertation is about method: what is a useful way to study gender that includes women's practices as well as of the constraints of local and global social forces, specifically of capitalism? The work is based on more than two years of residence which involved the usual wide range of events, much of which are not included in this thesis. (I regret excluding, for example, the beauty contests, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian rituals, weddings, soap opera production, perpetual traffic jams, political protest, and AIDS-prevention condom distribution.) My residence in a neighborhood at the edge of Chinatown informs my discussion of secondary materials about the Chinese and Sino-Thai minority in chapter one on Chinatown.

During prior field visits (in 1988, 1990-91) and at the start of my research (December 1992-January 1994), I began observations both systematic and ad hoc of almost

every major market area in the city. These provided a sense of how selling and shopping work, and a "map" of consumption in the city. Based on this survey, I selected relevant markets for study. Each of the six market "types" studied in this dissertation, most of which I encountered in my weekly rounds, nonetheless involved separate but overlapping approaches. For Chinatown and merchant capital commerce, which serves as a background to the thesis, I rely primarily on published sources. Department stores and malls were studied with observations, interviews with consumers, as well as reviews of the business literature. Patpong and prostitution has long been a topic of interest to me and so I bring years of reading and English and Thai newspaper clippings to the study. It is also one of the areas where I spent the most time, volunteering at a prostitute's advocacy organization as well as socializing. I also informally interviewed owners and clients of gay male establishments in the Patpong area. I held a job at a marketing office of the leading cable TV company, which provided a modern opportunity for "participant observation" in the classic sense. Finally, I observed direct sales transactions, Amway meetings, and interviewed direct sales sellers. Regarding language, I used both Thai and English with informants and associates, depending on the wishes and capacities of my interlocutors or the social situation, and often a combination of the two. For each market form, I draw on an array of sources for information including texts,

architecture, and material goods, but in the later chapters, I try to focus on the women's own practices and expressions.

How convincing my arguments are hinges to a large extent on the exploration of particular market forms as significant social sites, rather than on a substantive body of discourse of a delimited group of informants, for example. The different market types grounding each chapter allow something of a diachronic, rather than properly historical, look at women's uses of markets. Each type can be taken to signal a particular version of commerce, and is ordered somewhat chronologically to illustrate broader trends in capitalist strategies, with different uses of space, media, and labor. The market types lend themselves I think to an exploration of some particular gender roles in more depth, Patpong and the sex worker being an obvious example. In addition, I intend the juxtaposition of market types to provide important class variations and to present a view of capitalist developments that is complex, non-linear, and non-deterministic -- suggesting both continuity and discontinuity which characterize Bangkok life.

I undertook formal interviews about consumption practices with students, teachers, and advertising professionals, among others. However, I did not find formal interviews with women that helpful, especially for in-depth elaboration or interpretations of experiences. I also shied away from formal interviews because of a sense of the hierarchical meaning of interviews in Thailand (e.g., Briggs

1992), and a decision to look for sources beyond verbal discourse. Because of limited funds and the desire to belief in paying decent wages, I did not employ a research assistant and therefore undertook most of this investigation alone. For the most part, information from speech came from informal interviews or day-to-day conversations, when I noted women's frequent and repetitive references to shopping and appearance and observed various vendors' sales pitches. Most of these women were 20-40 years old, reflecting both demographics and the nature of the markets I emphasize. Reflecting the make-up of Bangkok, many of these subjects were of Chinese descent although not necessarily identified as Chinese Thai. The economic backgrounds of the people I discuss vary, ranging from minor royalty to peasants, with residences in family estates or slums, but because most of them are involved in trade, office work, or professional employment, none of them could be described in Thai terms as the urban poor or "under class." The dissertation rests on the understanding that people's practices create meanings, and so a good part of "data" comes from observing: what women wear, how they move through commercial space, interactions, and the like. While not lending itself to in-depth semiotic analysis, I think my approach does allow me to gauge priorities, emphases, and values involved in social identities and relationships. To ground my discussions of Thai women's practices, and to provide the historical and economic backgrounds, I also used a wide variety of English

and Thai library and textual sources, much of it from Thailand: newspapers and periodicals, a few primary sources, published and unpublished reports, government propaganda (e.g., about AIDS), some television and more radio, and even tourist literature.

A note on my approach to ethnographic representation: my work limits self-reflexivity to the purposes of the dissertation. If this thesis experiments at all, it is more as feminist anthropology, in the analysis and fieldwork, than as feminist ethnography, in terms of reflexive or postmodern formal concerns. The important, diverse challenges raised by deconstructions of anthropological and feminist representations of non-Western or non-white people (e.g., Asad 1973; Crapanzano 1992; Jones 1970; Ong 1988) have, so far, influenced the way I analyze material and undertake research (chiefly in terms of my engagement with Thai women's organizations) more than the way I write. In this thesis, I have attempted to acknowledge my presence and involvement where it seems significant for the arguments, methods, or context I present (cf., Abu-Lughod 1986; Crapanzano 1980). Also, I attempt to situate my anthropological reporting within the broader field of representations about Thailand by invoking (and deconstructing) a diversity of such texts: hence the intentional inclusion of tourist or popular materials. Following anthropological convention, I have used pseudonyms for individuals discussed except well-known public figures.

The fame of Bangkok and some of the institutions within it make disguises of physical sites futile and therefore I record actual market and street names.

PART ONE: BANGKOK AS A CITY OF CONSUMPTION

CHAPTER I

CHINESE MIGRANTS, SINO-THAI FAMILIES, AND
A CITY OF SHOPHOUSESChinatown: 1990s

For two years I lived at the edge of Chinatown, a 200-year-old area which dates from the founding of official capital itself. Chinatown is a market area, really a dense zone made up of an array of markets, industries, and ethnicities. Above all it is shaped by its commerce, by the numerous wholesale and retail, institutional and casual markets that overlap and adjoin each other. I begin the first section of this thesis by describing the contours of this neighborhood in order to introduce an exploration of the ways gender was involved in the making of the merchant families, class, and urban form of Chinatown, and thereby making Bangkok a city of consumption.

Like many places in Thailand, Chinatown goes under a variety of names and naming systems, and learning to quickly locate specific pockets of it within the greater Bangkok metropolis (learning how to get home, for example) took some time. The Bangkok subdistrict of Sampantawong encompasses this area, but Thais do not usually refer to official,

bureaucratic nomenclature.¹ Nor do they always invoke official street names. Most typically, people speak of the names of particular lanes or markets within Chinatown, or of Chinatown as a whole market area. There is the street Yaowarat, replete with bright gold-shops painted in red with gold (or neon) lettering where women and men buy the gold jewelry that is a staple of people's attire and also a conventional form of savings. Sampeng is an old wholesale lane, a densely packed narrow strip lined by hundreds of small wholesale shops (who will usually sell retail as well) packing cloth, paper and plastic goods, bags, hats, and novelty items to ship elsewhere in the city or nation or abroad. Sampeng also enfolds within it Indian trading area of Pahurat. Other markets are the "thieves market" and a Sunday maze of lanes dedicated to electronic and mechanical wares, mostly used. Overall, Chinatown and Sampeng are well known for a patchwork of commerce ranging from imported to prepared food, everyday to luxury textiles, electronics to junk, and gold to contraband, and density of people, activities, and exchanges, in markets or in the array of

¹ More than one researcher (the author included) has attempted to apply Lynch's Image of the City to Bangkok, because learning how residents "map" and navigate their region is both compelling and vital information. The taxi and tuk-tuk drivers who navigated this terrain were generally not native but recent migrants from the countryside in the northeast Isan. To tell a driver how to find my flat, I might specify the General Post Office, Little Market (talad noi), the nearby movie theater, the large hotel. The "automobile graveyard" term in Teochiu would only be known by savvy native Bangkokians and nearby taxying motorcycle drivers.

shrines and temples (both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhist). Despite the claustrophobic feel, it is a tourist attraction and has been noted as such at least since the 1960s. Chinatown is also home to the "Chinese," the Chinese immigrants and their descendants, the Sino-Thai, as well as to Thais, South Asians, and a few Westerners.

I lived by the river just beyond what most people view as Chinatown, but nearest to the narrow lane full of shops and stalls called Sampeng. The building was a six-storey apartment building with a sign outside the open entrance, "Furnished Apartments for Rent" in Thai and English. The top, sixth floor was more expensive and therefore housed a shifting cast of westerners (farang) or Indian and Chinese renters who were mostly in Bangkok for intervals for trade or other businesses. Over my two years, four to five Thai women lived on this floor, as different kinds of partners to a few of these men. These one-room studios, renting for US \$200-240 a month, had wallpaper, linoleum floors, and were furnished with two twin beds, a refrigerator, end table, desk, and chair, and a large air conditioning unit: they had no hot water. Our doors opened onto an open-air atrium from which one could look down at the hanging laundry of the residents below. The building manager's office was on this floor and an Indian nightwatchman protected us, from what? Perhaps from the residents below, mainly Thai, who lived in smaller, darker

rooms (often as a family) with none of these amenities for cheaper rents.

My immediate neighborhood usually escaped representation on Bangkok maps, even though it was sandwiched between Sampeng and a major tourist hotel area, both well-known, and my six-storey apartment building did have a postal address. The quarter was most often known as Little Market (talad noi), referring to a small market wedged in the spaces between two streets (which had been labelled little in relation to the major market of Sampeng). It was comprised mainly of low row houses, with a taller guesthouse and a few apartment buildings. Two government authorities stood at one end of the area: the Sampantawong District Office and the Harbor Authority with a pier for the river ferry, and so brown-uniformed officials flowed into the food stalls during working hours. Although relatively unmapped, my presence as a westerner and foreigner was hardly remarkable in this area and in fact followed a long tradition of immigrants, traders, and travellers to Chinatown.

The eponymous "little market" was comprised of an open area of wooden stalls selling produce (meat and vegetables) and prepared curries, rice, and such. Selling from these stalls were women and some men, who waved flies from the produce and chatted with each other or with their long-time customers. (This square also housed a number of small cats and large rats who apparently had contracted some

kind of comfortable coexistence.) Walling this square were shophouses, with the first floor of many operating as a shop, usually sundry goods shops selling candy and soda, the flipflop rubber shoes everyone wore around home, and household necessities. Others opened the tall wooden shutters that acted as the nighttime door to sell homemade desserts, preserved eggs, or other household specialty. Though used by many residents, this was not a thriving market, and many of the wooden stands were empty. However, the area provided an open space suitable for some of the community events. When a family sponsored a production of the Chinese opera to honor a deceased member, the area adjacent to the wooden stalls nicely fit a stage and ample room for folding chairs.

This small area was also colloquially known in Teochiu as the automobile graveyard, because, beginning promptly at 8 am Monday through Saturday, men would heat and pound hubcaps and other noisy castoffs, reworking the scrap into useable parts. These businesses were housed in the shophouse, the two to four storey buildings which comprise much of Chinatown. The bottom floor opened to the outside, where the young male workers piled the gears and oily metals. Inside might be a hot fire for smelting and two or three shirtless men alternately hammering a metal form. The streets of this region, therefore, were particularly male populated. Sampantawong as a whole, in official or commercial censuses, is home to more men than women, perhaps

a reflection of some of these small-scale industries. But In these shophouses, the proprietor families and often extended kin and unrelated workers lived. Sino-Thai women and girls and young Thai women workers pervade the streets, stalls, and markets as well.

The Sampantawong district as a whole is one of the most densely populated. Chinatown, or rather, the small quarters within it, seem to act as one of the only true "neighborhoods" in Bangkok, an interesting quality for the area that has been a major commercial cross-roads and is not a "traditional Thai" community.² The automobile graveyard area is bracketed at one end by a Catholic church (with services alternately in Thai and Teochiu) and at the other, a long-standing Buddhist temple. (There are of course other temples within this vicinity as well.) Regular community events are staged in the lane, such as the Chinese opera at the Little Market. Several times a year, a resident sponsored an outdoor film, projected on a screen string across the street by my flat, with a few vendors selling roast calimari or brightly colored soft-drinks. An audience of youth and adults (perhaps more males) sat on newspapers

² Given the sprawling growth of the city and scattered residence, people do not often live near their kin, workmates, or even lifestyle cohorts. For example, there is not a clear "wealthy" neighborhood. The lanes (soi) which make up most of Bangkok's residential areas are "mixed" in demographic terms, with wealthy often living next to poor. The newer housing estates erupting on the outskirts of the city have not yet produced "community" life per se. Perhaps the other significant quarters with some perception and practices of community are the slums, such as the Klong Toey region by the port.

or bags on the ground to watch the Taiwanese or Hong Kong gangster and action pictures and Thai ghost stories or romantic comedies. I also stumbled across a pre-ordination ceremony for a local boy (and was invited to the large, multi-course meal the next day). The automobile graveyard housed a major Teochiu festival, the 10-day vegetarian festival of October, with in a lot in front of a Mahayana temple right on the river, with Chinese opera, temple festivities, carnival amusement stands, and many vegetarian food vendors. Many residents have known each other their entire lives, which is quite distinctive in Bangkok.

Gender and the Traces of Chinatown History

What is significant about Chinatown for gender is not that the markets are predominantly female, although many are full of Chinese, Thai, and in one small area South Asian women. Indeed, here is where more men -- Chinese men, by and large (but also Pakistani and Indian) -- are involved in marketing to the greatest degree, selling bolts of cloth, managing the apothecary shop, or serving up leg of pork on rice or bird's nest soup. By and large marketing in Chinatown is a family affair. In other words, much of Chinatown commerce was and is organized by a kin economy. Furthermore, the multiplicity of populations, immigrations, business strategies, stores, and such, betray traces of a complex history of the neighborhood and its Chinese and Sino-Thai populations. At its heart, the history involves

the formation, transformation and partial dismantling of the kin-based Sino-Thai merchant world in relation to the changing powers and practices of the state and social world of the capital city.

Chinatown continues to be a vital wholesale and shopping area, although its fame as a quaint marketplace, ethnic enclave, and vice zone of yesteryear perhaps obscures the more mundane economic functions. Sampeng and other areas attract tourists not only for bargain shopping but also as a representative of an old-fashioned, and ethic, form of marketing. A shopping mall which opened in 1993, Ye Old Siam Plaza, announced a nostalgic vision of old Siam and old Chinatown, within the very heart of this wholesale-retail zone. In Bangkok culture, the figure of the Chinese male shopkeeper -- the taokae -- is now almost a comic nostalgic figure in popular culture (for example portrayed in an AIDS-cartoon I saw, or in the title of a how-to business article, "So you want to be a taokae"). Although the topic of Chinese identity remains problematic and sensitive, and anti-Chinese sentiment abounds, there is also a widespread sentimentality about disappearing features of Chinese-ness, often relating to commerce. The nostalgia of foreign tourists and Thai discourse surely marks the end of the dominance of this arena, but also transforms the real state and economic conflicts (if not violence) into kitsch.

In this chapter, I trace the history that produced this area, which is also the history of the Chinese

immigrations and accommodations to Siam, of the capital Bangkok, and of the economy of Thailand. This history is usually presented in terms of men -- Chinese immigrant men, Thai rulers, and the values and practices of the all-male monkhood. Considering women in this narrative not only adds to the story but changes the normative interpretation of Thai society by emphasizing the position of "others", and the force of gender and ethnic difference, in forming life in the capital and conceptions of the modern Thai nation.

The development of the "modern" commercial economy in Thailand occurred through practices and discourses which pivoted centrally on an ethnically defined group, the "Chinese" or "Sino-Thai" merchants. The commercial hub of the nation until the 1960s was "Chinatown" -- but Chinese merchants fanned out all over the country, forming what has been considered an intermediary class between Thai nobility and commoners. Out of this group developed the Bangkok bourgeoisie and Thailand's commercial class, whose social and cultural position transformed from 19th-century welcome to 20th century hostilities. This chapter sketches the ambivalent evolutions of the "Chinese" population -- and ethnic category -- so critical to the formation of the capital and economy of the country, foregrounding the place of gender in these processes.

19th Century Migrants from China

Chinese immigrants to Siam were part of a larger, predominantly male diaspora from the southeast coastal region of China to Southeast Asia and elsewhere. This coastal region had already been immersed in commerce and trade, and migrants came to Siam with some familiarity with monetary systems and commodity exchange. From the 18th century on, the largest stream of migrants to Siam were brought by fellow clan members (not indentured) from the small province of Teochiu through the Swatow port, especially after 1886, when steamships provided direct travel to Bangkok. This group spoke the Teochiu dialect related to, but not mutually intelligible with, Cantonese. A number of male migrants were literate in the lingua franca for Chinese populations at large, written Mandarin.³ (Many Chinese parents continued to educate sons -- only rarely daughters -- in this language, which proved significant in regional trade with Singapore and Hong Kong).

The 'traditional' Thai society that these early migrants joined -- meaning the Thai kingdoms before the mid-19th century reign of King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) -- was a tributary, feudal society, but one that was already dynamic (Tambiah 1977) and already had begun major transformations associated with modernization (Nithi 1994). The aristocracy

³ Perhaps some women who remained in China or migrated were also literate. A well-known Thai epistolary novel about a Chinese immigrant, Letters from Thailand (Botan 1991), unfolds through the letters of the protagonist to his mother back in China, who is described as literate.

was comprised of mainly Thai men (with significant intermarrying) who performed the political, spectacular, and administrative tasks of noble rule, but did not undertake economic affairs. Elite women, particularly high-ranking queens and consorts, did not occupy public roles nor engage in much economic affairs. (However, the inner palace of the king's consorts was its own town, with women traders, judges, and artisans.) The majority of the population were rice-farming peasants whose tributes to their lords (in the King's name) took the form of produce, adult men's corvee labor, and later cash. The extent of trade in these agricultural "subsistence economies" has been underestimated, at least for the north (Bowie 1993; Moerman 1975), where there were established systems of monetary trade, with men often travelling some distance to market surplus produce. While women traded locally, they were constrained by gender norms, unavailable transport, and limited markets from marketing more widely. Nonetheless, Thai women were engaged in important local trade with Chinese itinerant merchants, with whom they bartered with produce, cowries, Mexican coins, or rupees (Ingram 1954). Thus in most communities, Thai women and Chinese men acted as the frontier of the monetary economy. Overall, the Thai peasants were prevented from accumulating wealth by the substantial tribute obligations, restrictions on their mobility, and the prohibitions against their engaging in

paid labor until the abolition of slavery (1874-1905) and corvee (1899) (Akin 1969; Elliot 1978).

Therefore, it was by and large foreign men, especially those from China, who managed the economic affairs of the country,. Most long-distance trading between regions, import-export trading, early industry, tax collection, and financial business (loans and investment) were the work of immigrant men, notably Teochiu and Hokkien Chinese, but also Hakka and Cantonese, and Indians and Mon (Akin 1969; Keyes 1987).⁴ As tax collection became increasingly privatized in the 19th century,⁵ the "middlemen" between the state and subjects were the elite of Chinese migrants -- specifically Teochiu and Hokkien. They collected taxes and fees from the owners -- mainly other Chinese entrepreneurs -- of brothels, bars, gambling houses, or opium dens (a market forcibly created by the British). This group of well-to-do Chinese intermediaries, able to

⁴ Foreign residents included Javanese, Burmese, Sri Lankans (Ceylonese), and Vietnamese. The Indian migrants were known to be Bombay Indians, "Kling", Makassarese, Sikhs, Bengalis, Tamils, and Gujaratis (Abha 1982; Hussein 1982). In Bangkok, many lived in the Pahurat area of Chinatown built over a former Vietnamese (Yuan) quarter. In Thailand's northern market towns, Yunnanese (Haw in Thai) and overland Han Chinese had been trading with Thais at least since the 19th century (e.g., Hill 1988: 54; Moerman 1975).

⁵ During the first half of the 19th century, during the reigns of Rama III (1825-1851) and Rama IV (1851-1868), the government increasingly relinquished its direct control of trade, and sold monopolies allowing individual traders to bid to "farm" the taxes for specific commodities (Ingram 1954; Skinner 1957). This tax farming was more lucrative than trading for the Chinese and more effective for the government (Sternstein 1982).

accumulate cash and goods, were more appealing clients for noble patrons than were peasant men, and they formed such mutually beneficial links with key aristocrats (Akin 1969, 1975). Their nai lords bestowed upon them a minor rank of nobility, through which elect Chinese men became "Thai." Thus, political affiliation and economic accumulation allowed elite immigrant men mobility in prestige and office; several ethnic Chinese became governors, for example, of Songkla in 1773, Ranong in 1854, Trang in 1909 (Skinner 1957; Akin 1969: 135-136, 1975: 116).

Other overseas Chinese immigrants completed the needs of the growing export-oriented economy at all levels, including the professional crafts, artisanal work, and all varieties of wage labor.⁶ However, much of the wealth accumulated by these immigrants was remitted back to China - often to wives there -- rather than being invested in

⁶ Different positions were filled by different language-ethnic groups, which resulted in a vast variation of class in the "Chinese" population. Teochiu and Cantonese in particular filled profitable niches as rice-mill operators or compradores (mainly Teochiu and Cantonese). Slightly less prosperous, a middle-class of sorts was comprised of traders, shopkeepers, and artisans (who were often Hakka). Since the early 19th century, the Siamese government encouraged foreign immigration to replace conscripted Thai male labor on public works (e.g., constructing the capital's forts, canals, and later roads). Chinese immigrants, particularly the poorest men from Hainan, performed the dirty work of wage labor -- public works, gardeners, fishermen, servants, waiters, porters, and peddlers: no Siamese worked as wharf coolies, rickshaw pullers (introduced in 1871), or servants (Sternstein 1982). While Siamese women raised pigs (bought from Chinese breeders), Siamese men left the spiritually costly work of slaughter to Chinese butchers (Purcell 1980).

enterprises in Siam (which later became a source of complaint about this "alien" class).

Modern Siam: Rama IV and Rama V

The society the 19th-century immigrants entered in Siam was increasingly interconnected with a capitalist world system and threatened by expanding European empires nearby. Formal feudal arrangements were giving way to more bureaucratic forms of rule, although cultural frameworks and popular discourse continued to reinscribe aspects of social hierarchy in ways that endured into the next century, for example informing ideals of decorative femininity. The beginning of Siam's modernity is attributed to the reigns of the forward-looking, polygynous, ex-Buddhist-monk King Rama IV (1851-1868) and especially that of his son Chulalongkorn (now a quasi-deity), Rama V (1868-1910). Their rule ushered in the changes to the government, religion, economy, and culture that effectively initiated a "modern" nation-state, replete with the apparatus which brought civilization that also defined and regulated Thai citizens: notably, Western technologies of knowledge and rule (universal education, censuses, and postal service) and infrastructure (electricity and the railway).

The watershed for these changes occurred in 1855-56, when Rama IV ratified the compromising Bowring Treaty with England which opened Thailand to trade with England and

subsequently other European traders.⁷ Economic developments were expedited by a 'symbiotic' relationship between the large European trading houses and Chinese millers and traders (Anderson 1970; Wyatt 1982: 218). The economic pattern established after Bowring was one of intensified commercial farming, trading concentrated in Bangkok through the mills and trade -- mainly Chinese -- and European export houses, with non-Thai wage laborers: this arrangement endured until World War II (Tate 1979: 512).

The key consequence of Thailand's increasing participation in global trade was greater and greater commercialization of farming, a process which affected peasants, Chinese middlemen, and the elite. Spurred by high rice prices, high interest rates, and greater need for cash (for tributes, corvee payments, and imported goods), peasant families cultivated more land and raised more rice for sale by intensifying their established techniques (rather than concentrating in plantations or large-holdings). With so much effort devoted to the cash crop, they produced fewer household products. For example, Thai women purchased the imported cottons and wove less (Elliot 1978; Ingram 1954), and also stopped hand-milling rice at home, instead bringing it to Chinese mill-owners, who accumulated and sold the in-kind payments to exporters (Ingram 1954:70) (among whom

⁷ A series of treaties with Western countries ended the Siamese royal monopoly on trade, reduced tariffs, granted extraterritorial privileges and other conditions, all of which overall increased internal and external trade.

Europeans predominated [Wilson 1977]). King Rama V released Thai men from labor obligations to state, patrons, or debt masters, in a civilizing move to discourage European moral justifications for colonialism and also to create populations available for wage labor (Elliot 1978).⁸ Thus, especially in the central plains surrounding Bangkok, a feudal system which drafted male labor (and relied on female farming labor to compensate) evolved into a nation of farming citizens, women and men who intensified their cultivation of rice and other crops for cash, from which they paid forms of rents and taxes and bought imported goods in exchanges with Chinese merchants.

These economic shifts affected the consumption of the elite as well, who, for example adopted a hybrid Thai-Western fashion particularly as aristocratic women became more involved in public receptions (Suwadee 1993). They also destabilized the basis of power and wealth for many of the nobility who had formerly managed state revenues (Akin 1969). But aristocratic men did not rush to enter the trading boom, and the obstacles or reluctance of Thai men to

⁸ The corvee relation between King (realized through local Lords) and subjects changed from several months of service on public works to in-kind payments and then cash payments (1851), finally to a head-tax on adult men (1899-1938) (defaulter still provided labor). This Thai tax was higher than the "alien tax" on the Chinese (Ingram 1954). On one hand, these changes would have shifted some the 'cost' of state obligation to women, since their labor generated produce and cash for the household as well. On the other hand, military conscription, which began in 1905 and remains as a lottery draft, can be seen as a continuation of corvee labor, compelling young, generally poor men into state service.

engage in trade became considered a characteristic of "Thai" by outsiders: "One of the outstanding features of the period since 1850," writes the economist Ingram, "has been the general willingness of the Thai to leave the entrepreneurship function to foreigners" (Ingram 1954: 37). Europeans prevailed in export trade and some initial industries (e.g., ice and aerated water), but they had little to do with local Siamese.⁹ By controlling the rice trade, Chinese migrants came to dominate internal and interregional trade in Siam, in what became a competitive and sophisticated marketing sector, especially compared to industry (Ingram 1954).

Chinese Settlers

Following the general pattern in Southeast Asia, most of these Chinese immigrants lived and worked in towns and cities, above all the capital. Bangkok was a commercial city in the 1880s, with the first postal registry noting 8 established markets, 4,578 shops, 42 percent of registered residents (only one per household) involved in various marketing activities -- including Buddha icons and opium -- and 5 percent of residents in such commercial enterprises as brothels, pawn shops, or gambling dens (Wilson 1989: 55). In the capital, a third of the estimated 27,000 Chinese,

⁹ Europeans -- who had been excluded from Siam from 1688 to 1855 -- now ran steam-powered rice and saw mills and passenger and freight steamboats (Anderson 1970: 91). Businesses such as the Borneo Company dominated the export trade (Wilson 1977) -- but not internal markets.

mainly Cantonese, Teochiu, and Hainanese, lived in the Sampeng area (thus, the frequent cholera epidemics affected the Chinese above all). This quarter surrounded the dense merchant lane Sampeng which lies between Bangkok's first road, Charoen Krung (Progress City, built 1862-63) and the Chaophraya River (Sternstein 1982). Waterways provided the major mode of communication in Bangkok, and many Chinese lived along the canals and the river, often in floating dwellings or houseboats. Most Chinese rented their living spaces, some from women proprietors (presumably Thai) who, according to the 1883 postal registry, owned 21 percent of rental properties (Wilson 1990: 86-87). At the same time, the owners of nearly a fourth of rented buildings were Chinese, suggesting that some migrants were investing in real estate (Wilson 1989: 56).

Chinatown developed as the central commercial center of the capital and the nation, taking advantage of new technologies such as horse-drawn (1887) or electric (1901) trams and professional photography. Printing had been introduced in the 1840s by an American missionary doctor, and by the 1880s, papers were advertising a full array of shipping news and Chinese and European commercial services, such as the Tung Hap laundry ("I wash to perfection all kinds of clothing and have a large staff of Cantonese workmen to execute work in a few hours") or Ah Young tailors -- "White Suits, A Specialty" (Anake 2535). In the 1880s,

Carl Bock noted the excitement of the major market area of the capital (1884: 42-43):

This is one of the liveliest and most characteristic quarters of the city, where in happy confusion may be seen Chinese pawnbroker's shops; Siamese and Chinese eating-houses, between which there is not much to choose; Chinese duck farms...; Chinese drug-shops; Siamese potteries; Chinese and Siamese dram-shops...; street-stalls, where John Chinaman offers his home-made lemonade, or his dish of boiled vegetables...

This Chinatown area included some women, both Chinese and Thai, as I note below, but its space, character, and population was disproportionately male (as was much of the capital outside of the inner palace), filled with growing numbers of laboring and trading men, and the establishments which made up their world.¹⁰

Though most immigrants resided in the capital, Chinese merchants -- "John Chinamans" -- brought their trade beyond Bangkok, travelling by boat or later rail to outlying regions as itinerant traders. Some settled down in the provinces around Bangkok, at the mouth of the Gulf of Siam, and in larger villages along avenues of commerce (Skinner 1957). For example, Bang Chan, the site for Cornell University's Thai studies in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Skinner and Kirsch 1975), became linked to the capital and its markets in the mid-19th century by the new Saen Saeb Canal, which fed into the Chaophraya River. Eric Wolf (1982: 321) notes,

¹⁰ The Chinese minority, male and female, grew from an estimated 230,000 in 1825 to 300,000 in 1850, and 792,000 in 1910, or from less than 5 percent to 9.5 percent of Siam's population as a whole (Skinner 1957; Wyatt 1982: 217).

The people who settled in Bang chan were a medley of Hainanese Chinese intermarried with Thai, Muslim Malay prisoners of war from the south, Laotian prisoners from the northeast, and freed slaves from Bangkok.¹¹

Chinese immigrants settled in the town of Choburi even earlier in the 1900s, working at trading, food processing, mechanics, and construction, and the city remained heavily Sino-Thai (Napat and Szanton 1986: 39). The descendants of Hainanese still prevail in the shops and stores of a market city in Phitsanulok province to the north (Preecha 1980).

Chinese migrants and settlers linked local and national economies of Siam with the world capitalist system. Obligated to a minimal immigration fee, exempt from the corvee labor, and enjoying the advantages of extra-territoriality, some were able to accumulate wealth particularly through trading (Skinner 1957) and rice-mills. Some families developed sizable wealth (or capital), which allowed their 20th-century descendants to form a capitalist class through powerful kin-based enterprises (Hewison 1988).

Marriage and Reproduction

This section sketches the place of Thai women in the making of the ethnic Chinese or Sino-Thai merchant class (see Bao 1994). The sizeable Chinese population in this early modernizing period has often been depicted as

¹¹ Wolf here takes issue with the John Embree's (1950) model of Thailand as a "loosely structured social system," arguing that this characterization "must be understood not merely as a social structure of a certain kind but as the outcome of the expansion of commodity production" (1982: 321).

outsiders to true Thai society -- i.e., rural peasant society -- who comprised a distinct, urban Siam (Wyatt 1982: 219). In this image, the growth of this class represents a change, for example, "that occurred alongside, or atop, [Thai] society" (Wyatt 1982: 217). This view of complete distinctions erases the regular interchanges which Chinese migrants had with women in local village markets, in Bangkok brothels, and in some of their homes. Until into the 20th century, Chinese traders lived alongside Thai women who joined the metropolitan, Chinese worlds.

One of the ways that ethnic identification is made, regulated, and reformulated is in biological reproduction and sexual relations, both of which are euphemistically rendered in literature and public memory as marriage.¹² Underlying the significant differences of different language groups, migrants from southeast China shared a general background, for example, a Confucian model of gender and family relations organized through ideas of family continuity, patrilineality, and practices of ancestor worship (Bao 1997). If men married in their village in China, as many did, they entered arranged marriages and they were encouraged to produce a son before emigrating (Matthaei and Amott 1990). It is likely heterosexuality was very

¹² I am compelled to write in terms of marriage because that is how the literature discusses sexual relations (or in fact where it discusses women at all). Since Chinese men were the majority of traders and wage laborers -- in other words, the population with cash -- they were also the clients at brothels (Pasuk 1982).

compulsory and rather normative. In Siam, the Chinese pattern of community involvement in marriages continued, as Chinese associations, known as triads, tongs, or secret societies, helped to locate brides and arrange weddings for their members (Purcell 1980).

Chinese women migrated to Siam rarely before the 1890s, in small but increasing numbers from 1910 to 1917 (when they were 10 percent of Chinese migrants), and then in greater flows after World War I in the 1920s, when the relative proportion of women rose within a large influx of Chinese immigrants (Skinner 1957; Sternstein 1982: 103-4). At least until the 1900s, many Chinese men thus intermarried with Siamese women (Purcell 1980; Tate 1979: 540). When marrying, Chinese migrants followed the Thai system of bride payments. The amounts of these were graded according to the scarcity and value of different ethnic categories: reported rates were 50 to 200 baht for a Thai girl, 100 to 300 baht for a Sino-Thai girl, and 300 to 500 baht for a Chinese girl (who had to be brought from China) (Landon 1939). Thus, a 'respectable' Chinese girl (or a girl imported for marriage) often married a wealthier Chinese man -- a Teochiu and Hokkien tax farmers, or more prosperous rice-mill operators and shipping magnates. Before 1890, Chinese plantation owners, farmers, merchants, artisans more often than not married Thai (Siamese) women, not of the well-to-do, and by the turn of the century, half of the long-term Chinese immigrants had married Siamese women (Sternstein 1982: 103).

Well-to-do Chinese male immigrants often married more than once -- i.e., polygynously (Sternstein 1982: 103). The class of Chinese immigrant laborers did not often get to marry at all, but did frequent brothels.

Whereas in the United States, where there were also significant numbers of southeastern Chinese migrants (Matthaei and Amott 1990), or in older European colonies (e.g., Stoler 1989, 1992), in Siam, these unions were legitimate, neither discouraged, state regulated, nor stigmatized. Since ordinarily, Siamese did not live or work in the capital in any great numbers,¹³ these women must have migrated to Bangkok for their marriages with relatively wealthy Chinese men. Or, as Sternstein puts it, "immigrant Chinese males in Bangkok probably induced an in-migration of indigenous females" (1982: 104).

Far from condemning intermarriage, Thai and foreign commentators have praised the benefits of such unions for business and the nation. Siamese women have long been credited with "shrewdness" in trade and money matters and actively contributed to business. They worked in the family

¹³ However, Thai women already worked in some of Bangkok's markets and industries (weaving, opium, metalwork, or the 1913 Siam Cement company [Hewison 1986: 11; Wilson 1990 86]). Thai women in Bangkok included nobility, artisans, and commoners. Among the heads of households recorded in the 1883 postal registry recorded were nearly 3000 women, of whom the vast majority were Thai commoners (2,628) and a proportion of Chinese (222). Almost all of these women worked and many -- 78% -- owned their own homes. Interestingly, the postal survey did not record the respondent's gender per se, but carefully noted ranks and titles, which are often sex-specific (i.e. Amdaeng, Miss or Mrs.) (Wilson 1990).

enterprises, although such work may have often been glossed as domestic labor rather than as business collaboration (e.g., Bao 1997). Furthermore, Thai women provided their immigrant husbands with links to local trade, lending, and wealth.¹⁴ In turn, it was asserted that they treated their wives with more affection than Thai men (Skinner 1957).

Observers disagree about whether or not the children of Thai and Chinese couples were 'Siamese' or 'Chinese.' In terms of culture, the children reflected a mixture of backgrounds. Typically, they spoke Thai and many adopted the mannerisms of their Thai mothers, servants, and extended family. However, many sons were taught Chinese and Teochiu continued to serve as the language of business. Chinese associations mingled the parents and children from particular language or clan groups in sports events and celebrations. Hainan youth in a Phitsanuloke town, for example, grew up with links to their ethnic group in Bangkok (e.g., Preecha 1980). In 1909, the state ruled that children's nationality was determined by the father, so a Chinese immigrant man's offspring were Chinese (Purcell 1980). But culturally, the self-defined and externally

¹⁴ In Thailand, The New Siam (NY: MacMillan, 1941: 114; cited in Purcell 1951: 118), Virginia Thompson labels the Siamese wife of the Chinese husband the "head of the household and property." As with many authors uncomfortable with this suggestion of "matriarchal" organization in Thailand (see e.g., Potter 1977), Victor Purcell argues that the Chinese husbands sensibly arranged property in the wife's name to protect her and their children (1951: 118).

perceived population of Chinese-Thais extended beyond citizenship.

Middle-class and elite Chinese men, with Thai, Sino-Thai or Chinese wives and children ran family firms which were the basis of the "nascent bourgeoisie" (Elliot 1978). As a class, this mercantile group held economic assets but no real political power, even as some Chinese and Sino-Thai men obtained educations and joined the growing state bureaucracy (Wyatt 1975: 140). Many Sino-Thai households had links to Thai families through Thai or Sino-Thai wives. But the practices involved with ensuring continuity of family and firm -- making appropriate offerings to gods and ancestors, using Teochiu language, spending conservatively, having and educating sons -- constructed a Chinese, or Sino-Thai identity which in effect effaced the work and inheritance of the Thai women who helped build this world.

Chinatown: Commerce and Vice

The rapid expanse of money exchange and the changing life of the capital associated with the Chinese immigrants produced unease among some. The anxieties about commodification and urban unruliness took form in concerns about social problems, in changing discourses about the Chinese minority, and about the combined pollutants of female bodies and low-class urban markets.

In the mid-to-late 19th century, the Chinatown streets of Yaowarat and Sampeng were famous for vice: opium

dens,¹⁵ brothels (identified by green rather than red lights), gambling, secret societies or triads and their gang fights (Abha 1982: 47-55; Purcell 1980). A contemporary observer, Karl Bock (1884:43), reported,

More numerous, perhaps, than anything else, are the ubiquitous gambling-houses, with a Chinese Waiang, or theatre, close at hand. The State derives a considerable revenue from the licenses for these "hells," which abound in all parts of the city, being patronized by all classes of both Siamese and Chinese.

Newspapers reported brawls and murders, gang fights, and secret societies activities. Sampeng was considered an unsavory area -- even one of its old temples, Wat Sampeng (renamed Pathum Khongka) was tainted as the site for the execution of nobility.

If we accept the categorizations of the first Siamese postal registry in 1882-3, the Chinese owned the majority of these centers of vice: saloons (92% of 548 establishments), gambling houses and lottery shops (91% of 129), pawn shops (99% of 167), and opium facilities (98% of 275) (Wilson 1989: 56). Reporting on the 1883 postal survey, Constance Wilson (1989: 56) concludes that, "[t]he only vice they did not control was prostitution." Of the 27 brothels, the "Chinese" reportedly owned 9 (or a third), Thai women headed 8, and 1 Chinese woman owned another (Wilson 1990:

¹⁵ Opium was introduced into Asia by the British over the objections of local governments. For example, King Rama III's (1824-1851) seizure of vessels carrying opium created diplomatic problems. After the Bowring Treaty, opium entered more frequently. In 1917, opium taxes generated one-fourth of the state's returns (Tate 1979: 561-562).

87).¹⁶ Thai men therefore controlled a third of these recorded houses. Yet the brothels and the prostitution trade were associated with the Chinese immigrants, who provided the patronage (men from Hainan -- the poorest immigrants -- were singled out [Landon 1939: 162]), collected the taxes, owned nine houses -- and were also often the workers themselves.

Even as relatively few Chinese women came to Siam before 1890, those who did were often recruited to work in brothels. Cantonese tong associations trafficked women between China and the United States (Matthaei and Amott 1990: 65) and probably for Siam as well, since one source identifies the Siam workers as Cantonese (Abha 1982). Thai women, and reportedly Japanese and Farang also worked in brothels (Khao Sot 1989). Many of the Thai women were sold as slaves, or entered the brothels after "emancipation" of Siam's slaves, with no other means of an income (Truong 1990). The rates varied depending on the length of time and the stature of the prostitute; one reports the cost 37 satang, or one-third a baht (Abha 1982: 52), another specifies 2 saleung to 1 baht high level for Thai and Chinese women, but 2 baht to 4 baht for Farang and Japanese (Khao Sot 1982: 14).¹⁷

¹⁶ It is not clear from Wilson's two accounts (1989, 1990) whether the lone Chinese female proprietor is tallied within the nine brothels controlled by "Chinese."

¹⁷ 1850 to 1890, Ingram suggests an exchange rate of 5 baht to US 3 dollars. A satang is one-hundredth of a baht.

Chinese women metonymically represented prostitution: the Thai women, many of them slaves sold to brothels, working in the trade adopted a Chinese name like Kim Lung, Kim Hiang (Abha 1982: 52). The Chinese area was so associated with prostitution -- or the reverse, prostitution was so associated with the Chinese -- that one name for prostitutes was ae sampeng (or Sampeng women). (Another was "green-lantern women," like our red-light area.) In Thai constructs, just as trading is associated with the Chinese and women, so excessive or immoral forms of profit like prostitution were (and in ways still are) signified through Chinese ethnicity and female bodies, either Chinese or Thai. These illicit (if not illegal) trades, while real in themselves, also embodied the anxieties about expanding commodity exchange in general: uncontrolled, proliferating expanse of monetary value into social realms governed by non-monetary (if material) evaluations. Economic exchange, money, and commoditization were also associated with Chineseness and with the female gender in everyday life, and so the public fears about this increasingly powerful realm were conveyed, in part at least, through these ethnic and gender "others" -- particularly through the figure of the Chinese prostitute.¹⁸

¹⁸ In the United States, there was a similar construction of the Chinese woman. In 1856, The New York Tribune wrote, "the Chinese are lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order" (cited in Matthaei and Amott 1990: 65).

Nationalist Regulations: 1910-1950

Chinatown's reputation for vice, and Chinese women's conflation with prostitution, flag a direction that Thai authorities followed in the first half of this century. The Thai state, in various incarnations, continued but elaborated on the modernizing projects of Rama IV and Rama V, with attempts to refashion the country and its subjects through modern knowledge, technology, infrastructure, and regulation as well as through definitions of legitimate Thai tradition. In these efforts, the state directed attention to Chinese economies in particular, but also to women's bodies and Thai identities.¹⁹

The revolution in China was a pressingly close event for Thailand. After 1949, Chinese invested their money within Thailand rather than remitting it to China. However, the Chinese revolutionaries had supporters in Thailand and Sino-Thais acquired that contradictory double-label of communist and capitalist, both of which invoked state surveillance and regulation. The commercial nature of the Chinese challenged the ethnic nationalist formation of the Thai identity.²⁰ The complaints about foreigners selling

¹⁹ This nationalist period has been the subject of much interesting work. See for example, Hewison 1986; Suwadee 1993; Thamsook 1977; Reynolds 1994; and Thongchai 1992.

²⁰ Replacing the name Siam with Thailand -- which started in 1939, reverted to Siam, and was reinstated in 1949 -- was an ethnic-nationalist move, redefining as a nation an ethnic Tai group that spans from Southern China through continental Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam) but excluding other sizeable minorities like the Malay, Chinese, or Indians. Some progressives

to and buying from indigenous people represented fears of "alien" political subversiveness, economic control, and cultural distance which, it seemed, seriously threatened the modernization of Thailand.

The post-war decades of military dictatorship resumed and refashioned the development of a modern "Thai" identity for the country and its citizenry. Since the 1950s, Thailand has had the fastest, and steadiest growing economy of the developing world, and a developing economy was a part of the modern Thai conception. Both the urbanization and the national integration that make up a modern nation-state were achieved, in part, through the growth of modern retail. However, for the regime of the dictator, Phibul Songkram, who ruled on an off until the later 1950s, the force of an "alien"- run modernizing commercial sector in the new, modern Thai identity compromised the state vision and kept capital under the control of Chinese families. A public discourse about Thai participation in the modern economy arose, assisted by the evaluations of foreign experts, which resulted in a wide range of policies designed to alter the concentration of economic power.²¹

prefer Siam.

²¹ For example, the government began state enterprises. These included the Department of Public Welfare pawnshops, which remain poor folk's form of banking and thereby provides a way of producing capital out of small-scale wages. In 1952, nine occupations were declared reserved for Thai nationals, among them female hair-dressing and dressmaking (Purcell 1980: 163). The state promoted (or forced) the engagement of Thais in wage labor as well.

While specific job reservations and state enterprises failed (though not the government pawn shops) and explicit anti-Chinese sentiments faded with shifting elite regimes in the late 1950s, this military-driven effort did produce changes in the economic arrangements. It made Chinese capital more Thai by making both the Chinese and the capital Thai. It attempted to make the economy more of a market economy, but not a Chinese market: in fact, with repressive politics the order of the day, the transformations made the economy into something of a restricted public sphere.

The state efforts also produced more assimilated Chinese -- that is, it attempted to the capitalists Thai (e.g., Ingram 1954; Skinner 1957; Wyatt 1982). Thai-ification was pursued through a variety of measures, such as compelling or encouraging Thai-language education of children (rather than Chinese-language), adopting Thai names, and subscribing to Thai Buddhism. Compared to state and local violence against Chinese entrepreneurs in other parts of Southeast Asia, these efforts were mild, but in many ways successful. In the 1960s the new, Thai-like generation of Chinese business people come of age unable to completely reproduce the earlier generation's networks: they did not speak Teochiu fluently, lacked the political contacts, and were cut off from political influence by the Thai nationalist regime (Keyes 1989).



Figure 3. View of Shophouse in Chinatown. Top photo shows an itinerant beverage vendor in the foreground. Bottom picture has an an optical shop on the ground floor and residences above. Photo by Eva Kolodner.



Figure 4. View of Shophouse in Chinatown. A Sampeng wholesale plastics shop. Photo by Eva Kolodner.

Sampeng and the Shophouse Economy

By the 1950s and early 1960s, the days of opium, gang-fighting and explicit brothels were over as the concentrations of vices migrated to other pockets of the city. Chinatown emerged as a more pure commercial and cultural zone (although "tea shop" brothels remained), and Sampeng remained as a crowded, hot, wholesale lane of Sino-Thai merchants and the Pahurat Indian textile-trade area. It continued as the leading wholesale zone of the capital. But by this time, in the context of increasing visits from foreigners and a nascent tourist industry, "old-time" markets became opportunities for bargains, but also signs of tradition that were marketed to foreign guests.

The leading English-language paper of the time published a column called "News for Nang and Nang Sao" (News for Mrs. and Miss) with advice for the migrant, mostly Western, homemakers -- for instance providing a sidebar called "CHECK YOUR COOK!" which listed market prices of food to survey the spending of Thai employees. In 1963, the column reports Sampeng as a well-known but worthwhile attraction. "Despite frequent listing as one of the 'sights to see' in Bangkok, Sampeng Lane is not a tourist trap but is a strictly utilitarian market," it advises, followed by instructions for how to get there, what you will find (e.g., assorted textiles, plastic goods, birds' nests, Italian rugs, Helene Curtis shampoo), and how to bargain with salesmen who act "as if the bargainer is depriving him of

his next meal" (Bangkok World June 16, 1963: 10). Later, tourist guides invite trips to this former zone of vice, providing maps to the convoluted lanes which branch off of Sempeng's markets (e.g., Van Beek 1988). Thus, Sempeng and Chinatown represented a functional, established form of marketing -- but at the same time one which was traditional, a quality meaning quaint or backwards, depending on the observer. If we consider the familial or kin quality of the Sempeng economy, and if we contrast this form to the subsequent forms of modern retail (as in the next chapter's discussion of department stores), we can discern some of the implications for the place of women's marketing in modernizing Bangkok.

The narrow but important road Charoen Krung has long been a commercial route stretching from the old city, through Chinatown, and down into an area where 19th century workers of Western companies, consuls, and the like clustered their businesses (it now houses the Muslim South Asian enclave of gem traders). In the 1960s, the British author cited above describes the strip:

New Road [Charoen Krung], the longest and oldest street in town -- formerly an elephant track -- is an extraordinary patchwork of yellowish or off-white terrace shops, their Victorian-style classical mouldings barely discernable beneath the grime. Canvas or cotton awnings, with faded advertisements, droop from the projecting concrete ledges separating each shop from the dwelling above. Thick, ugly telephone poles support a profusion of wires. (Insor 1963: 16).

Alongside this street in Chinatown are these shophouses, two to four-storey forms that above house the

family and any help they hire, possibly some renters, as well as the shop, store, or workshop on the first floor. "Here the majority of the Chinese traders work and live," reported a geographer, "but also Thai people of the merchant class" (Donner 1982: 860). These "Chinese houses," as they were called (Donner 1982: 860), dominated the urban landscapes of Thailand, have been the first frontier of urban expanse into new areas. The shophouse form of retail commandeered consumer trade until eclipsed by department stores in the 1970s (discussed in chapter two). The British observer, Insor, cringed at the sight:

...the prevalent shop is the Chinese 'shop-all'. This is a 'hole in the wall', its simple, oblong interior crammed with goods. Behind the shop is another, smaller room from which stairs lead up to the grilled and shuttered bedrooms....Little children, almost naked, play on the pavement in front of the blocks or in the dark, narrow lanes between them. The women wear silky Chinese trousers, black and baggy; the men wear trousers or shorts. (Insor 1963: 17)

What this 1960s Western observer saw as decayed chaos was a different economic and domestic form of the family firm. The shophouse was also the house; "public" space was the children's play area; and Chinese women always did wear pants. In the shophouses, families mixed kinship and work, mingled the spheres of "production" "exchange" and "consumption" that are separate, at least in discourse, in a modern, industrial economy. An American marketing specialist suggested that production, distribution, and consumption were not clearly separated as they were in the west (Anderson 1963). But the Chinatown area, replete with

crowded shophouses, was known as a "condensed," even "blighted" area of "substandard" housing (Donner 1978: 863-864).

These Chinese or Chinese-Thai families have reproduced themselves -- their members, culture, and identities -- in part through their commercial spaces and practices. In front of their shops, such families made -- and continue to make -- regular offerings of food (roast duck, egg, whiskey) and votive papers to the gods. Inside the shop, on the floor at the back, are the red shrines to guardian spirits. In this family form, the female members of the family played active economic roles making goods, selling them, helping with accounts, and managing staff. However, within overseas Chinese culture and public Thai discourse, these roles were not always publicly acknowledged as work, especially when located within the category of housewife (e.g., Bao 1997).

Yet when the old patriarch died, formidable grandmothers or elderly aunts occupied the place of family head. An important part of Chinese or Sino-Thai efforts to reproduce or improve their financial (class) position has been education (Wyatt 1975). Many of these families thus educated their daughters, nieces, or granddaughters further than did Thai peers (largely because they could afford to). Once women began entering the university in sizable numbers in the 1960s (Knodel 1994), Sino-Thai women were well represented among college students, academics, and in the

professions.²² Many of them entered the family business or other professionalizing firms, and Sino-Thai women entrepreneurs have been considered especially powerful in the realm of real estate.

Anthropologists and (European) historians have shown how a distinct economy based on market principles is an historical creation that results from withdrawing family or kinship from control of production. Linda Nicholson (1987) offers an analysis of how such capitalist development involves gender in the process, notably by producing a bound, abstract realm of the economy (a conception she asserts Marxists use themselves). The formation of a market economy expelled much of women's household, kin, or productive labors from what is viewed as the "economy." The "modernization" process which intensified in Thailand in the 1950s and 1960s thus more or less reduced the kinship nature of the economy in the two prevailing arenas, agriculture and commerce.

Into the 20th century, Chinese merchants remained the most powerful local economic group in Thailand but their family firms were forced to include Thais as workers, managers, and executives. At an abstract level, this change represents a reworking of the economy, the separation of economic distribution (commerce) from Chinese kinship and community. In commerce, explicit political pressure of anti-

²² During the 1960s, women flowed into higher education producing larger numbers of women graduates and professionals. (See chapter five and Knodel 1994.)

Chinese nationalists from the 1930s to the 1950s and the need to transform operations in order to diversify, professionalize, and compete with foreign firms, shifted Chinese firms from family businesses to more bureaucratic ones. The new Chinese business form included Thai power elites and Thai professionals from the growing Thai middle class, as well as their own well-educated children. These children, daughters as well as sons, also moved into other companies (in addition to the Thai preserves of government work and universities).

To "modernize" economically, the Thai state attempted to change from a kin-based, family firm economy by creating distinct economic spheres of industrialized production and modern distribution. Informed by Cold War and anti-communist commitments (and U.S. pressure), this modernization took on an anti-Chinese cast particularly during the post-war dictatorial rule into the 1950s. In order to make Thailand capitalist, and have capital more in Thai hands, businesses were to some extent forced away from complete family control -- where Sino-Thai women were active. In becoming more professional and oriented towards modern global markets, the commercial businesses of Thailand in some senses redefined the landscape of markets to a neutral space of business which expelled or obscured the traditions of marketing Thai and Sino-Thai women.

Gender and The Question of Chinese Identity

Discussions about overseas Chinese have formed a veritable Chinese Question in scholarship on, and political discourse in, Thailand (and elsewhere in Southeast Asia).²³ Animating these official discussions are economic concerns (about their centrality to trade and the remittances to China) and also political, nationalist and anti-communist anxieties. Indeed, the ethnic Chinese have been scrutinized for both communist insurgency and capitalist invincibility. "Chinese," or "Sino-Thai" identity is constructed at least in part by such public discourses. As is the case with ethnic categories in general, the imagined Chinese community, often depicted as distinct and bounded, is a construction forged out of motivated glosses on history and genealogy. Its complex history involves the interplay of Thai and Chinese discourses -- Chinese concepts of descent and Thai laws about citizenship, for example, state and local practices (Bao 1997).

In post-war Thailand, what counts as the "Chinese" ethnic minority involves a complex mix of Thai, Chinese, and foreign state discourses, ethnic markers (language, names, appearance), as well as people's everyday identifications and practices. Official Thai tallies documented citizenship: those who declared themselves Chinese and had passports to

²³ For a recent critical investigation of Chinese ethnicity in Thailand, see Jiemin Bao's 1994 dissertation, Marriage among Ethnic Chinese in Bangkok: An Ethnography of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity over Two Generations.

prove it entered the rolls as Chinese (Donner 1982: 796). But in the lived worlds of Bangkok, the 'Chinese' population was much larger, and much more amorphous, than passports allow. As the economist Ingram wrote in 1954: "When reference is made to the 'Chinese' in Thailand, it is necessary but difficult to know who is meant."

Frequently, the reference is to the 3,000,000 people who are Chinese ethnically or by ancestry. Thus if a man has a Chinese father and a Thai mother but has been brought up as a Chinese, he may be considered "Chinese" in many cases. Frequently, the word "Chinese" is used to mean only immigrants from China...most official statistics classify as "Chinese" only those not born in the country...Sometimes, for example, one son will be Thai while his brother is brought up a Chinese. (Ingram 1954: 4)

Thus, the explicit self-identifications and public conception of Chinese descent varies. What establishes the ethnic Chinese identity in Thailand (aside from Chinese citizenship), revolves around practices and discourses in which gender is key -- and typically, what establishes or reproduces official ethnicity is predicated on men, literally in the case of citizenship laws defining children's nationality by the father. "Gendered ethnic identities," writes Bao (1997) of Chinese-Thai communities, "rest upon a shifting male-centered foundation of power."

Chinese identification in Thailand tends to be ascribed patrilineally.²⁴ Being "Chinese" not does require

²⁴ Official censuses did not provide ethnic or language categories, but rather distinguish nationals and aliens (Donner 1978[1982]: 796). Capitalism did make such distinctions: to operationalize the ethnic category, a 1960s market research firm defined Chinese as "households in which Chinese language is spoken at home by 2 or more members of

maternal ancestry in China:²⁵ while some "Chinese" people I knew had Chinese grandmothers, others' grandmothers were Siamese. On the other hand, male ancestry can be absorbed into the female lines: I found people identifying as "pure Thai," who later mentioned that a grandfather was Chinese. (Obviously what counts as "true Thai" or "Thai" itself is equally constructed and perhaps even more fluid.) The term "Sino-Thai" can be used in reference to the children of Chinese and Thai ancestry. Language has been an important marker. Many of the post-World War II, post-Chinese-Revolution era no longer speak Chinese (and women were rarely taught to read Mandarin) -- thus they are considered very "assimilated" (Preecha 1980: 14).

Compared to other Southeast Asian countries (e.g., the Philippines), the Chinese in Thailand are said to have assimilated the most and been subjected the least to violence or anti-Chinese difficulties (e.g., Lim and Gosling 1983; Tate 1979). (Despite anti-Chinese, nationalist hostility after 1932.) Part of this assimilation is credited to the men's intermarriage: by marrying Thai women, Chinese men had access to local life and also adapted to Thai

the household" (Business Research 1966).

²⁵ Academic researchers have defined "second and third generation Sino-Thai" as those "whose fathers or grandfathers were born in China respectively" (Napat and Szanton 1986: 39).

custom.²⁶ Most important, their children became more "Thai," leading many observers to predict that the Chinese would become completely assimilated into Thai society (e.g., Ingram 1954: 218). The early waves of Chinese men who married Thai women "became good Siamese citizens," according to King Rama VII (r. 1925-1935), who lamented that, after the 1911 overthrow of the Manchu dynasty: "Now the Chinese bring their wives from China, and are determined to remain Chinese" (cited in Girling 1981:58). The entrance of Chinese women, then, was the problem: they created a "wall against assimilation" (Purcell 1980).

The anthropologist Jiemin Bao (1994) proposes viewing Chinese identities as "contextually specific, highly variable, and contingent." She suggests that concrete practices (including sexual behaviors) reproduce a contingent Chinese identity for some individuals and families. Obvious behaviors marking and reproducing ethnic Chinese identity, which I encountered frequently in the area around the flat I rented, include votive paper burnings and

²⁶ This evaluation of foreign men establishing rapport with locals through sexual and marital relations with native women is not unique to the Chinese in Thailand: many discussions of colonialism pinpoint the start of difficulties with the arrival of Western women when such ties with native women were severed (e.g., Stoler 1982, 1989). This sexual epistemology suggests that white male coitus with local women provides the men and colonial state knowledge of the people and offers superior connections. (In some British colonies, concubines were called "sleeping dictionaries.") Such an interpretation continues in the contemporary discourses of foreign customers of Thai prostitutes, who assume that their sexual relation provides them with a "truth" or greater knowledge than platonic friendship.

duck offerings to spirits and ancestors and the characteristic style of funerals. Using her Indonesian and Dutch upbringing as an example, Ien Ang (1993:4) similarly argues for "the indeterminacy of Chineseness as a signifier for 'identity'" -- in terms of the Chinese diaspora.

However situationally contingent in day-to-day life, "Chinese" has remained an important part of Thai rhetoric in ways that infuse social life, most conspicuously in its associations with commodified exchange. The figures of the Chinese boss (taokae), the neighborhood merchant, the real-estate matriarch are all illustrations of the merging of Chinese ethnicity with economic roles. The construction of Chineseness also implicates gender (and sexuality), an interconnection which Bao (1994, 1996) explores in depth.

Paradoxically, commerce both separates and assimilates the Chinese. One study in a northeast city found that retailers and wholesalers are "better assimilated" than middlemen and processors (cited in Preecha 1980:9). Another suggests that "assimilation" occurs "above all, by residence and business contracts with the Thai" (Preecha 1980: 14). In the rapid economic growth following the 1950s, Chinese family firms formed a large part of Thailand's "capitalist class," but it is possible to argue that the class identity -- involving critical links to political cliques, and relying increasingly on Thai professional labor -- in fact superseded or determined the ethnic identity (Hewison 1988).

Yet commerce itself is symbolized, and in part

reproduced through representations. Discussions about the Chinese question in Thailand have involved ethnically segmented constructions not only of "Chinese" but of "Thai" proclivities and "bodies." Thus, a leading economist warns,

As long as the Chinese minority continues to form a separate body in the nation, Thai entrepreneurship will be hampered...Because of the strangle hold the Chinese have on business activities, the Thai have little chance to acquire experience and develop know-how in them" (Ingram 1954: 217).

In the shift from Siam's welcome to Chinese merchant migrants to Thailand's fears of Chinese obstacles to Thai modernity, the potentials for Thai entrepreneurship hinge on Thai men. The creation of a modernizing economy thereby has inscribed a modern contest between Thai men and Chinese men (or families) over modern capitalist markets. The productive exchanges between Thai women and itinerant Chinese men in village markets, sexual relations, or family businesses, the partnerships of Chinese women, and the on-going but transforming contributions of Sino-Thai daughters are thus obscured, delegated to the private work of the domestic sphere or to the dangerous excesses of commercial vice.

CHAPTER II

DEPARTMENT STORES AND THE DOMESTICATION
OF WOMEN'S PRODUCTION

One day early on in my fieldwork, a woman who had befriended me in the neighborhood, Warunee, invited me to go with her and a cousin on a tiow (a recreational trip) to a department store, which, besides short group pilgrimages to temples or shrines, was one of her main forms of fun. Warunee left her small, two-storey shophouse in a the Sino-Thai (or Chinese, depending on the definition) family, with parents, siblings, a young nephew, and a few workers under the watchful eyes of the enshrined photograph of her paternal ancestor. The family business was metal work (the characteristic business of the area), but Warunee worked outside for an electronic-goods company (called "Family") "finishing" television sets, she explained using the English word. She picked me up from my six-storey apartment building, and we retrieved her cousin from her shophouse home across the river. This house no contained a ground floor business, and the front room now was a living room with a couch and low chairs facing a television, and on the wall, a calendar and photographs of Warunee's cousin receiving their college diplomas from the King or Princess

(as is the practice with elite state schools). We proceeded to an out-of-the-way street stall with metal tables and chairs for the pork-ball noodle soup which had an excellent reputation.

We then travelled on the back of one of the revamped pickup trucks which serve as local transport to head to a major modern retail area across the river from Bangkok, and went to a Central Department Store chain there. In the brightly-lit and spacious store, my hosts moved rapidly up the escalators, and we sped casually through a few departments, stopping in the small supermarket and the stationery section. Warunee bought a bag of dried cuttlefish which she insisted on giving me, and her cousin browsed through the greeting cards to find one to give to a co-worker who would be leaving her office.

This brief excursion raises several points about the place of modern retail -- specifically department stores -- in contemporary Bangkok life. First of all, it provides one anecdote illustrating the ways that department stores provide an important venue for leisure (and, as I show in the next chapter, are particularly significant for women). Although women occupy the "public" realms of markets, their mobility and travel is still constrained, if only by fear (of danger from men, thieves, or ghosts). Furthermore, at least in my telling of it, Warunee and her cousin's life illustrates the contrast not only between the class-positions revealed in the homes and occupations of the two

cousins, but also between the old-style shophouse form (not often becoming a more conventional 'home') and the modern, all-in-one retail space of the department store.

It is interesting to consider what this case suggests about the significance of department stores for these subjects in terms of their consumption: Warunee and her cousin both purchased gifts, the currency of social relationships. One of the ways that changing retail is significant for gender and social identities is general is not only by providing the items for individual or family consumption and display, but by increasingly taking part of the exchanges which make up social life. Department stores and other forms of retail not only provide the gifts which are used in "traditional" exchanges, they also have come to influence the amount, definition, and standards of exchange (the "leaving-the-job" card, for example, or the Christmas holiday in a Buddhist country).

In order to appreciate the relationship between the female gender and changing markets, I think it is especially useful to explore the public and symbolic role of this modern form of retail. Therefore, what I consider in this chapter is not the specifics of the consumer goods for which department stores are famous, nor women's consumption of them, but instead the background which illustrates how Bangkok commerce has come to play a powerful role in articulating public discourses about friendship, family relationships, as well as the identities of wife, mother,

and woman. To do so, I explore the historical developments that made modern retail a prominent presence in the spaces and relationships of the city, in part by supplanting the Chinatown shophouse and local markets of Thai women with the department store form. The emergence of modern retail involved a symbolic economy of gender which represented "modernity" in relation to women's domestic or individual consumption, and economic backwardness and urban chaos with Chinese and working-class Thai women's markets.

In many ways, retail and Bangkok modernized together, if uneasily, from the 1950s through the 1980s. During these decades, new downtown business and shopping zones spread the city outward, beyond Chinatown and the government seat, creating a sprawling urban, commercial, industrializing capital city. But the roots of this cosmopolitan, international, modern form in Bangkok lie in the trading families and shophouses of Chinatown, as I explain below.

Central Department Store

The department store, while related to the general store, is a particular form of concentrated and centralized retail organized into discrete sections or departments. It began in the West in the mid-19th century, with one of the earliest examples the French Printemps store (Mayfield 1949: 35). During the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), such European "department stores" as Badman's and John Samson's

served the European and Thai elite in Bangkok, for example, providing the Western blouses, stockings, stockings and shoes that comprised the emerging hybrid fashion of the wealthy Thais; but these stores did not endure.¹ The innovation of a new kind of popular retail was the work of the Sino-Thai commercial world.

The first modern consolidated retail shop -- the department store -- emerged in Chinatown from Sino-Thai merchant trade, and over a few decades grew into the largest department store chain in the Southeast Asian region.² In the 1920s, the peak decade for Chinese immigration, about 95,000 people left southeastern China for Siam each year (Tate 1979: 539). Among these travellers, one young man travelled from the island of Hainan to Bangkok, where he became a merchant. Hainanese immigrants tended to occupy the poorest 'coolie' positions, such as gardeners, waiters, peddlers, or fishermen (Sternstein 1982). Instead, Tieng sold goods in Thonburi, an area of orchards and residences across the river from Bangkok proper. He eventually fathered 26 children, and, although we are not told about his wife or wives, we can presume that a woman he married was likely to

¹ Although some of the buildings did: for example, the John Samson's store became a Public Works Office.

² The story of Central is culled from the following sources: Business in Thailand 1987, 1981; Harlow 1992; Hewison 1988; Nakagawa 1987; Santi 1980. There may have been earlier department stores such as Tai Fah in Chinatown. In Chiang Mai city, the Tantraphan Department Store emerged from a shop which opened in 1942, earlier than the first Chirathivat store, but when this shop developed into an all-in-one department store I do not know.

have been from China as well, for after 1920 greater numbers of Chinese women were able to enter Siam (Sternstein 1982). As with all Chinese residents in Siam, Tieng took a Thai last name: Chirathivat (also spelled Jirathiwat). This surname flags the nationalist context in which his business emerged: state policies, especially in the 1930s to 1940s, were designed to assimilate (or subjugate) the Chinese population, for example by insisting that aliens register, carry a photo identification card, and pay residence fees, while resident Chinese were compelled to adopt a Thai surname and the Thai version of Buddhism, and to place their children in Thai-language schools. State policies also aimed to extract more control over wealth and economic affairs from the ethnic Chinese commercial minority. In other words, the Siamese government attempted to make both capital and capitalists 'Thai' (Chapter One; Bao 1994; Skinner 1957).

In 1947, two decades after he immigrated and two years before legal migration from China would cease with the 1949 Chinese revolution, Tieng opened a store with his eldest son Samrit. The first "Central" was a small shop (50 square meters) selling imported goods on Charoen Krung road in Chinatown, which expanded three years later to a nearby site five times the size. The family opened further stores in the Chinatown area. The next branch, in 1956-57, was a 500-square foot imported-goods store in Wang Burapa (apparently an auspicious site as there is still a Central branch there). This location became the chain's "first

store" and drew customers predominantly from Sino-Thai residents in Chinatown and beyond. For example, Dean, whom I discuss in chapter six, was taken as a young child in the 1960s shopping there by her mother or guardian aunt. With this store, the Chirathivat family developed what is considered the first true department store in Thailand, adorned with the English name, Central Department Store (in Thai pronounced Centrun).

In the 1950s, Chinatown was the prevailing shopping district of Bangkok (and hence of the nation). People who grew up in Bangkok during these years (and after) recall Chinatown as the heart of consumption in the city. Their families would come from across the river in Thonburi or outside of downtown Bangkok to shop and dine. The third Central branch stood on a main artery of Chinatown, Yaowarat, a street lined with gold shops, restaurants, and another of the early department stores, Tai Fah. (However, this Central branch did not attract the business it needed among the local Chinese clientele and later closed.) Near the 'first store' Wang Burapa Central branch, the Nightingale Olympic store sold (and advertised) Vassarette bras. But amid this retail abundance, and for the well-to-do of the million residents of Bangkok,³ Central was the department store.

³ One million figure for the greater Bangkok from Tate (1979: 538). In 1947, the population of Bangkok proper was tallied at 889,538 and for Thonburi across the river, 281,343 (Donner 1982, Table 161: 791).

Out of competing stores selling imported goods in Chinatown, Central survived. Central evolved into the leading department store chain in Bangkok with a proliferation of branches that made the company the leading chain in Southeast Asia. (Only in the 1990s did Central open branches outside of Bangkok, in the northern capital, Chiang Mai.)

In these early years of the department store, the Chirathivat family introduced innovations which represented a new mode of merchandising. The all-in-one shopping center far surpassed the offerings of a general store, by including furnishings and a variety of services (e.g., tailoring, shoe repair) that provided for workaday and home life. What the department store met was the changing fashion, home, and service needs of wealthy, middle-class, and working class living of the 1950s and 1960s. In the Wang Burapa 'first store,' the firm introduced price tags on their imported stock, a new concept in selling goods in Thailand. The entrenched marketing mode had been bargaining (or haggling), a form where customer and vendor interact dialogically (Kapchan 1996). Fixing the prices of goods weakens the interactions between sellers and buyers, and requires less market 'intelligence' from each. The shopper need not be familiar with current prices and reputations, nor be skilled at negotiations -- a trait which some informants who felt inadequate or awkward bargaining noted with relief, while the vendor need not constantly calculate shoppers'

psychology or profit margins. Such a shift also reinforced the ways that the role of "shopper" was becoming symbolically associated with the "housewife." Fixing prices differentiated department stores from markets -- shophouses or market stalls (aside from produce, which often used set prices). Price tags made the codified value of goods easily commensurable with international systems of value. They also

The department stores also changed the nature of labor involved in selling. The position of salesworker no longer required the market knowledges or bargaining skills (let alone those required for negotiating with police, local patrons, or government officials). However, department store selling requires other kinds of knowledges: literacy, for one, and familiarity with the consumption world of the store. In fact, to qualify as a sales clerk, a candidate has to have completed at least the official minimum elementary-school education (currently sixth grade) and sometimes secondary school, something a fair number of rural migrants or urban poor have been unable to do. For example, many of today's sex workers do not have the educational requirements (which can be as high as 10th grade) to consider department store clerk as an employment option. Lower-class Thais, or students working part-time, were trained to present the goods, atmosphere and instruction for the middle-class theater of the up-scale department stores (a process described in the west in Benson 1986). Sales staff are disproportionately female (although men tend to be placed in

such departments as electronics or men's wear). And women are disproportionately in sales: in the late 1960s, according to one report, 40 percent of women workers were in sales (Anderson 1970). Work in sales and services highlight the workers' appearance, and department stores, banks, and the like put workers in uniforms (paid for by workers). For example, many service workers in banks and hotels and such receive training in applying cosmetics. (Such service work increasingly relies on the workers' consumption of consumer goods such as pantyhose or make-up). This sales work offered professionalized, respectable work in the 'formal sector,' and was vastly different from vending in the markets.

The department store signified a dramatic departure from earlier popular forms of retail, notably, the Sino-Thai shophouse which characterized the merchant families of Chinatown (and beyond). Here was a distinct space dedicated to sophisticated and civilized selling, away from the crowded merchandising on the streets of Sampeng lane. Yet Central department store not only emerged from this merchant capital, Sino-Thai world, it remained by and large a family affair. By the time the founder, Tieng Chirathivat, died in 1968, his children and employees managed the large and growing empire. In the 1960s, the Central enterprise was managed by the founder's 26 children, assisted by daughters-in-law. The eldest son, Samrit, was the general manager and later chair of the Central Group until his death in 1992. Other brothers and sisters competed in running or buying for

separate sections of the firm while younger children prepared for future roles by studying in England and the United States (Anderson 1970: 70-71). In this way, the Central group remained to a large extent in the control of the Chirathivat family. At various times, the founder's sons were leading executives in portions of the diversifying empire. The Chirathivats were one of the elite, intermarrying and joint-venturing families which made up Thailand's capitalist class (Hewison 1988: 85-89). By the 1990s, however, the evolution of the firm compelled the Central Group to place some of its businesses on the stock market (go public) and hire more non-kin and foreign management.

Although the printed accounts of the store do not detail the women in the family, typical Sino-Thai family firms rely on the labors and management of wives and daughters (Bao 1996). The innovation of the department store form in Chinatown involved gendered family relations and ethnically based business practices. In turn, the expansion of this version of retail involved and affected gender and national identities as well.

The Making of the Modern City, AD 1960s (BE 2500s)

During the 1960s, Thailand's economy began to grow at rates which were among the worlds highest (Keyes 1989). Underwriting much of this growth was U.S. aid in relation to Indochina wars and Cold War politics, but it also derived

from funnelling local wealth and inviting foreign capital into new business investments, which hired greater numbers of workers -- many of them young male and female migrants from the northeast or north. Modernizing the nation meant modernizing the economy, primarily along industrial, free-market capitalist lines (while relying on rural farming families to provide migrant labor, reabsorb unemployed workers, and feed city populations): development did not mean redirecting the distribution of wealth to poorer classes or rural areas (Pasuk 1988). The pattern of male and female migration only intensified, eventually leaving farming communities with few young adults except during harvest time, and firmly linking these households with metropolitan culture, consumption, and capital.

Department stores were a defining part of the growth of the capital city. Bangkok's urban territory doubled from 1960s to 1970s, moving eastward in particular, along roads formed over paved-in canals (the last of which were filled during the 1960s). The growth of Bangkok involved new residences, businesses, and markets, of department stores were especially important signposts of this urbanization. As the frontier of the city expanded outward, commerce overflowed beyond the Chinese merchant quarter. Reaching outside of Chinatown, modern retail recast existing markets and carved out whole new downtown areas along newly laid roads (rather than along canals, as in the past). An early such shopping area replaced part of a long-standing open-air

market, Pratunam (literally, watergate), then at the outskirts of the city.

The first modern retail site outside of Chinatown was a portion of this Pratunam area called Rajprasong, which during the early 1960s saw a flurry of retail construction. Central opened a short-lived branch there in the early 1960s. In 1962, a new shopping complex, the Rajdamri Arcade, opened. The next year a supermarket appeared around the corner. The developments of this area fashioned the eastern side of a large shopping district, claiming the new center of growing Bangkok. This zone continued to evolve as a major retail area (see the map in chapter three, which discusses malls on the western side). (In the 1990s developers tore down further portions of Pratunam for the World Trade Center, which houses the Central "Zen" branch.)

Even with all these developments, an English observer complained that 1960s Bangkok was so "horizontal"; engineers hadn't yet figured out a way to build to heights (Insor 1963: 15). Outside of the old section of the city with its palaces and temples, markets formed a major reference point in the navigation of a complex web of lanes, streets, and arteries. Department stores stood above the horizontal skyline as landmarks, and in people's talk, metonymically represented their neighborhoods. They also grounded narratives about Bangkok's progress from tradition to modernity, from third-world to industrializing economy.

Here is a description of Bangkok's growth in the early 1960s:

Lately there has been a great increase in activity in Bangkok: wooden shops and houses were taken down and replaced by new shopping blocks in smart colours; a new luxury hotel (the Rama) was built, roads were widened, parking meters installed, playing fountains erected. But the traditional pattern still predominates. With the exception of a few stores owned by Thai, Indians, or other foreigners, the prevalent shop is the Chinese 'shop-all'." (Insor 1963: 16-17)

This description juxtaposes "the traditional pattern" -- the Chinese shophouse -- with a flurry of commerce. These two forms have been presented in succession -- "wooden shops" are taken down and "new shopping blocks" erected in their place; in other words, as a triumph of modern retail over the Sino-Thai family shop. Yet, both forms continued to co-exist -- or perhaps compete -- in a widescale expanse of marketing that accompanied, and furthered, the rapid growth of the city. For the government and professional elite, the retail sprawl stood in an unstable tension between modern, professional (and male-run) retail and female street markets.

In 1964, a new department store (besides Central) opened in the Rajdamri Arcade. It was the Daimaru department store, a subsidiary of a two-centuries-old Japanese firm. Daimaru at first sold Japan-made goods to Thai consumers and introduced the enthralling innovations, escalators and air conditioning. Escalators offered not only excitement and a technological interior but served to clearly distinguish the seasoned from the novice shopper: stories about watching

the grandfather's or the peasant's fearful approach of the moving stairs continued for decades. The Japan-styled department store thus fashioned an interior realm of avant-garde comfort. The construction of large stores for a general public was not innovated by Western businesses but by Asian capital, originally Sino-Thai and then Japanese. By 1967, Bangkok had a dozen department store branches (Nakagawa 1987: 20, table). Some years later, the Central chain reported "a sales-per-square-foot figure equal to Macy's" (Business in Thailand 1981: 34). The Sino-Thai Central and Japanese Daimaru department stores were the industry leaders and dominated the retail scene until 1979 or 1980.

Departmentalizing Retail

While new shopping complexes were officially celebrated, retail as a whole occupied a conflictual place in the modernization of Bangkok. Department stores signalled cosmopolitan consumption and a modern economic form which were assumed to represent the consumption future of an industrializing city. These stores stood as icons of Thailand's consumption, distinct from the shophouse and street vending. But they did not supplant the profusion of other versions of marketing which spread apace with Bangkok's growth. A geographer laments the "haphazard distribution" of commerce beyond the wholesale trading at the river and Chinatown:

This has led to congestion and it has certainly got completely out of control. In recent years, a number of comprehensive shopping centres, department stores, market areas and the like have been built, but this has not eliminated the small retail dealers along nearly all roads nor the mobile hawkers along the footpaths. (Donner 1982: 874-875).

The shophouse form continued, and in fact proliferated as part of the urbanizing frontier, along with an array of vending forms. Moreover, the prevalence and spread of basket-carrying food vendors, open-air markets, street bazaars, mainly staffed by large numbers of lower-class or poor female vendors, only intensified, tied to the increasing population. The geographer notes, "commercial activities have spread all over Bangkok and Thonburi since in practically all families a member follows some trading business" (Donner 1982: 874). The usual family member for Thai families was a woman. In contrast to the department store, these forms of merchandising, carried out by women or Sino-Thai men -- or by poor Thai families as a whole -- were considered un-modern, backwards, chaotic, and often an obstacle to progress itself. Such marketing refused to remain within clearly defined functional areas.

Government authorities and economic planners conveyed the hope that organized retail -- the department store -- would replace the demeaning shophouse form and chaotic bazaars and help to instill an urban order. The creation of a new suburban retail area north of the city provides one example of the differentiation but interrelation between department stores and other markets.

In the oldest portion of the capital, housing the Grand Palace and most government buildings, there is a multi-purpose open field, Sanaam Luang. Royalty continues to use the site for significant ceremonies, such as the annual royal plowing ceremony and royal cremations. It also serves as a park for recreation (notably kite flying) and, through the 1960s, it hosted a large, popular weekend outdoor market. This field has also provided an important site for major political speeches, protests, and conflicts through the present, many of them pro-democratic or leftist. Perhaps because of the popular and populist political role of this field (I have been told), the government decided in the late 1970s to relocate its thriving urban market. Some vendors relocated to a nearby canal, resulting in an on-going contest with authorities over that use of city space (see also Pongsak 1994; Charin 1994). The major market reopened at the edge of Chatuchak park, at a heavily trafficked intersection in an outlying suburban area. The State Railway of Thailand, which owned a large tract of land by this intersection, wanted to lease the land, but apparently abhorred the idea of "rows of ugly shophouses" (Santi 1980: 33). The State Railway leased the land for 30 years to the Central group (specifically to its real-estate subsidiary, headed by a Chirathivat son). Central added a department store branch (and hotel and convention center) conveniently located near this popular weekend market, thus fashioning a new, cross-class commercial area in Bangkok halfway between

downtown and the airport. The official interpretation of modern shopping complexes as desirable, and the effort to reduce and regulate ugly shophouses and unruly hawkers continues into the present day. I suggest that their tense coexistence involved a gender symbolism that reverberates through discourses about markets and urban life as well as about modern women's roles.

Department stores and shopping centers heralded the end of the shophouse economy. The department store's fixed prices, trained staff, and air-conditioned environments diverges from the shophouse run by a (perhaps short-tempered) Sino Thai merchant. It represented a pinnacle of modernity not only for the range of imported goods or fancy display, but for the form of retail itself. The novel, brightly colored indoor shopping centers offered material and symbolic proof of a new domestic economy. Whereas shophouses often combined business and living -- and making, selling, and using -- department stores symbolically disarticulate these practices. Shopping complexes presented a physical, spatial and symbolic separation from production, in a site dedicated to consumption (distinctions which in part define 'post-Fordist' economic regimes).

Discourses of progress and development became more explicit during the 1960s on, and played a part in the economic policies and practices of the state. In space, speech, and practices, the modernizing economy relies on distinctions between spheres of production, distribution,

consumption, and social reproduction, and on a separation between the economic and the familial. Economic practices became, ideally, disaggregated into spheres -- in Marxist terms production, distribution, and consumption or social reproduction. These spheres are distinguished by multiple discourses, by state policies and by the evolving urban and industrializing landscape. Although abstract, they inform and involve conceptions of male and female realms and practices, particularly in terms of family labor. As industrial industries developed in the central region in the 1960s to the present, new manufacturing plants were banished for the most part to the peripheries of the city, a long commute workers made on company buses (those who do not live in dormitories).

Department stores presented geographic, economic, and symbolic separations between production and consumption. They helped depict the 'modern' Thai world, particularly the modern domestic realm. For example, supermarkets -- mainly housed in department stores, although increasingly also freestanding supermarkets like Foodland -- have been extremely popular, and for the well-to-do are replacing green markets (e.g., Walker 1992). With their packaged foods (ready-to-heat dishes) and uniformed staff, supermarkets erase the links to agricultural production that were more apparent in the open-air foodstalls.

We can consider these structural economic shifts in terms of their impact on households and families, or

kinship. State efforts and economic shifts in pre-war and post-war Thailand achieved one mark of modernity: the distinction between an external 'economy' and domestic or kinship realms. To some extent, 'modernization' has reduced kin control of wealth and production (or perhaps shifted that control to kin-and-government-based oligarchies). Anthropologists and (European) historians have shown how a distinct economy based on market principles is an historical creation that results from withdrawing family or kinship from control of production. Linda Nicholson (1987) offers an analysis of how capitalist development or economic change involves gender in the process, notably by producing a bound, abstract realm of the economy (a conception she asserts Marxists use themselves) -- an economic and representational arrangement which expels much of women's household, kin, or productive labors. With this model, I suggest that the 1950s and 1960s modernizing more or less reduced the kinship nature of the economy in the two prevailing arenas, agriculture and commerce. The 'economy' was created as an imagined and spatial form, conflated mostly with production and capital. The modern economy and the modern domestic sphere thus were created and reified together, and implicitly -- often explicitly -- associated with male and female genders.

In commerce, political and economic pressures forced Chinese firms to shift from family control to bureaucratic designs. As enterprises grew in size, they employed more

Thai laborers. Becoming more bureaucratically controlled meant including Thai power elites (on boards) and employing foreign managers -- but also their own well-educated children (Korff 1989). Sino-Thai children, daughters as well as sons, played important roles in professionalizing businesses (and moved into Thai preserves of government work and universities). Thus, the daughter role of the Chinese family became redefined in part, from out-marrying dutiful daughter to a more incorporated member, even professional, of the household economy. The separation of capital accumulation and control from kinship was an incomplete and on-going ideal, as is shown by the continuing control of Central group businesses by Chirathivat family members and by the overlapping business, marriage, and political links among the capitalist class (Hewison 1988).

The definition of economic modernity in terms of separation of production and consumption, or work and home, overlaps with the gendered images of a modern Thai social order. Similarly, the threat of the uncontrolled spread of vending resonates with public concern over the unregulated growth of the population -- in other words, with women's fertility and reproduction. The threat of advancing modern, competitive shopping centers (with foreign capital) was rendered in such a metaphor:

Central Department Store, thus, suggested that it is time for the government to impose 'birth control' on shopping centres and department stores to prevent proliferation (Business Review 1984: 10).

During the 1960s to 1970s growth of the city, various official discourses began to pronounce on the dangers of population growth. The population of the city, permanent residents and migrant laborers, also mushroomed. In the 1960s and after, the capital of the country grew disproportionately (i.e., its "primacy" increased) due to both fertility and in-migration: resident Bangkok women had more (surviving) children and as men and women, many teenagers, migrated from the provinces to find employment. Certainly the city's growth testified to the attractions and energy of the capital's economy and therefore manifested the development and progress of the nation. But the sprawling frontiers of the city, and the increasing concentration of urban poor and working classes within it, contradicted the official visions of an orderly, Thai modernity. In the third official five-year plan for government policy on economy and society, in 1972, the state expressed concern with population control (Amara 1996:14). The regime became alarmed not only by national population growth rates (in response to the advice of international agencies), but especially with the overflowing population of Bangkok in relation to other cities -- chiefly with the influx of rural migrants (Sternstein 1982; Suwanlee 1982). The fears manifested themselves in calls for population control, condemnation of the sprawling street markets -- the poor people's department stores -- and in concerns for political order. The Public Health department provided one

channel through which to regulate both the pregnancies and markets of the poor. It also regulated women's fertility by requiring prostitutes to receive STD checkups and encouraging their contraception use as well as by family planning clinics for women generally. Street markets, such as Klong Lod, a canal-side night-market which grew after the Weekend Market was relocated, were pronounced a health risk and a vice zone (e.g., Pongsak 1944). This anxiety about the teeming masses of slums and markets provides a backdrop to public representations of mothers, wives, and women.

Public Consumer Culture

During the 1950s through the 1970s, commerce increased its role in propagating and defining public culture. The concentrated complexes like department stores became increasingly important in provisioning and also symbolizing the national calendar of royal and cultural festivals, with sales promotions and store decorations marking the changing seasons. The best sales season for department stores is the extended winter holidays, starting perhaps from the King's Birthday-National day in early December, including Christmas (honored mainly as another opportunity for people to exchange cards and gifts) and the international January 1 New Years, and lingering until the Chinese New Year. (The Thai new year, now simply a festive holiday, takes place in April.) During the peak December to January period, department stores display snowy evergreen

tableaus, broadcast non-stop Christmas jingles, and are bedecked with "holiday gift baskets," a convenient solution to the New Years gift exchanges. With a US \$10 basket of Thai confections or a decorated \$100 to \$400 assemblage of whiskey, Nescafe, SPAM, nutrasweet, and other imported goods, shoppers (male and female) fulfill some of the many gift obligations of work, patronage, and family. Another later season is marked when stores sell (and advertise) mooncakes, the baked accompaniment to a yearly Chinese ritual. The supermarkets of department stores such as Robinson's provide standardized offerings to Buddhist monks or the temple: a saffron plastic bucket containing a monk's robe, Lux soap, Ovaltine or coffee, an orange face cloth, Fab detergent, a toothbrush and Dalie brand (formerly "Darkie") toothpaste, plastic cup and plate, incense, matches, condensed milk, and a plastic scoop for bathing, the entirety packaged in saffron plastic wrap.

In this way, department stores have inserted more commodified goods into a greater range of social and religious exchanges. Moreover, they have also symbolize the occasions and terms for the exchange relations between kin and colleagues -- providing cards and gifts for multiple occasions -- and between the public and the state, as in the decorative commemorations of national and royal holidays. Modern retail, more than office buildings and hotels, assumes the role of public space, even public sphere, in part for the ways that it symbolizes public culture.

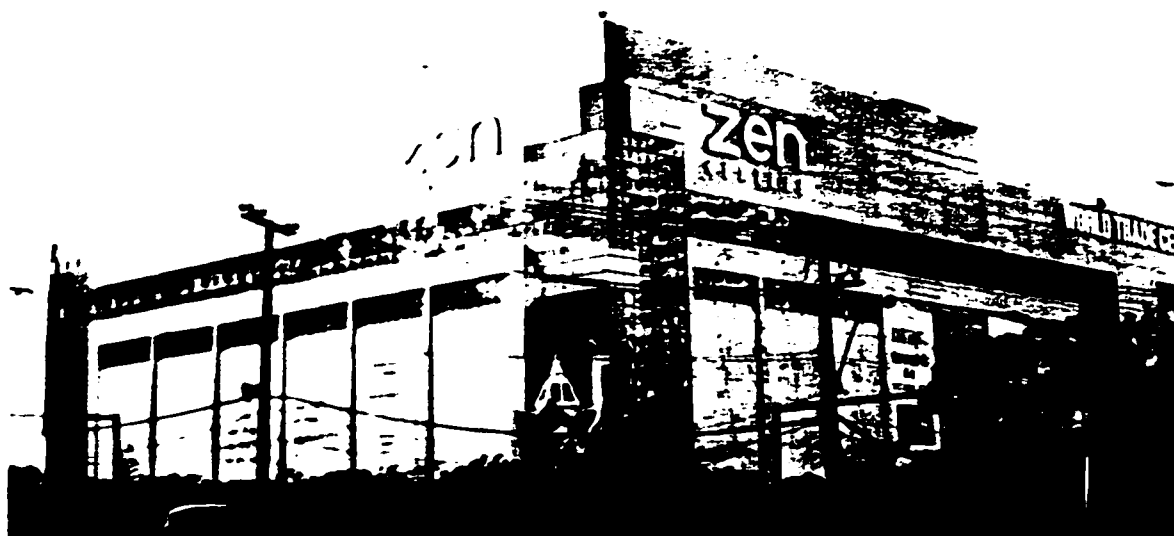
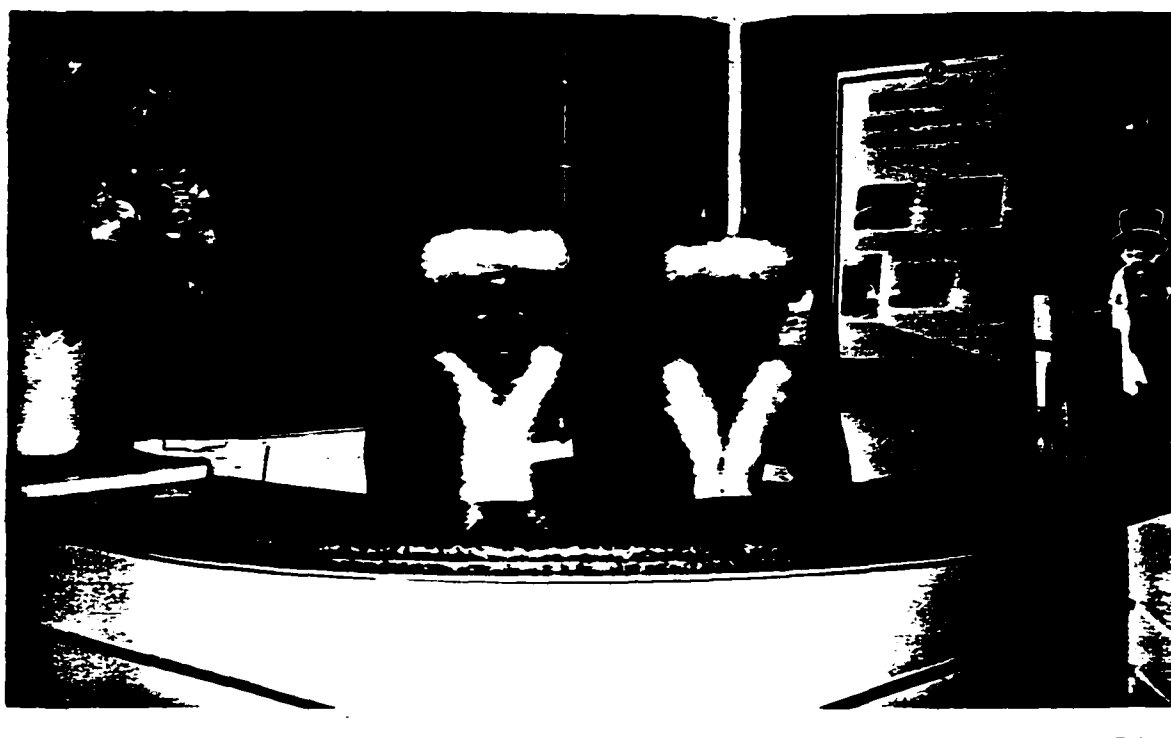


Figure 5. The Public Image of Department Stores. Top photo shows workers at the information desk of Robinsons. Photo by Rachel Rosenbloom. The Zen Department Store below is a new branch of Central located within the World Trade Center. Note the spirit shrine at the front.

Retail can be seen as a "technology of gender," to use de Lauretis' phrase (1987), which connects with other representational technologies like media and the state. It provides models and materials for making (and interpreting) gender identity. Department stores in general are structured along gender lines with separate men's and women's departments and even gendered floors (once engineering permitted multi-storied structures in Bangkok). The store presents models in their mannequins and promotional materials, and instructs in the use of products, such as cosmetic demonstrations announced in the early 1960s. The merchandise for which department stores are famous are the tools of appearance: clothing, the most profitable product, make-up, and perfume. Counters dedicated to lines of perfume establish the entrance of an up-scale store. Department stores helped to train Thais to rework their bodies in line with a national image framed in terms of Western standards. In the 1970s, Central staged regular fashion shows and offered instruction in beauty regimes, as in Central's 1971 "food day for health and beauty." They excel in femininity.

With colorful copy in Thai and English, department stores embellished an indigenous vocabulary for femininity and beauty. Skin and hair (only recently weight), defining features of feminine beauty, are described, extolled, and presented with abundant products. Heavyweights like Palmolive, Lever, eventually L'Oreal and others make shampoo, for example, one of Thailand's most cutthroat

industries, sold in supermarkets and variety grocery stores.

Retail advertisements present images of women in suburban family life, associating them with the modern home and western-style kitchen. In imagery, while mother remains a staple and rich image, promotional media also highlight the romantic or marital dimension -- as wives.

Domesticated Gender

"Robinson's wants to be part of your family," says a mother's day sales catalogue (which recommends perfume or beauty products as appropriate gifts). For fun, families can recreate in shopping areas, a past-time deliberately fostered by retail. In the 1970s, one middle-brow department store, Pata, introduced a rooftop zoo and the trend since then has been for retail areas to provide some kind of family entertainment areas (considered a necessity in the 1990s). A Pata executive said, "We try to provide an environment here, that will attract the whole family to spend as much time as possible on our premises. We want them to feel at home..." (Business Review 1984: 18). Even the upscale Japanese-owned Isetan has "baby rest area" and "playland." Family time and spaces are defined in terms of leisure and recreation away from the economic world of production -- and they are feminine places (though perhaps not to the degree found in America). Robinson's philosophy is "Total family" (Business Review 1984: 17). The department store acts as a quasi-public sphere which extends domestic

space (rather than civil-political or productive space) (cf. Walkowitz 1997).

The "whole family" includes father and mother and children, in a nuclear family arranged around the companionate conjugal pair of husband and wife. Yet in advertising and media, it is typically Thai women who create and represent the spheres away from economic production, whose separated and consumption form constructs modern Thailand.

In translating, the English term 'housewife' typically glosses the Thai term 'house-mother' or 'home mother' (mee baan). Yet, these two terms differ. The word baan covers the affective and material dimensions associated with 'home.' More than a dwelling, baan -- whose etymology describes a riverside hamlet (Akin 1969) -- invokes one's natal or affective community. If it suggests a dwelling, it means the family home rather than the place where one currently resides, which could be a flat or dormitory. The 'mother of the home' is a term which, semantically, can include productive work growing rice, raising poultry, and tending to -- nurturing -- the residents of the home. 'Housewife' of course flags a woman's marital status and conjugal tie, and invokes the physical structure of the dwelling.

Public, commercial discourses about Thai femininity seem to emphasize significations better captured by 'housewife' than mee baan, even if they employ the Thai

word. Discourses about elite women, household products, and home, present social reproduction autonomously from the 'economy.' (The 'modern' economy constructs this realm of work, exchange, and use as non-economic.) At the same time, urban and labor developments of the 1960s to 1980s also separated work and residence. Chinese shophouse firms or Thai family farms sent children to work outside. In commercial and popular culture representations, the 'home,' which in Thai connotes family, place, or community of upbringing, becomes redefined more as a house where family leisure, not productive activities, take place. Cooking, childcare, and such become domestic practices, therefore feminine, and unrelated to production. Through consumption in supermarkets and department stores, women create the modern Thai home.

The home conceived as a self-contained site of leisure and display is above all a representational creation. In the 1960s, a western observer reported that the private house was less important to family consumption than television, car, clothes, and food (Donner 1982). The 'living room,' as it were, lay outside the house. Even though an array of house and garden magazines can now be found at kiosks around the city, this observation still rings true for many residents of Bangkok. The interior of a house typically does not provide the major vehicle for self (or family) presentation. Of course, the home is a place for watching television. Through TV commercials, and print and

radio ads, department stores induce families into their theaters of commercial leisure. After all, if women and families were to remain in the domicile, they would not be consuming: retail businesses need family consumption to take more profitable forms than home recreation.

Production Obscured

When teaching or talking with women as part of volunteer work, I asked what their mother living in the provinces did. "She's a housewife," they would reply, a reply also provided by any of the English or Thai educational texts. When I asked about specific activities, of course, the housewife mother grew rice, raised ducks, planted vegetables and such. (Ever unneutral, I would advise them, "She's a farmer.") In the United States, a Thai tutor wrote an English paean to mothers for mother's day/The Queen's birthday at the temple where I studied: she said that, "though men are the breadwinners..." The 'bread' metaphor for a rice-culture aside, this woman sold real-estate in the U.S. herself, and came from a country where women perform half of the labor in rice production (though perhaps the less valued work) and where their participation in wage labor and commerce is high in terms of international rates. Academic studies also reiterate the narrative of the traditional Thai male "breadwinner" (e.g., Bencha 1992: 21, UNESCO 1990: 3).

In the emerging discourses that break down and separate economic realms, women's various labors are largely obscured. Now that the economy is an external realm, family work is not work, but leisure or rest in a separate domestic space -- in a familiar rendition, women's childcare, nursing, food production, cleaning and the like do not count as labor. Elite households often hire siblings or relatives for domestic help, who form a subordinate part of the compound.

Thai women's wage labor has followed a pattern familiar pattern in Asia and worldwide export-oriented zones (e.g., Ong 1987), filling lesser paid jobs classified as unskilled or unorganized service work. Their disproportionate numbers in industrialized factories and in tourism suggest that women's labor has been critical in the rapid economic growth rates following the 1960s (Amara 1996). Yet women's wage labor typically is not represented in the images of labor that appears in or about Thailand. The Thai factory woman or bank teller is not an icon for the nation. And while the Thai sex worker often does symbolize Thailand in international discourses (although not truly as a 'worker' per se), the state and public resist and decry that representation. In public culture, Thai women's wage work is invisible. The labors involved in service work (whether sales or prostitution) are 'naturalized' as part of Thai 'tradition.'

In most representational schemes, women's contributions to family wealth, Sino-Thai capital, and national reserves are not legible, not part of the modern Thai national identity. Western and Thai scholarship deploys the term 'housewife' uncritically. The common narrative about women in Thailand presents a retroactive story of modernity: the progress from oppressive housewifedom to working women (who retain 'traditional' feminine ways). This narrative captures some of the transformation to elite women's situations: in the post-war period, elite women have 'begun' to work, taking advantage of education to enter professions, business, and government -- they have also changed the official interpretation of marriage and kinship to that of a monogamous, companionate conjugal pair. However, the narrative of women's progress reads into the 'traditional' past a separation of the waged 'economy' from the domestic realm which is a product of modern developments. (Interestingly, Sino-Thai families have produced both the image of the domineering businesswoman and, more than middle-class Thais, the non-working 'housewife.')

Distributional Disruptions

In this first portion of the dissertation, I have looked at Chinatown and the innovative retail form of department stores which emerged from it to illustrate some of the ways that Bangkok developed as a city oriented and

symbolized by consumption. In the process, state and economic discourse separated production from consumption, and presented an abstract 'economy' (defined mainly by industrialized manufacturing) which was distinct from the home.

In the post-1950s commercial representational milieu, the image of the adult woman hovers around motherhood and wife roles. Prominent images of the housewife foreground the domestic, inside sphere of the home, the wife role, separate from a broader kin economy. However, the realm of distribution, and the gender in the department store, is not fully domesticated, and produces disruptions of its own. The processes of development and urbanization necessary to create a modern nation also produce the threats to the modern social order: over-population of the city (hence disgruntled urban masses) and the urban blight of shophouses and sidewalk sales. As a public sphere, retail threatens to disrupt the sanctioned social order, as with the teeming masses at a weekend market in a politically charged field, or with overflowing vendors clogging streets intended for automobiles travelling between offices, shopping complexes, and suburban homes.

The threats of unorganized, indistinct marketing continuous with domestic and work realms is parallel to -- and linked with -- anxieties about gendered excess. Thai women's links with capital, consumption, and commerce undercut the neat packaging of public femininity.

Furthermore, women's uses of commodified exchange predicated on individualism (even where symbolized through the family) produces public anxiety about excessive or deviant consumption (cf., Ong 1990, 1991), such as public warnings to women not to spend too much money on clothing (Suwadee 1993: 11). Such concerns about consumption are also expressed in relation to youth in general, as well as to working classes or urban poor, among others. The next section of the thesis turns to the non-normative dimensions of consumption, by examining how romance and sexuality have become interpreted in relation to commerce. Chapter three explores the excesses of the young consuming female in that post-modern favorite, the mall.

PART TWO: GLOBAL CAPITAL, LOCAL SEXUALITIES

CHAPTER III

MBK: ROMANCE AND HOMOSOCIALITY IN THE MALLS

The first portion of this dissertation explored the intertwined growth of commerce and the capital city of Thailand, arguing that these developments symbolized Bangkok as a city of consumption through contradictory gendered and ethnic themes. This second section, Global Capitalism, Local Sexualities, elaborates on the limits and contradictions of such symbolic economies by considering the realm of markets' threatened excesses and by turning to women's participation in two very different transnational forms of 'markets.' Two sites of commodified leisure -- shopping malls and the foreign sex trade -- took root in the 1970s, but particularly flowered in the 1980s under international capital flows and after the heyday of department stores. The young women consumers of the mall (in this case, MBK) and those working in the Patpong go-go bars are for the most part -- but not entirely -- different groups of people defined by rather unequal circumstances. Nonetheless, I propose to think about both groups in relation to a similar question, about how commodified spaces and leisure have become involved with intimacy -- friendship, romance, and

sex. In the commodified forms of leisure of the mall and sex trade, women consumers and workers respectively interpret and transform Thai and foreign conceptions of romantic relations and sexual identities. In each case, gender structures their reformulations of local sexuality within international capital markets, reflecting the different avenues and entitlement Thai men and women have for leisure, sexual identifications, and sexual practice in Thailand.

The Mobility of Gender

Gender is pivotal in determining the resources available for expressing and enacting sexual identity. The prevailing Thai gender/sex norms attribute men with natural, active, legitimate need for sexual release (notably, ejaculation) while women as individuals are treated as relatively asexual whose sexual pleasure is not a necessity. (However, in cultural imagery, "woman" conveys threats of infecting and consuming males, including the sexual threats of tempting monks from their ascetic practices.) Provided with higher wages, and less obligated to family support,¹

¹ The different performance of filial support by men and women is often noted in commentary and scholarship. The most common explanation is that men fulfill their obligations to return the care of their parents -- expressed as a form of indebtedness -- by ordaining as monks for anywhere from a few days to the standard three months, usually in their early twenties. (Employers are required to allow this leave.) Women, barred from this means of obtaining merit and securing parents' place in heaven, are expected to support their natal and new families. Another possible explanation for different family support might lie with the matrilineal "bias" in Thai kinship systems and former matrilocal residence.

men realize (or possibly generate) their demands for leisure, including sexual recreation, through an abundance of specialized places and services. In addition to sports arenas and nighttime cafes catering mainly to men, there is a famously wide array of services available for men's sexual pleasures: a diverse bounty of sex-related arenas, ranging from masquerading tearooms and barbershops to go-go bars, massage parlors, escort services, and at the lowest end, to pick-up areas around railroad stations, parks, or the canal which flows alongside the royal palace. Also abundant (and illegal) are erotic media -- pornographic magazines and videos. Specialty sex-related businesses also cater to men seeking sex with men. Some bars feature male-to-female transgendered (kathoey) workers,² who themselves gather in the theaters for drag revues or in bars for men-seeking-men.

² Discussions of femininity should incorporate kathoey femininity, but in discussing social life I distinguish between kathoey and born-women in most of the thesis. In practice, kathoey is the identity for born-males who adopted the dress, comportment, and associations with women and femininity (and sometimes the physical form). The role is associated with women but not equated completely with born-female women, suggested by the occasional label of the "second kind of female." To my observations, while kathoey perform Thai femininity, they do not typically adopt the social restrictions and weightier familial obligations of those born-female women (including the tom). Rather, the kathoey enjoy the social license for mobility and sexuality accorded to men, (although such license is evaluated differently) (cf., Jackson 1989; Morris 1994). Western analyses (such as recent "queer theory") which equate transgendered women with biological females in terms of gender "performance" or constructed bodies often neglect the place of such social relations in defining public gender identities.

This "man's city" has also been called "the brothel of the world," illustrating its popularity with so-called "sex tourists," but in fact the largest number of venues cater to local men. The sex/gender system shapes the development of gendered commercial leisure and the real estate underpinning it -- the development of "red-light" areas, for example. Men's sexual leisure, whether hetero- or homosexual, is associated with physical spaces.

The prominence of commercial sex work in Thailand suggests that Thai men and women are attributed with different sexual desires and entitlement and that the urban space of leisure is gendered. With a few exceptions, most of them short-lived,³ there are no leisure sites which explicitly cater to women's sexual or erotic pleasures, whether heterosexual or homosexual (configured as tom and dee, as I explain below). Leisure's relationship to sexuality differs for women and men (and for many transgendered kathoey). Women's leisure is almost never explicitly for sexual release nor even markedly erotic. Leisure, sexuality, familial relations, and gender are intertwined.

³ There have been reports of go-go or Chippendale nightclubs for heterosexual women, particularly in the beach resort of Pattaya, but I did not locate any. Several bars catering to tom and dee have come, and gone, quickly, over the past few decades. In 1995 an American man opened a gay and lesbian bookstore-cafe and bar called Utopia, which hosted a weekly lesbian pub in the upstairs bar. This area has a gay male bathhouse and several bars, and thus probably offers too much competition in the gay male market.

Beyond the different ways males and females are constituted as sexual, other dimensions produce the gendered character of much leisure. Thai girls and women have been far less entitled to the freedom of movement and time, family resources, and autonomy from the family which underpin much of men's recreation and mobility. Women and girls are expected to provide family support and household labor to a greater degree than are male members. Adult women work the familiar "double shift" of wage and home labor. Women's leisure, therefore, often extends household work and exchanges, rather than being for individual pleasure. For adult women, temple activities, e.g., holy days, making merit, or festivities, provide a vehicle for social life and fun, while fulfilling social, spiritual, and familial obligations. For younger women, recreation also involves the family to a greater degree than men. Depictions of traditional village life suggest that girls' worlds were far more contained within the family compound until marriage -- and even after, given uxori-local tendencies (Keyes 1986). However, Thai women's domesticity, if it can be called that, includes rice farming, marketing, and a fair degree of public pleasures. Girls' and women's pastimes typically extend beyond the family and household, with friends and peers, most often other women -- that is, in a single-sex or homosocial form. For example, groups of women (as well as mixed-gender groups -- see Mills 1993) will make one-day or longer pilgrimages in Thailand, taking bus tours to make

merit at famous temples, eat well and frequently, and have fun, sometimes travelling far away from home.

This homosociality may be traditional but it is also informed by modernity, notably by universal compulsory education launched in the 1920s. When parents sent daughters to school, the girls came into greater contact with non-kin and such friendships became more significant in the pastimes of female youth. Bangkok well-to-do send their children to single-sex day schools (more rarely boarding schools). The Catholic-run girls' schools have a reputation for producing tomboys (tom), and many elite women report crushes and romantic pairings during their schooldays. (Alternately, the fear of heterosexual encounters is one concern parents express about 'bad influences' on daughters in school -- Knodel 1994:35). Working class and rural girls were also brought into more interaction with people outside their families through wage labor (sometimes with dormitory living) and urban migration. Men, by contrast, have long formed homosocial relations through institutions of corvee labor (only fully ending in 1899), military conscription, the monkhood, and a tradition of sojourning, when they travelled from their village for work and experience before settling down (Keyes 1975; Mills 1993).

Leisure is valued in Thai discourse (Phillips 1966) and incorporated into holiday calendars, common expressions ("don't work too hard" is a frequent way to close a letter), and even public critiques of compatriots (representing Thai

people as lazy compared to hardworking East Asians). Of course erotic recreation is significant to male sexuality, but more generally, leisure is central to romance and courtship in Thailand. While by convention, parents heavily influenced or made the choice of a daughter's husband (particularly in the northeast -- e.g., Mills 1993), youth have also long had a great deal of leeway in nuptial arrangements, and villages had formalized occasions for flirtation and courtship. Individual courtship and romance within temple festivals or village activities have been part of Thai heterosexual relations.

The spate of research on the construction of homosexuality sometimes makes same-sex desire appear as the only "constructed" sexuality: but heterosexual desires, relations, and identities are equally the creations of discourses, practices, and institutions (Katz 1990). In Thailand, heterosexual relations have been regulated by local communities, Buddhist creed, concerns of the nobility and the Thai state, with selective accommodations to western opinion since the mid-19th century. As I pointed out in the introduction, the regulation (and construction) of heterosexual desires and practices varies by social rank (elite and commoners), region (reputedly permissive north compared to stricter northeast and south), ethnicity (Thai, Malay, or Sino-Thai), and by city-country differences. However, within and across these different constructions, sexuality is not applied uniformly across the genders

(arguably three) and gender determines different desires, practices, and privileges. The prevailing form of heterosexual relations in Thailand is bifurcated, allowing monogamous marriage for women (who are not sex workers or kathoey), but multiple partners -- with ideally only one legitimate union -- for men.⁴ Even though bigamy is technically illegal, in other ways family and marital law in Thailand underwrites this asymmetrical arrangement of female monogamy/male polygamy (a point not lost on Thai feminists). In practice, elite men's non-monogamy has differed from commoner men -- the troops of concubines of former kings and dictators offering one elite-specific form.

Whatever the gender dichotomies, public discourses about heterosexual relations invoke idioms and images which cross genders: the principles underlying love and romance apply to men, women, and kathoey. For example, until recently, well-known romantic forms prevailed in the rural north and northeast in witty rhymed sparring between a male-female pair (phleng choi or phayaa) (Suvanna 1988). These, however, have diminished since the 1950s and 1960s with the spread of radios and the rise of the Thai country music

⁴ In Thai discourse (and I would argue in most Western discussions), heterosexuality is not fully comparable to homosexuality, in the sense of suggesting mutual desires and practices. The desire for hetero sex is attributed primarily to men while for women the heterosexuality implied in "real" womanhood means desire for marriage and family and possibly romance; heterosexual practice is likewise constructed according to gender. As for female homosexuality, it's often said that tom "want to be like a man" -- that is, the desire is framed in terms of (unobtainable) gender/ phallus -- rather than a desire for women.

industry (some of which incorporates conventional love songs) (Mills 1993: 106-109). Furthermore, most visions of (Western) modernity in Thailand position monogamous married couples as central to families and society (i.e., privileging conjugal ties over others). Such husband-wife pairs provide an influential staple in government, popular, and medical representations.⁵

The conventional structuring of the relations between men and women has long employed "public" spaces and practices and also involved material exchanges as bridewealth (explored more in the next chapter). To summarize: men, attributed with a strong and legitimate sexual desire, enjoy a wider arena for sexual and romantic experience than do women (as well as a wide array of vehicles for homosocial recreation). Indeed, such gender difference is one of the few which markedly permeates different classes, ethnicities, regions, and ranks. Women's social life has been more rooted in family and community life, and often taken homosocial forms. Recreation tends to take place in temples, community festivals, or in

⁵ From the beginning of this century, Siamese-Thai governments have attempted to promote the ideal (though not necessarily the practice) of monogamy for men and women. For example, amid the wide-sweeping modernizing mandates propounded by the 1940s dictator, Field Marshall Pibul Songkram (Pleck), was the requirement that husbands kiss their wives before leaving home. Unlike other mandates about clothing, this command was ignored. Bigamy -- or rather, men keeping two wives and households -- is technically illegal although fairly prevalent and difficult to prove. With the HIV/AIDS epidemic, public health materials have tried to motivate men to be monogamous in marriage.

marketplaces. Such recreation can include courtship and romantic relations as well, but if we are to speak of "traditional" Thailand, it appears that female social life is not completely commensurable with male social life, as conventional and imported romantic imagery would imply. If anything, typical women's pleasures derive from pastimes with one another more consistently than through conjugal relations with men.

Because there are dedicated leisure sites for men but not for women in Bangkok, I argue, markets in old-fashioned and modern retail forms -- such as the mall -- are more significant to women's social lives. The mall, of course, is not an empty, passive setting for such pastimes, but a crystallized investment of local and international capital which has been designed deliberately to influence and funnel such consumers.

The Retail Revolution

The Mah Boon Krong complex, known by the English initials "MBK," is probably the best known shopping mall in Bangkok, offering a cacophony of goods and sounds on its multiple floors in what feels like a combination of outdoor market stalls with modern indoor malls. Such a formidable place as MBK has emerged out of significant economic history. As I showed in chapter two, Bangkok department stores had reigned as the pinnacle of modern consumerism from the 1960s on. Shopping complexes like Rajdamri Arcade

and the popular Siam Center entered the scene in the 1970s. But it was in the mid-1980s (when the MBK complex was built) that the proliferation of such commercial structures was pronounced by business commentators a "retail revolution." At that time, Bangkok had 39 branches of department stores and 7 shopping centers, with 17 more complexes under construction as the space of retail (measured by floor space) expanded over 200 times (Harlow 1992).

The explosion of retail required capital, consumers, and space. Thai people provided both the capital (through bank savings over the previous decade -- see Hewison 1985; June 1992) as well as the income, as consumers spent more and more in the 1980s (even when their incomes did not increase accordingly or during government austerity measures -- June 1992). Local and foreign investors were eager for profitable projects in Southeast Asia. First-world companies, after a global recession (and increased U.S. interest rates, among other motivating factors), looked to profit from cheaper labor and eager consumers overseas. Typical of most modernizing trends in Thailand, the explosion of retail remained confined to the capital city for some time before reaching select provincial cities (e.g., Chiang Mai). Besides investments in new industrial zones outside of Bangkok, developers were keen on central Bangkok, whose escalating downtown rents made retail the more profitable venture than housing or factories (Guy 1994). (Moreover, investors are not above status and style

concerns, and many local capitalists desired upper-end hotel or retail properties.) Speculative finance and real estate, therefore, underlay new venues for retail and hence new modes of consumption.

The "revolution" ushered in a radical new retail form: the mall -- that enclosed space of multiple shops which in the west became emblematic of "postmodernity" and contemporary consumption (e.g., Morris 1988). Enclosed all-in-one shopping centers combine department stores (typically including supermarkets in Thailand) and scores of shops and stalls as well as food and entertainment. Accompanying this trend towards the shopping complex was the rise in "niche," "lifestyle," or "segmented" retail, designed to profit by catering to (or cultivating) increasingly specified consumer tastes. Shopping complexes and department store chains targeted a range of consumers, which were typically demarcated into 'upper' and 'lower' segments. The 'upper,' wealthier customers (including foreigners) -- often figured as the new professional class -- were the preferred segment by many retailers. In general, both strategies aimed particularly at young (presumably heterosexual, married) couples and especially the new teen and youth market (dubbed "generation X" and "roon X" by some journalists). Above all, the ascendent consumer market was that of youth, the unmarried young with disposable incomes. In the early 1980s, half of Bangkok's residents were under 30 years old (National Identity Office 1984). Teenagers emerged as a

specific market: "teenagers have freedom in choosing what to buy," reported a beverage company manager (Supakana 1993b: 52).

The Mah Boon Krong "trade center," as it was then known, was the biggest shopping complex project at that time, costing about US\$120 million. A major business magazine pronounced that MBK "sheds new light on the further growth and expansion of Bangkok as a truly modern Asian city."⁶ The history of MBK is representative of the complex history of capitalist developments in Thailand. MBK evolved from a Chinese immigrant agricultural business to the Mah Boon Krong Properties and Development Plc with private shareholders (and currently headed by women), the group which developed MBK as investment property. (Bronze busts of the two founders, Mah and Boon Krong, grace MBK's entrance.) Sino-Thai family (or former family) enterprises have effectively managed most of the nation's local capital, which competes or collaborates with foreign investment from Japan, Hong Kong, and later the west. For example, the "anchor" store of MBK is a Japanese-Thai department store, Tokyu.

⁶ Quotation from Business Review 1984: 24. Material on MBK assembled from articles from the business press: Bangkok Post 1994: 17; Business Review 1984: 9-21; Business in Thailand 1987: 91; Harlow 1992; Kung-Nguan 1994; Nuntawan 1994; Supakana 1993(a), 1993(b); Tanom 1995; Phucatkan Raaysapdah 1994 (2537). An overview of retail businesses can be found in Guy 1994; for the 'Asian retail revolution' in Thailand, see Nakagawa 1987.

While it is easy to generalize about a uniform "transnational capital" or unilinear capitalist development, on closer look, even a single sector of the economy (retail) is characterized by significant divisions and complexity. Bangkok's "retail revolution" emerged with conflict among local and foreign retailers. Local department store companies (including the Central department store group) attempted to curb the entrance into Thailand of foreign retail chains -- which they predicted would offer unfair competition by being subsidized by larger firms -- by forming a "retailers association of Thailand" and invoking an Alien Business Law.⁷ Shopping complexes, which needed to lease space to multinational or foreign retailers (e.g., Esprit) opposed this move. The mall therefore emerged amid competition within and among business sectors. Its emergence recapitulates the history of the department stores: an economic history inflected by ethnic and gender identities, by the interplay of kin and corporate businesses, and by the influence and investments of Asia and the West.

Mah Boon Krong

MBK lies at the western end of a concentrated shopping area (see map). Around the corner from this mall is Siam Center, a three-storey center dating to 1972 which in

⁷ Here is when Central Department Store proposed that the Thai government to impose 'birth control' on the proliferation of retail complexes (Business Review 1984: 10). See chapter two.

the 1970s was the preeminent venue for elite, stylish young window-shoppers (an English sign calls it "House of Boutiques"). Both MBK and Siam Center, each with a McDonalds franchise on its ground floor, bracket a major shopping zone called Siam Square.⁸ This whole patch of retail and cinemas (which is also home to Hard Rock Cafe-Bangkok) comprises one of the city's main leisure sites, especially for middle-class or elite youth. (One of its stores, 0101, sold gay-themed t-shirts and shorts along with men's and women's imported fashions.) Siam Square is uniquely appealing because the restricted automobile traffic and small, navigable lanes (unlike the congested eight-to-ten lane roads that criss-cross the city) allow shoppers to stroll outdoors, and ample pedestrian overpasses allow safe passage to Siam Center or MBK, something virtually impossible anywhere outside of Chinatown. Indeed, the pedestrian nature of MBK and this Siam Square make it exceptional among the crop of modern shopping complexes which are in the main organized around car access.⁹

⁸ It is interesting that Siam -- the name of the country until after World War II -- is popular for modern-style complexes since the 1970s (e.g., Siam Center, Siam Square, The Old Siam Plaza). 'Siam' invokes the high-colonial (European) era of the Southeast Asia as well as absolute monarchism, and hence partakes of European-colonial and Thai-royal nostalgia.

⁹ The Australian feminist critic Meaghan Morris, in a provocative meditation on the epistemology of the shopping mall, proposes "pedestrian" as an organizing rubric for discussing reflexively the participation of female consumers (Morris 1988).

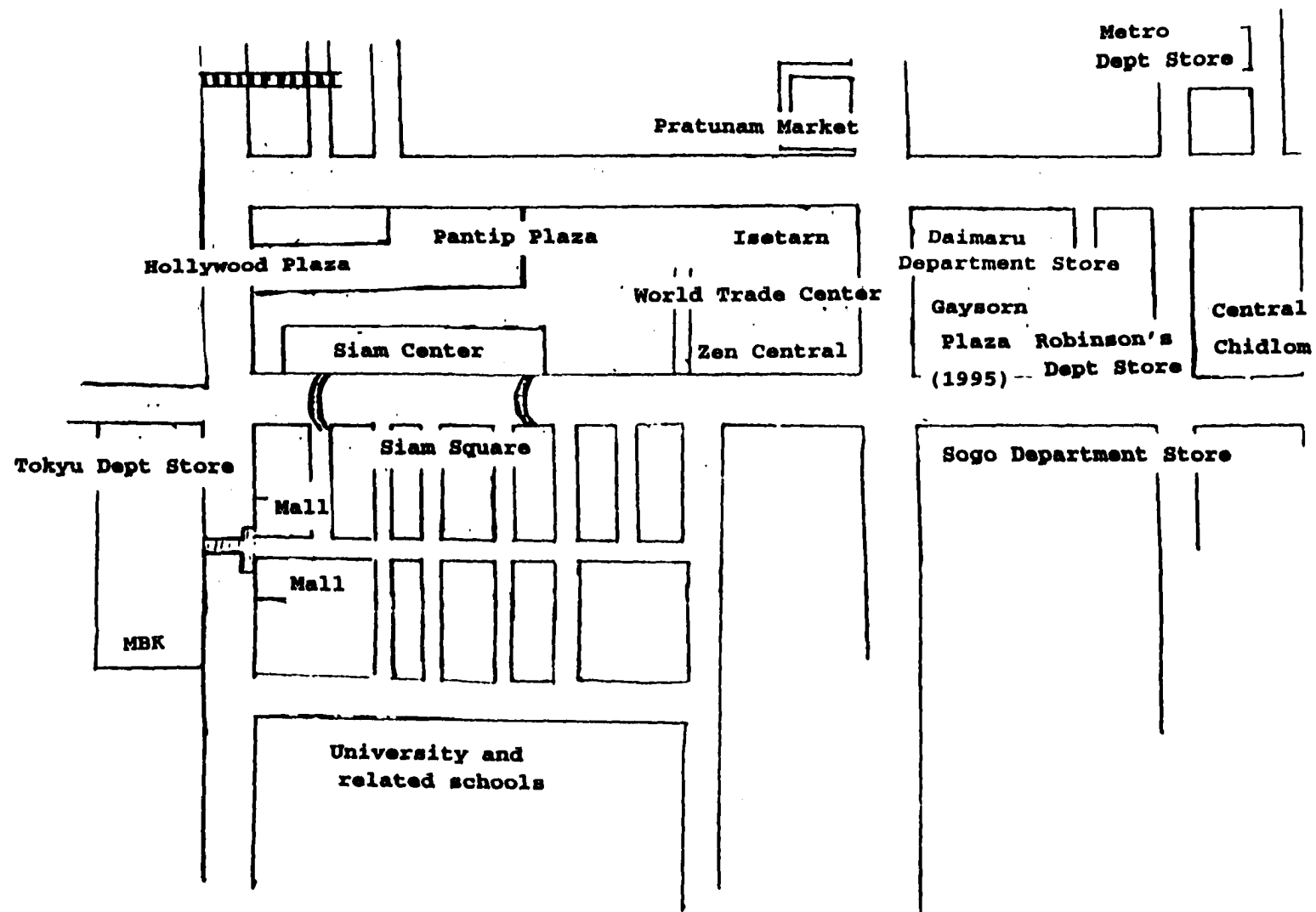


Figure 6. Map of Downtown Shopping Area. MBK and Tokyu Department Store are on the western side.

As a property developer on land leased from the state, MBK's real profit derives from rents from the multitudinous tenants. MBK leases interior floor space at varying rates (fees on the not prime, upper floors initially cost about US \$6 per square meter). The relationship between the MBK company and customer spending therefore is indirect, mediated by the rents of these shops. Furthermore, the company does not control the mall in any simple, cohesive way: control is divided among different shareholder factions, causing conflicts within the company itself, especially over rent prices.¹⁰ Such conflict has hurt the firm in reputation, income (in legal battles or sacrificed rental income), and access to more capital (it was de-listed from the stock market). The mall itself remains popular.¹¹

¹⁰ Since 1987, the MBK complex has figured in an internal corporate battle over ownership, control, money, and strategy. Two major shareholders -- one, the current chair, a titled Khunying (similar to a British Lady) -- wrangled over the legitimacy of her control. As MBK Properties negotiated its second leases (for 1997 to 2013), the former major power-holder (Sirichai Bulkul) demanded that the leasing fees for upper floors under his control be far lower (about US \$14 per square meter) than Khunying. Chanut Piya-oui's proposal of a nearly 10-fold fee increase (from US\$6 to \$50 per square meter) (Nuntawan 1994). In 1995, they came to a bargain: Sirichai won lower leasing fees for his space by agreeing to drop five troubling lawsuits against the Khunying (Tanom 1995).

¹¹ Besides such legal entanglements and minimal regulations, MBK's existence involves the Thai state in several ways. The government encourages joint investments such as those underwriting Tokyu department store as well as the factories producing the "made in Thailand" products sold there. Moreover, MBK leases its land from the public Chulalongkorn University (named for the quasi-deified King Rama V) and so ultimately from the state. Besides providing

MBK, like most shopping complexes, relies on a long-term lease to a large department store to lure other leasers. This commercial "anchor" for MBK is the Tokyu department store, a US \$20 million investment jointly owned by the Japanese Tokyu company (which already had branches in Taiwan and Hong Kong) and Thai interests (i.e., a joint venture) (Nakagawa 1987). Opening in 1985, Tokyu was initially intended as an upscale venue selling imports to elite couples, but after disappointing sales was redirected towards more middle-class consumers. Tokyu lowered the prices of its household goods and clothing (among other goods) by selling more Thai-made goods rather than imports from Japan and elsewhere (Business in Thailand 1987: 91).

In front of the Tokyu Department store stands the place-spirit shrine at which store workers regularly make offerings of wooden elephants or incense. Such place-spirit shrines, often empowered by Hindu spirits such as Ganesh, have increased in popularity for 'modern' hotels, office buildings, and shopping complexes (especially since the famous success of the nearby Erawan shrine of the four-headed elephant). On a smaller scale, inside an entrance to MBK stand two busts of the ancestral founders which typically are adorned with garlands. In tributes such as these, and the public tributes on royal, ceremonial or national holidays (such as for Mother's Day, the Queen's

land, this university complex, which includes a model secondary school as well, supplies MBK with a steady stream of consumers.

birthday), shopping complexes construct national (and other) public identities. Businesses like MBK allocate spaces and images for themselves -- and for the public -- to pay their respects to national and local forces. In so doing, these commercial displays suggest a social contract not only between citizen and state (business or consumers and royalty), but also between businesses and their communities and consumers. In other words, by seeming to fulfill a social obligation to the state and public, such tributes in fact construct the terms of the social contract between the business and consumers, or more generally between capitalist firms and Thai society.

Aside from such tributes, from the outside MBK offers little visual stimulation; besides a few snack vendors, the street life outside consists of traffic from the bus stop or pedestrian overpass to and from the mall. (Yet such pedestrian, public transport, and vending life still exceeds that at most other 'modern' complexes, and perhaps contributes to MBK's unruly reputation.) There is no nearby park. Over the last three decades, more and more of Bangkok life has moved indoors, to the climate-controlled environments, working phone booths, and refreshments found in malls and office buildings. The windows of MBK's many stories are not arrayed with display (as department store windows in other countries are) but are on the whole covered up. The real stimulations of MBK, and its relevance for Thai gender and sexual identity, lie inside the mall.

Times Square Shopfloors

After a slow start in the mid-1980s (coinciding with a recession), MBK leased most of its space¹² and became famous in Bangkok, even emblematic, for offering a cornucopia of goods and sounds on its multiple floors.¹³ Tokyu department store (with its supermarket) takes up one corner, while the other side is connected by a pedestrian overpass to two smaller mini-malls and the Siam Square area. The mall interior is structured around two large atria in which hang seasonal displays (e.g., the holiday scene with snow), one featuring a tepid fountain; but the focus is away from this open space inward, to the scores of shops, stores, and stalls. Many of these enterprises (fastfood chains, glassed-in shops) resemble those found in department stores or elite shopping centers, other stalls overflow the neat containment or sedate calm of the department store image; with scores of small, low-brow shops, some of which engage in haggling, MBK has been described as a cross between an

¹² The MBK mall still has an incomplete feel: on the top floor in 1993-1994 was a barely functioning children's entertainment center. Rising above the mall proper is office space and, as of 1995, an incomplete hotel. The ghostly fifth floor was dedicated to stores selling western-style kitchen and household furnishings.

¹³ A decade after MBK's opening, MBK still provided the image for a certain chaotic shopping experience. For example, MBK was used to describe other complexes, such as a new mega-sized complex: "Seacon Square has revolutionized the Mah Boon Krong concept only insofar as it is several times larger, but at least there are no claustrophobic crowds -- yet." (Eckardt March 1995: 15)

outdoor market (like the famous weekend market) and a modern mall.

In the main mall there are shops selling a full range of retail goods from durables to food, clothing, and computer products, services (e.g., photocopying-printing, key making), two bookstores, another minor department store, hair and beauty salons, small video-game arcades or stands, and fortune tellers and a karaoke stall (by the cafeteria). Food offers an important attraction as well as sustenance for shoppers: shoppers can buy pizza, Mr. Donut or Dunkin Donuts, McDonalds, Japanese suki-yaki, Swenson's ice cream, or Thai dishes at the cafeterias and snack stands, Thai specialties (like sweets) on fourth floor stalls, as well as groceries or prepared food at two supermarkets (one in Tokyu). Plentiful sounds fill the mall: music playing from many shops mingles with samples of karaoke videos, movies, or popular music, along with store-wide piped music and the occasional female voices making announcements in Thai and English. On the first floor, near the stalls of heavy-metal, psychedelic, or Harley-Davidson motorcycle paraphernalia (copyrighted),¹⁴ a two-screen movie theater shows mainly

¹⁴ Harley Davidson employed a British private investigation agency to enforce the authenticity -- that is, copyright status -- of Harley Davidson items sold in Bangkok markets. The investigations were carried out by an American employee, an Ivy League graduate fluent in Chinese and Thai, whose Thai lover ran their own (illegal) stall of (illegally) imported goods. The bootlegged, pirated, or "knock-off" music, apparel, software, and pharmaceuticals for which Thai markets are famous present an increasing problem in Thailand's relations to the U.S. government, which has linked intellectual copyright issues to Thailand's

American films ("Alive," "True Lies," and "The Crow" were some I saw there).

Most of the first four floors are made up of aisles of open stalls and enclosed stores selling clothing, perfume, luggage, gold, shoes, videos, music (compact discs and tapes), and other consumer goods. The small stalls (sometimes barely more than the necessary storage space) typically sell one type of ware -- watches, jewelry, or pants -- or one mode of fashion, for example the overlapping motorcycle/hippie styles (in Thai heavy): turquoise jewelry, heavy-metal band t-shirts, leather boots, denim jeans, and hardware such as knives. Popular were small stands from which customers could match a belt with their choice of stylish silver- or gold-colored buckles with the crescent and moon (i.e., the symbol of Islam), Chinese characters, cowboy images, or geometric forms. Stalls often sell imported goods, especially on the prime floors (e.g., Doc Martens lace-up boots, Levis-brand jeans) but also often sell locally manufactured wares, some of the stall-owners' designs but most often mass-made imitations of foreign brand-name styles (and often purchased in the Pratunam wholesale clothing market in the same district as MBK). Prices range accordingly: the price of a t-shirt could cost

status as a trading partner. American companies (notably in software) have used the U.S. government's threats and 1994 GATT agreements to enter and dominate Thai markets, eradicating or weakening local, often household businesses (e.g., Indian families' software supplies and Sino-Thai music cassette piracy). See Lombard 1995.

slightly over US\$2 ("special!", the sign announces in English) for a Thai-made garment to US\$20 in the Domon store of imported men's apparel.

Customers enter the second floor inside by mirrored escalators inside or from outside via a crowded pedestrian overpass, into the bright lights from a concentration of gold shops.¹⁵ At one end of this floor are many restaurants, and at the other end is a demarcated section of boutique stalls named "Times Square." Its aisles bear English signs reading "Eighth Avenue" and other New York names. Boutiques in "Times Square" typically sell more chic fashions, often the designs of the entrepreneurial owners (similar to some of the clothing stalls in the popular weekend outdoor market, which some said MBK resembled, only indoors). Thus the investments in MBK range from Baskin Robbins or McDonald's franchises to small-scale, Thai entrepreneurs selling carefully selected goods, sometimes their own manufactures. (For example, a first-floor shop of European clothes and shoes, Aqua, was owned by two Thai men and a naturalized Thai citizen of Spanish parentage who fetched the inventory on trips back to the continent.) Besides their leases (which cost less on the crowded, and low-ceilinged upper floors selling cheaper merchandise), shop owners must meet fees for cleaning, security, and other

¹⁵ Gold is by no means the domain of the wealthy. Many Thai and Sino-Thai people of all classes use resources at their disposal (income, gifts) for gold, and have done so for a long time.

services, and the wages for salespeople (besides the cost of merchandise).

MBK itself does not employ a great number of people, besides the two young women staffing the information booth. Maintenance work -- the women cleaners and male security -- is subcontracted to service companies. Some smaller stalls, such as those of small-scale designers in Times Square, are run by the owners themselves. Typically stalls employ one or two workers, more often female (depending on the product), most of whom are in their teens or twenties. Such workers have divergent backgrounds -- the brother of a sex worker I knew worked in a relatively elite first floor shop, but his position represented a higher status, possibly even a different class,¹⁶ than his sister (and was not unrelated to his gay identity). Typically, MBK sales personnel could just as easily be consumers as well -- unlike department stores, the workers' class positions are shared by a good proportion of MBK visitors.

Competition at MBK is high, as customers compare prices and in some smaller stalls, bargain with vendors. Despite the competition, sales pitches tend to be low-key -- vendors rarely call out to passersby by and at those stalls which bargain, such exchanges are rarely as protracted or engaged as in other markets. In addition to managing stock and selling goods, the staff duties also at times include

¹⁶ Like a number of rural men, he had been able to advance his education further than his younger sister by ordaining as a monk.

freshening the offerings on an elevated shrine on the back wall, placing lighted incense sticks and an opened bottle of Coke (or a glass of whiskey or plain water) in front of the icon, followed by a head bow (wai).¹⁷

With all the visual confusion of MBK there is actually minimal advertising, such efforts being confined to placards with prices over goods, or a standing sign and L.E.D. billboard in MBK's two atriums. Likewise, in the 1990s, MBK did not often advertise itself as newer malls did. The shops' profits (and ultimately MBK's) derive from volume of sales, from drawing large numbers of people into the floors of the cavernous mall. The economy of MBK, therefore, ultimately depends on the atmosphere, the spectacle, and the climate.

Some people I knew in fact preferred not to shop at MBK, because of the assault on the senses from overwhelming sights, sounds, and crowds, and it has a reputation as a younger person's place. Many of the goods and services can

¹⁷ Suspended in a corner of most stalls and shops is some image of worship -- a shrine, if only a blessed sacral cloth tacked on the wall to which staff make regular offerings of incense and drink. In the stores or permanent shops, the most common shrine is the lone statue or image of King Chulalongkorn set on a shelf with offerings (sometimes in the form of a glass of whiskey with the famous-make bottle alongside; an opened bottle of coke with a straw, or plain water will suffice). Buddha images also prevail, in statue, cloth, or amulet form, as do Chinese blessings. (Chinese shrines to the spirit of the place, red house-like structures containing fruit offerings and incense, are placed on the floor.) Another figure, the "beckoning lady", also appears regularly. The merchants' patron charm, she is a seated figure with one arm outstretched, hand beckoning, and the other on a bag of money, making explicit a connection between seduction and profit through sales.

be obtained elsewhere (cheaper in an outdoor market) and are not MBK's claim to fame. This fame came from the same repellent, claustrophobic features which were the very draw for the throngs of people visiting MBK on most afternoons and especially on the weekends, or when pedestrians in Siam Square escaped a monsoon rain. Some people compared MBK to some of the crowded outdoor markets, particularly the enormous weekend market popular with youth: in ways the MBK mall reproduced the stimulation of vendors and mercantile markets so prevalent in Thailand, but in a form which was modern, cosmopolitan, and comfortable.

Shopping Mall Custom

What recent western theorists of capitalist culture have concluded, while otherwise disagreeing, is that these commercial sites which foster, create, and shape people's consumption are significant for recreating, resisting, or reformulating broader political or economic forces (an understanding which underlies much of the field of Cultural Studies.)¹⁸ Studies of malls or media dramatically change the meaning of "shopfloor" struggles: rather than workers' "shopfloor" efforts around production (e.g., in factories or mines), critical studies now analyze the politics of "cultural struggles," audience responses, or transgressive

¹⁸ A partial list of such students of capitalist culture includes David Harvey (1989), Frederic Jameson (1984), Meaghan Morris (1988), Daniel Miller (1995), among many others.

interpretations of consumers (who may also be workers: e.g., Ong 1991; Kondo 1990) -- realms which formerly were subsumed under the category of "social reproduction." For MBK, therefore, exploring the effects of Japanese, multinational, and Thai capital on the practices and discourses of MBK's customers draws on an established approach. MBK is one place where global capital and national hegemonic ideologies meet relatively well-off people's daily lives. Both the profit and the social effects of MBK derive from its spectacle, from the 'public' space and diverting offerings of the interior world of the mall.

The spectacle and recreation of strolling and viewing offer the main attraction of MBK (and Thai spending on "recreation and entertainment" exceeds that for clothes and rent -- Key Statistics 1993). On the weekends, teenagers and adults will endure long bus rides to while away hours among the modern goods and modern people. In Bangkok, markets like MBK, which I argue comprise a major "public sphere," are a primary arena where social identities are established or expressed. To pursue the overextended theater metaphor, MBK is a kind of social theater, a capitalist stage for the expression -- or performance -- of social identities and relationships. What MBK offers is a variety of diversions and, above all, the showcase and the accoutrements for contemporary, urban social identity in Thailand. The lower, prime floors of the mall feature repetitive stalls and shops providing the elements necessary

for fashionable youth. This includes music, which emanates forth from most stores, such as bootlegged mixes of popular western songs (until U.S. pressure forced crackdowns on copyright violations). The fashions resemble much of the youth selections in the west (including a limited rendition of hip-hop style in the 1990s), heavily represented by tee-shirts with motifs ranging from English slogans to American sports team names. None of the t-shirts bear Thai writing. Aside from one small shop, official-style student paraphernalia, such as the mandatory uniforms or sports equipment, is not sold in these Siam Square area malls but in government supply stores. There are also stores that provide the little gifts required for many and frequent exchanges, selling bric-a-brac, cards, and ornamental notebooks or decorated pencils.

Sitting in a group of friends associated with the Thai lesbian group at the new Wendy's fast-food outlet in the cavernous first floor atrium, one, a journalist, observed to me that MBK seems so interesting because "all kind of people come here; it's not just one type." We agreed, though, that youth -- teens and people in their early 20s -- predominated. While day laborers would probably not venture into the mall, MBK invites customers from a wider economic range than did earlier up-scale venues such as Siam Center, Central, or Daimaru. The Tokyu department store early on shifted its targeted consumer from up-scale to middle and lower-middle class young families,

"especially couples", according to a quote from the Chief Executive (Business in Thailand 1987: 91). MBK in particular became associated with young consumers. This strategy was realized through the atmosphere of the malls, by providing the all-encompassing environment and stimulating experience of the shopping mall, one which exceeded the interior theater of the freestanding department store.

Within the MBK mall proper, most people are taking their leisure away from families, in groups and in "couples," although not completely in ways envisioned by store management. Such leisure for men and women is important to the friendship and group relations, to romance. It is also important to individual and group identities, which are in part defined through the goods consumed and exchanged. Relatively well-off youth -- that is, not the urban poor or day laborers -- use this mall as a space away from home and school to pass time with friends and sweethearts and to study and concoct individual public persona. The question I ask is, what happens to 'traditional' patterns of social relations when realized, as they increasingly are, in the social economy of the commercial venues such as retail? What happens when women create and recreate intimacy and romance in MBK? Below I consider how the commercial imagery and women's uses of it construct heterosexual and homosocial interactions in transformative ways.



Figure 7. The Atrium of MBK.

The Invention of Heterosexuality

Jonathan Ned Katz (1990; 1994) calls for attention to the construction of heterosexuality with a (playful) argument that heterosexuality was "invented" only in relation to homosexuality. In the 19th century German, English and American medical science discourse shifted the categorization of practices (like sodomy) to propose a system of identities based on the gender of object choice. This imagining of a condition of homosexuality, many authors argue, constructed the homosexual identity in public discourse, law, and self-image. The same process, Katz suggests, created heterosexual people as well.

Western bio-medicine, which was incorporated into the Bangkok elite world in the 1920s, has become entrenched as a major public authority about bodies, practices, and object choice. This role was especially solidified in relation to aggressive population control policies in the 1960s and, subsequently, STD and AIDS epidemics. However, the place of medical discourse (so critical to recent analyses of western sexuality) seems to have remained less salient to sex and gender discourse in Thailand (with the exception perhaps of sex workers). I propose that the prevailing norms for romantic relations and sexual identity derive from national and local gender discourses rather than official medically-inflected discussions of sexuality.

Among multiple discourses about love and sex and heterosexuality, the prevailing source in contemporary

Bangkok is commercial: the representations and narratives of popular culture, advertising, and consumer goods. Most of these are influenced by American narratives (often by way of Japanese products). Commercial discourse, therefore, is the major site for the invention of heterosexuality as an identity. Modern retail offers versions of heterosexuality through the models and images denoting family and romance. Another part of this construction can be found in elaborate definitions of femininity through consumption: marketing for shampoo, the leading consumer product, presents femininity as well tended long hair. Other imagery depicts femininity and womanhood in terms of conjugal relations with men (marital or sexual). (Indeed, such correspondence between femininity and heterosexuality are key to the trope of the Thai female in tourist promotions.)

Advertising and marketing rely on images of families which often mimic western conceits of the "housewife," "breadwinner," and small nuclear family (see chapter two) -- conceits which dominate popular and even academic discussions of families or male-female roles. Such domestic imagery prevails in advertisements for housing estates, the leading spender in advertising in the mid-1990s. The gendered and sexual imagery of commerce is reinforced by such other technologies of representation as television, radio, and movies (all of which include foreign and Thai content), as well as by state discourses.

Middle-class or up-scale markets sell goods which are either imported or else reproduce the styles of western, or to a lesser extent Japanese, commodities. Within this style is a consistent representation of heterosexual romantic imagery. Decorative covers of notebooks and cards often feature male-female couples (typically white). In 1994, a popular style for New Year's cards were color-painted black-and-white photos of a little boy and girl posed in heterosexual relation (holding hands or giving flowers). Japanese and Korean products often provide cartoon images of hetero romance. Between the time of my first trip to Thailand in 1988 and the start of my fieldwork in 1992, the images adorning commodities for school-age youth seemed to supplant popular depictions of single-sex (especially female) friends with those of more heterosexual themes, for example with pop-icons such as the group New Kids on the Block.

Advertisements for western products provide a reliable supply of depictions of male-female romance and sexuality. The exposure in Thailand of sophisticated advertising imagery from such American and multinational brands as Guess or Calvin Klein is wider than those firms' own marketing, as Thai entrepreneurs make high-quality copies for reuse or sale. Evocative black & white photographs of a partially clad man and woman embracing, for example, are mechanically reproduced (minus the ad copy) into posters, cards, tee-shirts, or the covers of photo-

albums. Thus advertising imagery enters Thailand not only to sell goods but as a product itself: advertisements are commodified. (The process is widespread, as trademark logos like Pepsi decorate motorized rickshaws, a motorcycle helmet, even the sign of a police station.) Marketing imagery in Thailand over the 1980s to 1990s became more explicitly sexual, particularly by employing fashion advertising and popular culture from America. Markets sell - and introduce -- images of heterosexual relations which present male-female romance, increasingly sexual and erotic, as central to youth experience.

How do these representations interact with Thai romantic imagery? How do transnational conceptions of romance and heterosexuality impact Thai people? The question raises the theoretical issues which animate discussions about the ways that "global" trends shape, extract from, or are resisted by "local" practices. Without entering into this wide-ranging material, I will note that ethnographers of various disciplines have emphasized people's active reinterpretation or appropriation of "mass," consumer, or global material, often pointing out that the local cultural practices are themselves always dynamic and already syncretistic. In Thailand, then, on-going economic developments and the newer technologies of representation they bring about have not necessarily produced a clear faultline between tradition and modernity. What counts as long-standing conventions of Thai social life -- as in

features of male-female intimacy -- has already involved material calculations, trade relations, and bricolage combinations. In terms of heterosexuality and homosociality, foreign/local or modern/traditional oppositions (themselves of course constructed) have defined and reformulated male-female erotic and romantic relations -- in relation to the west, to immigrant or subjugated populations.

Yet undeniably, the pace, extent, and reach of economic changes and state powers have become far more profound in recent decades. What are the ways in which friendship and romance -- and the gender and sexual identifications underpinning them -- are unfolding in Bangkok's social worlds? More specifically, how does the commercial spaces and discourses of MBK affect (or even constitute) gender and sexual identities? Looking at how people use MBK offers the most rewarding way to explore such questions: at women's leisurely consumption in and of the mall.

Theories about the performative dimension of identities might offer some suggestions for addressing these questions. Tackling western philosophy and ontology, Judith Butler's complex book Gender Trouble (1990) proposes a different take on the "expression" of gender. She argues that the expression of gender or sex seen in individuals, texts, or bodies does not manifest underlying (true) sexual difference, but rather creates those sex differences as norms: the performance creates the (presumed) original. At

the same time, Butler argues, it is in this process of reproducing a gender metaphysic (my term) that sex/gender "performances" result in mutated versions of gender, producing a potential "proliferation" of sexual and gender positions. I want to consider her argument in light of the contexts for such gender performances. One of the major settings for enacting gender almost anywhere today is commercial or capitalist venues of work or leisure. When the production and reproduction of social identities occurs through commerce, what happens to those identities? How faithful is the reproduction of cultural 'scripts'? Does a commodified gender performance foster a commodified, or at least modified, sexual norm?

While commercial leisure is shaped by people's 'demand' (which is gendered), capitalism shapes back. The commercial sites, consumer goods, and commodity exchanges enter into women's relations with each other and with men (as well as among men). Specifically, female homosociality and heterosexuality become reproduced -- or produced -- through commercial stages but in transformative ways. These take place along two lines -- tom and dee phenomenon, and the "invention" of heterosexual courtship in Thailand.

Deviant Normality: Heterosexual Dating

Scholarship on the west has explored myriad ways in which capitalist developments commodified features of social life. The historian Kathy Peiss (1988) has documented how

for the early 20th-century U.S. working class, the emergence of such commercial leisure forms as the boardwalk, affected gender and sexual identity. She proposes that these forms of entertainment altered women's homosocial, female-centered social worlds and kin-based identities to become more "heterosocial," more male and female pairings along romantic and sexual lines. Thus this entertainment fostered greater social freedom, heterosexually, than was available in the confines of the household. This freedom, however, became dependent upon commercial establishments.

I see evidence in Bangkok of a pattern similar to the rise of "heterosocial" world through early 20th century American working-class pastimes. As I have noted, popular culture imagery is introducing a Western version of heterosexual courtship. Recreational activities like shopping, cinema, even ice skating rinks and amusement centers are concentrated in shopping complexes. (One center features a miniature zoo.) Some of these, particularly amusement centers, attempt to attract consumers by providing "family entertainment." However all allow heterosocial dyadic relations -- or dating.

These commercial sites are frequented in large part by groups of males and females, often high school and college students. Couples frequent them on dates: watching a Hollywood movie, eating at McDonalds, Wendy's, or Mr. Donut, and roaming the floors of MBK. Their dating realizes what they have seen in romantic imagery -- mainly the commercial

representations of the vein found within MBK itself. Hetero hand-holding seems to be evolving into a popular practice mostly within these shopping venues (less so outside).

Commercial imagery and the leisure that is encouraged do foster heterosocial over homosocial relations -- and a romantic and eroticized image of a male-female couple. These commercial influences have contradictory dimensions. On one hand, they are establishing a new normative sex discourse, setting boundaries of the appropriate and inappropriate -- the "invention" of contemporary heterosexuality. However, they also present sexualized interpretations of leisure and women's roles that are inappropriate for the standard woman's role.

Conventionally, private heterosexual relations were subsumed within co-ed groupings. The kind of heterosocial dating seen in malls is, therefore, itself unconventional. The displays of affection are especially noteworthy, when public affection between men and women is still considered somewhat taboo (more so in the provinces). In some ways then these wanton hand-holding women are appropriating commercial spaces for a new expression of relation and identity. The sexual expression is subdued in these performances but represents for women a departure from standard norms.

Conventional Dating: Tom and Dee¹⁹

On my first visit to Thailand, I was struck by a phenomenon that had never been mentioned in the literature on gender in Thailand: the tom.²⁰ Although the public attention bestowed on the tom has increased since the mid-1980s, this position is less remarked upon and taken less seriously in public discourse than gay men. Such relative neglect derives from the lack of explicit recognition granted to women's sexuality. Moreover, tom do not form an identifiable community. There is no clear symbolism, not a definitive sign, and no formula for achieving tom identity. Furthermore, tom have no dedicated space as do gay men or kathoey: thus they lack the apparatus forged by those other minority positions. Nonetheless, the identity is practiced and is, in a relatively quiet way, remarked upon.

¹⁹ I do not here address the dee -- the feminine partner of the tom. By almost all accounts (besides a few self-named dee), the dee is a temporary identity defined in relation to the tom. Dee are "real" women or "natural" women, not homosexual or gender deviant; it is assumed, often with resigned sadness by their female partners, that the dee will eventually fulfill the near obligation for women to marry.

²⁰ Since my first trip to Thailand, tom and dee have received more attention in academic work on gender and homosexuality: c.f., Jackson 1989, Morris 1994. Within Thailand, there have been two masters theses on Thai "lesbians" at Thammasat University as well as numerous articles in the popular press.



Figure 8. Tom in Malls. Top photo is from an indoor market in Chaing Mai City. In the bottom photo, the woman to the left works in a cassette music shop in MBK.

The word tom most commonly conveys the English meaning of tomboy (although applied across a wider age range than the English to include adults). It refers to a girl or woman who adopts male clothing, demeanor, or appearance. Whether tom incorporates lesbianism or female homosexuality varies: sometimes no, increasingly yes. A music magazine depicted the Canadian pop singer k.d. lang as a "true tom," which equates true tom with lesbian, a depiction which indicates that foreigners are sometimes recognized as tom (but not always). The tom's feminine girlfriend is labelled a dee, from the English "lady," and is considered a "normal" woman who happens to be with a female lover rather than a lesbian, a woman defined by desire for another woman. Thus typically, a dee requires a tom to be a dee, and does not present an independent persona. Tom, on the other hand, stand alone, and I saw them everywhere in Thailand: young women in male clothing or with boyish mannerisms appeared on public transportation, at weddings I attended, in public parks walking hand-in-hand with girlfriends, and in the sex trade. But they were especially prevalent in markets and shops, including the Mah Boon Krong complex. Other people I talked to, including a Thai woman employed to interview tom for research, identified the mall as a site popular with tom.

Why are there so many tom in MBK? To start the exploration of the tom-MBK connection, I will consider why they work there. Many tom work in shops, stalls, and

markets in Thailand. The stalls and shops of MBK employed a fair number of tom workers, selling lingerie, cassette tapes, silk shirts, or luggage (among other goods). This prevalence may suggest that the tom identity is in part a class-based one, a trading- or service-class role, in the way that certain lesbian "butch" identities, usually remembered during the 1950s, appeared mainly in working-class communities (Faderman 1991; Kennedy and Davis 1993). However, to a great extent, the position crosses class. I did meet middle-class, or even wealthy self-identified toms. Being a tom impacts one's work life and occupational options. One tom, persuaded by her parents to pursue a degree in the United States, explained why she chose the field of business: "I want a job where I can wear pants." Her stipulation ruled out work for the government -- the largest single employer -- which mandates a skirt for female employees, as do many service or office jobs. Hence, commerce offers a comfortable occupation for tom.

The intertwining of appearance, identity, and work may be familiar to Western readers, especially after the recent growth of writings about the diversity of sexual meanings along the lines of race, ethnicity, or class, such as those chronicling the experiences of U.S. working-class gays and lesbians. These works in gay, lesbian (or "queer") studies and recent gender studies, emerging as they have within an identity politic and biographical framework, have not focused centrally on the impact of capitalist

development on the construction of sexual identities. However a few authors have also argued that the development of capitalism (with the involvement of the actors concerned) produced the modern gay and lesbian identity. Capitalist development in the United States, according to John D'Emilio (1983), propelled people out of families and into wage labor, consequentially creating the individual sexual autonomy which fostered the development of a gay identity and gay community. Most tom -- like most unmarried women from Bangkok -- still continue to live at home and therefore do not enjoy the autonomy D'Emilio describes for America. Their individual wages or rising family incomes, however, do allow them to participate in contemporary urban consumption, including commercial leisure. This consumption is critical, if not determinant, to the tom role.

I think it is as a space of consumption that the mall is most significant to the tom identity. Among the throngs of consumers in MBK are numerous tom, in groups of girls, in co-ed groups, or in a couple, with a dee. The cavernous atrium provides an important area for tom away from home and kin, and one where they can learn, or polish, the accoutrements of tom identity. MBK and other markets offer a display of tom style, providing would-be tom with an education, a shopping list, and a stage.

The tom identity is constructed by an individual's performances of identity: in other words, by moving through the world, acting in relation to others, as a boyish woman.

What are the sources -- or scripts -- for such enactments? Tom are drawing, for the most part, on a conventional range of inspiration. That is, the tom identity is produced by conventions. Most commonly tom describe the object of their desire as conventional, "proper," "tidy", "appropriate" (riap roy) women; as real women; and in terms of contemporary standards of beauty: tall, fair, with long hair and with a nice personality. They do not draw on nor necessarily identify with "lesbian" imagery introduced from the west, for example. In fact, for the most part, everyday tom reject overtly sexual images of their desire or identity, such as the sexualized connotations of "lesbian" from pornography and Patpong sex shows.

While certainly the conventions for gender roles derive from local Thai formations, much of contemporary identity scripts, I am arguing throughout this dissertation, derives from commercial sources, both local and foreign. The tom identity achieved a certain prominence in the mid-1980s because of two very popular pop-singers who were known to be tom: Alice and especially Anchalee, who "came across as pure butch and was a major influence on at least half the teens attending all-girls schools," according to a recent interview (Nation [Thailand] 1997). (Foreign lesbian representations matter less to average tom or dee. k.d. lang's "coming out" was irrelevant to Thai consumers, to tom as well as to the company that pirated her song for a TV commercial.) Pop-stars come and go, of course, and during my

research another tom became the darling of the 1990s teenybopper set, who would buy laminated wallet-sized photos of her (or male heart-throbs) in MBK and elsewhere. The "fact" of the pop-singers tom identity was important to tom, but the illustration of a tom look also served an important function. An interview with the 1980s pop star Anchalee in which she renounced her tom past in favor of Christian morality, quotes the singer:

"People always think of me as a tom. But I've always felt more comfortable in really casual clothes. I wear jeans, a man's shirt. It's my character. When I released the first album and it did well, I had to stay with that character because that's how people wanted to see me. I needed a style of my own," says Anchalee who today no longer has that tomboy look. (Nation [Thailand] 1997)

Presenting tom looks provides significant information in a context of compulsory or presumed heterosexuality (in the sense of romance more than sex). Hence such role-models validate and educate as much or more than explicit, written discussions of tom or lesbianism. Commodity images, such as the pop star, can and do fulfill this purpose. During the 1990s, fashion magazine layouts also employed the occasional boyish or short-haired woman, probably copied from the periodic mannish styles of Western fashion displays of neck-tied, suited women.

In practice and in the public eye, the tom identity is intertwined with modernity and the creations of commerce. In public discussion, tom are sometimes ascribed to "fashion" (using the English word), meaning that being a tom is a youth trend because it represents a cute and au courant

style. For example, Thai gay men explained that the prevalence of tom in public was due to "fashion." One obvious implication of tom-as-fashion is to render it asexual: the tom we see are not motivated by sexual desire for other women, the interpretation goes, but by a statement of style. The link with modern consumption is telling.

Real tom, as well, differentiate among tom performances, pronouncing, "they're not real, they're just dressing like that." The presentation of a tom persona takes place through one's appearance, and accordingly relies on commercial products perhaps more than certain postures or airs. The tom is established above all through the short hair cut, which is a crucial marker for the well-off when school and typically colleges require skirts for all female students (as well as faculty). The standard tom attire away from school consists of men's flip-flops or shoes, male pants (e.g., chinos) -- often hooked with a metal keychain -- topped by a loose-fitting men's button shirt over an undershirt.

Of course, living as a "real" Thai woman requires as much construction through commodities -- probably more, given exacting standards of femininity and growing importance of cosmetics, pantyhose, and haircare products. And of course, heterosexuality is even more "prevalent" in the malls. The point here is that the performance of tom identity relies on, and takes place through, commerce. MBK and markets, by offering a display of tom style (both "real"

and stylized), provided would-be toms with an model and a shopping list. Furthermore, it was the presence of tom in MBK (especially in comparison to how butch-friendly U.S. malls appear to be) which allowed me to identify the displays of heterosexuality.

Tom about Town

In terms of leisure, tom socialize in the same pattern as other girls and women, in homosocial groups and at times co-ed clusters. (There is also dating.) The spaces, therefore, are the much the same as for other women: restaurants and shopping areas. Accordingly, within the throngs of young people in MBK are numerous tom. The leisure practice of tom, then, continues the expected norm of homosociality more than does heterosexual dating (which may in part explain a common lack of strong family censure.)

Though most women tend to socialize in groups of friends, particularly after school or work, often they participate in pairs. Because same-sex physical affection is the norm in Thailand, and because of the preponderance of same-sex leisure, tom-dee romantic couples walk hand-in-hand or sit entwined, camouflaged in a way that they would not be in most of the anglophone world. This invisibility in part explains the lack of attention to female homosexual relations in Thailand and many similarly homosocial

countries (and of course can be chosen as a deliberate or self-aware survival strategy).²¹

Tom and dee courtship continues homosocial traditions at the same time it interprets romantic imagery that is heterosexual and mostly commercial. Lillian Faderman (1991) suggests that the U.S. butch lesbian of the 1950s emulated ideals more closely than men did, since they took their models more consistently from representations of romance and gender, as seen for example in Hollywood movies. A similar process seems to be underway in Thailand, where male courtliness is presented in Western representations as in the American movies shown in MBK's cinema. But in other ways romantic practices extend, or reinterpret, the homosocial bonds among women friends -- exchange of the gifts and cards that MBK sells in abundance -- coding the friendly "love" in more explicit, romantic ways.

In performance metaphor, the mall functions as a "theater" providing -- or pushing -- imagery and scripts, props, and space for enactment of identities that is especially significant to women. Consumers express gender identifications (which reproduce a sex/gender system predicated on compulsory heterosexuality and homosociality) through commercial venues. In the process, they reformulate definitions of the female gender. Women expressing

²¹ I learned to recognize tom and dee pairings from experience with tom-dee groups in Thailand, but also probably from experience "reading" masquerading lesbian and gay couples within the United States.

heterosexual and tom positions both draw on romantic imagery, commercial as well as conventional, transnational as well as Thai. Heterosexual dating transforms sociality from usually single-sex groups into conjugal coupling which seems increasingly to demonstrate sexual dimensions. Tom interject the largely imported romantic model into homosocial worlds.

Are uses of commerce for sexual expression resisting traditional constrictions on sexuality and desire? For men, no, since sexual release is already an entitlement.²² For women, possibly. Tom and dee lack the usual resources associated with resistance -- community, family, and spaces. Following gender norms, toms have developed little community beyond confined friendship networks, a situation perpetuated by the lack of explicit tom (or even female) commercial leisure. However, they express a deviant relationship -- perhaps a (temporary) resistance to compulsory heterosexuality. (Many of these women's families compel, urge, or advise heterosexual marriage, but others report that their families never even mention marriage or accept

²² It seems possible that men's sexual consumption could be read as a kind of (individualistic) resistance to the claims on their labor from their wife's families. In Thai rural communities, families could make demands on and somewhat supervise sons-in-laws, at least while new couples resided in the family compound (cf., Keyes 1975). Therefore, men's substantial spending on brothels, and cigarettes and alcohol, although sanctioned, can perhaps be indulged as their claims over the products of their labor (and often that of their wives, as well). For the tensions around men's labor in a matrilineal society in Malaysia, see the work of Michael Peletz (e.g., Peletz 1995).

their daughter's tomness.)²³ Being a tom means deviation and I would say escape from a labor-intensive femininity. As long as they remain appropriate in other realms -- in reputation, work, and support for the family -- young tom's identifications and intense romantic relations are often tolerated in many peasant, poor, or middle-to-upper class Thai families, while those women from the nobility and Sino-Thai groups typically face less acceptance. In particular, if a tom earns enough money, her peccadillos are entertained.²⁴

To my reading, the reliance on commerce contains and recuperates much of the transgressive qualities of these positions, contra the ways such deviant desire and identifications are interpreted as subversive, radical, even vanguard-like in much of "queer" (or post-structuralist) theory. Commercial venues, shaped in the interest of profit making if not accumulation, constrains people's practices.

²³ Although marriage is strongly urged and compulsory in some families, there is some flexibility, and increasingly more people are marrying later or not at all (Knodel 1994: 43). Speaking about 'traditional' central rural Thai ways, Suvanna (1988: 123) reports, "Usually a person who remains single, either by choice or other reasons, is not thought of as unusual. It is generally said that if a person can earn his living without trouble and does not depend too much on other people, he should have full authority to choose his own lifestyle." Mills (1993: 202) reports that a number of women migrants to Bangkok did not foresee marrying.

²⁴ Given the 'deviant' nature of tom and dee, there is no formal documentation of numbers of women whose family accept, ignore, or condemn their proclivities. My impressions derive from conversations with individual women and from the evaluations offered by organizers of the lesbian group Anjaree.

In particular, commerce might limit tom and dee's broader identifications, or "community" -- although it could be argued that these commodified renditions of romance will or do lead to networks and identifications which comprise a (post-) modern alternative 'community.' Above all, international retail and marketing propounds a specific and relentless model of romantic, increasingly sexual heterosexuality which, in the absence or fading of other resources and representation, reinterprets local compulsory heterosexuality in a more liberal but pervasive hegemonic form.

What my reading of MBK proposes is that relying on commerce for leisure involves new versions of sexuality but also constrains at the same time that it generates reformulations of sexual identity. In general, Thai women are enacting an increasingly romantic and sexual heterosexual script while continuing homosocial leisure practices. The enactment of gender scripts creates uneven, incomplete, or mutant reproductions of homosociality and heterosexuality. Modern commercial arenas, such as MBK, offer influential spaces for the creation of modern sexual and gender identities.

Conclusion

By comparing the place of commerce for men and women's leisure, placing sexuality in a context of sociality, and looking at the uses and implications of the

mall, we see the relevance of capitalist forms for the construction of gender and sexual subject positions in Thailand. It is important to replace the view of monolithic, deterministic capitalist forms with one that allows for interplay and mutual impact. In fact, the complexity of capitalist commerce itself -- its internal corporate battles and an indirect relation with consumers -- promotes particular investment strategies (retail) and shape the mediated, consumer spectacle form of the mall. At the same time, the different avenues available for men and women's pleasures demonstrates that the construction of sexuality through commerce diverges according to male or female gender: it is not a gender neutral process.

This chapter has emphasized women's consumption in the speculative investment of MBK. As such, it provides an illustration of the ways that "post-Fordist" or transnational capitalism informs Thai gender meanings. In the next chapter, I turn to women's labor in transnational commercial economies, examining the negotiations of commodified sexual relations with foreign men in Bangkok. The ways in which Thailand has generated male-oriented leisure offers perhaps the clearest illustration of the ways that gender meanings and commercial enterprises (bars, brothels, sports) shape each other with different implications for men and women.

CHAPTER IV

PATPONG: THE ECONOMIES OF INTIMACY

Learning about Prostitution

On my first trip to Bangkok, in 1988, I met with a fellow ethnographer who was then in the midst of her research on sex work in Thailand. Cleo Odzer and I had decided to investigate Soi Cowboy, or Cowboy lane, a less illustrious strip of go-go bars for westerners than the well-known area of Patpong. We sat at the bar and I struck up a conversation with the bartender, a young woman with short hair. Another barkeep told me (at the first's instructions), "she likes you." We joked about some of the customers and I impressed her by carving grammar-school-level Thai on a bar napkin.

Cleo and I had planned to continue on to a prominent disco located in the Patpong area. When we told our friend that we were leaving, she appeared disappointed and asked us to stay. We invited her to join us. "I can't," she said, "I'm working." Cleo's research provided her with knowledge about the operations of bars. She asked the barkeep if it were not true that if we paid the bar fine, she could go: how much was it? We paid the 250 baht (US \$10) and then

caught a tuk-tuk, one of the noisy three-wheeled taxis pervasive in Bangkok.

Cleo had to go back to her apartment near Patpong, her research site, to change clothes. Later she and I wondered what the bartender must have thought, having two women take her out ostensibly to a disco only to head directly for an apartment. (Years after during my own fieldwork, I found that going out with a female customer, rare to begin with, typically occurred with a heterosexual couple and was almost always initiated by the man.) She sat politely on the couch and turned down our offer of a Coke.

I talked with her while Cleo dressed. The moon was nearly full, and I attempted to explain in basic Thai that farang (Westerners or caucasians) see a man in the moon. (Thais, like Chinese, see a rabbit with an axe.) I also asked about her. She came from the poor northeast region, Isan, as do almost all the workers at Soi Cowboy and in the foreign go-go bars in general. Many of the workers at Soi Cowboy come from the same villages through kin and friend networks: she had followed an elder cousin. She had not been in Bangkok three months. In fact, she and I had been in the capital about the same length of time. One difference was that I had travelled all over the city, whereas she had remained on Soi Cowboy, either working in the bar or living in her dorm above it. She said she had never been taken "off" by a customer before, which was believable. She had never been to a disco.

Rome Club stood on a small, dead-end lane known as trendy and gay, in the Patpong area very near the red-light strips for western and East Asian men. From its founding, Rome Club had served mainly gay men and had a reputation for the best music and a stylish two-storey interior.¹ The music was loud, the floors were packed, and there were far more lights and video monitors and people than would be found in the smaller one-room bar where she worked. Discos can be overwhelming the first few times, and so Rome was to our bartender. After we paid our admissions fee and entered, she took my hand for comfort. I asked her what she wanted to drink.

"Milk," she said.

As we drank our different drinks on the second floor overlooking the dance space, I talked to her about the gay nature of the place, which intrigued her. Far from recoiling, she asked questions, for example wondering whether there were gay women. We went to dance on the crowded dance floor, encased by balconies of onlookers and one wall of video, but she found it too much and wanted to quit before one three-minute song was completed. Finally, she wanted to return to the bar, and Cleo saw her to a tuk-tuk and gave her money to return to Soi Cowboy.

¹ By 1994 Rome management (made up of gay men) explicitly shifted its clientele and reputation, targeting foreign heterosexuals. Thai gay men, especially those whose appearance suggested that they were sex workers, drag queens (kathoey) or working class, were turned away and a short-lived poster appeared stating such a policy. Once presumably heterosexual, its' success and reputation faltered.

Cleo and I felt poorly about this encounter, which I later mulled over with other people. Were we customers or were we offering her a friendly night on the town? Should we have paid her for her time? Did we do the right thing? Was she thinking that we intended to have sex with her? We had assumed that, since she worked in a go-go bar, the barkeep would know the ropes, understand our friendly offer, and, had she wanted it, insisted on payment. I had also relied on Cleo, as the senior researcher, to know the negotiations involved in this milieu.²

It turned out that all three of us were inexperienced in this regard. Our friend knew as little as we did about relevant protocol (at least with two Americans women customers). She was fresh from the countryside, new to urban life, working in the apprentice-like position of bartender where women need not go out with customers. I never saw her again.

This barkeep had not been lured into the industry nor instantly forced into sexual relations for money. Women who work as barkeep may find their income insufficient and, to earn more money, choose to move to a position which entails going out with clients. For this woman, perhaps going off with us was a partial preparation for this move. Sex workers, after all, are known in public in large part

² Cleo Odzer went on to write a dissertation in anthropology at the New School (1990) which she later revised into a book, Patpong Sisters (1994), and draws on for material in her personal web page on the Internet.

through their consumption: free cash, bold clothing, distinctive make-up, and their presence in discos and restaurants with western (normally male) companions.

The awkwardness on all three of our parts is indicative of the discomfort, adjustments, and accommodations when commodified exchanges enter unfamiliar or non-commodified realms. Applying commercial negotiations to sexual intimacy requires preparation -- a kind of education. Thai men explicitly receive this education from peers or male guardians (for example when a father provides a teenage son with a trip to a brothel). For Thai workers, negotiating the range of exchanges and expectations involved in commodified sex are learned by and large on the job. All work involves socialization and adjustments: working in the sex trade inculcates the worker with a rapid ability to navigate commodity logic at the same time maintaining "personal" relations.

In this chapter, I explore how women workers' learn and negotiate intimate commodity exchange in one of Bangkok's more sensational "markets." In any map of transnational sex trades, Bangkok comprises a major capital. By way of a background, after a brief introduction to debated interpretations of commercial exchanges around sex, I sketch the development of Patpong's industry in Bangkok. Then I consider the women's relation to commoditized exchange. How do women learn to negotiate intimate commercial exchanges? How do those often viewed as

commodities navigate commodity exchange? To address these questions, I continue the discussion from the last chapter about the background of Thai sex/gender notions. Patterns of gender and courtship relations in "traditional" Thailand already include material exchanges, suggesting less a clear rupture with commercial sex than a continuity or plurality of intimate exchange forms. The sex industry is different, however, notably because public attitudes towards its material exchanges are more ambivalent, and attach that ambivalence solely to the women workers, never to their male patrons. The women workers address this public stigma each day, in part by interpolating market calculations with their own exchange conventions.

The Commoditization of Women?

This thesis considers how commoditized exchange is implicated in defining and living out the female gender in Thailand. No form of exchange links commodity with gender so brazenly as prostitution, or sex work.

Prostitution is often referred to as "the commodification of women," a term which implies capitalist economies but more often than not refers to the vision of women as quasi objects, bought and sold, valued for their price. This term often seems apt for criticizing the traffic in women particularly from third-world nations. The commodification of women also intersects with other senses of ways that women are objectified and exploited as well in

representations and discourse (like pornography) as well.³ This body of criticism objects to the erotic-economic calculations of women's bodies. Focusing on the male customer's ability to purchase sexual services, these activists note that prostitution and pornography are sanctioned or tolerated by most societies even when illegal. Some of the proponents of this approach, such as those working with the U.S. group Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (W.H.I.S.P.E.R.), thus refer to "prostituted" women to highlight the analysis of the worker's victimization.

This interpretation of the "commoditization of women," however, is not shared by all feminists. Critiques of this perspective from sex workers, feminist advocates, and scholars (notably historians) condemn such perspectives for rendering women in the trade as passive victims and denying their choice to earning money and the power of such earnings.⁴ (In North America, this critique emerged in

³ Critics of the commodification of women school include, famously, Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon. Cf., Kathleen Barry, 1984 [1979] Female Sexual Slavery, New York: New York University Press; and the proceedings of a conference in Kathleen Barry, Charlotte Bunch, Shirley Castle, eds. 1984 International Feminism: Networking against Female Sexual Slavery. Report of the Global Feminist Workshop to Organize Against Traffic in Women, Rotterdam, the Netherlands April 6-15, 1983.

⁴ For the pro-sex worker position, c.f., Bell 1987; Bell 1994; Delacoste and Alexander 1987; Pheterson 1988; McClintock 1993 (Social Text 37 (Winter) with a special section on the sex trade). In terms of non-western cases, Pheterson's volume is the most thorough. Although second-wave feminism is often considered anti-sex-worker, some earlier writings showed a complex take on the industry,

feminist discussions following in particular the early 1980s "sex wars.") Proponents of people's rights to sell their sexual services substitute the label "sex worker" for "prostitute," or the rarer "prostituted woman," to depict a job pretty much like any other. For proponents of sex work, what differentiates the work from other employment is not the worker-customer or worker-pimp exchange, but state harassment and social stigma -- distinctive problems which, proponents argue, the view of prostitutes as commoditized victims in fact exacerbates (Alexander 1987; Pheterson 1987). They also suggest that the promiscuity of women coupled with high earning power attracts social condemnation. Anne McClintock writes: "Society demonizes sex workers because they demand more money than women should, for services men expect for free."⁵ Historical research on prostitution in New York City, the American West, England, and colonial Nairobi have stressed the specificities and variability of sex work, particularly casual or occasional work on the part of working-class women, as well as highlighting the conditions where women have had high degrees of control over their work and where

e.g., Jackie MacMillan 1977 "Prostitution as Sexual Politics," *Quest* IV (1) (Summer): 41-50 and Kate Millet, 1976, *The Prostitution Papers*, NY: Balantine.

⁵ Anne McClintock 1993: 1. According to her logic, however, higher-paid sex workers would bear greater societal stigma and condemnation than lesser paid ones. Such is not the case in Thailand or the United States.

they have lost this.⁶ Judith Walkowitz' (1980) pioneering work on England especially demonstrated how much public and state efforts at helping or saving prostitutes served as social regulations which reduced the women's powers.

Much of this Western feminist debate around prostitution understandably revolves around questions of sex and gender power: whether the worker-client sexual encounter perpetuates or subverts sex/gender norms. Activist and scholarly work about Thai prostitution by Thai and foreign authors, on the other hand, manages to avoid, and perhaps even synthesize, this Western feminist dichotomy. In a survey of this material about Thailand, Parissara Liewkeat finds that these writings accept that prostitution is work that can be chosen (when not forced prostitution or duplicitous trafficking), identifying contemporary prostitution as "an inevitable economic transaction" which has resulted from capitalist development and cultural interpretations of women's junior status (Parissara 1996: 54). The Thai feminist analysis, far more than recent discussions of Western prostitution, emphasizes the national and international political economic context in generating the trade, which bypasses a dichotomy between prostitute as victim or agent. According to my assessment, the emphasis of most writing about Thai prostitution is to explain why Thai

⁶ On New York, c.f., Stansell 1982/1986 and Timothy J. Gilfoyle 1992. For the American west, c.f., Butler 1985 and Rosen 1982. Walkowitz' 1980 work on colonial England has inspired a range of subsequent researches. For colonial Africa, see White 1990.

women enter the trade (which is tacitly understood to be abhorrent). American anthropologists (c.f., Keyes 1984, Muecke 1992) and Asian feminist authors (Thitsa 1990, Truong 1980) have tended to emphasize the role of Theravada Buddhism in motivating women to provide for their families and make merit. This emphasis is not shared by Thai authors, who, as Parissara notes, write differently in English than they do in Thai: "the hidden agenda of the authors to rescue the image of Thai women in the international community, where Thai women have gained a negative reputation through the growth of the sex trade in Thailand" (Parissara 1996: 53). The emphasis on working women's dutiful provisions for their families and on the harsh economic realities which they face may serve to shift the emphasis away from a sexualized interpretation of the sex worker (and Thai women in general). Thanh-dam Truong, in her complex study of sex tourism in Southeast Asia, also notes the evasion of sexuality: "The framework for the analysis of the political economy of women's labour has so far not bridged the gap between sexuality and the economy" (Truong 1990: 192).

I propose to follow the Thai scholarship by viewing prostitution in relation to political economy, although highlighting more brightly the question of material exchanges -- or commoditization -- within the sex worker-customer relations. These exchanges seem to lie at the crux of popular evaluations of prostitution as well as the experience of the sex worker and customer (and

anthropologists' confusions). Moreover, I interpret the stigma of prostitution--borne by the worker alone--in terms of popular reactions to the economic transformations which are reformulating Thai life. Public concern with sex work, in Thailand, and elsewhere, is not only 'about' sexual mores but also 'about' the alarming powers that market values seem to hold in contemporary social life.⁷ Therefore, I see in popular discourses about the right or wrong of prostitute sexual relations coded evaluations of the right or wrong of monetary exchanges in intimate social life.

By commoditization, commodification, or commodity exchange, I am referring to cash exchange in a monetary economy. The point of the commodity is that it is made, bought and sold based on a monetary (rather than utilitarian) calculation of its value. Thus, in the capitalist economy, goods are made with this market, "exchange value" in mind, rather than the purpose or recipient. Marx argues that "the fetishism of commodities" is an ideology based on market exchange: the notion of

⁷ In a separate paper, "From Supply to Demand: Commodification and Western Customers in Bangkok's Sex Trade," I analyze the prevailing discourses about sex work in Thailand. Almost all of these focus on the women, notably the question, "why do these women do this work?" I argue that, by not examining the commodity exchange itself, many discussions of prostitution -- including feminist ones -- unintentionally reinforce an unstated economic theory, a "supply side" free-market vision: assuming that the "supply" of women/commodities drives the trade; that the market, though evil, is neutral; and that men's use of the market for sexual leisure is natural, even if reprehensible. That paper counters by considering how commoditization informs, or produces, the specific "demand" for commercial sexual services by men from industrialized countries.

inherent values of consumer goods defines value according to an abstract measure of money which renders goods and services comparable within its calculations. Defining value through market exchange obscures the social value in the labor that produced it. The price becomes the inherent value, so that your time, my effort, these things, even intangibles, all become interchangeable and measurable in the market. (This is the "fetishism" of commodities: imagining some innate, inherent value that relates to price (exchange value) rather than to the people's effort creating it or the use to which it can be put (use value). The relevant point here is that monetary exchange involves values, modes of thought, which supplant or use other kinds of exchanges among people. In sex work, a person's sexual availability enters the commensurability of the market.

My trip from Soi Cowboy to Rome Club makes clear that the place of commodity exchange interactions between this Western visitor and a sex worker is not always self-evident. Was I a customer? Was this interaction a money-making one for the barkeep? Perhaps the trip was confusing because (we knew) we were not looking for sex. But I also think exploring the exchange relations around the sex trade illuminates aspects of sex work in general. Looking at different kinds of intimate exchange relations allows us to consider both the ways that women are funneled in structures not of their own making or control (the commoditization of women dimension), as well as their capacity for strategies,

choice, or what's called agency (the freedom of the market dimension). The place and interpretation of commodity exchange is complicated, ambivalent, and, even in circumstances which are to me sad, open to a kind of play with commoditization itself. The working women who have been described as commodities also have their own responses to the kinds of exchanges in which they traffic.

For a year and a half during fieldwork, I participated in a sex worker advocacy organization unique for its secular (i.e., non-Christian) approach which did not involve "reforming" or "reeducating" workers. At Empower, I taught English, which the women studied to better negotiate with customers, or, if they wished, to find another job. I also translated letters to and from customers who were abroad, and took part in street theater that distributed condoms in and out of the bars. My relations with some of the students and staff extended outside of work, in a couple of cases to intimate, on-going friendships: indeed, with some of the people I discuss here I formed among the most enduring and rich relations of those I found in Thailand.

The Creation of Patpong⁸

The sex trade in Thailand is large and diverse. In a formal interview, the head of the sex worker advocacy

⁸ This history of prostitution is compiled from multiple sources, including these secondary references: Pasuk 1982; Parissara 1966; Khin Thitsa 1980; Thanh-Dam Truong 1990; Sukanya 1988; Van Esterik 1990.

organization reported that "there are more brothels than schools." It is important to note -- and western customers regularly do -- that most of these sex establishments serve Thai men locally (often by women brought in from the rural north, hill-tribe communities, or neighboring countries). The trade takes diverse forms: scary brothels, some of them "locked" or with indebted labor arrangements; teashops or barbershops fronting as smaller houses; large massage parlors; nightclubs; coffeeshops where freelancers work; limited 'street walking' near the train station or a canal; escort services (some promising western women); and short-term hotels.⁹ However, in the last few decades the "night life" services for foreigners, clustered in tourist spots and signalled by bright neon and loud music, have been the most noticeable, particularly in international media. Of these, Patpong is the most famous.¹⁰

While the services oriented towards Westerners in particular have attracted the most publicity, and although media commentary often conflates massage parlors, child

⁹ One estimate tallies 60,000 sex-related establishments nationwide in Thailand (Wanjiku, Orathai, Kanya 1994). Another researcher found in Bangkok the following: 119 massage parlors, 119 tea shops/barber shops-cum-massage parlors, 97 night clubs, 248 disguised brothels ("whore-houses"), 394 disco-restaurants (cited in Pasuk 1982: 9).

¹⁰ As one U.S. music 'zine-cum-magazine article "Babes in Thailand" puts it, "Patpong is the sex supermarket of Bangkok" (Black 1996: 35). Another American man describes Patpong as the "spectacular sport district of Bangkok" (O'Merry 1990: 47).

prostitution,¹¹ Western-oriented go-go bars, and international trafficking in women,¹² it is important to differentiate the distinct trades. The term "prostitution" glosses the real variation among disparate forms of commercial sex services, which present workers with dramatically different working conditions, incomes, leverage, and health risks. To my knowledge, women did not move from Thai brothels to Western or Japanese bars and the networks for recruiting (or procuring) women into these trades are different. Women from the northern province disproportionately work in brothels all over the nation, while women from the northeast province in particular staff

¹¹ In this work, I am not discussing the child prostitution trade which has received much attention of late and is said to be increasing. Though it exists, I did not encounter the specialist sex trade providing children to pederast customers, because such trade is not displayed publicly (although not hard for a man to locate). Some of the workers in the go-go bars are minors under 18 years old, but this is illegal, they work alongside older women in a different trade, and they have not entered in debt-bondage contracted by their parents. Patpong bars, while they employed teenagers, were not the arena for the sex trade in children, nor even for seedy brothels with older (over 25-year-old) workers. For child prostitution, see Orathai and Chanya 2537 [1994].

¹² The prostitution of Thai women abroad -- chiefly in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, the Netherlands, and Germany -- does draw women through multiple networks for the local trade as well as from Western-oriented establishments. However, international Thai prostitution takes different forms and paths, from voluntary migration on the part of individual women (typically already working in Patpong or a similar site), to "mail-order" marriages, to illicit trafficking of women for foreign sex trades. See International Workshop 1991; McDonnell and Buakumsri 1993 Rose 1995. Thai prostitution within the United States was discussed when a brothel staffed by Thai women was uncovered in New York City (e.g., Goldberg 1995)

foreign-oriented bars. Work in Patpong or Thaniya (the Japanese and Korean bar lane) offered women comparatively greater flexibility, higher incomes, and wider options, particularly since she negotiated sexual exchanges with individual customers (rather than being assigned) and condom-use (hence, safe sex and contraceptive practice) was more expected than the local houses of prostitution.

Patpong refers specifically to two lanes of what is now the major business area in the decentralized capital city of Thailand, but the name also identifies the greater nightlife area, including lanes dedicated to Japanese and Korean bars (Thaniya), gay male venues (Soi Four among others), and the overflowing stalls of street vendors. As with other red-light areas for foreigners, Patpong the sex strip was produced by a confluence of economic development, Cold War and Indochina conflicts, along with a growing tourist industry. The contemporary sex industry in Thailand builds on a longer history of brothels catering to Chinese wage laborers and foreign visitors to Bangkok's ports.¹³ But the sex trade for foreigners, and the expanse of sex venues for local men, are the result of Thailand's

¹³ Many observers of the sex trade in Thailand have linked the modern form to concubinage of the royal courts (influenced by Hindu conceptions of gender and rule), Chinese immigration, and slavery and debt bondage (cf., Pasuk 1982). In addition, American anthropological analyses suggest that Theravada Buddhism underpins women's participation in the trade (as daughters providing for families) (c.f., Keyes 1984; Khin Thitsa 1980; Muecke 1990). However, to my knowledge, no careful histories of the evolution of the trade exist.

modernizing projects. The Thai state, as part of on-going attempts to regulate social order and manage its international reputation, from the mid-1950s onward enacted measures which officially prohibited sex industries while allowing the continuation -- or proliferation -- of select, bribe-giving forms.¹⁴ As with most government regulations of sex trades (c.f., Walkowitz 1980), these efforts placed women more firmly under the control of bosses and police (but not pimps): that is, on the whole, under the control of men. These regulations spawned a proliferation of acceptable

¹⁴ The Siamese-Thai governments participated in international discussions and made gestures towards regulating trafficking before the 1950s. In 1904, Siam was party to the Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic. The Siamese state enacted a 1909 Venereal Disease Control Act and a 1928 Traffic in Women and Girls Act (or Sex Trade Control Act) -- both involving international pressure. Greater domestic attention to prostitution followed from Siam's participation in the 1936 League of Nations Conference in Java on the traffic in women and children in the Far East. However, the laws which remain relevant today began in the 1950s, for example, with the criminalization of pornography in 1955 (after which, a British observer reports: "In the smaller cinemas, naughty Japanese films are popular" [Insor 1963: 18]). In 1956, the revised Penal Code raised the age of consent for sex and regulated profiting from prostitute's earnings (in Truong 1990: 55). Following the United Nations' lead, the Thai government defined sex work as a crime of promiscuity in a 1960 Prostitution Suppression Act. Such international legal discourse punished the sellers (the women), not the consumers. Six years later, the government's Service Establishments Act (1966) allowed entertainment venues to offer "special services" -- a term proposed by the police department -- thereby legitimating sexual services under the auspices of such businesses. The Thai legislation differentiated three different legal realms: seduction of minors, prostitution, and entertainment (Truong 1990). In 1967, a treaty with the United States (under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara) enabled troops to engage in R&R in Thailand and 1975 government policy about tourist development allowed for "personal services."

sex trade venues, such as massage parlors or go-go bars, some of which clustered in strips. Women or youth who are arrested (predominantly from venues oriented towards locals and probably where the owners have fallen out of favor) are sent for rehabilitation at "homes for socially handicapped women."

In the 1960s, Patpong was not yet the most famous sex area for Westerners, according to one author of a pulp paperback guide who dismissed "the ultra-modern privately-owned little road." "Although both its massage parlors and its night clubs are well patronized, its bars are by far the least popular in Bangkok" (Harris 1968:32). Over the next two decades, and especially in the 1980s, the foreigner bars developed into the most well-known "nightlife" area and became a financial boon for the sole land owner, Mr. Patpong. During the early 1980s, "sex shows" were developed. These attractions feature heterosexual copulation (often in an unusual form, e.g., on a motorcycle, and unsafe, without a condom); "lesbian sex" (where one worker may perform cunnilingus or, more recently, apply a dildo on another worker); and, most famously, workers performing bizarre stunts with their vaginas, such as pulling out a string of razor blades or shooting a dart (using the skills, if not the enthusiasm, depicted in the recent Australian film, "Priscilla Queen of The Desert").¹⁵

¹⁵ For more detailed depictions of the erotic shows, see for example, Odzer 1994; Manderson 1996.

Lining the lanes of Patpong are go-go bars, restaurants serving foreign food, and related establishments (a pharmacy) beside businesses serving the daytime world of a financial and business downtown (including a Christian bookstore, a supermarket, a bank). The shophouse-style buildings stack two stories of such bars as "Pussy Galore," "Safari," or "Supergirl." The largest conglomerate, the "King's Group," owns a family of royally named bars (e.g., "King's Corner," "King's Castle"). Also upstairs may be found some sexually transmitted disease (STD or VD) clinics and beauty salons where the workers go daily to prepare for their shift. There are also open-air drinking bars, called "beer bars," without dancing or shows, but still offering cable television and women to sit with (and to take out of the bar). At one end of this lane is a large spirit shrine, where I saw women and men workers bow (wai) and make offerings of garlands and incense.

The typical arrangement on the Patpong lane has two stories of go-go bars, with the sex-shows found in the upstairs establishments. Both of these employ touts, often men in a uniform red vest or colorful tie but sometimes tom or working women, to call to passersby and invite them in, saying "have a look," or reciting the offerings of the upstairs erotic performances. The bars which open onto the night market allow strollers to gaze in and see the women dancing on stage in bikinis. Bars post signs listing drink prices for "happy hour" and after, as well as special

announcements for upcoming events. (For example, a raffle in which one can win "a living doll.") Inside, upholstered seats, tables and chairs, and bar stools allow the view of the narrow stage behind or even in the middle of the bar. A mamasan (female manager, from the Japanese word) or tout seats the customers, who are waited on by female wait staff dressed uniformly. In one bar in Soi Cowboy, the waitresses outfits resembled school uniforms. Besides the hostesses, waitresses, and bartenders (often women) are the dancers, who don robes between their set of three-songs and join customers. Dancing or performing a sex show offers a bit more salary each month but also can be a source of shame to the women, many of whom were reluctant to identify themselves as dancers: despite the prominence of such shows, bodily modesty in Thailand remains a virtue.¹⁶ (I only encountered one sex-show performer, a transsexual, who discussed her work proudly and publicly.) All of the workers bear numbered badges on their bikinis or vests.

A 1987 government-sponsored "visit Thailand year" campaign seems to have increased the number of visitors to Thailand and the length of their stay. In this process,

¹⁶ Modesty is, of course, culturally and situationally defined and subject to changes: for example, the attitudes towards women's exposed breasts has become more critical, although elder women in the countryside may still tie their sarongs below their chests. Thai women do not regularly appear nude in front of one another. Locker rooms typically provide private stalls. At the beach, many women still swim in clothing -- jeans and t-shirts -- rather than a bathing suit or underwear. And western customers have reported surprise at the modesty of male and female go-go dancers in private rooms.

Patpong continued to evolve. The sex shows and go-go bars became a standard tourist site, mentioned in every guidebook: "Sooner, or later, you will succumb to the lure of Bangkok's infamous nightlife and go have a look for yourself. It will be a worthwhile trip. Bangkok's nightlife is quite unlike that found anywhere" (Van Beek 1988: 190).

The fame -- or infamy -- comprises the allure of Patpong. Increasing numbers of women -- paired with men or other women, or part of a group -- join the steady stream of foreign men visiting to "check it out." Many European male migrants to Bangkok identify Patpong as a tourist trap. Sex tourists began patronizing cheaper red-light sites (e.g., Nana, which offered nude dancing, or Soi Cowboy) or fled Bangkok for the beach resort of Pattaya. The Patpong area produced a bustling souvenir night market patterned after a successful bazaar in the tourist magnet of Chiang Mai city. Patpong bazaar stalls sell mass-produced (but appealing) "Thai" crafts modelled on Burmese handicraft, such as the sequined elephant baseball hat, as well as fake Rolexes, bootleg music cassettes, or Chinese-silk shirts. On any given night, a visitor weaves through the crowds in narrow lanes between these stalls, haggles with vendors (some of whom, particularly the many deaf sellers, use calculators to bargain prices), and is approached on the sides by "touts" saying, "sir! madam! you see sex show! pussy show!..." Thus, the go-go bars and the tourist market enjoy an interdependent co-existence.

Patpong as a Venue for Commodity Exchange¹⁷

Patpong is a market, or what in this thesis I call a venue for commodity exchange. Patpong's structure resembles MBK: the spectacle draws consumers, from whom entrepreneurial owners of bars (or shops) profit through selling merchandise (drinks or clothing), while the owner of the overall venue (Mr. Patpong or MBK) profits through rents. The go-go bars or restaurants typically are leased, and typically subleased, to entrepreneurs, many of whom are Thai, often retired policemen, and a few of whom are Westerners eager to try their hand at the bar business (and usually failing). Bars do not "sell" the sexual services of women in the way a massage parlor or brothel does although they do extract a payment (about US \$14) when a woman leaves with a customer. Most bar profit comes from selling drinks, which in turn relies on the provision of erotic entertainment, attentions and companionship of dancers and hostesses, and the selection of a range of sex workers. The workers are expected to encourage the customer to buy drinks for himself (US \$2 to \$4) and a specially designated "ladies drink" for them (often orange soda, costing roughly US \$3). The author of the 1968 pulp guide explained this as "the Tokyo-Hong Kong system." "You are expected to buy the girl a

¹⁷ Although the greater Patpong area includes establishments providing sexual leisure by young men for men, as well as the Rome Club strip with gay pubs, I am focusing on the portion with establishments staffed by women and some third gender male-to-female kathoey workers for male customers.

glass of colored water called a 'drink,' and she splits the price with the management" (Harris 1968).

Part of the amorphous "service sector," the sex trade employs cheap labor to provide the entertainment which attracts customers whose spending on drinks generates the profit. It is these women workers -- the spectacle -- who not only attract the spectators but also transform them into consumers. Their presence and efforts therefore produce income for the bar owners, taxi drivers, night market vendors, and the Bangrak police precinct (the wealthiest precinct and most coveted assignment).

In these go-go bars, women generally provide sexual services outside of the bar. They are not forced to take specific clients, however, they are compelled to be taken "off" with a specified minimum number of customers a month. In order to receive the base salary (of about US \$200 a month), a woman must show up on time prepared to work (that is, made up), and must generate income for the bar through specified sales goals. She must sell a number of "ladies drinks" and produce a minimum number of bar fines ("off" payments to leave the bar with a client). These requirements mean that she must go out with a customer six or so times a month. The workers thus generate their own \$200 salaries through the combined intake of bar fines, ladies drinks, and of course produce bar profit by attracting and entertaining drinking customers. As laborers within this sector, they enjoy little to no protection in terms of hours, holidays,

or pay (particularly since police are regularly paid off by the bar or own it themselves). Few discussions of sex work, however, focus on this level of exploitative or commoditized wage work.

In this account of Patpong sex work, I have stressed the encompassing economic context as a way of putting the exchanges between individual women and johns in scale. Women negotiate with whom, and for how much, they will go and do what for an hour, a night, a week, or longer. The interactions between workers and customers in Patpong allow for a fair amount of latitude, choice, or play. But they take place within an already existing industry which is organized around male desire.

Women and Commodity Exchange

What has made Patpong and the sex industry are the investments shaped by national and global political arrangements. But what fascinates most outsiders are the working women. Every journalistic account of the sex trade in Thailand focuses on the sex workers themselves, who do generally share features in common: most of the women working for foreigners come from the northeast (while a disproportionate number working for the local, Thai segment come from the north) and most are young, certainly under 25: 20-year-old Ploy told me that some men said she was too old for them.

At the time of my fieldwork in the mid 1990s, most of the women workers had been born in the late 1960s or 1970s into rural, peasant families. Their childhood took place in a region changing rapidly, particularly as village youth became more closely intertwined with government efforts. In 1968, for example, only younger men worked as soldiers, police, or teachers, and girls began going to school (Moerman 1968: 108). During this time, the United States placed military bases in northeast Thailand, around which sprouted American-style bars (including go-go). These young GIs tended to form on-going relations, sometimes living together, with women the Thais labelled "rented wives." Underwritten by U.S. aid, the Thai government built roads and introduced electricity at this time -- more to achieve political control than economic development. These by-products of international politics linked villages directly to the capital and to the global economy. Isan women began migrating to provincial cities or Bangkok for wage work, in numbers at times exceeding those of young male migrants.

Thus, the 1960s and 1970s produced a strong service sector in Thailand, new patterns in young women's labor migration, and the early forms of a sex industry for foreigners (as well as national self-consciousness about this industry). As I discussed in relation to department stores (chapter 2), official commentary expressed worry about Bangkok's overflowing population and the urban chaos

of slums and street vendors. Accordingly, the government also articulated concern about women's fertility. In the 1970s, the state switched from nationalist pro-natalist policies to population control focused on controlling women's reproduction.¹⁸ (Thus, while prostitution was officially illegal, it was nonetheless regulated by medicine in the name of public health and population. Women workers are compelled to receive regular check-ups for STDs and, in theory, for HIV.) The medical regulation of women, as well as the introduction of a 1972 law denying Thai citizenship to children of Thai women and foreign men, arose simultaneously with the growth of the sex industry for westerners (as well as an influx of refugees from the Indochina wars).

Certainly during this time, rural folk became more and more styled as urban consumers. From the early 1960s, travelling merchants entertained with record players and subsequently villagers listened to music on their own radios and cassette-tape players (c.f., Mills 1993: 106). However, these rural communities had already been purchasing imported goods from itinerant ethnic Chinese traders for years and had employed an exchange economy long before the post-1960s

¹⁸ During 1965-1970, a leading university hospital in Bangkok placed more IUDs than any other IUD clinic in the world (Sternstein 1982: 106). Depo provera also became widely used during this time. A decade before, the government had enacted legislation granting bonuses for large families and criminalizing abortion. The shifting policies of the government to a large extent reflect the alternating advice of the World Bank and foreign advisors regarding population and economic development.

form of cosmopolitan consumption (or modernity). A 1974 survey reported that villagers asserted more than city dwellers that it was important for them to keep up with changing styles and to possess goods, and that rural people evaluated others according to their dress or possessions (Anderson 1970: 101-104). It is likely what differed here was the strategies by which villagers and urbanites depicted themselves, yet many observations suggest that rural Thais had long been receptive to commercial goods and leisure.

Also relevant are the ways in which people's relationships involved objects and exchanges. Thai "traditional" society, like most, is constituted by regular, patterned exchanges between social parties -- not only between people but with the temple or community spirits as well. These exchanges are not themselves commodity exchange because their values are not measured mainly in terms of monetary value, and the logic is not that of market exchange. However, with an increase in monetary exchange, these exchanges often incorporate cash or consumer goods, such as the donation of a VCR to a temple, or the offering of Coke or Chivas Regal to a spirit shrine. These offerings, which employ consumer goods, lie on a continuum with market exchange but they remain more embedded in social life.

Most relationships in Thai society are inflected with defined patterns of exchange obligations, typically in hierarchical ways. In any given social encounter, the elder bears the obligation of providing for the juniors, which can

mean footing the bill; juniors in turn repay with loyalty and service. The sense of obligation to a guardian or nurturing elder is known as bun khun, which Akin (1969:94) describes as closely related to debt and reciprocity while distinguished from loyalty. The elder-junior or patron-client relations have a well-documented history in the formal and informal structures of Thai society. In the feudal relations which characterized the Bangkok rule until this century, all "free" persons -- or at least males, the texts are unclear about women's participation -- had to register as clients of a noble or the King (and were tattooed). To become a client of a superior was known as fak tua, or giving one's body/self temporarily; enlisting as a client of a prince or king was called thawai tua, offering one's body/self permanently. In both cases, the supplicant offered gifts and continued to make gifts in kind or money to their patrons. The gifts to thawai tua to the King included the same offerings one proffers to Buddha images (that is, flowers, incense, and candles) and continues to be invoked when officials request the King to conduct marriage ceremonies for their children (Akin 1969: 94-95). (Note that one colloquial term for prostitution is khaay tua, to sell one's self/body.) The extent to which these formal patron-client relations involved women (other than as slave property) is unclear from this literature, but their underlying principles -- the reciprocal obligations for superiors to protect and for subordinates to serve --

continue to organize informal relations between elders and juniors in contemporary Thailand in ways which clearly include women.

Within the family, the idiom of exchange of bun khun animates parent-child relations. Children are born indebted to their parents. Sons and daughters, however, face different options for making good on their filial obligations to their parents. Conventionally, men ordained as monks for a brief period in their adolescence, a prestigious act which guarantees that their parents (mothers in particular) will go to heaven. Women repay this debt by taking care of their parents or guardians, a duty which is reinforced by the tendency for youngest daughters to look after their parents at home (in turn inheriting the house). The daughter's care-taking obligation increasingly is measured in terms of material support: cash, television sets, a home (Muecke 1984). And this active sense of obligation contribute to a young women's decision to earn more money by working in a go-go bar than work in a factory or home.¹⁹

¹⁹ The cases where parents "sell" their daughters into brothels is related but different to this obligation. Families, particularly in the north, are approached by an agent who offers a "loan" of perhaps \$2000 against a daughter's wages for a year or two. Sometimes the families and girls are led to believe that the work is waitressing or housekeeping but sometimes they know what it is. This recruitment produces workers for brothels catering to local clients around Thailand and also traffics workers to Japan or less often to Europe, especially Germany. Such trade is not the same as the industry that I am writing about here.

Another relevant exchange takes place between men and women in courtship or marriage. Men and women are not supposed to touch in public and youth are not encouraged to "date" alone. Publicly, virginity is expected of women at marriage. In the not-too-distant past in Isan, if the community discovered that a male and female youth had touched each other, the young man would be compelled to pay a fine to placate offended village spirits and also the girl's family -- the amount depended on the part of the girl's body touched (Klausner 1972: 63-64). If he married her, he produced "brideprice" for the girl's family. The practice of brideprice continues today, with high rates of inflation. It is a precisely worked out amount of cash, gold, and gifts, all of which is proudly displayed, enumerated, and photographed or videotaped at the wedding. The sexual exchanges between men and women, then, have long been accompanied by material, even cash exchange. These exchanges around heterosexual relations perhaps resemble the "commoditization of women" in prostitution in that they attach a material value to sexual access to a woman. Yet the cultural logic of the sex trade market is different. Marriage payments seem to represent one part of a groom's obligations to the brides' family, which include his agricultural labors on the wife's family lands: thus this calculation is embedded within on-going kin ties. (As I note below, many consumers of the sex trade who court workers for

marriage regard the monetary calculations involved in Thai matrimony objectionable.)

It is possible to view children's indebtedness and romantic exchanges as different points on a continuum with capitalist market exchanges. At times, one event -- a wedding -- contains more than one form of material exchange. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize how these exchange calculations differ. The former social exchanges take place in a network of exchange obligations which are mutual yet hierarchical: juniors and seniors give in different ways. Another way to see this is that giving and receiving constitute, reproduce, and differentiate between juniors and seniors or wife and husband. The colloquial name for brideprice is "milk money," a name which links the money and gifts to the mother's nurturing (work) and the obligations it generates. Unlike market exchanges, these local social exchanges remain connected to production and social (and biological) reproduction. The bride is not a commodity, although she may be objectified and measured in terms of a brideprice amount. Her identity is seen in terms of relations to her family of origins, to her in-laws, and to her new family.

Rural Thai women were, and are, thoroughly involved in markets. Such involvement in local markets has meant that Thai women occupied a frontier for the commoditization of the economy. Such a broad division of labor where women are expected to do economic work, particularly in marketing,

carries over into women's preponderance in sales, the service sector, and prominence in real estate. It also suggests that women, more than men, shoulder the ultimate responsibility for the material or financial care of their families. By and large Thai men, except the wealthiest, expect that a wife will work. More diffusely, women are associated with money and commodities, with selling and consuming.

Commoditized Sex

Women's paths to entering work in Patpong or similar sites take similar forms. Poor young women, or girls, really, leave school at the age of 10 or 12 (the legal minimum of 6th grade), or the lucky ones at 15, and go to work with expectations that they will support themselves and contribute occasionally (at least on demand) to their family. Many women from the north or northeast migrate to a provincial city first or end up taking a bus into Bangkok to find a job. Often women decide to work in Bangkok after a failed marriage or romance. Younger women who enter into the nightlife directly usually have a sister, cousin, or friend already working there. Others begin with lower paying work. One woman I spoke to in a bar in Nana Plaza had been working as a sewer in the Kader Doll Factory until a fire razed it in 1993 (in the world's worst factory fire to date), she came to work in the bar. Others had worked around the clock as domestics for Bangkok families.

Work, especially the early jobs during teenage years, provides training, not just in the tasks at hand, but in subtle practices and negotiations, as well as about social order and people's worth. Working in sexual entertainment trains its workers in particular ways, varying with the specific form of the job. Sex work provides a training in cosmopolitan commodity exchange. Women learn to negotiate, in a foreign language learned on the job, with men of much higher status (in terms of class, race, and nationality): to bargain for more money, certain conditions, or the use of a condom. The more seasoned workers learn how to extract additional profit: having a john buy a gold necklace, or buy more expensive meals.

What the women learn to do is to see the attentions, flattery and service they provide men -- something they were expected to do in the general course of their lives -- in terms of the money it can produce. While virginity and monogamy are prized, the women learn to live with promiscuity and to calculate their bodies, services, and attentions in terms of cash.²⁰ In these ways, the women learn how their gender subordination is a commodity. Sex work trains in few skills, besides using the vaginal wall

²⁰ However, Thai sex workers do not price their sexual labors based on particular acts, body parts, or even amount of sexual relations, as do Western workers who, for example, may charge more for anal sex or refuse to kiss customers at all. This does not mean that anything goes -- such acts as sodomy or fellatio would have to be negotiated. But the Thai workers effectively put themselves at the customer's disposal for a period of time in a non-rationalized fashion that is a major part of the appeal for Western consumers.

muscles to peculiar ends. Part of the training is in the rapid calculations of a commodity logic.

When they return home to the village, the women present the admired sight of the urbane, fashionable city woman. Her urban attire and the cash she gives her family bestow her status, or at least protect her from public criticism. When Human Rights Watch interviewed young Burmese women working in Thai brothels asked what they understood prostitution to be before beginning work, they answered, "wearing Western clothes in a restaurant" (Asia Watch 1994: 2). These women provide direct links to the international world. They know English and know something of Germany, Italy, Australia, and so on. Some of them have visited these countries, either to work or with a partner ("fiance visas" allow heterosexual partners to enter a country for 6 months). In this way the women are brokers for their village, introducing current elements of global style and the world economy. Their material support often enables the families to live beyond their (eroding) means: to have a television or VCR, but not more land.

The way the women respond to this commodification is ambivalent or contradictory. Even with the status that money and clothes bring, or the pride from doing right by their families, the public stigma does not sit well. Given the double standard, some women said that they felt grateful that their 'boyfriends', former johns, did not despise them for being sex workers. Others became blase, or even brash.

Just as "traditional" rural Thai life included its own evaluations of relations in terms of exchange or material support, the women measured their johns in similar terms. "He's nice, he gave me US\$80," or a gold necklace, or paid for expensive meals or gifts. The men's goodness was calculated by giving, continuous with Thai social relations. They would berate a customer who had been less than generous as a "cheap charlie."

On the other hand, many women express discomfort with the view of them as greedy, materialistic, or even as promiscuous (known as being a "butterfly"). According to the author of an idiosyncratic memoir titled My Wife in Bangkok, "[m]any girls made it clear that you were helping them out financially, and it was not a straight cash-for-sex deal. They felt better and so did you. If the woman went butterfly, well, you didn't donate enough to the family and she had to make ends meet" (O'Merry 1990: 120). The women often display generosity towards their friends and intimates, including their longer-term customers. Returning from a retreat with the advocacy group I worked with, one woman -- 25, and especially bold and confident -- asked me for help picking out a knickknack for Ed, the American she had been seeing for two weeks who worked on helicopter maintenance in Oregon and Africa. (I vetoed the cute doll and suggested beer snacks.) They will also be generous in other relations, often offering gifts or picking up the tab for me as a teacher or friend, as well as continuing

contributions to Buddhist temples. The American customer-boyfriend cited above wrote of his long-term companion in Thailand that, "Pidang loved to help people. She was always lending people money...[sic]couldn't say no, even when she didn't have much for herself." ²¹

My neighbor for part of my stay in Chinatown was a bright young woman who studied energetically at Empower, the school where I volunteered. She lived with an Israeli man who had contracted her for a longer relation. One expression of women's discomfort with pure commodity exchange lies in the ways they form relations with the clients. While perhaps most episodes are once-only (either "short time" hour or so or "long time" overnight), all the women have occasional connections that last longer. Sometimes the johns want a tour guide, sometimes romance, sometimes a wife. The customers that last longer than a week fairly quickly become described as boyfriend or sweetheart (fan), and the money is negotiated on a longer basis: perhaps two weeks at a resort for a specified payment (which is typically at a lower rate than the cost for one night). If the relation becomes more on-going, the arrangement may be simply that the man provides the support and gifts for the woman as opposed to

²¹ O'Merry 1990: 10-15. During their first encounter after meeting in a coffeeshop, they did not negotiate a set fee, and O'Merry even asked Pidang to contribute money for the US \$4 hotel room; afterwards, he gave her 100 baht for the evening, took it back, and finally handed her 200 baht (US \$8). In many cases of freelance work (but not in Patpong), women do not negotiate a fee but rely on the man to give a gift or tip.

an income (although she will request pocket money or gifts for her family and the like). Women like my bright young neighbor desire these relationships, even if they have no security. Indeed, her Israeli patron finally dismissed her with a small amount of cash. After a brief trip home she had to return to work, quickly, by now too tired, she said, to continue her studies. (He replaced her with another woman right away.)

When the customers leave Thailand, as most of them do, they often have a correspondence with a bar worker, even one they saw for a short time.²² I became one of the "scribes" who translated these communications. The women often ask recipients for money and sometimes the two make an arrangement where the boyfriend/client sends money regularly to a woman's bank account. (The workers therefore need to open bank accounts -- facing the knowing scorn of bank tellers -- and to provide the number and address to customers, which is an impressive accomplishment for those who could not read or write.)

The letters of these men often express an anxiety about whether their correspondent's interest in them is primarily monetary: they become, in other words, nervous about the commoditized nature of the relationship. For the Western men who migrate to Thailand to live long term (who refer to themselves ex-patriates rather than immigrants),

²² On these correspondences, see Walker and Erlich 1992; Cohen 1986:115-127.

the women's economic calculations make them seem acquisitive, materialistic, or even "mercenary."²³ Some "customer advocate" literature views the women as innately greedy and immoral. The women's efforts to maximize the money or gifts they receive from customers -- or "materialism" -- derives, in part, from their economic situation. The women are clearly trying to do better than survive: their job offers no security; many do not have the minimum sixth grade education or urbane persona to work even in a department store; and they bear more or less a fiscal responsibility for their parents and children. They thus learn to extract money, to commoditize many encounters, on the job.

Aside from this obvious motivation of survival, the women's material calculations with customers (what the latter perceive as "materialism") derives from different economies of intimacy. I have suggested that the women's expectation of material exchange in social relations, including 'romantic love,' resonates with broader patterns

²³ An American professor of geography and specialist of Thailand wrote this to a Danish tour guide and would-be writer friend:

In short, yes, most of the Thai women are not particularly intellectual but they are beautiful, interesting and although very much conspicuous consumers, still quite refined and sensuous... (1/23/94) The writer explicitly contrasted Thai women with Western women. The Danish friend was the boyfriend/customer (what we might call a sugar daddy) of a woman I knew very well, Ploy. I came into possession of the letter when he died suddenly (leaving no provisions for her in his will) and I held some of her papers. Ploy found the author's remarks about Thai women offensive.

of kinship and social life. The women approach the economy of intimacy differently from the way customers do. Furthermore, the women have their own, culturally specific ambivalence about association with commoditized intimacy. They seem more comfortable with the cash and gifts as a kind of exchange, rather than as a wage, and most of them expect to reciprocate in kind. (Their continued calculations of materials received appears to many Westerners to deny or contradict romantic, non-commoditized relations.) One bar worker told an interviewer that she had this advice for Western (farang) men interested in marrying a Thai worker:

You want to marry Thai lady? You have to meet family. Take time. Be careful. Need money. Have to take care family. Every month. Have to do. He have to pay. He have to send money home. Not the same like America family. Now you have to pay. Have to take care family with money. Ask the lady, "OK, how much I have to give you for family, for mother, for father?" Money. He have to pay more than 10,000 baht a month. 10,000, 20,000 baht. Because of this, they fight, they marry, divorce a lot. (Walker and Erlich 1992: 162)

The women are entering a famous industry, and shouldering a serious stigma that is directed only at them, never at the customers (who as men are expected to frequent prostitutes) and rarely at owners or traffickers. The stigma derives from promiscuity (which can mean a woman with more than one sex partner) but moreover, from the profit. It seems also that the public concern with sex workers as a blight on the nation's image, or as social disorder, reflects an inchoate criticism of the rapid commoditization of their economies and lives. In many ways the discussions about prostitution, in Thailand and in feminist or

international discussions, are about our failures to understand what's involved in the "successes" of capitalism.

Navigating Prostitution

My companion to Soi Cowboy and Rome Club many years ago, Cleo Odzer, has written a provocative book called Patpong Sisters (1994), in which she compares the erotic relations she had with Thai men with those of Western men paying for Thai women: are they the same, she asks?²⁴ She points out that in her case, the Thai men manoeuvred and struggled to pay her way, in an appropriate masculine role in a romantic exchange.

After more experiences of my own such as the one Cleo and I shared in Rome (mercifully left out in her book), I also became more conscious of my shared position with the Western men with whom I was loathe to link myself. Like most johns, I am white and wealthy compared to most Thais: I am a potential customer. Part of this acceptance meant understanding my position in a commoditized exchange, and understanding the awkwardness, training, and also role play involved. My confusion in this situation was part of a larger discomfort I also have with rendering more and more

²⁴ Odzer's book has been criticized by anti-prostitution feminists and several Thai scholars for offering a perhaps somewhat light-hearted look at the sex trade. While she is not explicitly invoking critical theories, I think this offers one of the more honest and risky attempts at reflexive anthropology, not so much by discussing her erotic experiences but being willing to equate herself with Western male customers.

of our daily lives in and through money. The Thai women who work in the safer, more flexible parts of the industry, namely these bars, learn to use and manipulate their image as commodities as well as the commodity exchange itself. But this exchange takes place within a larger stage of first world power, government control, and many-layered economic arrangements. It also emerges from local patterns of generational and gender relations. Even those people steeped in commodified intimacy, the sex workers and their clients, try to humanize these exchanges in terms of their vision of intimate reciprocity.

This section of the dissertation explored young women's sexual deviance, heterosexual and homosexual, in relation to commercial consumption in Bangkok. Just as the female identity has come to be linked with domesticity and familial consumption, so too is female sexual excess configured in relation to excesses of commercialization and materialism among Thai women. In the next section, I explore ways that Thai men and women working in marketing transnational products (imported television shows and direct-sales consumer goods) attempt to negotiate, in different ways, a modern Thai entrepreneurial identity which is at once appropriate and mobile, cosmopolitan and Thai.

PART THREE: TRAVERSING MARKETS

CHAPTER V

IBC: GENDERED NAVIGATIONS OF THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY

This section of the thesis, *Traversing Markets*, further explores sexual and gender identities in relation to transnational markets. The spatial nature of the "markets" here, however, differ: whereas the sex trade and shopping malls involved fixed places, other venues for commerce traverse spaces, and are not rooted in one identifiable site. 'Markets' becomes 'marketing,' in a shift from a space to a process, as the job of selling catapults from low-status labor to a professional career. By their nature, advertising and television -- the combined subject of this chapter -- are not centralized or spatially defined but are mobile, reaching into public and intimate life in Thailand. Nonetheless, such marketing occurs in specific places and interactions: transnational phenomenon must also land somewhere.

For more than a year in Bangkok, I worked part-time at the marketing office of one of the leading subscriber television companies in Thailand and the Southeast Asian region. I obtained the job the usual way in Thailand: through connections. My official work, which was well paid

relative to Thai salaries, involved writing the English-language materials for program guides, promotional materials, television spots, correspondence, and so forth. Often the job entailed simply showing up more than actually translating or writing copy. Following the example of anthropologists such as Doreen Kondo (1990), who drew on her experiences working in a Japanese confectionery shop, my observations derive from the variety of activities associated with a paid job.

The first day of working at IBC, I met my young supervisor Anan, for breakfast in the McDonalds below our temporary office site. Like the other Thai customers, Anan ate fried chicken with a fork and knife, while I opted for coffee (there are no special McMuffin breakfast items in the Thai franchises). Educated in England, his commiserations with me were in a British accent: "Thailand is so bush," he said as we waited by the marbled banks of the elevators. Upstairs, in a large partitioned space with fluorescent lights and low acoustic-tiled ceilings, we proceeded to work on the television guide, Spectrum, and to develop a promotional contest to accompany the launch of a new Batman cartoon which would be dubbed in Thai. This marketing office, a crossroads between foreign media and local interpretations, is a concrete instance of the broader, diffuse trends of globalization and transnationalism. 'Knowledge' workers there, including Anan, who was not all the attitudinal expatriate he first appeared, mobilize Thai

and foreign cultural identifications in complex and contradictory ways. After introducing the route of the information through Thailand -- notably via IBC's parent company Shinawatra -- I examine the ways that the transnational traffic in commodified representations is created by, and creates, modern Thai professionals.

Globalizing Empires

The cable television company for which I worked, known by three English initials IBC (International Broadcasting Corporation), is one part of a large telecommunications empire, the Shinawatra Computer and Communications Group (SC&C). The founder of the company is Pol. Lt. Col. Taksin Shinawatra, Ph.D., named after the somewhat dishonored first king of Bangkok who was part Chinese. His corporation is generally referred to by the surname Shinawatra, already famous for the family's silk business in northern Thailand. In 1983, Taksin founded the Shinawatra Computer Group (SC), as it was known until 1991, which expanded profitably into telecommunications and information technologies. My workmates (and company literature and frequent articles in the business press) explained the empire to me. IBC Media consists of the cable television core and the Rainbow Media Company, which packages programming and paid commercials to broadcast on TV networks, and a phone-directories division (formerly with AT&T) publishing the yellow pages described in

advertisements as "The Encyclopedia of Buying." SC&C's telecommunication division includes mobile phones (now an omnipresent feature of urban life), pagers, and data technologies. There is the original computers division (e.g., mainframes and software sold to government branches); a satellite division; and international operations.

IBC and SC&C management self-consciously reflect broader economic and technological trends associated with the "information age." Corporate literature such as Annual Reports or other publications positions these companies as the gateway between transnationalism and Thailand, for example, "accelerating the Kingdom's development as a whole":

As Thailand is approaching "NIC" [newly industrialized country] status, the Kingdom's industrial and business sectors face numerous challenges. In order to survive in a highly competitive world, the country needs to develop its data and communications networks. (Shinawatra 1991)

This modern Shinawatra corporation reflects shifts away from the earlier Sino-Thai businesses, shifts which other family firms have taken as well. Such businesses have expanded laterally into other sectors, often away from manufacturing and retail, and increasingly into real estate development and high-tech telecommunications: that is, investments both in space and in the means to transcend it. The telecommunications industry in Thailand is flourishing, as many family companies and corporations move to employ new computer, satellite, and fiber optic technologies. Other companies compete with Shinawatra in subscriber television,

satellite broadcast, mobile phones, and other telecommunications projects. For example, the Sino-Thai family-based C.P. group collaborated with the U.S. company NYNEX to install telephone lines for the government.¹ The growth of these industries based in electronic technologies rely on the growth of the semi-conductor manufacturing industry in Southeast Asia, most of which rely on young female laborers (Heyzer 1986; Ong 1987, 1991).

The expanse of this industry has involved collaboration and interconnection with the Thai and neighboring governments, especially with the break-up of state monopolies (e.g., the Thai government control of telecommunications).² The fact the former police lieutenant Taksin became involved in a business is hardly startling in Thailand (where government and military figures have been

¹ The Charoen Pokaphand or C.P. Group is illustrative of general modernizing trends in the Thai economy. A Sino-Thai, largely family-run firm, the C.P. group was originally based in agricultural industries -- in a seed and chick shop in Chinatown -- but diversified into manufacturing and retail (e.g., 7-Eleven and Makro). In the 1990s, the conglomerate ventured into property development and telecommunications (telephone lines and a joint satellite with China), while remaining under 'conservative' family control (Nation 1994: 16). The C.P. group has received particular attention for its successful forays into the Chinese economy and for a role in the recent U.S. 'donorgate' controversy about Asian or Asian-American funding to the democratic party (see for example Nick Cullather 1997 "A Professor Writes..." *Lingua Franca* June/July: 9).

² IBC operates under a 20-year license from the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (1989-2009) and the joint Thaicom 1 satellite project gave Shinawatra an 8-year monopoly on satellite transmissions to Thailand (IBC Annual Report 1992: 18).

invited on Sino-Thai company boards since the 1950s), but what is interesting is that Taksin consolidates in his person the two interest groups involved in business: the Thai state and military -- typically Thai men -- and the Sino-Thai commercial families. Taksin, who is a well-known figure, moved further into the former Thai domain of government by entering politics in 1994, when he was placed on the slate (not without controversy) of the reformist Buddhist party by its charismatic and ascetic leader, Chamlong. One of the criticisms levelled against Taksin was that as a politician he would maintain control of the businesses through his wife, Potjaman Shinawatra, who was President of SC&C and Director of IBC (and with whom he held roughly US\$204 million in cash and more than US\$2 billion in total assets mostly in SC&C [Banyat and Nattaya 1994; Bangkok Post 1994]). Like Shinawatra, the information-technology sector as a whole has a keen interest in politics; in the 1992 elections, such telecommunications firms made more donations to parties than financial or industrial sectors (Manager 1995: 25).

The Shinawatra Satellite company joined the government in 1993 to launch the first Thai satellite, Thaicom1, facilitating television transmission to the provinces, paging services, and e-mail, among other functions, in Thailand and Indonesia. Thai firms are taking advantage of their regional superiority in this Asian region by exporting their businesses to China and the recently

opened neighboring socialist economies. For example, in 1993 IBC began subscriber television with TV 5 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and in 1994 -- when Thailand joined Laos via an important bridge -- it opened a TV station in Vientiane, while the Shinawatra International Company is involved in enterprises in India and the Philippines.³ As IBC noted, at first it's "International" label referred only to its programs, but after 1993 reflected the company's scope as well (or "program delivery points") (IBC Annual Report 1993: 20).

That first day I met my supervisor in a McDonalds in 1993, the TV guide was being produced, temporarily, in a borrowed corner of rented office space. The Shinawatra empire was too large to be housed in one site and had several spaces in Bangkok. That year, it opened a shiny 30-storey highrise as its headquarters on a main thoroughfare between downtown and the airport. Soon after, we TV-guide workers left the rented space and rejoined our marketing and promotions colleagues in the former Shinawatra company headquarters, which now served as the expanded IBC cable television office. (But the motorcycle drivers who ferried me from the bus stop or ferry pier still identified the building as 'Shinawatra.') This base was several kilometers

³ Taksin reported having a close relation with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen (Banyat and Nattaya 1994) -- the agent of the July 1997 coup -- yet was also accused of involvement in a 1994 failed Cambodian coup attempt linked to Hun Sen's rival, Prince Norodom Chakrapong (Bangkok Post 1994).

away from the new highrise, in an older part of Bangkok near the Chaopraya river and a bit north of the original capital city. Later, in 1994, our office moved yet again.

In the pages of a 1991 special anniversary publication in an English-language newspaper, Taksin Shinawatra writes, "With the advanced communication technology of today's Information Age, distance is not longer an obstacle." But of course space remains a key issue in doing business. The arrangements of my employers represent a newer, dispersed arrangement which disarticulates production from management or distribution, and disperses business functions in different spots in the world (e.g., Harvey 1989). We communicated with printers, suppliers, or bosses based in the highrise by phone or fax. The printing was contracted to a printing company -- located in yet another area of the city -- most known for producing popular cartoon magazines. The three of us involved in producing the TV guide travelled to a relaxed back office there for the monthly check of proofs. The woman managing IBC publicity, Noi, visited the prestigious Shinawatra tower regularly for press conferences. I only went there once, to help fill up the audience for the announcement of a special broadcast of a Madonna concert in Asia. (Recall that Bangkok traffic stands among the worst in the world, so that cross-town visits can take an entire afternoon.) Separated in space, the Shinawatra subdivisions received an in-house magazine called Today that provided information on divisions

activities and people, for example describing the Shinawatra "Sports Day" recreational retreat, but also work tips, such as exercises to do at one's desk. Our TV guide also published a one-page update on the corporation's achievements like the opening of the headquarters or launching of the satellite. Facilitating such a dispersed arrangement are communications technologies -- the very business the Shinawatra empire lead.

Cable TV

Before IBC began broadcasting to the provinces in 1994, even before it began broadcasting to Bangkok in 1989, versions of cable television had existed outside of the capital. Entrepreneurs, after placating local officials, would provide subscribing homes with national news and local programming along wires strung between houses (Hamilton 1992). But IBC introduced the first 24-hour 'modern' cable television with high-quality programming, at first with only two English-language channels for Bangkok residents. When Thai-language programming began on another channel, subscriptions soared. The ability to appeal to less cosmopolitan and foreign-oriented Thais is critical to IBC's growth particularly across the nation. After 1993, most imported programming (besides news) was broadcast with two soundtracks, original and dubbed in Thai. IBC hires freelance translators for subtitles (I was once consulted

for recent slang) and employs "teams" of dubbers in-house as well.

I learned some esoteric vocabulary by translating subscriber and marketing materials at IBC: antennae, decoder box. IBC broadcasts scrambled transmissions from the top of a towering hotel in the middle of the Pratunam wholesale garment district, which are received by a dish placed on subscribing buildings and conveyed by cable to dwellers who pay initial fees (for the antennae, cable, a decoder box) and monthly payments for the programming. Therefore, IBC sells its product (television programming) across space into homes; it is not a centralized entertainment center or store. As the company's slogan says, "We Bring the World into Your Home." Broadcast technologies bypass the difficulties of Bangkok's infrastructure or of centralization, by projecting services into public and private spaces in Bangkok and, after 1994, nationally, to the major provincial cities in Thailand (and to Laos and Cambodia).

Subscriber television contributes its share of the on-going commodification of leisure, entertainment, and information. With subscriber television, the programming itself is the product sold, which differs from the way that 'free TV' earns income by creating audiences for paid commercials. Mainly the company purchases the product from Thai firms and Western and Asian distributors and media networks. (Most of the English-language movies and situation

comedies -- Beverly Hills 90210, Roseanne -- Hong Kong imports, and cartoons featured Thai subtitles and much of it was dubbed in Thai for an additional Thai-language broadcast [reception of which required special equipment].) During my stay, IBC produced a minimal amount of programming -- Trendsetters, a lifestyle show, and Bangkok Catwalk showcasing local designers, as well as the frequent IBC promotions -- and Shinawatra formed a separate production company called Symphony to create such shows.

Two Thai men selected the programming for four channels. HBO-Asia (the Asian branch of the U.S. Home Box Office network), selected the U.S. films for channel 5 (added in 1993) which were transmitted to IBC from Singapore via satellite. Chum was a casual fellow whose job it was to select the shows for the two variety channels in English and Thai, channel 2 and 3. He travelled to promotional festivals to view and buy foreign programming for IBC: for example, he brought back the brochures for a Madonna concert from a French film festival. The most popular channel was Thai variety (3), which ran Thai serials, comedy shows, some dubbed imports such as Odessa File or Dr. Strangelove. I did not know the programmer for news and sports. CNN was the mainstay on the news channel (1), mixed with shows covering financial affairs in particular for Japan (NHK in English repeats), England (BBC and ITN), The Stock Exchange of

Thailand, and Australia.⁴ The sports channel (4) offered foreign and international events, among them U.S. football, auto racing, international soccer, and Getting Fit with Denise Austin at 05:00 (Thailand's modern timetable ran on a military clock). When our office had a television, it was on the HBO movie channel, and we worked with the backdrop of "Basic Instinct" (which my colleague Kat called "porno") and "Cape Fear," which I found especially distracting.

IBC thus projected a barrage of Western and imported images and Thai programs around the nation and region, in public and private venues. As Annette Hamilton (1992: 91) notes, "The average viewer in Thailand or Singapore has been exposed to a much wider range of visual material in style, genre, and cultural code than is the case for any 'average western viewer'." Indeed, IBC provides familiar language, visuals, actors, and formats for foreigners who are not appeased by Thai television. It also renders the audio for such international programming accessible to Thais. In Bangkok's red-light beer bars serving Western men, TV sets ran IBC's movie channel (usually with the English soundtrack

⁴ News broadcasts were subject to state censorship. In Thailand, a government-regulated office provides radio and 'free' TV with their news copy (c.f., Hamilton 1992) and regulated foreign news broadcasts. During the 1992 violent crackdown on democracy protests, IBC workers told me that soldiers came to the IBC offices to prevent broadcasting about the events from international media on the news channel. In 1994, a Swedish correspondent in Bangkok wrote to IBC to complain about censorship not of political issues but of the visuals (the audio ran) for a report on the first sex shop in China. (Many foreign men in Bangkok express great umbrage at any regulation of their sexual enjoyment.)

turned off or drowned out by taped music -- but, with Thai subtitles, still comprehensible to literate workers). As part of a promotion to middle-class Thais, our channels appeared in the major English-language (ESL) school in Bangkok, which was closely connected to the U.S. Embassy and which also taught Thai to foreigners. The Thai variety channel played on large screens in the railway station.

IBC is not allowed to feature commercials in its programming (although U.S. movies contain their own product placements and IBC promoted itself in frequent spots). Therefore the profit derives, for the most part, from subscriptions,⁵ which increased from 120,000 in 1993 to 140,000 in 1994 (out of a city population of roughly six million).⁶ According to company reports, these were mainly Thai families (70 percent of subscribers were reportedly

⁵ As a holding company, IBC Media was also involved in commercial "free" TV through the Rainbow Media subsidiary, which sold time slots for commercials. In addition to the revenue from this and IBC subscribers, IBC also generated profit from paid advertising in other avenues. For example, the IBC television guide is filled advertisements -- gaping mouths in dental ads or pastoral suburban scenes for housing estate promotions -- and even the dense show listings themselves feature product logos. It includes "Shopping Express," ("Shop the World by Mail"), a home-shopping catalogue for mainly imported consumer goods such as elaborate gold jewelry, German coffee-makers, an Italian breast enlarger, a U.S. stomach trimmer.

⁶ In 1989, Bangkok had more than one million television sets for nearly 6 million people. As IBC spread to the provinces in 1994, using the Thaicom 1 satellite and "direct to home technology, the company predicted that it's market niche would be 5 percent of the 8 million households with television sets, or 400,000 (IBC 1993 Annual Report: 23). At least in the early 1990s, there were more than six times the number of television sets than the number of telephones (Thailand in the Nineties 1990).

married) composed of several "viewers" (5.5 on average). Most of the subscriptions were for, or at least in the name of, men (75 percent in 1994), on average 38 years old, mostly (90 percent or more) Thai citizens rather than foreigners, with more than a third business owners and a third business employees. The cost of subscribing includes a deposit and installation charge and a monthly fee, with additional charges for HBO's channel 5. In 1994, the total start-up for all five channels for one TV set was about US\$300 with monthly fees of nearly US\$40. Although television sets were owned by many laborers and even farming families (Mills 1994), IBC's cost is generally prohibitive for all but well-to-do individuals and at least middle-class households.⁷ Nearly half of IBC subscribers earned more than US\$1600 a month (and probably enjoyed a second income, since most Thai women work), which is above many professional workers' salaries, typically well below US\$1000 a month. IBC co-workers, for example, earned about US\$400 monthly. Most of them did not subscribe to IBC (although most lived in households with higher collective incomes); as

⁷ According to 1992 figures, the average monthly wages for a man working in urban business were just under US\$200 in manufacturing, US\$230 in commerce, and about US\$120 in services. Government employees earned more; for example, a man in an urban government commercial enterprise earned \$420 a month (GDRI 1995: 61) -- however, government employees only accounted for 14 percent of IBC subscribers in 1994. Although these are average wages, well-educated workers do not receive dramatically higher pay, as indicated by 1987 figures, when the average monthly pay of single working 18-to-24 year olds with a high school education was roughly US\$80 a month (Knodel 1994: 43).

one worker pointed out, IBC programming is censored, and you could easily buy an uncensored copy (an inexpensive pirated video).

Marketing

In this chapter, I am not analyzing the multiple discourses and contradictory popular culture of televised and advertising representations themselves -- that is, not IBC's product. It is important to note that the process of creatively mixing and negotiating forms of representations and technologies that are foreign and Thai, global and local, and 'modern' and 'traditional' is hardly new. Thai elite and government regimes have been employing and reworking media technologies for more than a century, since the printing press was introduced by an American missionary mid-19th century. Talking movies and radio entered in the 1920s, black-and-white television broadcasts began in 1955 and graduated to color the 1960s, and VCRs pervaded the country during the 1980s. (Such technologies generally saturated the provinces only later, following electrification, intensified cash economies, and domestically produced [cheaper] equipment.) Since the 1920s at least, government regimes have employed the techniques of the advertising industry in state propaganda, employing a full range of print media, radio, television, and movies to instill loyalty to dictators and King, spur anti-communist sentiment, model proper citizenship, and codify Thai

'culture.' These apparatus were also employed to incorporate provincial areas within Bangkok's rule, as well as to encourage the interests of foreign tourists and industry. (Headed by a prince now considered "the father of Thai advertising," the state railway, for example, began courting tourists in 1924).⁸ In addition, entrepreneurs have also used these media as a profitable business itself or to promote trade; for example, public movie screenings were sponsored by travelling 'medicine shows' and rural marketing campaigns (e.g., Hamilton 1992). As so much of cultural studies argues (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1995; Walters 1995), government propaganda or American-style international media does not merely inject packaged contents into passive Thai recipients, but is read and interpreted in ways that are locally meaningful (Hamilton 1992; Ubonrat 1989; Van Fleet 1996).

The job of the marketing office was to encourage people to subscribe or renew subscriptions, and also to ensure that IBC's name remained well-known as the leading cable television provider. This was accomplished mainly through print advertising (television commercials were not permitted) and special promotions, such as movie screenings or contests. It was also important to ensure regular coverage in the business press, which my co-worker Noi

⁸ For discussions of the history, creation, and reception of various representational technologies in Thailand, see: Abha 1982; Anake 1992; B. Anderson 1983; D. Anderson 1970; Hamilton 1992; Nation 1994b; Keyes 1989; Phillips 1975; Thananya 1994; Ubonrat 1989; Van Fleet 1996.

accomplished through constant press releases, press conferences, and press-oriented events. IBC undertook sales promotions (offering premiums or reduced fees), "special" promotions for specific shows (Madonna's "Girlie show"), and joint promotions (for example with Citibank or department stores).

The workers in our office occupied rationalized subspecialties: for example, Kat handled promotions and special events, Noi publicity and press, and Anan the television guide. Market research on television viewing patterns came from an outside firm (there were more than 20 in Bangkok).⁹ A Sino-Thai woman, Bee, developed IBC's advertising campaigns. She presented these guidelines to SC Matchbox, a distinct company that Shinawatra created in 1991 to design advertisements, mainly print and television, for Shinawatra divisions and also outside firms (Thai Wah property developers, Spy Wine Cooler).¹⁰ (The ad agency's

⁹ Marketing and market research comprise a growing professional sector in Thailand, especially since advertising spending has increased about 20 percent annually since the late 1980s. I knew an advertising manager for Proctor and Gamble's, a man who was half-Thai and half-English. His division undertook research on product recognition in test commercials (called "off-the-air" research) and developed ad campaigns, but hired separate agencies to do quantitative research, develop ads, and place them in media. His goal was to make sure P&G's three brands did not overlap and reach targeted markets. As he noted, with some excitement, "they've got to wash their hair." The shampoo sector is one of the top spenders in advertising, particularly on expensive television commercials.

¹⁰ SC Matchbox, which employed 63 people, nearly doubled its billings from 1992 to 1993. (The billings of the multinational giants Lintas and Ogilvy & Mather, however, remained ten times larger.) (Advertising 1994: 23)

logo, a match bent in zig-zags, spoofed the naga snake cover on a prominent brand of matches in Thailand.)

One day, Bee asked for feedback on a mockup ad from several of us in the office. The text says "and today IBC makes women...different [mai thammada]". The image was a painted sketch of a woman divided into four parts: a artist's bereted head, a turtleneck torso, yellow pants and a microphone, and sherpa boots on the feet. It was intended to illustrate IBC's English arts show, CNN fashion, CNN news, and travel shows. Kat, Gai, and Bee agreed that the message was not clear, not of good quality, and that people wouldn't read it, especially in black and white in the newspaper. They recalled that similar images had been used in an ad for sheets and a hotel ad as well as in an IBC collage. We proposed other possibilities, for example, "before" and "after" IBC, but Bee resisted criticizing anybody with a negative "before" image. We asked, who is the market -- who is the customer [luuk kha]? Bee said, "it's working women, career women, who are interested in art, news...knowledge: women who know about these things." Kat and Bee agreed that the ad should not be text-centered: "you have to see it and understand and it has to be attractive." Pointing to the artist's head and turtleneck, Bee joked that it could be more R-rated (bo, or erotically exposed). Kat suggested a woman who looks happy with her life: modern, pretty, well dressed, and healthy -- maybe holding a suitcase for traveling. Bee reiterated the objective: the ad

would sell those IBC shows targeting women to the women's segment of the market: "women who want to improve themselves." When the Matchbook designer calls, Bee says "don't even 'good afternoon' me' [may tong sawasdee] because they aren't buying the ad," she indicated with the English, also using the words "concept", "explain", and "attract." Unfortunately, I never saw the final product.¹¹

Most of the our marketing discussions and the ads themselves were not so explicitly gendered as this particular effort. The participants did not invoke their own gender -- "as a woman," "as a man," in their evaluations. What this case illustrates is the more general process by which IBC workers conceptualized a "market" of potential subscribers which combined a sense of the local constraints with discourses about consumer desires and identities which have an international cast. Bee's image of a niche of "women who want to improve themselves" speaks to an ideal of personal management and self-help that resonates with

¹¹ Another such discussion demonstrated the irony of my reformist approach to advertising. The proposed ad presented an image of a cigarette pack suggesting the different programs, while the headline told readers that they would become addicted to IBC. We had a lively discussion, and I was not able to refrain from objecting to this tact, pointing out that IBC could be seen as identifying cigarette addiction as a desirable state, including for children. Some time later, Bee made a point of telling me that they had scratched the cigarette ad, and she showed me the new ad. What had replaced the IBC-as-cigarettes image was IBC-as-books. The ad suggested that viewers need not bother reading (getting) best-selling books anymore because they appeared as movies on IBC's HBO channel. Somewhat deflated, I no longer objected.

discourses of entrepreneurship as well as spiritual development (see chapter six).

These group crit sessions were not officially part of my job, which was to assist with English-language materials in the TV guide, special promotions, and IBC's spots. Kat was one of the staff I worked with most closely, in charge of special promotions for the shows. She was tall, bright, and fun. Her father was a police officer. Kat had studied for a certificate in radio and video broadcast at an art school in Philadelphia. Of the staff, she knew a great deal about broadcast technology, explaining with some disdain that our company was not truly "cable" as it billed itself. Over a lunch of northeast (Isan) peasant food, she discussed the merits of satellite and fiber optics developments in broadcast, preferring the clarity of the cable image.

Knowledge Workers

The Shinawatra conglomerate, and its IBC division, reflects recent transformations to the labor market which have recast corporations and their workers. The labor market of Thailand has been in flux for much of this century, as governments and companies pushed or lured farming families into waged labor work and as the "middle class" -- or bureaucratic, professional, bourgeois class -- consolidated. The Shinawatra's subcontracted coffee-cart women, cleaning women, phone operators, delivery men and messengers -- many

of them migrants from the northeast -- represent the growing numbers of wage laborers in the service sectors of cities, above all Bangkok. (In the next chapter I discuss one of these workers.) But the core of these growing industries relies on a different set of workers: people who can design and operate technology, create products, manage modern workplaces, and sell to -- or create -- new consumer markets. This work is done by 'knowledge' workers, many of the new middle classes, and many of whom are women.

In the new business terrains of telecommunications and up-to-date advertising, even older family-run firms employ professional workers and modern marketing techniques. At the same time, multinational or foreign companies based in Thailand, such as Proctor & Gamble or Oglivy & Mather, require a larger staff of professionals. Taksin's Shinawatra is not based on the Sino-Thai kinship-economy mode where mostly family members controlled the mercantile businesses, and import outside professional workers to replace or supplant family members. Although clearly Taksin drew on family wealth, and his wife is a key executive in the business, SC&C is not staffed with the Shinawatra clan; nor do the names of executives seem drawn from the leading families of the banking and commercial class (as reported by Hewison 1988) and they are all Thai (or Sino-Thai). The IBC office mixes people from different backgrounds: minor royalty, business families, government functionaries, and even people from the countryside.

During the 1960s, international and 'modern' companies based in Thailand employed mostly foreigners, especially Westerners, to fill executive and management positions, and continue to hire non-Thai for management or consultancy (but also for low-level English writers and editors, as in my case). Although there had been several advertising agencies founded by Thais of the nobility since the 1920s, from the 1960s until the 1980s the senior levels of dominant multinational advertising companies (e.g., Cathay) were foreigners, after which time more and more senior posts have gone to Thais, now considered to have learned the industry (Thananya 1994). The rapidly growing fields connected with high-tech communications employ large numbers of the growing class of educated Thai workers.

Work in the new broadcast enterprises requires a mix of educational, class, and also symbolic qualifications, including the conventional requisites of local connections and American-style technical and cultural know-how. An education is needed to provide both required knowledges but also the necessary credentials for professional work. Several people doing freelance work for IBC had graduated from Chulalongkorn's prestigious media department, and most of the office staff had studied at private business colleges in Bangkok. (Some college students, typically advertising majors, worked part-time as well.) An advanced degree or certificate is desirable for obtaining work and status and, as it has been for generations, a degree from abroad is

preferred. So far, these degrees are considered less for the overall quality of the school than for the nation of origin, with the United States the most desirable. (I knew a tomboy who was reluctantly going to the United States to pursue a business degree in order to please her parents.)

Corporations such as IBC draw on a pool of educated Thais which has been increasing particularly since the 1960s. Since then, greater numbers of college students have chosen to pursue work in business over a position with government, long the secure, prestigious and desirable choice for Thai men (e.g., Kirsch 1975; Wyatt 1975), and have altered the choice of their field of study accordingly. Communications is an increasingly popular major (though is limited by the fact that higher education is not based on liberal arts and therefore students select their faculty upon applying at age 17 or so). Significantly, this redistribution of student orientation from government to business also coincided with the entrance of greater numbers of women into college, which prepared them to enter -- and transform -- academic, government, and business fields. In Thailand, families increasingly choose to educate their daughters as much as their sons past the minimum requirement of six years of grammar school (which most, but not all children complete). These daughters have taken advantage of the examination system to prevail in many portions of the educational system. In the later 1980s, women began to outnumber men in tertiary education, comprising 56 percent

of college and university students.¹² In recent years (i.e., for those born 1966 or after), more of those women able to study beyond high school choose university or vocational education rather than teaching or nursing (Knodel 1994: 16). This choice, and the popularity of different college majors, reflects the shift away from state employment in schools or hospitals into the business world.

This field required 'modern' knowledges of business operations and the new information technologies -- not just the technical, hardware side but also 'symbolic' knowledge. Facility in English gave speakers a clear advantage (though was not by itself sufficient for advancement or status). Although most of my office workers besides Anan and Kat were shy about using English with me (like many Thais, less afraid of my compromised Thai-language skills than of making a mistake in English), most had a basic facility with reading and writing English. The company's television guide, in fact, presumes such a facility not only on the part of the workers but also on the part of 90 percent of its viewership. The name, "Spectrum," was in English, as were the table of contents and (which I found most perverse) the days of the week. Such hybrid texts resembles the post-colonial vocabularies of the Philippines, Malaysia, or

¹² Of the student body, women represented 56% of universities, 66% of teaching colleges, and 91% of graduate nursing school. Men outnumber women at vocational schools. (Knodel 1994: 15-16)

Indonesia -- but as Thailand was never a colony, it represents more of the identification of an elite modernity.

A vital but less defined qualification in this field was cultural savvy and creativity. Coming up with copy for a promotional showing of the American action movie, "Speed," for example, requires both knowledge of Thai slang and interests as well as information about the movie and stars (the latter barely held by the American anthropologist). The Spectrum TV guide featured a section, titled in English "Backstage," which provided Thai-language backgrounds on select stars from American sit-coms or films.¹³ The two of us who wrote the copy for the guide in English and Thai did so separately; the Thai woman gleaned descriptions from distributor's information (as I did, knowing so little) and also from her knowledge and Thai film magazines.

IBC's work involved evaluations of what Thai viewers would want or understand. IBC professionals understood Thai viewers as a specific non-Western niche with partially modern, global tastes. The programmer for foreign entertainment, Chum, told me that the recent films "Pulp Fiction" and "Reservoir Dogs" would be too violent for Thais (although, horror and ghost stories are otherwise quite popular genres). In synthesizing the Thai with the foreign, office staff identified themselves as familiar with

¹³ As with popular movie and television magazines in Thailand, the focus was on the actors -- or "stars" as they were called in both English and Thai -- in their many roles and personal life -- rather than on directors' vision or the film's narrative.

transnational culture and cosmopolitan tastes, and able to grasp farang tastes, but viewed their charge as calibrating such cultural products for a more general Thai audience. This office of mostly women and a few men funnelled and shaped advertising and programming -- in other words, major portions of popular or public culture -- for a large audience.

Thus the marketing and media work of this professional class depended on the worker's consumption, and in ways production and consumption mingled in this representational universe. It required that the marketers know the subject of TV (or subject themselves to the TV's knowledge). Most of the office grew up with television, from the 1960s on, which played a mixture of dubbed American and Thai programming: *Dragnet*, *Mission Impossible*, *Big Valley*, and *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (Anderson 1970: 144), and later, I was told, *Bewitched*, Tom kap (with) Jerry, *Leave It to Beaver*, and a game show called Tani Thong (golden minute). (The name of the mall adjoining MBK, Bonanza, points to another popular American television import.) These middle- and upper-class office workers shared a store of references with each other -- and with me. (A popular game in Thailand among all classes -- I played it first with Patpong workers -- is "Popeye and Olive," a spin-off from the television show that involves comically lascivious hip gyrations.)

At lunch, the talk invariably turned to intertextual discussions of western movies and local stardom -- Thai television, modelling, and movie figures -- drawing materials from newspapers, film, radio, television, and gossip. Boon, who was not from our office but sales support, a gay man from Isan, talked about how handsome he thought Keanu Reaves from "Speed" or other actors were. As for "The Piano," my colleagues agreed it was pretty but too slow and also that the girl in the movie was a bad daughter (though a good naturalistic actor) for not following her mother's wishes (she gave a note her mother asked her to deliver to a lover instead to her adoptive father). Thai viewers took for granted that loyalty to one's mother was more important than congealing a nuclear family (which is one read on the girl's motive), the theme and interpretation of so many recent movies in the United States (e.g., Walters 1995).¹⁴ The IBC workers were enthusiastic consumers of media products, avidly watching movies and skimming magazines. One woman who helped out with promotions had an authorized, copyrighted Alladin toy on her desk when the Disney remake of the classic tale came out. I asked her who it was for; "It's for me," she laughed. ("Cute" (naa rak) is a valuable quality, and decorative motifs from cartoons [Felix the cat] and

¹⁴ We also discussed Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List" which was playing in theaters -- about the director's insistence that the film not be cut, and about the holocaust: they asked me to explain -- as did members of the Thai lesbian group with whom I watched the picture -- why the Germans hated the Jews so much (prompting Boon to ask if Jews were bad).

movies [James Dean] adorn many t-shirts, pens, notebooks, and other consumer products often used by, and given to, adults as well as children.)

Anan & Kat

For those with the proper credentials and know-how, telecommunications and marketing offers a better chance at upward mobility than many other fields, especially for those from the middle-class, like Kat. For those from the nobility or well-to-do, such as Anan, the field provides a professional forward-looking means to maintain social and material standing. However, work takes place within specific contexts, ones which are heavily structured by enduring values and social arrangements -- by older hierarchies. Furthermore, the stakes for identifications with the West or Thailand around such issues as family relations, sexuality, or nationalism vary for different people. Comparing these two workers provides a useful illustration of some of the class and gender differences that these knowledge workers face in navigating through the opportunities and constraints in the changing economy, and in negotiating a cosmopolitan Thai mix of transnational and Thai cultures.

My earliest supervisor was Anan, who commiserated with me about Thailand's "bush" status. I learned of his royal blood from talking the English education he and his father received. (His father studied at Oxford; Anan studied in high school and a technical college in England.) Anan's

paternal grandmother is a Serene Highness, one of the daughters of one of the important wives of Rama V (r. 1868-1910) (whose status Anan illustrated by saying that the current King calls her 'Auntie'); therefore, as a great-grandson of the King, Anan is titled Mom Luang (or M.L.). His paternal grandfather is another child of Rama V -- Anan noted the "incest" -- but of a lower-ranked wife; he did not enter Anan's narrative except to establish that one half of Anan's blood is royal.¹⁵ He likes being royal, he said -- had a monogrammed cigarette case with his family crest -- but not the uptightness. Anan's mother is one-half Vietnamese; Anan thus calculated himself to be only one-quarter common Thai.

The focus on England was characteristic of nobility, who had been sending sons to study there for more than a century (Wyatt 1975). Anan elaborated on a British style inflected with American elements. He wore a ring engraved with the family crest ("You do have them in America, don't you?") and used fountain pens. In a lifestyle magazine feature, which Kat teasingly read aloud, Anan is quoted as saying that he used to be a hippie, but now he prefers the "Gatsby style." (He said they put words in his mouth.)

¹⁵ Royal offspring descend in rank each generation, eventually becoming commoners. In chatting about Anan, Kat asserted that he could not legitimately trace his royal status through a woman (a grandmother) but had to descend from a male (which she considered unfair). Given that the ranks of princes and princesses were graded according to their mother's rank in the harem, this seems inaccurate.

Kat was more oriented towards the United States where she had studied for two years. She had a mastery of American slang and an American accent that surpassed many who had lived longer in the U.S. than she had. "Hey, man" she would call out to me (Anan would also use "man"). One time, Barry Manilow appeared on the TV set playing at work. Kat dashed over and began singing along in best karaoke style. "I love Barry Manilow," she told me. In the United States, she reported, she had gone to New Jersey for shopping, although noted that Delaware is the best ("No taxes!"). She singled out the Jersey suburbs as attractive and desirable places to live.

America symbolized the new technologies and trendy styles. England remained the elite signifier of a cultural hierarchy, even as the United States stepped into economic, technical, and popular culture dominance. This English-U.S. distinction appeared in the inconsistent spellings of English words. The two English-educated Thais and I produced a guide which reflected schizophrenic spelling arrangements. Rather than agree on one system, the spelling varied according to author but also terminology: 'programme' remained.

Kat's and Anan's self-presentations -- their identifications -- are part of their qualifications for the work of this professional class. At the same time, such self-presentation strategically positions them in their local contexts -- the hierarchy of the office, the relations

of the family. This professional class deploys 'global' or Western knowledges and practices, but in variegated ways, combining for example the new American symbols of global power as well as the signifiers of feudal Thai society, often rendered through nostalgic signs from the British Empire. While Thailand achieves a position in the global economy in part through projecting a local, national culture -- in the tourist industry above all -- knowledge workers like Kat or Anan are manoeuvring their positions in the local place of a Thai office by using foreign, global symbolism: their mastery of English, their media savvy, their comfort with foreign employees.

A great deal of work around media and information technologies concerns being au courant, urban, and modern: the power of old social ranking or newer family wealth are not, by themselves, enough. It requires "symbolic capital" on the part of workers, in addition to connections and certificates. The qualifications are symbolic in two ways: first, in terms of knowledge, in the requirements of cosmopolitan intelligence about current themes and relevant motifs. Second, symbolic work is necessary in terms of one's person, to demonstrate credentials, to convey affiliations with powerful systems, and in general to navigate the hierarchies and power relations of the corporation. Nonetheless, these navigations occur in specific contexts and particular relations, within which Kat and Anan face different constraints and obligations.

Families and Sexuality

The intimate relations of family life and romantic life provide an area of the starkest differences between Anan and Kat in ways that are somewhat representative of well-to-do Thai men and women.

When we had to check proofs at the printers, Anan often drove me and the traffic allowed time to talk. Driving his red convertible MG, Anan told me that his father taught him about women, among other things. When Art was 15, his father bought him a trip to an expensive prostitute, a model, he said, during Anan's lunchtime break from school. Beforehand, his father told him what to do: you touch here, there. After the first time, the woman called Anan and showed him Patpong, he said, laughing, and then they spent the night in a motel. His father said, "far out, you're far out!"

We also talked about Anan's girlfriend, a prominent, half-European half-Thai model. (Anan himself has modeled, and was well-recognized and well-paid.) He explained that on returning from England, he had asked friends to introduce him to a "clean girl, you know what I'm saying, a virgin" who was also shorter than he. A friend said he had just the thing, new to Bangkok, a model, and "no one's touched her." At first she didn't take to him -- this was his pre-Gatsby hippie, long hair, and drugs phase -- but they became friends. After a jealous ex-girlfriend attacked her and he intervened, Anan said, he started "chatting her up". Back

at work, I asked whether the lacquered photo on his desk is her: "Yes," he said, and pulled out a magazine to show me her image on the cover and inside spread, "she's a major model." Even though she is Eurasian, Anan explained, she doesn't model in Europe because she's too short and she'd have to take off her clothes: he won't allow that.

Interestingly, despite Anan's rather convincing heterosexuality, he was sometimes the subject of teasing or gossip for "acting like a gay." (And Kat told me that his royal grandfather had been reputed to be homosexual, noting that Anan had gay relatives [one of whom I knew].)

The options for sexual expression, and moreover, the codes available for discussing it, differ markedly for Thai women and men. In contrast to Anan's light-hearted recollections, and like almost every Thai woman I knew (including most sex workers), Kat was circumspect about her sexual experience and feelings.¹⁶ She never mentioned or even alluded to sexual relations as explicitly as Anan did, and she was willing to have me assume (or have me appear to assume) that she had never had them. (I was circumspect myself, and I may have missed clues about, or invitations to

¹⁶ My generalization about women's circumspection is not meant to apply to all of Thai society. In the countryside, customary courting songs abounded in double entendres and erotic allusions (Klausner 1972), but the women's lines often pointed to the consequences and ethics of potential transgressions (Keyes 1984). It is possible that rural elder married women enjoyed a license for sexual talk (e.g., Van Esterik 1982).

ask for, greater revelations. Or I may not yet understand middle-class Thai women's codes for discussing sexuality.)

However constrained, Kat would wheel her chair over to my desk to talk about her long-term boyfriend or her second lover, an older policeman. (Speaking in English, she felt somewhat secure since our colleagues did not understand English as well). She participated in general office banter, for example singing the ribald birthday song verse that wishes the recipient become a prostitute and her husband a pimp (to the tune of our "Happy Birthday to You"). She also told me that living away from home would be better because of privacy -- because neighbors and such would not see whomever came to visit. And one of the many items Kat contemplated buying from various IBC staff moonlighting as part-time vendors (see next chapter) was a brown teddy-and-shorts ensemble she studied in the Vienna lingerie catalogue.

Kat's long-term boyfriend was the son of a wealthy general who, she explained, "did well on investments" (which is one way to describe the financial success of military men), and therefore the boyfriend's mother looked down on Kat as too poor; Kat's family was comfortable (phaw kin phaw chai). Unmarried at 28, Kat said that marriage was "a big thing" that required a lot of thinking -- sex is important, but they had to think about money for a house, a car, a comfortable standard of living. Kat also considered the possibilities of her boyfriend's (i.e., her possible

husband's) philandering: she suspected her long-term boyfriend of having other women, but did not care about whether her "special friend" did.

Kat lived at home, like all of the professional women whose home situations I knew about. (The coffee-cart woman whom I discuss in chapter six lived in a dorm-type flat.) Kat's father drives her to work and her boyfriend (the first, long-term one) drives her home. Unlike Anan, she discussed her future plans in relation to her natal family and social mores; she also had to consider money more than he did. When she returned from the US, Kat said, she was easily angered, for example by the heat. Her mother was afraid she would become an atheist and go crazy, and so enjoined Kat to become a lay nun for a few days. We also discussed where her boyfriend would ordain as a monk when he could get the time from work (generally after two years, companies provide such leave).

Anan lived in his family's compound, which was a common practice among nobility and old-money families with large parcels of Bangkok land (Askew 1994): yet he lived in a separate house while his sister lived in the family home. Anan told me that he did not care so much about family concerns -- "they're going to die someday" -- and was more focused on life with his girlfriend. His Vietnamese-Thai mother disapproved of the relationship because his girlfriend was not nobility (while the royal father and grandfather did not seem to mind) -- but she did not

interfere. She was strict with his sister, he noted: old-fashioned. As a man, a wealthy man, Anan was more mobile than Kat: driving his MG or Porche around Bangkok, Anan could negotiate sexuality, work, residence, and future plans without as much thought to the obligations of attending to his family or to public commentary.

Social Limits and Creative Contradictions

The requirements and operations of the telecommunications enterprise and the new professional class staffing it involve new contradictions. In the era of globalizing technologies and economies, there is uncertainty about one's position and mobility in this professional class: even as new qualifications matter enormously, the old social hierarchies remain. Any job seeker in Thailand knows the importance of connections and status in the job market. The woman who formally hired me (to replace an American academic friend of mine who had replaced a Thai-American academic friend of his, the cousin of this woman) told me she never had needed a resume to get a job, first in journalism, then hotel work, then telecommunications.¹⁷ Of

¹⁷ Such a trajectory across industrial sectors is common in Thailand, where people's approaches to employment do not fully resemble the U.S. conception of "career." One elite example can be found in a competitor to IBC: Rachanee Yingchairat's cobbled-together firm outbid Shinawatra and other groups to win a large contract from the Telephone Organization of Thailand. Coming from a family that owned sawmill and real estate businesses, Rachanee followed a degree in education with a versatile resume: first in public relations, she moved successively to personnel manager (sending Thai female laborers to a Singapore Minibear

course the newspapers feature help-wanted advertisements with specific requirements, frequently including gender, age, and requesting a photograph. But many people obtain, advance, or move between jobs or even sectors through connections. In this informal way, older social arrangements prevail, favoring and privileging high status, good families, elite school ties, and the like. "Seniority," Anan said: "that's an important word in Thailand." Yet although he was junior in age -- and probably educational credentials -- to Kat, for example, Anan was the one promoted when our supervisor left to work at IBC's "free" TV Rainbow division. "We want to give him a chance," she explained to me, not mentioning his gender or royal status. Anan was an affable, likeable fellow, and understood his promotion was problematic for others. Though Kat expressed a sense of injustice to me, she remained fond of Anan.

The work requirements for these symbolic workers differs from the managers or the largely contracted support staff. As knowledge workers in marketing or creative positions, the IBC office was interested in the creative aspects: in making the guide or spots look good, sophisticated, fun, and worldly. Anan applied himself to redesigning the TV guide to make it more magazine-like. It was widely felt and quietly mentioned that the Shinawatra empire and IBC boss did not understand this field and only

factory), air hostess, real estate developer, and television equipment importer before this bid (Suphaphan 1994).

viewed it as a business: but entertainment was not a business like silk (referring to the Shinawatra family enterprise). The marketing workers felt that the product of television programming and materials suffered for being treated as another money-making unit in a business empire, rather than being recognized as different for its creative and televised nature. Our office championed the cause of providing higher quality than "free tv" -- that is, they embraced their own marketing pitch -- but they recoiled from the crude calculus of profits.

Anan in particular chafed at the commands of his uncomprehending superiors. Driving me in his father's Japanese car refitted with turbo power (which he took advantage the moment traffic permitted), Anan told me about his differences with management. The boss specified that, with service now reaching the provinces and neighboring countries, programming and the TV guide had to go "low," emphasizing the term by using both English and Thai words. Bonding with me, Anan told me that he insisted on more English-language content, reminding the bosses that this reflected the early customers. Anan decided to quit IBC (and went to work at an ad agency). The IBC executives, he said, called his house to persuade him to stay, and spoke very politely to his grandmother.

IBC workers enjoyed and prided themselves in creative aspects of work, in applying their knowledge of Thai and international culture. Noi praised the design of a

cute pen-shaped-like-a-plant gift using a mix of Thai and English, saying "idea dii maak" (the idea is very good). The use of the English "idea" (rather than Thai khwaam khit) invokes a grasp of a transnational conception of creative work of generating ideas and concepts as a distinct skill, effort, or even commodity (as do the words 'creative,' 'idea,' and 'concept'). IBC marketing workers resisted and resented the purely commodified view of the work and product -- that is, as interchangeable with silk, mobile phones, or some simple product. The application of symbolic skills, and the entertainment and media features, made it different. Workers were quietly invested in the symbolic distinction of the endeavor.

When my office-mates were explaining the extent of the Shinawatra conglomerate to me, one worker joked that IBC was "a colony" of the firm. Shinawatra's traffic in entertainment was in fact a byproduct of corporate investments in information and technology, rather than a reflection of an engagement with media or leisure fields. (Although IBC provided a glamorous asset, and its programming provided a steady stream of images of political figures, cartoons, movie stars, and sports games for corporate representations). In the perception of my IBC colleagues, this colonization was a problem and a constraint to their view of the media business.

Salaries for workers in our office were not very high compared to some other businesses -- the person in

press or special events earned about 10,000 baht (US\$400) a month. Low pay, but the high status of the television field. Privileging status over money is not exceptional in Thai society, which is said to have allocated more prestige to the control of people or of the self (in terms of Buddhism) rather the accumulation of wealth and material goods (Akin 1969; Tambiah 1976). The power of money has increased of course. While a few well-appointed staff could view their IBC job as a temporary apprenticeship, others without family resources, like Kat, worried about achieving their aspirations for a house and family. Nonetheless these workers viewed their work as part of a creative or fulfilling endeavor, perhaps even part of a career. Even as their work involves trafficking in global commodified exchange, these workers resist and modify their own labor's commodification, distinguishing their role from the standard business worker. Their ability to mix the local and the global in knowledge and in their identities are part of their profession (e.g., Bourdieu 1984).

This world of intense transnational trafficking is made possible by high-tech telecommunications -- precisely the investments of my employer, IBC. As the clarity of nation, local culture, status, or "place" itself is being unmoored (if it were ever truly anchored at all) -- though not yet discarded -- the work of my co-workers was to fashion a modern, Thai identity, which they did with calm and humor. With their familiar immersion in global culture,

such workers are in part global subjects, enjoying a kind of hybrid, Thai-international, 'traditional'-modern identity formed in the post-1960s context of western movies, television, and music. However, their self-presentations and qualifications as knowledgeable, global modern Thai subjects involve negotiating complex local settings, defining and mixing "foreign" and "Thai," balancing opportunities and obligations, and appeasing and resisting the hierarchical workplace.

CHAPTER VI

THE AVON LADY: DIRECT SALES AND ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITIES

One day in the IBC marketing office in the former SC&C headquarters, I was having a conversation with the woman whose job it was to prepare the ice water or instant drinks (coffee, hot tea made from instant ice tea, or cocoa) for office workers and guests. (It is not comme il faut to get your own beverage.) I knew Suranee sold Amway products and was discussing the company's growth with her. Amway is one instance of what is called "direct sales," a hundred-year old merchandizing approach that is being revitalized as its products, selling style, and doctrine spread around the world. "I hear Amway is preparing to enter China," I offered. (I had learned this from a conversation with a couple who were among Thailand's earliest distributors.) "Yes," she said, countering: "But why did Amway choose China?"

Such rhetorical form of questioning is, to my experience, uncommon in ordinary Thai talk, particularly outside of the male-dominated institutions specializing in rhetoric, the monastic order or political bodies. This form of speech manifests the extensive training offered by the

U.S. company Amway in particular, but at the same time conveys a logic shared by much of the direct-sales industry (e.g., Avon, Tupperware, Mary Kay): to distribute goods through vast networks of 'professional' and respectable sellers drawn from the ranks of ordinary people. The key to direct sales is not reworking the way goods are produced: Instead, the mode of distribution. Direct sales uses an army of salespeople -- renamed distributors or representatives -- who in principle use catalogues to sell the cosmetics, coffee, household products and so forth which they later deliver to their own local network of buyers. The companies strategically focus on the seller -- after all, which is more famous, the Avon Lady or the Avon product? -- and offer distributors a supplemental income, a professional identity, and in some cases a vocabulary of self-advancement and self-help: direct selling offers a means to recreate oneself and one's station through economic exchange, and a means by which to hedge the confining limitations of institutional wage work or family labor.

According to Suranee, who was fairly well schooled in the topic, Amway is entering China because there is an abundance of resources (she mentioned mountains and people) and, as she noted, "not all the people there are poor. "As Amway's presence in China and in Suranee's life attests, American direct sales companies are intensifying their international activities. In a vast diffusion barely noted in academic scholarship, direct sales corporations are

bringing or sending some semblance of their corporate philosophies, catalogues, and products to Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe -- anywhere with sizeable and stable consumer markets -- and in turn prompting local companies, like the Thai company Mistine, to enter the industry.

In this chapter I am interested in this process for Suranee and the thousands of other Thais who have elected to sell from Amway, Avon, and other direct sales company catalogues for part-time, occasionally full-time source of income. While clearly the major motivation for such work is extra income, the enthusiasm and creative practices of the sellers suggests that the work is salient for other reasons as well. What does it mean for Suranee to learn transnational corporate rhetoric from the midwestern United States? I think that the professional selling identity of the "Avon Lady" or Amway distributor are key to understanding the popularity of this retail system. Landing in Thailand, the direct sales methods are translated -- or transliterated -- into Thai words, representations, social networks, and individual practices. The direct-sales approach is recast in translation -- both deliberately to accommodate local concerns, but also through being enacted through local social networks. In this chapter, I draw on corporate representations (catalogues and events) as well as the stories of three distributors in particular to illustrate Thai renditions of a transnational form of commodified exchange.

Direct Sales: Method Before Product

The direct-sales method can be traced to itinerant merchants in colonial America (Biggart 1989) and later travelling salesmen, but the roots of the modern direct-sales corporate strategy which competed with retail firms (e.g., U.S. departments stores such as Macy's which developed in the 1860s and 1870s) lie in the 19th-century precursor to Avon Cosmetics. The business emerged from the entrepreneurial reflections of a travelling salesman, David H. McConnell, who peddled books -- items which tended to endure and were therefore not purchased repeatedly. The selling technique itself was fine and in fact held unrealized promise:

McConnell realized the potential in manufacturing a line of consumable goods that could be sold by canvassing agents, directly from factory to consumer. Thus the selling method was already established; the next step was the selection of a suitable product. (Phillips 1980: 3).

Thus, the system for trafficking in exchange values needed something with short-term use-value. Perfume was the repeat-sale product McConnell chose initially, and in 1996 founded the California Perfume Company which later became Avon. The highly consumable goods of perfume, cosmetics, and jewelry remain the staple of many direct-sales companies. (A century later, fragrance products still comprised a third of Avon sales). Avon built upon this basic approach, which was later picked up by other companies like Tupperware or Amway (founded in 1959).

Direct sales is the form of selling that uses multiple salespeople, renamed "distributors" or "representatives," who use catalogues and samples to sell goods mostly involving "personal care" and cosmetics (but including furniture, silver, automobile goods, lingerie, books, etc.). These distributors "mark-up" the goods themselves, paying the company 50 to 75 percent of the retail price they receive from customers. Large-scale direct sales companies invite the distributors to recruit others in a satellite or network system (hence this form of merchandising is also called 'network marketing'). For example, typically one is recruited into Amway as part of the "line" of a distributor, whom the company will give a percentage of her subdistributors' sales, and the sales of their recruits as well. Hence, the real income to be made in Amway derives from accumulating six to nine percent profits from the volume selling of many subdistributors, hence, from recruiting and motivating satellite sellers. Distributors therefore are quickly encouraged to recruit others to build their own "line."¹ (This structure has come under criticism, especially for Amway, as a "pyramid" scheme.) Most large direct sales companies induct the sales force into their worldview through trainings, inspirational

¹ When a distributor has amassed enough volume in sales, which requires cultivating a sizable number of enthusiastic satellite sellers in one's line, that person -- or couple -- can break away for the original lineage they joined to become a direct distributor (and receive a greater percentage of profit).

meetings, publications, and incentive programs (for example, trips to Hawaii or the Amway headquarters in Michigan).

In the context of the United States and the industrialized West in general, direct sales represents one version of range of 'alternative' forms of business -- or of capitalism -- which has become increasingly vocal and profitable particularly since the 1960s. The well-known efforts of Ben and Jerry's ice cream or Saturn automobiles in the United States concern quality of goods as well as quality of worklife. In retail, various entrepreneurs have criticized the dominant corporate industry, and presented their ventures as a sensible alternatives (Biggart 1989) -- alternative in terms of consumer benefits, business strategy, worker's experiences, and even the earth's survival. The explicit *raison d'être* of direct sales, as well as catalogue sales, direct mail, and home-shopping from television or computer -- other systems expanding around the world -- is to benefit the consumer with greater value by bypassing the middleman or wholesaler -- or according to Avon's founder, "to put the moneyed value into the goods themselves" (cited in Phillips 1980: 4). A staple public relations strategy of such alternative businesses (as well as established companies) is to publicize concern for the environment through supporting ecological projects, recycling or making recyclable goods, shunning animal testing, and employing a 'green' aesthetic (e.g., unbleached packaging). Such efforts are a core theme in the cosmetic

firm The Body Shop,² but are also present in other cosmetic and personal care businesses, including Amway and Avon.

Corporate narratives present these 'alternative' modes as a more viable form of business in economic terms as well. Direct selling by distributors, catalogues, or computers allows companies to minimize the overhead costs associated with retail sites, extensive management, and waged staff. Individual distributors also offer ready-made, inexpensive market research, as a case study on Avon points out (Phillips 1980: 13). The use of distributors not only to introduce and promote new product lines but also to continually recruit other sellers provides Avon, Amway, Tupperware and other companies with self-propagating sales staff and facilitates high growth rates (especially when the business enters a new market area). Direct sales seems particularly well-suited -- even exemplary of -- the recent economic arrangement characterized as "post-Fordism" or "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989). Not because it is new, but because direct sales offers one of a variety of old-time economic strategies (like piece-work) that modern companies employ to adapt to markets with greater decentralization, flexibility and global reach.

² The Body Shop, a retailer of natural personal-care products, is another well-known form of alternative retail - both for the effort to avoid mediating middlemen in obtaining raw materials from all over the world and especially for an ecological and cultural-survival ethic (for a critique of The Body Shop's corporate self-representations of "a world without borders," see Kaplan 1995).

Of the direct sales companies, Amway most clearly articulates the 'alternative' nature of the business, an anti-bureaucratic stance framed by American conventions of populism (Biggart 1989). The company grew out of the 1950s midwestern United States and its economic discourses reflect that background. One of Amway's founders, Rich DeVos, is a leading proponent of "compassionate capitalism," the name of his 1993 book, whose endorsements from Gerald R. Ford, Alexander Haig, Jr., and C. Everett Koop suggest the conservative credentials of the corporation's approach. Characteristic of Amway's combination of capitalism with moral values, DeVos' 16-point corporate Credo echoes the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, with frequent invocations of God: first, people are created in God's image, ergo equally; fourth, we should arrange our lives around "God, country, family, friendship, school, and work"; and thirteenth, we should help others help themselves. Credo 6 says, "We believe in capitalism...because it provides us and our world our one great hope for economic recovery" (DeVos 1993: 333-336).

Amway's name stands for "American way," according to the co-founder, "because the America way of private ownership and free enterprise is the best way" (Devos 1993: 2). This "American Way" runs counter to prevailing corporate arrangements, which stifle initiative and confine earnings to fixed salaries. The founders and followers take an evangelical approach to germinating the philosophy and

practices of the company (Butterfield 1985). Therefore, I was taught a great deal about the organization from distributors such as Suranee. Other companies, such as Mary Kay or Tupperware, train their salespeople as well (although none so completely as Amway). In the 1970s, for example, Avon increased the training of the sales force, in an effort at "better preparing and motivating Representatives, recognizing their achievements and fostering a warmer, more personal relationship between them and Avon," according to one study (Phillips 1980: 6).

As an industry, direct sales is large and profitable, and has saturated U.S. markets. In the early 1980s, according to one direct-sales advocate, Avon catalogues ("brochures") entered more American homes than any publication besides TV Guide (Bernstein 1984: 151). The growth and transformation of the industry have been shaped by gender discourse and practice within the United States. Avon, and its figure of the Avon Lady, for example, offered an appropriate way for 'housewives' to earn money by discretely transforming them into workers selling to other housewives. In the 1970s, as greater numbers of women entered the U.S. wage-labor force, the retail industries which had made housewives their bread-and-butter market were compelled to change. For the textile and apparel industries, for example, as Cynthia Enloe (1989) demonstrates, the growing ranks of women working the familiar 'double shift' of house and wage work needed inexpensive easy-to-care for

clothes. These were created from the new (and class-marked) synthetic fabrics assembled in "global factories" in East and Southeast Asia and Latin America. In direct sales, Avon had to shift to recruiting working women as distributors and also designed campaigns and products to appeal to them as consumers. Nonetheless, many direct sales companies could not maintain high rates of growth within the United States. Avon, Amway and other companies looked to provide their corporate entrepreneurship to international markets as a solution. In doing so, they bring 'alternative' discourses to a rather established business strategy of global expansion.

Globalization

Gracing the cover of a 1995 Avon catalogue from Thailand is the picture of an Asian woman swinging a shopping bag stamped in English reading "Avon/ New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Bangkok." Direct sales companies and methods have gone global. Avon began international expansion in the 1970s (when it entered Thailand), and in 1981 had representatives in 32 countries; by 1995, it was in 125 countries. Companies like Avon and Amway compete with established retail in marketing and producing lines of consumer goods. For example, in 1971 Avon distributed more "fashion jewelry" worldwide than any other company; in the 1980s, a century after its founding, it manufactured and distributed the greatest volume of cosmetics and perfume as

well (Bernstein 1984: 145, 147). The "emerging markets" of Latin America, the former Soviet Union, Asia, and the Pacific are called "Avon's Heaven," by the firm's CEO (The Economist 1996; Stanley 1996), with over a third of sales and one-half of total profits coming from these regions, which are growing at three times the rate of the more "mature markets" in industrialized countries (McDonald 1997).

Not far behind is Amway, which even has website pages devoted to "Amway's Global Village" (see illustration). Suranee, one of Amway's global villagers, showed me the list of 60 Amway headquarters in 50 countries and territories. New territory is equally critical to on-going expansion of Amway -- which entered Mexico in 1990 -- and other firms as well. By the middle of this decade in the former Soviet Union, for example, there were 25,000 Mary Kay "consultants," with 100,000 Amway distributors in East Germany alone and 16,000 Avon representatives in Russia (DeVos 1993: 4; The Economist 1996; Stanley 1996).³

Of these new zones, Asia is perhaps the most important. Roughly one third of Amway sales now take place in the West Pacific (Ywin 1993), with its largest markets Japan, Australia, Taiwan -- and Thailand. In Japan, claims DeVos, Amway is the third largest foreign corporation (DeVos

³ Not all of these registered distributors actively sell. Official distribution numbers reflect a significant proportion of people who sign on for a small start-up fee in order to receive the seller's discount on goods they purchase for themselves.

1993: 4). By 1993, there were almost 50,000 distributors in Indonesia. One of the ways Amway enters new countries is through the initiatives of individual distributors.

For example, among the early proponents of Amway in Thailand was a married couple, a Thai husband and American wife whose parents had sold Amway for over two decades in the United States. Now, Thai distributors go to China to sell to, and recruit distributors from, the numerous Thai citizens already there. Amway sent 1000 top sellers in Thailand on a first-class trip to China.⁴ And why, after all, is the Amway corporation entering China? China offers a huge market of consumers, distributors, and laborers. Amway is investing US\$40 million to construct a factory in the Guangzhou development zone. The "second" and "third" world has been integrated into a world system as less expensive producers of goods; the globalization of direct sales means integrating such populations as cosmopolitan consumers and professional distributors, typically well before the companies launch manufacturing plants in those countries.

⁴ Conversely, Amway's rewarded leading Japanese distributors with a trip to the Jomtien beach area of Thailand favored by foreigners interested in sex work or pederasty.

AMWAY'S GLOBAL VILLAGE PACIFIC RIM

Select a country
by clicking on its
flag or name listed
below:

[Australia](#)

[Brunei](#)

[China](#)

[Hong Kong](#)

[Indonesia](#)

[Japan](#)

[Korea](#)

[Malaysia](#)

[New Zealand](#)

[Taiwan](#)

[Thailand](#)

[Amway Japan Limited](#)

[Amway Asia Pacific](#)



| [Global Village](#) |



To Be The Best Business Opportunity In The World

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[Global Village](#)

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Figure 9. Amway's Global Village Web Page. Pacific Rim
Pate. (Internet 12/16/96.) <<http://www.Amway.com.amw...-bin/gvhome.map?234,167>>

Catalogues and Cosmetics in Thailand

The direct sales method has been in Thailand for at least 20 years, beginning with Avon Cosmetics. Since Amway's energetic entrance in 1987 -- by 1994 it had invested over US\$2 million in 13 centers in the country -- and the founding of a Thai direct sales company, Mistine, in 1988 (by a former manager of Avon and Coca Cola in Thailand), the industry has taken off. Thirteen of these companies have joined to form an industry network, the Thai Direct Selling Association (Suwanna 1994), where Amway's General Manager serves as president.⁵ In 1993 the overall industry had US\$240 million in sales (Nongsuda 1993) and Amway, for example, increased its sales income 10 times in its first five years.⁶

The relative success of direct sales in Thailand can be understood in relation to the economic context for retail -- first, the 1980s and 1990s growth of the consumer spending, and second, the predicaments of the spatially and administratively centralized retail industry. The problem of

⁵ The 13 official companies are: Amway, Asian Home, Avon Cosmetic, Best Book, Forest Publication, Household System, Lucks Royal, Marketing Media Association, Mary Kay, Nutri, Thai Phola, Tupperware, Phuen Satri (Ladies Friend). There are other companies which use catalogue-bearing distributors, such as Vienna and Cameo, both lingerie companies.

⁶ Amway sold about US\$ 5 million in 1987, its first year of operation, increasing to \$60 million for FY 1991-1992. Over half of sales income came from beauty and personal care products (40% percent personal care, 19% cosmetics) and a quarter from home-care products like detergent, with the rest made up of coffee, jewelry, and home goods (Nongsuda 1993).

bringing consumers and point of sale together is exacerbated in Thailand by the inescapable traffic conditions. One answer is relocating shopping from downtown to mega-shopping complexes at the capital's periphery. Another step taken by a range of industries has been to decentralizing their management and operations, in part to accommodate the severe problem of transportation.⁷ Direct sales was able to grow even in the highly competitive markets of personal care and beauty products (dominated by Lever Brothers and Procter & Gamble) because its distribution system is already decentralized, trans-spatial, and expansive. As the General Manager of Amway said, "[o]ur distributors are like mobile department stores" (Nongsuda 1993). (Although otherwise direct marketing agents are careful to differentiate their form from the mediations of large retail.)

Most important in direct sales companies' growth is the embrace of the method by numerous individuals. Because Amway and Avon are not popular in my own urban circles, it took my untrained eye a while to recognize the pervasiveness of the roughly 600,000 registered direct sales distributors

⁷ See chapter 5 for information technologies and decentralization. European specialists in direct mail, for example, are seeking to "penetrate the Indochinese markets and Southeast Asia" via Thailand (Ywin 1994b: B1). Others send catalogues, such as the "Shopping Express" enclosed in IBC's TV guide. One telemarketing company is joining with commercial banks to provide "home shopping" by computer (Thailand Times 1994). Furthermore, established industries like major retail are decentralizing management. These business trends in some ways parallel the government's policy efforts to "decentralize" by mitigating Bangkok's overwhelming primacy in the nation.

in Thailand. I had to learn to see the ubiquitous Amway stickers: on a market stall across the river or the wall of a Chinatown noodle restaurant. I noted Avon tee-shirts on my commutes and the Amway coffee served to me at an up-country wedding, made from canisters that cost US\$10. Catalogues and samples from American or Thai companies (like Mistine) appeared in workplaces I researched, such as the cable-television office and go-go bars.⁸ Open-air market stalls selling Thai-made beauty products often had Avon or Mistine products for sale as well, and I saw a YMCA staff member selling Avon to cleaning women crouched on a hallway floor. When I asked students at a Bangkok technical college about their shopping habits and preferences, the majority reported that their families bought from catalogues (a word most of them recognized in English), typically cosmetics, jewelry, or household goods, including furniture. Over a third said that a family member (usually mother or sister) sold Avon,

⁸ There is a good deal of direct selling within the sex industry of Thailand. In "red-light areas," itinerant merchants sell go-go outfits (i.e., lingerie), bric-a-brac, sacred and decorative icons (e.g., the quasi-deified 19th-century King Rama V), and jewelry. In a "beer bar" lane, two workers were looking at Avon and silver jewelry catalogues of their ambitious co-worker who "sold everything," they told me, "underwear and tee-shirts too." At the sex work organization Empower, several students sold from different companies. One student placed an Avon display case in the office; another set up a Mistine stall on lane before of go-go bars before working hours; others sold silver rings and Amway. From a different angle, one worker went "off" with a Swiss man who worked for Amway internationally, evaluating speeches and trainings (who was generous, she said).

Amway, Misteen or other brands.⁹ This small-scale, mostly part-time, face-to-face selling to neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family in Thailand generated about US \$400 million of reported sales in 1994 (Suwanna 1994).

In Thailand, sellers come from many classes: the coffee-maker for IBC, sex workers, and drag queens sell from catalogues, as well as farmers, professionals, and wealthy Sino-Thais. As the Thai man whose U.S. in-laws had introduced him to Amway told me, "Amway has an army general down to meatball sellers." Although I have no firm figures, my observations suggest that the majority of the sellers are women (particularly because over half of the direct sales companies in the Direct Sales Association sell cosmetics). The diversity of sellers offers a revealing index of the social flux in contemporary Thailand: wealthy, middle-class and poor people are employing direct sales as one self-determining tactic by which to navigate the rapidly changing economic scene. The many long-term or temporary direct sellers have adopted the method to earn money, generally as a supplemental source, but the motivations and

⁹ The survey was a one-page questionnaire about consumption in general. It was conducted in English with Thai translation during four English classes to a total of 81 18- and 19-year-old co-ed students divided into their majors of Tourism, Textile Chemistry, Hotel, and Chemical Technology. Of these 81 students, all but 10 reported some experience on the part of their families with direct sales and catalogue shopping. 57 reported buying goods from catalogues; 30 reported a family member selling, with 8 specifying Avon and 6 listing Amway brands. The English teacher, Eva Kolodner, was a World Teach volunteer who also worked at the Empower sex-worker advocacy organization.

interpretations involved are multiple. One simple illustration the way that Thais adapt direct-selling to their own procedures that many modify the catalogue-order procedure by stocking goods in a market stall or carrying bags, often having bought in quantity when the company offered a reduced rate.¹⁰ For Thai and Sino-Thai women (and Sino-Thai men) direct sales is yet one more market to which women have recourse, but a modern one which has been redefined -- or refined -- along the lines of a cosmopolitan, Western model which in fact render it more palatable for Thai men. Thus, I suggest that such sellers are operating within significant conflictual discourses about gender and commodity exchange. To illustrate the process by which the transnational economic form of direct sales is localized in Thailand, I look at the meaning of direct sales for two Amway distributors and one former Avon representatives.

Sewing, Subcontracting, or Selling

Suranee is one of the many Thai women taking up direct sales as a part-time (rarely full-time) source of income. In the IBC office during slow moments, or when she brought me my instant coffee, Suranee and I talked about

¹⁰ For one example, a tomboy I met sold a range of items -- from jewelry to pots -- formerly at one of Bangkok's dense street markets, Tha Pra-can, cleared by authorities in the name of traffic and order (e.g., see chapter two). Her illustrated namecard listed her membership in the Thai Direct Selling Association and in the Thai lesbian group.

Amway, current events, and her experiences. One day she talked of childhood in the northeast province of Khorat, recalling the pleasures playing and boating during the monsoon floods as well as the hard work. Her family were rice farmers, also raising a few ducks, chickens, pigs, mostly for their own use. (They once raised ducks commercially, but could not continue because, those the dogs did not eat, they couldn't sell.) Otherwise they sold extra produce to neighbors, but there was no "market," Suranee said, and prices were low.

Suranee, like many Isan girls, grew up with in the environs of her local community, more so than her six older brothers. Suranee only finished grammar school (e.g., the minimum 6th grade) and between the ages of 10 to 20, she lived with her mother (her father had died when she was an infant) and worked the fields. One brother ordained as a novice monk which allowed him to leave home, study through high school, and finish a degree at the open university. Suranee barely left her area, going to the provincial capital Khorat but twice and as a teenager travelling once with a brother to Ratburi, another city.

Since the 1970s, Isan youth have migrated for wage labor in the towns and cities. As with so many other children of northeastern families (e.g., Mills 1994), Suranee and most of her brothers headed to Bangkok for work. I asked if she had been scared to come to this formidable capital when she was 21. "No," she said, "I can read. And I

came with one of my elder brothers." Suranee noted that people are not desperately poor in Thailand, and that in Bangkok there is abundant work -- factory work or wage labor (ngaan kaamakon) -- if you can handle limited income or hard work, a lot of. Most of the cab drivers in Bangkok are men from Isan, and three of her brothers drove taxis. Suranee cannot drive. (But, she said, she has a bicycle at home, meaning Khorat). Suranee first worked four years in a textile factory as a seamstress until the company moved out of Bangkok; then she began work for the ESCO service company and was assigned to IBC, taking home US\$144 a month. The college-educated brother has landed in a different class from his siblings; while Suranee worked as a subcontracted service worker in IBC's marketing office, this brother worked as a marketing professional for a golf resort.

A friend from Suranee's residence introduced her to Amway, telling her, "here's a way to earn money that's not risky -- and it's legal!" the latter a significant criterion for a good peasant woman working for low wages in the city. Suranee paid the US\$24 membership fee and began selling in February 1993. She said she had not experience selling (discounting her farm experience) but emphasized that Amway trained you, and declared, "friendliness is the starting point and the main requirement." Suranee understood that she had to study and learn about Amway's procedures and learn more about economics in general. The income she said was good; she received 25 percent of the full price of the

product, and could increase that amount if she sold high volumes and recruited other distributors (from whose sales she would receive a percentage). After nine months, she had four satellite sellers (dao lai) and soon added two more. Amway members memorize the levels of distributors ranked by sales volumes, and the different percentages of the product's full cost they are entitled to. Once you get to the level of selling US\$6,000 a month, Suranee explained, you become a "direct distributor": you receive goods directly from the companies' warehouse, rather than from your sponsoring distributor (ap lai) (and receive a greater percentage of the good's price). (There were 800 or so at this level in Thailand, a high-level distributor told me.)

Suranee conveyed a clear enthusiasm for the methods and principles she had learned, and explained Amway's lineage structure and selling operations to me more than once. Suranee attended trainings, read the monthly Amway magazine, and used her Amway date book. Early in our conversations, to illustrate the advantages of the approach, she put pencil to paper, using the "Artistry" pad promoting Amway's new line to chart a comparison between conventional retail versus Amway on one side, and on the reverse, to sketch her Plan for anticipated sales volumes and profit percentages. Literacy in map-reading is not a widespread skill in Thailand, and I found her abstract sketching atypical, particularly for someone with a sixth grade education. For Suranee, the weekly visits to the Amway

center (located some distance away) were important to improving her knowledge and her skills, and she encouraged her satellite sellers to go as well. As an example of such learning, she held up a throat spray and explained its non-polluting aerosol pump and pointed out the money-back guarantee. She knows where the products she sells are made (in the U.S., as the labels, which are translated into Thai, announce), which is more than many small-scale vendors of imported manufactured goods.

There are frequent trainings and special Amway event in the major provinces of Thailand, listed in the Amway magazine. Suranee said about a hundred people attend a 3-hour workshop on problem-solving held every Friday evening. Suranee and I separately attended one special events, a huge, well-advertised gathering to launch Amway's new "Artistry" line of several "systems" of face care and cosmetics products -- revitalizing night treatment (progressive emollient creme; moisture essence serum; hydrating masque), clarifying series (cleansing gel, astringent toner), and delicate series (delicate care cleanser, hydrating fluid).¹¹ The hour I was at the all-

¹¹ Amway and other direct sales products -- including the those of the Thai company Mistine -- generally use English words for product names and titles. Such words are transliterated, rather than translated, into Thai. For example, in its catalogue, Amway renders English names phonetically in Thai script -- but a literal orthography is pronounced differently; thus, "colourful pencils" is written in both British English and Thai (pronounced "khunleufoon pensin"). One of the product's colors is "lotus" (read: "lotut") rather than "dok bua," a common word in a society which holds the flower is a major religious symbol.

day event, there were hundreds of people at the convention center (which faces Bangkok's major slum). The adults -- many brought children -- studied the instructional boards and display cases, underwent "skin analysis," or watched the schedule of staged events live or on video-monitors, such as the talk-show style discussion, "how do you sell your way to wealth?". Suranee, who was there at a different time, recounted her training in matching colors and lines with different skin types. It's more expensive than Amway's old cosmetics line, she noted, but it has attractive, beautiful packaging and new colors; and it's also non-allergenic.

Amway provides an on-going array of rhetoric and narratives to provide the seller with clear goals, meaningful motivation, and also a comfortable professional identity. The bilingual Amway monthly magazine prints affirmations up and down the margins. The company teaches sellers how to talk not only about products, but about their plans and goals. Suranee would rehearse this discourse with me: "You can have a better life, this is not all there is. In the future, you can have better if you want it -- if there's an opportunity, take it." Amway offered both strategy to change her situation as well as a discourse with which to articulate her frustrations. In discussing her frustration with the subcontracted job as coffee server, she pointed to a photocopied Amway motivational statement taped to the partition to explain, saying, "it's like this."

In an industry focused on the distributor, companies

need to recruit and fashion motivated sellers in ways that match the corporate image with individual's and culture's conceptions. One way that the companies do this is through a discourse of self-advancement and self-help. Emphasizing a productive and empowering relationship between company and distributor, Amway, Avon and some other companies teach personal management -- e.g., clarify goals, establishing plans -- and they provide clear milestones and markers to recognize individual achievement. These companies offer a path for recreating oneself and one's station through economic exchange. Such emphasizes meld easily into more widespread and increasingly pronounced discourses about entrepreneurialism, micro-enterprise, income-generating activities and self-help that characterize not only U.S. and other industrialized nation's political discourse but also that of developing nations, and of international aid agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and United Nations' discussions as well. Entrepreneurial self-help is a veritable transnational discourse, but one with local resonance and permutations.

In fact, Suranee became increasingly frustrated with her subcontracted job as coffee server at IBC -- specifically with her employers, ESCO -- because of the high percentage taken from her earnings, the regulations and corruption, the lack of potential for advance, and the lack of skills training. In ways, her frustrations resembled those of Anan and Kat at IBC, who resented the confines of

commodified, corporate labor. One day, as a group of extra workers were stuffing envelopes with IBC's announcement of the new Direct-to-Home broadcasts to the provinces, Suranee spoke critically about Thai society to me: about the hierarchy and limits, the expectation that one will stay in one's place, and the way superiors treat subordinates. Thai society is small, she said, indicating a small range with her hands. She spoke enviously of the on-the-job freedom of her taxi-driving brothers, and even remarked that her former job as seamstress at least involved skill.

Amway's entrepreneurial self-help discourse was rooted in an appealing egalitarian narrative -- all one needed was friendliness, hard work, and a Plan. Suranee did not yet earn enough from her Amway sales to leave her work, but she was cultivating more satellite sellers (although she was unsuccessful recruiting me) and aspired to leave the service job. Suranee wanted to be self-employed at 40 or 50 years old, and also talked about returning home to engage in agriculture, but on a commercial scale, with capital for fertilizer and hired help. Direct sales promised not only a potential income, but a method to escape the confines of low-paid work in a ranked bureaucratic office: selling for AMWAY there are no rules and no limits on what you earn -- "you're free." Direct-sales work offers freedom, she said, for us to set the time ourselves, to think whatever we want, and to reap what we sow (work little, get little; work lots, get lots).

As a good Thai daughter, Suranee wanted to fulfill her on-going filial duty to provide and care for her family of origins (i.e., her mother), an obligation that is increasingly measured in material, cash, and commodity forms (Muecke 1984). Thus Suranee periodically sent home part of her service-work salary to her mother in the northeast and brought cash, clothes, and Amway products home as gifts during Buddhist lent or New Year's visits. (Unlike other sellers I knew of, Suranee did not sell in her village, although Amway planned a distribution center in her home province [Nongsuda 1993]). The Amway income, however, she planned to use for herself: sometimes to buy clothes or something for herself, and some months to save -- but she wanted to use the money deliberately: "You have to know what you are using the money for." Amway was her individual program for self-help, involving her goals and her voluntary training.

The Tomboy Avon Lady

The possibilities of autonomy from the limits of work or kin obligations appeared in several direct seller's narratives. Dean was my co-worker at the sex-worker advocacy group, and perhaps my closest companion in Thailand, yet it was a long time before I knew that she had sold cosmetics from catalogues as a teenager, years before I met her. Dean was a tom, similar to the English "tomboy" except it can apply to adults as well as girls and increasingly indicates

lesbian or transgendered women (see chapter 3). She had no interest in cosmetics, was politically radical besides, and was an unlikely Avon Lady. We proceeded through a formal interview about direct sales somewhat informally, in the English and Thai mix we spoke together, as she sat on the floor of my flat smoking.

At the time of my research, Dean lived in the extended Sino-Thai family in which she was raised. Her grandfather had come from China, first running a rice-mill in Isan, then a small factory across the river from Bangkok. His wife, who survived him by many years, Dean remembers as frightfully stern and favoring the male children: both of these ancestors' pictures occupy altars on a wall of the house. The current "head" of the household was the her uncle, actually junior to her mother but referred to by Dean and her siblings by Chinese term for elder uncle. He was a gay man who had studied fashion in Europe and the United States and now ran a tailoring business and co-owned a chic Bangkok bar patronized by denizens of the fashion and media world. (I saw the girlfriend of IBC's Anan there a few times.) The apportioning of the family business and wealth was neither collective nor equal; not all the family was entitled to salaried work at the factory, even a qualified accountant aunt. Dean was raised by an aunt who managed the business who also lived in the household. The accountant aunt, an adult tom who lived with her female partner, raised Dean's younger siblings. Dean's mother held a lowly status

within the family for various failures, notably economic ones, and remained something of a dependent in the household. Thus, money as well as gender was key to status within the family, and overrode conventional Sino-Thai regulations of sexuality, marriage, or reproduction. Dean's guardian aunt who raised Dean respected women who worked but according to Dean, expected Dean to fail as her mother had. (Being a tom did not constitute failure and in fact, Dean said, this Aunt had selected the mostly boy's clothes for Dean.)

As a teenager, Dean welcomed the chance to prove her capacities and also to move beyond the spheres of family, their factory, and school to which her guardian Aunt confined her, even during vacations. She said of her aunt, "I felt bad she had to give money," but also remarked it perplexing that, within the same family and often household, her aunt had money while her mother did not. Dean had long seen Avon advertisements, and when she was 16 or so (she wasn't sure) in the early 1980s, she answered one: "if you want income in your free time...". Dean said, "I hadn't worked for outside," and viewed the meeting with the Avon representative lay as a chance "to meet someone with responsibilities outside the world of school and work, who was professional. She came by car, wore business clothes, and she explained clearly in a short time." Direct selling exposed Dean to a business that she found more organized and

professional than the family firm or selling confections her mother made.

At Dean's first "training," the agent asked Dean, do you have money? Why do you want to sell? She explained their products and the procedures, instructing Dean from a large illustrated reference catalogue and a smaller price brochure. The agent also offered some tips about sales methods: "speak nice, 'riaproy narak suphap' -- proper, sweet and polite." Dean signed on, paying the US\$14 to enroll and more for the start-up kit -- an Avon bag, catalogue, and some sample goods. Dean didn't use the Avon bag, though -- "it was ugly -- yellow, pink, brown-tan, yellow, colors I don't like. All their things were these colors," she said, waving at the pastel-colored wallpaper that I lived with for two years.

Direct sales enters into extremely local markets. Dean sold to the women around her in the family factory her family and the extended Sino-Thai household: two aunts (one bought wrinkle cream), her severe grandmother, a cousin ("she didn't buy," Dean noted), and workers. Dean also sold to friends at her girls school. She sold cosmetics: lipstick a bit, perfume, powders. White face powder and perfume were her big sellers. A box of powder was \$4 list price but Avon would regularly offer special sale prices, which were useful for enticing purchases.

Dean enjoyed the catalogues. "The big one had color," she remembered, "It had so many things in it, all

kinds of things." What was also useful is that it instructed in the use of cosmetics: "use with x and y, this color goes with these colors, shades. You could study a little about make up -- methods for makeup." For Dean, using the catalogue allowed women select for themselves. "It's funny," she said, "they'd ask me, 'is this pretty? how do you use this?' and I'd give them the catalogue, saying: 'look' -- I couldn't tell them." What she offered was not the usual, "this suits you":

I'd say, "if you have dark skin this will make look green." Not, "this goes with this color" -- I can't do that. Really, if you can do that, you could sell a lot of things.

Dean found a bit comical the fact that, as a tom, she sold Avon and was an "Avon lady," saying, "I was surprised at myself." Rather typically for Thai responses to gender deviance, no one made a fuss: "No one said, 'oh, a Tom is selling," Dean said, "but they wondered, how I can sell it? Dean selling this, eh? That's Dean selling cosmetics? But My Aunt was happy because I'm trying to make money."

She did sell Avon to make her own money and the income was good -- "for a kid." In the beginning, she sold well -- US\$12 to \$20 at a time from the 25 percent commission she received. Later, towards the end, she said, she might occasionally sell \$40, \$80, even \$120 worth. When Dean took orders, sometimes she would take the payment then, but sometimes she would wait until delivery -- "depending on how close we were," she explained: "Are we close? If it's your mother, you don't get [the money up front]." One

reason that she stopped was because of difficulty collecting the payments from her intimates, especially her mother.

However, in her teen years, Dean was a precocious social critic, and perhaps was also reacting against the family priority of money which had stigmatized her mother. Dean, I found, cultivated an aversion to accumulating money perhaps as a reaction to her family's emphasis on money as a key determinant of family and social position:

I didn't like selling -- I feel like I'm cheating every time I sold. That was the first experience I got selling not-good-enough things.

Dean criticized the products that she sold, saying that she never believed the beauty products claiming to improve skin or hair work. (Although she was "ok" about perfume, and remember liking Avon's brand "Wild.") She complained that she did not know about the origins or contents of products (the labels were in English which she could not then read as easily). Dean said that she found herself uncomfortable with the exploitative nature of the price mark-up and stopped. Dean, who went on to become a community organizer and social worker who specialized in trainings, did admire the method and approach of a job which was conducted systematically, and was articulated with the outside world beyond kin ties.

แซวมิดทีนอีกแล้ว



Figure 10. Midteen Cartoon. From Cartoon Maha Sanuk. No.143 (January) 1994.

Commodity Critique

Direct sales -- and profit making in general -- is not without criticism, as Dean's remarks show. A cartoon (see figure) from one of the popular comic books shows a young servant girls walking by a television set during a commercial for "Midteen" (i.e., the Thai pronunciation of Mistine). The corporate announcer asks a rhetorical question similar to Suranee's "why is Amway entering China?": "What's great about selling Midteen?" The girl grumbles, "Oh jeez, oi. What now? I just walked in and already you're asking me something. It's not like I'm just free to answer you. Someone has to sweep the house. Miss Lady over there asks a question. Huh, she knows everything." The low-status wage-worker grumbles at the facile enticement of the pretty (blonde) Midteen Lady. The cheerful optimism of direct sales recruitment is here juxtaposed with the drudgery of commonplace work (and the bad attitudes that presumably accompany it).

As with other moments when commodity exchange takes new forms or expands its reach, direct sales faces complicated responses having to do with cultural associations with commoditization or profit. While I did not hear people criticize Amway or Avon sales per se, I did witness people's wariness about a seller herself. After Suranee was located to another office, IBC colleagues complained that she had charged an extra fee to tend to plates or mugs used in daily snacking (she did not charge

me). They criticized an inappropriate introduction of material exchange into their relations with her, which was ascribed to greed. At the sex-work advocacy organization, a language student who was not a sex worker but a vendor of several direct-selling brands as well as other goods was the prime suspect when a wallet was stolen in the office. Direct sales companies face public suspicions about commodifying social networks for individual gain and corporate profit, suspicions taking particular cultural casts. It is in part to address such anxiety, I think, that the leading companies rely so heavily on positive narratives of the benefits to buyers, sellers, and nation -- and in particular, why direct sales discourse constructs a clean-cut, and clearly imaged identity of the seller.

In certain ways in Thailand, direct sales is continuous with the existing array of street-vendors, itinerant merchants, market stalls and shops in Thailand -- and certainly companies have a ready population of vendors looking for new products or venues. Therefore, the face-to-face vending continues traditions of selling by Thai women and Sino-Thai individuals and families which I have already outlined.¹² But while women are continuing their long-

¹² Other Thailand-based companies based on decentralized sales strategies use predominantly women: for example, there are omnipresent women in tan and brown uniforms daily distributes small yogurt drinks (Yokult) for US\$.25 from bicycles or mopeds to regular customers on a beat. (Dean, whom I discuss below, recalled a commercial of the women on bicycles from her youth, noting that the gender of the distributors was prominent and relevant to the image.)

standing recourse to selling, and although direct sales resembles women's historic village trading, this American corporate strategy differs from -- and the companies differentiate themselves from -- these existing market traditions.

One of the ways that direct sales is different lies in the nature of its own representations. Both face-to-face hawking and direct selling involve dialogical relations between seller and buyer, but the ideals of the transnational corporate model are different from the enacted vernacular of the marketplace (cf. Kapchan 1996). The direct sales mode is comprised by discourse -- by messages conveyed in catalogues, sales techniques, inspirational meetings, promotional materials, and advertisements. These are not only discourses about consumer desire, but also representations of goods in catalogues, images or identities like the Avon Lady, and narratives about the selling method itself, all of which present a global, respectable mode of entrepreneurship.

While Thailand's everyday Buddhism definitely accepts this-worldly, material concerns (e.g., Ingersoll 1975; Tambiah 1984), the place of profit and money in social life remains contradictory and ambivalent. As I have shown in the previous chapters, selling in particular is inflected with ethnic, gender, and class identifications. Dean presented a gender analysis of sales: "Selling is seen as inferior," she said; "men leave it if they can, and do other

work. It is low level....You have to respect, to take care of the customer. People think women won't be tricky or swindle them." Marketing is based on (and in turn defines) social identities and social rank.

In the process of entering Thailand, the American-based, transnational form of merchandizing adapts to local markets by instructing Thai sellers in the corporate sales approaches. To render selling as modern, professional, and even prestigious in Thailand, the identity of seller must be recast as well as the form. Thai-language books about direct sales (mainly translations of English-language volumes) explicitly distinguish it from other forms of marketing. More implicitly, company instruction, advertisements, sleek catalogues, and sales pitches refashion the seller identity into a clean-cut, corporate representative.

Norms of Sex & Gender

Amway holds motivational meetings with regularity in every region of Thailand. I dragged Dean through monsoon rains to one such spectacle at a Bangkok hotel, where an zealous distributor tried to recruit her (not noticing when she used the masculine particle khrap-phom, a playful habit she had gotten into), and where she again marvelled at direct selling's impressive organizing capability. This revival-style meeting recognized the successes of various levels of Amway distributors. The honorees, mostly heterosexual couples but some single women, came on stage to

the applause of the multitudes of participants -- we estimated 2000 -- to receive a pin marking their distributor status, after which they stepped to the front of the stage and waved at the crowd. I was not the only person tape-recording the event, and the mixed crowd was full of Filofax-type datebooks and mobile phones, but also included turbans, tatoos, and chadors.

After the recognition ceremony came the main inspirational speaker. A successful distributor, nattily dressed in a double-breasted blazer, presented his rehearsed story delivered in a light-hearted and natural style which often involved the audience. (When he asked how many of the audience had been to the Amway U.S. headquarters, approximately 100 hands went up.) He also presented a slide show illustrating his progress from a long-haired hippie youth to Amway seller, ending with images of the rewards of motivational trips and material possessions: at the Michigan Amway headquarters, with Mickey Mouse at Disney Land, and finally, in front of a car and house.

The basic narrative organizing his story and images revolved around his struggle to overcome the obstacles to success, one being the skepticism around him -- even from his mother! He related how he had to prove his mother wrong and go against her advice in order to succeed, a posture which departs from usual self-presentations in what is a somewhat matrifocal society. This distributor's professional, Western-inflected identity as a successful

distributor allowed, and compelled, a redefinition of family duties from filial obedience to individual (financial) achievement. For this Amway speaker, the rejection of maternal control was a way of remaking himself as a man according to the international, entrepreneurial narrative supplied by Amway.

Direct sales draws on gender imagery in the framing of distributor identities. The "modern" and "professional" nature of direct sales, associated with America and clearly distinct from old-time Thai marketing, renders it more suitable for Thai men in particular. But direct sales is most famous for its cosmopolitan, yet gender-appropriate, female roles, the Avon or Mistine Lady. Through their representations of professional female sellers, the companies avoid the problematic associations with conventional commercial women -- the independent and rough market woman selling in unruly street markets as well as the selfish, autonomous career woman pursuing her own desires. In their advertising and promotions, direct sales also draws on family imagery as well. One television campaign for the Thai company Mistine, for example, portrayed a seller using the money to buy a house to live with her mother.

Suranee, after asking if I were a "Miss" (naw saw, the initials for Nang Sao), told me she was unmarried too. She said she was choey choey (blase, casual) about marrying: if the time is right, and it happens, ok. She said that thinking about marriage is different from the olden days, a

wife and husband help each other. When I asked her if Thai men believed this, she said, "if they don't I won't go for them" -- adding "no" in English. Like Kat in marketing, Suranee felt that people should have children when they're ready, and she was not ready: ready means time, money, and an education. One reason she is not ready to have children (and presumably to marry) is that she has to work at a job she doesn't like. But would Amway then provide the resources with which to marry and have children -- or in fact, the resources not to?

Amway in particular defines responsible profit-making through conceptions of gender, including norms for marriage and sexuality. Part of the Amway motivational speaker's joking also involved his single status, which was explained -- and justified -- through humor. Former U.S. distributors have reported that Amway pressures single people to marry (Butterfield 1985). This single Amway motivational speaker, the tomboy Avon Lady Dean, and Suranee, who was deliberately unmarried, suggest that in Thailand sellers sidestep the industry's connotations of normative sexuality. Even in the Mistine commercial, there is no husband in sight.¹³ It is possible that the alternative income and foreign self-help methods from direct

¹³ However, a later Mistine television campaign adopted a soap opera story depicting a developing romance. Nonetheless, the mother still figured significantly. I am grateful to Erick White for calling this commercial to my attention.

sales may underwrite the deviations from the idealized discourses of the enabling corporations themselves.

Conclusion

With the confusing complexity of global cultural, economic, political, and migratory links which have intensified since the 1960s and 1970s (but which of course have much older, if sometimes forgotten, histories), discussions of these trends often depict a vision of "a world without boundaries," to use a phrase from a Ralph Lauren "Safari" perfume campaign critically analyzed by Kaplan (1995) (who herself has suggested replacing a world systems vocabulary with a global vision of "scattered hegemonies" [Grewal and Kaplan 1994]). Exuberant academic representations of globalization and transnationalism come close to reinscribing corporate rhetoric by implying that national borders, sedentary populations, or regional economic inequalities are non-existent or irrelevant. It is important to remember that the flows of capital, people, and discourse is still, by and large, patterned and structured - - rather than "scattered" -- even as the paths, vehicles, and sites of such mobility are changing. For example, most "multinational" corporations typically involve two or at most four nations -- and mostly the same countries at that. Furthermore, the bulk of direct foreign investment not only comes from, but is also placed in, developed economies: for example, the three major Western sources of transnational

capital -- the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany -- are also the major recipients of foreign investment.¹⁴ Politically, national governments retain some powers over international capital flows and within regional trade agreements: in the words of Amway's Vice President expressed in a Bangkok newspaper interview, "[e]ven the smallest country is more powerful than the biggest business" (Ywin 4 Nov 1993). In the case of direct sales, this transnational method of distribution is doubly conditioned, first by the disproportionate sway of American corporations and cultural terms and second by the national contexts and particular aspirations of the global villagers employing it.

Direct sales is a solution to the problems of modern distribution. Using face-to-face sales, it brings commodity exchange into workplaces like the factories, go-go bars, or cable-television offices; residences like dormitories and flats; and back to villages in the countryside. In so doing, direct sales relies on distributors to transform their social networks into avenues for income earning and profit accumulation. It promises distributors an alternative economic strategy of individual entrepreneurship. Thai sellers apply transnational self-help in their own worlds to address their frustrations with kin-based or corporate economies, and also renegotiates social limits of family and gender obligations.

¹⁴ See P. Dickens 1992 *Global Shift: The Internationalization of Economic Activity* (NY: Guilford Press, 49, 87), cited in Gibson-Graham 1996: 127.

What distinguishes global, "post-Fordist" arrangements of recent years is not that they involve discourse, but the fact that they have emerged as possibly the only economic discourse on the landscape. Capitalist representations of direct sales, therefore, themselves incorporate critiques of capitalism. In fact, they may offer the major voice for criticism and reform. In the U.S. and in Thailand, direct sales allows a kind of "acceptable resistance" to frustrations with low wages, bureaucracy, and exploitations, as well as with limits of local social hierarchies. Direct sales provides a global capitalist alternative to global capitalist problems.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: COMMODITIZED EXCHANGE AND GENDER/SEX
PERFORMANCES

Since the rapid economic growth that began in Thailand in the 1960s, even as migrations, wage labor, and demographic changes have marked the lives of women, a public identification of "the Thai woman" has apparently persisted -- or been perpetuated by the state, business sector, and popular culture. This ideal is signaled by appearances -- modesty and beauty -- and measured through conduct -- e.g., monogamy in marriage, and a high degree of support for family. The feminine Thai woman is an image critical to Thailand's nationhood and economy but also one realized in practice. It also frames a variety of academic and popular understandings of Thai 'tradition.' What this thesis points out is that this construct, and those women's expressions that realize or depart from it, involve economic themes at their heart. A symbolic economy of gender is pivotal to understandings of the continuities and discontinuities of Thai modernity.

The narratives about modernization which have accompanied Thailand's economic development since the 1850s

and especially in this century position features of modern gender identities as continuous or discontinuous with the past of Thai 'tradition.' The continuities in these narratives lie in representations of femininity, the female beauty and graceful service shown in beauty contests or the sex trade. What is enduring is thus the female gender positioned in relation to consumption, their own and others. Conversely, the discontinuities in these narratives lie in the economic realm. Elite discourses about modernizing society describe women's participation in the wage economy as new (as indeed it is for many aristocratic women), a product of economic development and a departure from women's confined experiences of the past.

In this dissertation, I reverse the logic of this narrative. I argue that the cultural constructions of women's identities in relation to consumption (as object and consumer) have intensified with economic development: that is, this version of "traditional" femininity is to some extent an effect of modernization itself. The exploration of Chinatown and department stores in particular suggest that the "traditional" ideal results from the modern economy's practical and symbolic separation of production from distribution and consumption. The chapters also testify to what is already well-known in Southeast Asian studies, that various forms of markets offer an enduring recourse for women of different classes.



Figure 11. New Year's Greeting Card. This card recasts "traditional" market women with baskets and carrying stick in a contemporary style of femininity. (For example, long hair, light skin, covered bosoms, and revealing sarongs.) (Sent by Jan Weisman.)

What I propose here is that the long history of women's economic activity comprises a salient "tradition" which is in fact continuous, although unevenly so, with capitalist modernity. Such a reconceptualization suggests that the expanding powers (or hegemony) of an aristocratic conception of femininity as an object of exchange, or linked to consumption more generally, serves to obscure the ways that women's identity has long been based on, and realized through, economic agency as producers and exchangers.

The six market forms explored in this thesis illustrate a wide range of transformations that have emerged as gender is enacted through the commercial portions of the economy. Even as a discernable ideal for the femininity continues (or is selectively reinvented), the ways that gender is expressed is undergoing revision. What counts as beauty is evolving in relation to transnational imagery (registered in changing appreciations of thinness, height, and cosmetics). Certain obligations for women, like women's expected support for their families as daughters or mothers, are being reinterpreted as they are applied within urban or industrial life. In a prescient article, Marjorie Muecke (1984) argues that the nurturing role is becoming defined more and more in terms of money, with daughters providing families with financial and material support. At the same time, there are more forms, or actual positions, which express the female gender in the public eye and individual's

lives: prostitutes; the romantic heterosexual woman; new class or occupational positions like factory or construction work or the career professional; since the mid-1980s, the prevalent "tomboys"; and I would argue, the "housewife."

The ethnographic explorations of gender in markets presented in this thesis raise considerations on two fronts, for (mainly western) feminist theories about the construction of gender and for the ethnography and history of Thailand and Southeast Asia. Here I provide an outline of some of the implications of these six ethnographies of commodity exchange for understanding how gender identities are reproduced and transformed in relation to globalizing economic regimes.

Markets as a Stage for Gender Performance

The methodological design of this thesis, focusing on markets as ethnographic sites, has implications for considering how gender is enacted and performed. To a large extent, Thai women offer walking definitions of gender that are produced and maintained through their labors. Markets like department stores and malls serve as important pseudo-public sites that are stages for presentation of the cosmopolitan self -- that is, women construct their gender performance in marketplaces. This performance is often highly feminine with an emphasis on beauty; but it also includes the "tomboy" and sexualized self-presentations as well. Women construct gender through markets, by obtaining

the goods and instructions for that presentation. For example, numerous historical and ethnographic studies demonstrate people's diverse use of markets to construct their appearance with clothes and adornment (though such processes less often enter contemporary theories about the construction of gender). Consumption has emerged as a key site for "cultural struggles" (Ong 1991) where people express and negotiate their control over bodies, identity, and relationships and launch (symbolic) critiques of established orders.

Markets are also important to other dimensions of gender. As income to many women in the service sector, markets enable women to help support their parents, siblings and children -- an important obligation that I argue is constitutive of the female gender. As jobs, markets also shape worker identities of the marketing professional, sales staff, or the sex worker. Looking at how women 'perform' gender through commodity exchange illustrates the place of economic and social contexts (like family obligations) usually neglected in this line of analysis. Markets are essential to maintaining social relations through exchange of commodities or in commoditized leisure.

Markets Shape Gender

Throughout this work, I have drawn on multiple strands of scholarship that explore how capitalism shapes identities or produces modern subjects. Without suggesting

that capitalist forms determine women's gender identities, I suggest that markets influence gender definitions in diverging ways. First, sales, marketing, or services sectors reinstate gender imagery in creating advertising and labor, for example through detailed requirements about workers' appearance, discipline, and work. Several studies from social history of the United States and Europe show that this work provides a training in capitalist definitions of appearance and production. Work in a go-go bar or in prostitution, in particular, trains women in a specific gendered regime.

Second, drawing on recent work from urban geography in particular, I see markets affecting identities is as spaces for leisure and daily living. Retail spaces, carefully designed to promote consumption and to function as public spaces for certain populations, steer the activities which are used in social relations. As a stage, the market venues are not static settings but, as part of capital accumulation with global links, involve intentional and unintentional instruction to women regarding gender, advertising providing the most obvious example. Given traffic and urban sprawl, space becomes a problem for commerce which advertising, telecommunications, and direct sales in some ways "solve."

A third argument is that markets abound in the gender imagery -- or scripts -- of advertising, goods, and entertainment like movies, a subject regularly addressed in

the field of cultural studies. Work in cultural studies often points out that such discourses do not "inject" whole scripts for behavior into passive audiences and emphasize the multiplicity of meanings, interpretations, or pleasures of such texts. (At the same time, much scholarship attributes to discursive fields great powers in determining identities and experiences.) More sociological branches of this field move beyond text analysis to study the ways audiences respond these materials (or "read against the grain"). Movies and commercial imagery do provide important models for behavior, especially for situations regarded as modern, like malls. Another critical way in which markets can be seen to influence gender is through the commodity form of exchange, which incorporates values, notably an abstract logic of monetary value which may apply to evaluations in a variety of non-market arenas, including gender. It is possible that key definitions of women -- nurturing and beauty -- are increasingly signified and evaluated in terms of commodities and money.

Exchange in Gender Theory

This exploration of social, ethnographic, and economic features in the construction of Thai gender and sexual identities highlights what could be seen as "material" dimensions which I see as less addressed in the current form of post-structuralist theories about the formation of identities, political subjects, or desire.

There are two ways this thesis emphasizes this "material" dimension: one is by considering quite concretely the ways in which capital accumulation strategies and globalization are shaping the expression and content of gender positions; the second is by highlighting the relational, social nature of gender definitions.

Much current work in gender studies (as opposed to the study of women cross-culturally) focuses on textual and discursive constructions of gender. Such formulations, while perhaps potentially encompassing ties with kin and social obligations, have tended to overlook social relationships as a force in constructing social subjects. The subject matter of much work is texts like films or novels, and when literary approaches turn to human life, behaviors and communication are often read as (or reduced to) texts, even where the social practices are more oral than "textual" or literate.

My work returns to a conventional established social science notion: that social relations form the social subject. In the case of gender, this work points out that obligations and social exchanges partly establish gender roles -- what it means to be a man, woman, or third gender kathoeay. Perhaps more importantly in the daily life of a Thai person, social exchanges also play a crucial and pervasive role in the evaluations of successful fulfillment or achievement of gender or sexual identity. That is, not just achieving female status, or the identity of woman, but

being a "good" or real woman -- which means being a good daughter, mother, wife, villager, Buddhist, and so forth. Achieving such identities are accomplished, in part, through social exchanges: support for families, nurturing to children, and donations to the temple (And perhaps appropriate and pleasing "public" comportment can be understood in this vein, as an exchange with the social world.) Certainly the understanding of sexuality involves conceptions of exchange, involving gifts, interaction, and sometimes immediate payment (although not to the degree of the Melanesian concern of bodily fluids, cf., Strathern 1981, 1988). Exchanges, and therefore social and encompassing relationships, are critical to establishing meaningful identity: not just woman, but good woman; not just differences between male and female, but also distinctions among women.

If, as I argue, forms of social and economic exchange are critical to the female identity in particular, what happens as exchanges themselves are commoditized? The chapters here have demonstrated how evolving forms of market exchanges affect gender by exploring how forms of commercial exchange have encompassed, recast, and interrelated with existing social exchanges. Looking at the expansion of commodity exchange into social relations illuminates the force of changing forms of capitalist accumulation on gender and sexual identities by shaping the way that gender is

lived out or performed in a transforming, commoditizing social context (or social "stage").

Re-reading Tradition

A study of Amway and malls would seem to address the future of Thailand: as Bangkok women go, so goes the nation. The standard narrative in Thai and foreign academics and public discourse is one of modernization transforming or adapting "tradition." I want to suggest that the prominence of commodified exchange in the markets I study, rather than reinforcing this modernizing narrative, can in fact challenge it. The place of exchange in these markets, and earlier village bazaars, suggests that exchange may offer a useful way to reconsider gender in "traditional" Thailand, as well. I will here suggest briefly ways that exchange allows us to recast the understanding of conventional Thai identities.

The work on "traditional", mostly rural Thailand treats women's economic roles as a default function, a by-product of male dominance. Instead, this thesis illustrates several avenues by which economic practice constitutes the female gender. Symbolically, I have suggested, women are associated with material exchange, money, and the sites of markets. The economy in general takes an ethnic and gendered cast in the conventional folk-Theravada schema. While market practices are conceptually differentiated from other forms of material transaction, we can understand exchange in

general as the idiom or pattern of most social relations: for example, between monkhood and laity, senior and junior, and parents and children. While neo-classical economic frameworks of the west tend to presume that exchange between rational actors represents equality, social exchanges can indeed represent and reproduce hierarchy.

Another way that economic practice constructs the female identity is through their market work. I propose that adult women can be seen to act as representatives of the family to the economic sphere, in exchanges with temples, kin, and marketplaces. (Women also use marketplaces for their own ends as well.) Following this rereading, I argue that the development of the modern economy, particularly the erosion of kin-based economies, imposed a 'modern' (Western) division equating the economy with male production and consumption with the female-identified family. This reading has implications for discussions of women's economic activity and family roles in traditional and contemporary Thailand.

The material I present in this thesis suggests that in Thailand, social and economic exchange shape male and female genders differently and that economic exchange is disproportionately involved in defining the female gender. Rereading the works on what is called traditional Thai life, usually based on rural communities, I interpret women's active economic participation as an generative feature in constructing gender.

Contradictions and Congruences

What are the implications of performing gender on capitalist stages? As capitalism engulfs further reaches of daily life in most of the world, and exceeds the control of unions, communities, or even nation-states, where are the sources of challenge, alternatives, or even critique?

This thesis does not point to dramatic moments of women's explicit resistance to either patriarchal arrangements or capitalist accumulation. Instead, the chapters identify where the markets, and especially women's use of them rupture hegemonic gender and economic ideals. My analysis proposes that Thai women's practices are less a resistance to social regulation or a deliberate invention of identity than a partial enactment of conventional gender ideals (although it is possible my definition of resistance is too narrow). Thai women are fulfilling their ideals of appropriateness, duty, and social ties through the powerful setting of capitalist markets.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the social identities that emerge within contemporary capitalist context which will contradict or even transform economic or social regimes, notably in the areas of sexuality. Trying to be a proper Thai woman through selling or consumption (or commoditized exchange) may in fact produce conflicts with norms of gender. As some analysts have suggested, it makes more sense to look at to current subjectivities as the locus of potential political or social change, rather than

yearning for an older, more wholly human, agent, one for example less 'materialist' and more natural (less 'cyborg') (Haraway 1983; Ong 1991).

Some theorists have considered how living out gender roles can transform or challenge the gender system by the very attempts to reproduce them: the paragon example is the gender recreations of American male-to-female transvestites. The dialectical argument that the reproduction of the gender system can produce its own contradictions, challenges, or change is useful for evaluating the Thai material I present here. Aspects of contemporary expressions of gender in Bangkok conflict with ideals about proper womanhood, like notions of selflessness, regulated sexuality, caretaking, or appropriateness. For instance, sexual or affective possibilities emerge -- like the tomboy lesbian, or the sexualized heterosexual romance -- that connote active desire and sexual experience even as they replicate certain norms about gender roles. Efforts to be beautiful by being fashionable shade into "sexy" displays that contrast with conventional female modesty.

This thesis, therefore, suggests that the most promising challenges to the national and transnational trafficking in Thai women as signs and objects may come not from escaping commodity exchange, but from rethinking it: from revisiting Thai women's significant, but unappreciated, powers to haggle, bargain, sell, and if possible, to set the terms of trade.

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¹ Following Thai convention, Thai names are listed Given Name Surname.

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