

Masculinity, Matrilineality and Transnational Marriage

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Abstract

Studies of transnational marriage tend to focus on the women and men engaged in these relationships, while ignoring the experiences of those who are not involved in, but who influence and are affected by such marriages. This article focuses on Thai men in Isan (the Northeast region) who are not engaged in these marriages and explores how transnational marriage has affected or altered masculine identities and subjectivities and how local men have negotiated the ongoing changes. It also discusses the dynamics of masculinities taking place in the context of matrilineality and patriarchal gender relations in Isan communities where these marriages are embedded. Qualitative research methodology was employed and fieldwork was conducted in 2016-2017 in an Isan village in Khon Kaen province. The findings show that the current transnational marriages have brought new challenges to Isan masculinities by highlighting male breadwinner ideals and ‘masculine culture’ practices. The ways in which village men have articulated and negotiated these changes are influenced and constrained by socio-economic conditions as well as by breadwinner ideals and matrilineal cultural principles regarding gender relations and status. The article also reveals that transnational marriages have reproduced patriarchal gender privilege, allowing local men to justify their incompetence in adhering to breadwinner ideals.

Keywords: masculinity, matrilineal society, transnational marriage, Isan men

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาการแต่งงานข้ามชาติมักให้ความสำคัญกับผู้หญิงและผู้ชายที่อยู่ภายใต้ความสัมพันธ์นี้ ในขณะที่ละเลยประสบการณ์ของผู้ที่ไม่ได้เข้าสู่ความสัมพันธ์ลักษณะนี้แต่มี

อิทธิพลและได้รับผลกระทบจากการแต่งงานดังกล่าว บทความนี้ให้ความสนใจศึกษาผู้ชายอีสาน โดยมุ่งตอบคำถามว่าการแต่งงานข้ามชาติมีอิทธิพลและส่งผลต่อการปรับเปลี่ยนอัตลักษณ์และอัตวิสัยความเป็นชายอย่างไร รวมทั้งอธิบายพลวัตการเปลี่ยนแปลงความเป็นชายที่เกิดขึ้นในบริบทของสังคมอีสานซึ่งเป็นสังคมมาตาลัย และมีความสัมพันธ์หญิงชายในลักษณะที่ให้ความสำคัญกับฝ่ายชาย การศึกษาใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยเก็บข้อมูลสนทนาระหว่างปี 2559-2560 ในหมู่บ้านแห่งหนึ่ง ของจังหวัดขอนแก่น ผลการศึกษาพบว่า การแต่งงานข้ามชาติที่เกิดขึ้นในปัจจุบันก่อให้เกิดความท้าทายใหม่ต่อความเป็นชายในอีสาน กล่าวคือ การให้ความสำคัญกับอุดมการณ์หาเลี้ยงครอบครัว อันเป็นบทบาทหลักของผู้ชายที่สังคมคาดหวัง และ “พฤติกรรมลูกผู้ชาย” การเผชิญและต่อกรกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงที่เกิดขึ้นของผู้ชายอีสานได้รับอิทธิพลและถูกจำกัดโดยเงื่อนไขทางเศรษฐกิจ สังคม และความลึกลับไม่สอดคล้องกันของอุดมการณ์หาเลี้ยงครอบครัวและหลักการของสังคมมาตาลัยเกี่ยวกับความสัมพันธ์และสถานะของหญิงและชาย นอกจากนี้บทความนี้เผยให้เห็นว่าการแต่งงานข้ามชาติก่อให้เกิดการผลิตซ้ำความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจที่สร้างอภิสันต์แก่เพศชาย เอื้อให้ผู้ชายอ้างเหตุผลสนับสนุนข้อบกพร่องในการปฏิบัติตามอุดมการณ์หาเลี้ยงครอบครัว

คำสำคัญ: ความเป็นชาย สังคมมาตาลัย การแต่งงานข้ามชาติ ผู้ชายอีสาน

Introduction

Studies of transnational marriages and marital intimacies both in Thailand and elsewhere reveal a type of ‘global marriage-scape’ (Constable, 2005: 3-7) – the common pattern of transnational relationships involving brides from less developed countries and grooms from the wealthier locations in the global economic hierarchy (Brennan, 2004; Cabezas, 2009; Cheng, 2012; Faire, 2009; Ishii, 2016; Jones, 2012; Lapanun 2013; Lu and Yang, 2014; Pananakhonsab, 2016; Wang and Chang, 2002). The emergence of this type of marriage has been taking place parallel with massive mobility and flow across national borders in a globalized era where transnational marriage has become a viable option in most parts of the world. In Thai society, the increase in marriage between Isan¹ women and *farang* (Western) men is a striking

¹ The Northeastern region of Thailand is also known as Isan.

social phenomenon which has received scholarly attention specially in the past few decades. Yet, early investigations of transnational marriages tended to focus on women engaged in this relationship, their agency, motivations, as well as the structural conditions propelling them to opt for such unions. Studies also reveal how women have actualized their desires and negotiated social relations in the sites of origin and settlement (Lapanun, 2013; Promphakphing et al., 2005; Suksomboon, 2009; Sununta and Angeles, 2013; Thai, 2008; Tosakul, 2010).

By contrast, studies of men's experiences in these relationships are rather limited. This limitation has to do with the fact that men are normally viewed as coming from a more advantageous position than women in transnational marriage liaisons. Only recently has research expanded to include the experiences of men (Cheng, 2012; Cheng, Yeoh and Zhang, 2014; Maher and Lafferty 2014; Smutkupt and Kitiarsa 2007; Thompson, Kitiarsa and Smutkupt, 2016). However, studies thus far have almost exclusively emphasized the men engaged in transnational intimacy while ignoring the experiences of those who do not engage in, but are involved with or affected by these relationships (Lapanun, 2018). Consequently, there is a gap in the theoretical claims about masculinities, gendered ideologies, and practices as well as the family life of inter-ethnic couples. The present study examines perspectives and experiences of local men living in an Isan village who are not involved in, but are affected by such marriages. From a transnational perspective, these men and other village residents live in the same "transnational social field" of those engaged in transnational marriage (Kyle, 2000; Levitt, 2001; Toyota et al., 2007). Hence, they are influenced by and must maneuver the social dynamics of these relationships.

This paper sets out two objectives. First, it explores how involvement in this same "transnational social field" has affected or altered masculine identities and subjectivities, and how local men have negotiated the ongoing changes. Second, it discusses the dynamics of masculinities taking place in the context of matrilineality and patriarchal gender relations in Isan communities where these marriages are embedded.

Conceptualizing Masculinity and Marriage

The notion of masculinity, according to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), is a relational concept of manhood and womanhood which is embedded in specific social environments and which changes over time. “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 836). Gutmann (1997) identifies four distinct ways in which anthropologists define masculinity: 1) anything that men think and do, 2) anything men think and do to be men, 3) anything that women do not do, and 4) the idea that some men are considered more ‘more manly’ than other men. He also suggests that the investigations of men and masculinity need to incorporate women’s experiences and opinions with respect to men.

In his pioneering book, *Masculinities* (1995), Connell argues that there are numerous notions of masculinity and he track show they relate to the hegemonic forms of masculinity that societies celebrate as ideals (Nye, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, he writes, “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).² Hegemonic masculinity reflects cultural ideals that may not closely correspond to the lives of any actual men. But it expresses desires and fantasies that men have negotiated, articulated and reinforced.

In investigating masculinity in the context of marriage, scholars often focus on the cultural ideals of providers/breadwinners. For example, Chen, Yeoh and Zhang (2014) examine how Singaporean husbands who have married Vietnamese women negotiate a stereotype of ‘losers’ in the marriage market, a source of their masculine unease. These men emphasize their role as ‘providers’ and ‘supporters’ for both

² Whether hegemonic masculinities need necessarily subordinated women is, to us, an open question, but beyond the scope of this article. It is certainly true that hegemonic versions of masculinity are very commonly premised on a superior masculine – inferior feminine relationship.

their own and their wives' natal family, which allows them to sustain their masculine subjectivity and validate their self-identity as 'real men. 'Another example is that of Maher and Lafferty (2014), who reveal how Western men who settled with their Thai wives in Isan communities perform what they see as 'hegemonic masculinity' – drawn on masculine ideals from their home countries and neocolonial imaginary. These men position themselves as 'providers' and real white men,' though in the long term such identities are subject to contradiction. Emphasizing breadwinner roles, Boa (1998) discusses how first- and second-generation Chinese male migrants who settled in Thailand differentiated themselves from (working-class) Thai men. Exploiting their breadwinner roles, Chinese men legitimated their promiscuity and negotiated the Thai philandering style of masculinity (*jao chu*). By contrast, philandering working-class Thai men are not 'responsible' for their family. These studies show the complexity of cultural ideals of masculinity shaped by marriage relations across transnational spaces, on the one hand, and by ethnicity and class, on the other.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methodology and was based on dual sources of information, relevant literature and fieldwork. The literature review focused on the concepts of masculinity in relation to (transnational) marriage and related work in this area. The major methodology employed throughout the fieldwork was in-depth interviews, using semi-structured interview guidelines with a list of questions and topics that the authors and research assistant brought up during the conversation with informants. The interview guidelines included such issues as the development of transnational marriage of village women in relation to community transformation, life stories, motivation and experiences of women under transnational intimacy and local men's perspectives, reactions and negotiations. The fieldwork took place in 2016-2017 in Na Charoen³, an Isan village in Khon Kaen

³ The names of the village and of all person quoted in this article are pseudonyms.

province, 77 kilometers northeast of the provincial capital. Na Charoen is one of the Isan villages where the number of women engaged in transnational marriage is high.

This study draws on interviews with 25 local informants, including 13 men between the ages of 24 and 63 and 12 women between the ages of 23 and 57. Three male informants aged over 55 are leaders – a village assistant head, a health care volunteer and a retired school teacher. Other men are engaged in various occupations such as farming, daily wage work, factory jobs, running shops. There are also male informants who have no jobs. These local men are related to women involved in transnational marriage in one way or another – as sons, ex-husbands, relatives or neighbors. As masculinity is a relational concept of manhood and womanhood, this study also included female informants. Five of these women are in a relationship with *farang* men; one is a village school teacher and the others are neighbors and relatives of women with a *farang* husband. Like the men, the female informants are involved in various income-generating activities.

Na Charoen: The Research Site

Na Charoen encompasses two *muban* or neighborhoods in the local administration system. These *muban* were one village in the past, located next to each other. Most residents of these *muban* are related through kin ties, have shared communal resources and participate in cultural and religious activities together. Currently, Na Charoen comprises 298 households with a population of 1,378; the male-to-female ratio is nearly equal (49:51). Na Charoen is a relatively well-developed village with good infrastructure. Some of the houses are large and designed in a style more representative of urban architecture rather than what one would find in other rural villages. Most of these houses belong to women with a *farang* husband. As in other Isan villages, most households in Na Chareon are engaged in agriculture; rice and sugar cane are the major cash crops. Other sources of income are factory jobs, wage work, trading, repairing cars and other vehicles, and running computer shops

and gas stations. Some villagers have migrated to work in Khon Kaen or other big cities, industrial zones and tourist destinations such as Bangkok, Chonburi, Rayong and Phuket provinces. About five percent of the population (two-thirds of whom are women) have higher education, such as a college degree, and are engaged in salary work elsewhere.

Labor migration has been a part of household livelihood in Na Charoen since the 1980s. The success of the pioneering migrants motivated younger generations to take this path. There were women who migrated to work in the tourist destinations and eventually married *farang* men. Some of these women left the village to resettle with their husbands overseas or elsewhere in Thailand, but have maintained connection with their parents and relatives. Others returned to settle in the village with their *farang* husbands. There are women who stayed in the village, while their husbands lived/worked in other parts of the country but managed to come and live with them in the village regularly. The improved economic wellbeing of intermarriage families has inspired other village women to follow this path. The demand for a way to contact Western men allowed a village woman with her German husband to start a match-making service in the village in the early 2000s. This development certainly facilitated transnational marriage of some women in Na Charoen and other villages in the area. There is no current record of the number of women with *farang* partners in Na Chareon. However, according to a staff member of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) who conducted a survey in 2004 (NESDB, 2004), Na Chareon is one of the villages in Khon Kaen province with the highest number of women engaged in transnational marriage. The three Isan provinces where almost half of the women married to *farangs* originate are Khon Kaen, Udon Thani and Nakhon Ratchasima.⁴ The increased number of transnational marriage couples and regular contact between those living elsewhere and in women's

⁴ According to the NESDB survey in 2004 (NESDB, 2004), there were 19,594 women in Isan married to non-Thai nationals, of whom 87 percent were Western men. Updated statistics from the National Statistical Office (NSO) in 2010 show that the number of Westerners in Isan had increased to 27,357. Ninety percent were men who had married Isan women (http://service.nso.go.th/nso/nso_center/project/search_center/23project-th.htm: accessed July 15, 2016).

natal families highlight the consequences and subtle shifts taking place in villages. This paper focuses particularly on masculine identities and subjectivities.

Material Relations: Transnational Marriage and Local Men's Views

The ways in which people regard transnational marriage varies widely depending on their background and relationship with women who are married to Westerners. Gender is one of the key factors shaping opinions of such marriages. Earlier studies show that the motivations propelling village women to marry a Westerner are multiple and complex, extending beyond material relations and romantic love. These marriages are often related to women's obligations as 'dutiful daughter' and mother, as well as local male images, gender imaginations and fantasies about modernity and 'a better life' (Constable, 2005; Ishii, 2016; Lapanun, 2012; Suksomboon, 2009; Sununta and Angeles, 2013; Tosakul, 2010). The women's parents and relatives share these views. Local men, however, often view these marriages as a way to improve the economic situation of women and their families (Lapanun, 2013). Asked why village women wish to marry *farang*, Som (50),⁵ (Pseudonym, 2016), a former assistant village head, explained:

These days the way of life of people in the village has changed. Everyone scrambles to earn money to improve their life.... Money can bring anything: a big house, land, a car and so on. To earn money, villagers have migrated to work in cities and tourist destinations. My wife and I did that, too, when we were young. We went to Bangkok and lived there for 10 years before coming back to settle in the village in 1978. I was a security man and my wife sold [takeaway] food ... Many village women headed to Pattaya and Phuket with the aim of meeting and marrying *farang* [men]. Through marrying *farang*, women were able to improve material wealth to support their parents and take

⁵ The figure after a person's name indicates his/her age at the time of the interview.

care of their children [born from a local father (Som [Pseudonym], 2016).

The view emphasizing, economic motives as the major reason propelling women to opt for transnational marriage, is predominant and shared by many local people. Big, a man in his late twenties whose wife left him to marry a Japanese man, told me that he did not earn much; thus, money became an issue in his family. Eventually, his wife and daughter left him. Big said:

I feel sorry that I couldn't earn enough to satisfy her and to support our child... It's good for my daughter to be under her mother's care; she can have a good education and a good life. It's good for my wife as well. She can have what she wants, jewellery, nice clothes, a house and car ... I don't blame her (Big [Pseudonym], 2016).

The conversation conveys Big's intention to point out that his wife made this decision for the future of her daughter and herself, although she still has affection for him. For some men these marriages do not imply that 'by nature' Thai women feel less passion for Thai men than foreign men. These relationships, they feel, are determined by material logic, rather than affection.

Women with Western husbands acknowledged that material aspects of transnational marriage were part of their desires. At the same time, they also recognized other factors that had motivated them to turn to Western men, primarily female filial obligations and local men's lack of responsibility in caring for their family. By contrast, local men often talked about transnational marriage solely in economic terms. This line of reasoning neither recognizes the importance of human emotions nor takes into account the behaviour of local men in family relations which drives women to seek transnational marriage.

Some local men feel threatened by transnational marriage because it offers the women in their community an alternative to the traditional marital relationships available locally. Interestingly, others

are less concerned about ‘losing women’ to *farang* men. These men are confident that in the end these women will return to local men. This perception draws on the fact that there are women who have been seeing local men, either while living with their *farang* partner or after their transnational relationship ended. While intimate associations outside of marriage are considered immoral, villagers talked about such relationships as a way for local men to enjoy material support and ‘a comfortable life.’ At the same time, such associations emphasize the image of local men as irresponsible people who do not take the relationship or their family’s welfare seriously. This image highlights the role of breadwinner which local men have to negotiate.

Breadwinner, ‘Masculine Culture’ and Patriarchal Gender Relations

The cultural ideal of breadwinner/provider is central to the notion of masculinity. Connell states that the “cultural function of masculine identity is to motivate men to work” (Connell, 1995: 33). This idea implies that the ability to provide resources for the survival of one’s family is the main basis of adult men’s standing and reputation. In this sense, breadwinning roles are the most fundamental foundation of masculine identity (Cheng, Yeoh and Zhang, 2014; Fuller, 2001). Elmhirst’s (2007) observations in Indonesia show that masculinities are often connected to men’s participation or nonparticipation in productive work. Successful masculine identities relate closely to success in providing for the family. The role of breadwinner is a key aspect of hegemonic masculinity that men have articulated and negotiated so as to sustain and reclaim their masculine identity (Connell, 1995). This section discusses how men in Na Charoen negotiate breadwinner masculinity, whether their practices shape gender relations in Isan communities, and if so, how.

Life stories of men in Na Charoen reveal fluid masculinities in relation to age; the older men are more successful in fulfilling breadwinner roles, although there are some younger men who work hard

to earn a living for their family. Narratives of the men who are in their fifties and sixties reveal that these men engaged in agriculture, as well as non-agricultural and paid labor so as to provide the essential resources for their family. Such engagement in earning an income is important even before getting married as a man's secure work is evidence of his status as a potential marriage partner. Sri (63) (Pseudonym, 2016), a man who had 30 years of experience in running an Isan folk song band (*mor lam*) to support his family, said that he had worked hard for three years before getting married to prove to his wife and her parents that he was qualified to be a partner who could take care of his family. Som (Pseudonym, 2016) had also engaged in other diverse kinds of work. He left home to work in Bangkok for almost 10 years after getting married but could not save any money. He and his wife, after having their second child, returned to the village. Then he earned a living by selling ice cream in his home village and in villages nearby. The earnings allowed him to open a food stall where his wife sold cooked food, which later evolved into a grocery shop, a business that the family has maintained until now. Both men have managed to embrace breadwinner masculinity and validate their identity as 'good husbands and fathers.' Though these men realized the differences between theirs and later generations, they often commented that nowadays young village men like going out and enjoying life more than working to earn an income. "Their parents have to support them. They don't need to work, but enjoy going out with friends (*thiew kab phuen*), drinking ... Some have their own ways to get money," Som said (Som [Pseudonym], 2016).

However, other young men, like Dan (29) (Pseudonym, 2016), take their family responsibilities seriously. Dan is from a relatively well-to-do family; after marriage he sold his car and motorbike to invest in a game shop with an extended section selling groceries. Being concerned about masculine responsibility in taking care of his family, Dan stopped philandering and drinking – activities that he had much enjoyed during his teenage life. "Now I have a different life style than most young men in the village who enjoy going out with friends, drinking and gambling," Dan said. Dan represents young village men

who have struggled to embrace breadwinner roles. However, popular stereotypes of young men in Na Charoen involve such as activities as going out, seeking thrills, drinking, philandering and gambling. Young village men consider such behaviour to be part of ‘masculine culture’ which is common for men even though makes them unqualified to be potential marriage partners. (Dan [Pseudonym], 2016).

When talking about men’s ability to provide resources and care for their family, the older men often mentioned that the ways in which people earn their living have changed. In the times when they were young and started a family of their own, people focused less on cash and were less materialistic than they are these days. Thus, in the current context, young men may face more pressure in working to earn enough to support their family. However, the older men did not appreciate the so-called ‘masculine culture’ behavior of the younger generation which have become common in the village scene, while the younger men talked about these activities as a way to deal with the economic pressure they encountered.

During the fieldwork, we often saw a group of young men get together in front of Dan’s shop in the afternoon – most of them in their twenties and thirties and engaged in daily wage work. They enjoyed chatting, drinking and sometimes going to town. Tom (25) (Pseudonym, 2016), a daily wage labourer who did not have a regular job, said:

I don’t earn much; I’m not able to make ends meet. It’s difficult to get a job with good pay.... I go out with friends almost every day. We meet here [in front of Dan’s shop] regularly in the evening. Sometimes we also go to town. It’s good to meet and talk to friends who are in a similar situation [unsecure/no job or low/no income]. There are no jobs in the village, even in town [Khon Kaen] it’s difficult to find a job ... We [he and another young man joining the conversation] both have a girlfriend (*faen*). To marry, we would have to have to a secure job and earn enough to support a wife and family, but we don’t.... (Tom [Pseudonym], 2016).

Tom, like other young men in the village, often cited the lack of economic opportunities as the root of his inability to earn enough to make ends meet and embrace breadwinner masculinity, thereby limiting their marriage possibilities. At the same time, they also claimed that *farang* men are in a better position in terms of their economic status, which allows them to fulfil the role of provider in a transnational family. Indeed, interestingly, parents often talked about the problems of promiscuity, hard drinking, and gambling in selecting a partner for their daughter, apart from economic considerations. Similar criteria also applied the women themselves (Tom [Pseudonym, 2016]. Nang (47) (Pseudonym, 2016), a woman with a French husband, said, “I always looked for a man, either Thai or *farang*, who was not lazy and who would take good care of me and be responsible for the family... I cannot accept men’s womanizing (*jao chu*)” (Nang [Pseudonym], 2016). Thus, this study shares with existing works the idea that although the role of breadwinner is central to masculine identity, it may not be the sole factor influencing marriage possibilities. The practices of ‘masculine culture’ have shaped and reshaped how men are perceived and whether they are considered qualified partners, apart from their role as breadwinners.

In Na Charoen village, men are aware that the existence of transnational marriage provides women with the choice of marrying *farang* men. In other words, the men are aware of the shift in gender power relations regarding marriage. The high level of material consumption and modern life style of women with *farang* husbands are obvious, although not all of these women have enjoyed a good marriage and a secure life. Such changes have highlighted the breadwinner ideal that local men have negotiated. Indeed, men in the village admitted that they were aware of the male role of provider. However, their actions in this regard did not always demonstrate it, although some men like Dan have embraced the breadwinner identity. Dan believes that being responsible for one’s family and maintaining a good relationship are crucial for marriage and family life, and that men play a key part in keeping the family together. Other young men seem to take this ideal less seriously; they did not change their “masculine culture” behavior,

claiming that such activities provide them space in coping with profound pressure from limited economic opportunities and the anxiety stemming from being seen as unsuitable partners. Dan, as well as other village men, related the ignorance of young men in refusing to embrace breadwinner ideals to their expectation that women marrying *farang* husbands would eventually return to local men. This expectation was reinforced by examples of relationships between some of these women and local young men in the village.

Such associations are perceived ambiguously. On the one hand, they are viewed from an opportunistic perspective; young men can gain material possessions and enjoy a comfortable life while women acquire intimate relationships that fulfil their desires. On the other hand, these relationships are considered immoral and inappropriate in terms of both masculine identity and dignity. This ambiguity is common and it turns up in the narratives of both men and women in Na Chareon. Not surprisingly, it is women who are labelled ‘bad women’ for being sexually active, while men are not. Indeed, male involvement in such relationships is said to be ‘cool’ (*jeang*). While struggling to qualify themselves as suitable marriage partners, young men still talked about marriage in a way suggesting that whether or not they are able to embrace breadwinner ideals, women will eventually return to local men. In this context, transnational marriage has reproduced patriarchal privilege to justify local men’s incompetence in carrying out the role of provider. This patriarchal gender relationship facilitates both men’s practices of “masculine culture” and their ignorance of how to embrace breadwinning roles.

Masculinity and Matrilineality

Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that “masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 836). In light of this, the present section focuses on masculinity in the context of current transnational

marriages in relation to Isan matrilineality. The discussions provide more profound insights explaining the limitations of Isan men in embracing breadwinner ideals and becoming involved in “masculine culture” practices.

In Isan society aspects of matrilineal kinship systems and the practice of matrilocal residence are widespread on the village level. Traditionally, it was customary for a newly married couple to reside in the house of the wife’s parents, with sons-in-law contributing their labor to the wife’s parents’ farm while land inheritance was divided among the daughters. Although the matrilineal system has been more flexible, especially since the 1970s when migration became an integral part of Isan livelihoods, matrilineal rules and practices are still obvious in Isan communities (Lapanun, 2013; Mills, 1999). Mills (1999) points out a range of features marking matrilineality and its influence on gender roles and status. Among the key aspects of marilocality is post-marital residence in the wife’s home (at least in the initial period after marriage), which provides women with economic and emotional support. These customary practices are sources of female social power within village society. They allow the wife to exert considerable control over household resources and budgets. Moreover, even though men contribute their labor or resources to the wives’ households, they are dependent on their wives’ families and the authority of their wives’ parents. In this context, although men perform breadwinner roles, they might not be able to either exert power in the family or be considered the head of household, unless they resettle their own household separately.

Bowie (2008) points out that when a man marries into a wife’s family, he might experience isolation and pressure in the new village as he has to live among his wife’s matrilineage and under her parents’ authority. Some men in Bowie’s study talked about their drinking behavior as a way for them to cope with pressure and conflict with their wives’ matrilineage. The limitations of Isan men in embracing breadwinner roles draw, in part, on the disjuncture between provider roles and matrilineal cultural ideals. Local men, like Dan who is considered a good provider and responsible husband, are praised for

their provisioning. The ‘praise-orientation’ status of Isan men is different from the ‘status-oriented’ masculinity in patrilineal society where men routinely gain patriarch status and are seen as household providers. Boa’s study (1998), mentioned earlier, elaborates this patriarchal masculinity, showing that among first- and second-generation Chinese migrants (*chinkao*) in Thailand, the economic contributions of women to their household were always considered ‘supplemental’ while men were the breadwinners. By judging who were and were not good providers, Chinese philanderers differentiated themselves from working-class Thai men, who did not embrace breadwinner roles. Drawing on their economic accomplishments – the core of *chinkao* masculinity – these Chinese men legitimated their promiscuity and enhanced male sexual privilege.

Isan masculinities as manifested in Na Charoen have evolved around the unrivalled breadwinner roles and matrilineal cultural ideals which village men have negotiated. This on-going process has generated anxiety among village men regarding their marriage prospects, on the one hand, and reproduced hegemonic male sexual privilege, on the other. This is another layer of the multiple and fluid masculinities in modern Isan society.

Conclusion

Studies of current transnational marriages reveal that women’s choices of marriage outside of marrying locally have brought new challenges to masculine identities and subjectivities as well as to gender relations in many Isan communities. The ways in which local men negotiate the on-going transformations highlight male breadwinner ideals, ‘masculine culture’ practices and patriarchal gender privilege, which allow them to justify their incompetence in performing breadwinner roles, while at the same time reproducing male sexual privilege. Older men are relatively more successful in fulfilling breadwinner roles than younger men, who take these roles less seriously. The practices of ‘masculine culture’ are often described in relation to economic pressure and male anxiety of being seen as unqualified marriage prospects.

The ways in which village men negotiate the current dynamics of masculine identities and subjectivities are influenced and constrained by both socio-economic conditions and matrilineal culture. The discordance between breadwinner roles and matrilineality principles underline masculine practices and identities which Isan men have to negotiate in the face of local-global articulation where transnational marriages have become a viable option.

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