

CHAPTER 6



SOCIAL OUTLETS

Farang living in Thailand have had a marginal place in Thai society since Ayutthaya times. This marginal position has been dominated by farang men with their own economic status, religious institutions and social associations. The sheer numbers of these men, and the fact that they are not new to Thai society, compared to the situation of farang women who have been common in Thailand for less than a century, makes farang men far less marginal than farang women. Thus, while farang women are a minority group in Thai society, they are also a minority within the group of farang living in Thailand. In addition, and despite the fact that the number of farang women married to Thai men is growing, they are also a minority in Thai-farang mixed-marriages, creating a double-minority status. Thus the women who have married Thai men and moved to Thailand have transplanted themselves into the outer most margins of an alien social system and as such have faced the challenge of 'fitting-in' to their host society. How accepted do these women feel by the general public and what are their reactions to their marginal position?

The majority of all the women interviewed said that they will never feel 100% accepted by Thai society, and many of the older-generation said that they have lived lonely and isolated lives. Any foreigner who marries a Thai and comes to live in Thailand not only

faces severed family relations and a loss of identity formerly provided by work or position in their old community, but they also lack friendships and support mechanisms, a fact which is exasperated by communication difficulties, a loss of independence and an extreme lack of knowledge of how to play the social roles of wife, daughter-in-law, and mother in their new environment. (Culture Shocked Marriages:5) However, age-generational differences in the women's experiences of these variables and perceptions of their marginal position and the need to assimilate were found.

Most of the older generation women felt intense pressure to 'become Thai', but despite extreme attempts to speak Thai, and learn their social roles, most still do not feel accepted and many have already left in despair. While speaking Thai was fundamental for the older generation, it was considered unnecessary by the new-comers. Likewise, finding a job was a financial necessity for the older-generation but was considered as an enjoyable social outlet for the new-comers. Thus, in contrast with the older-generation, the new-comers do not feel a need to 'become Thai' but would like to be accepted as themselves. Is this change in perceptions a result of Thai social change?

Faced with social and cultural differences and a sense of isolation, women from both generations felt the need to have a friend, or someone in a similar position to talk to and confide in. However, few women had such a person in the first few years and as their husbands were often little help and did not comprehend their wives predicaments, the women learnt to become more emotionally independent. However, some were only lonely in the first few years and have since managed to build their own social networks. In general, the older-generation were

more dependent on their children and husbands as there were so few other farang women around and little in the way of social outlets. However, while children were the major social focal point for women of both generations, age-generational differences in the children's own minority position will be shown in this chapter, to have affected the children's relationships with their mother. In addition, the older-generations' husbands were less inclined to include their wives in their social lives, often leaving them at home alone, and were reluctant to discuss any problems with their wives, thereby increasing their need for a friend. In contrast, with many more farang living in Thailand the new-comers have many social outlets available to them and most also share a social life with their husbands and have little difficulty in discussing issues with them. What can these age-generational differences in the social networks and support mechanisms available to farang women and their relationships with their husbands, tell about change in Thai society, and Thai male attitudes towards their wives?

Distinct age-generational differences in the women's perceptions of their marginal status, will be discussed to reveal a change in the significance and the effects of the following factors: language skills, the role of children, occupation and social outlets, upon the extent to which the women feel accepted by Thai society.

Another important factor that appeared to affect a woman's determination and effort to make and or find a place for herself is her own perception of the need to do so. Those that believed Thailand was a temporary place of residence often took longer to get socially involved than those who knew the move was permanent. Thus the woman's awareness of permanance and the effect this had

on her involvement with Thai society will be discussed first. Did she learn the language, get a job, make friends or have children, and if so do any of these factors increase the social outlets available to her? How do these factors serve to reduce or increase marginality? The age-generational differences to be seen in these variables will highlight Thai social change and the factors which affect a woman's ability to find a place in Thai society.

Women's Expectations of Stay

The factor which had most influence on the women's ability to adapt to their new environment, regardless of generation, was how permanent or temporary they expected the move to be. All but one of the older-generation women said that they knew the move to Thailand would be permanent compared with less than half of the new-comers. Of the older-generation, Karen knew her move would be permanent and considers herself lucky because,

the first thing my husband did when we came here was to get me a job - even before he found one of his own. Not that we needed the money, but he didn't want me sitting around at home feeling miserable all day.

At the time she says she would have been quite happy to stay at home and get used to her surroundings but as it turned-out, "it was the best thing he could have done: I learnt the language quickly, made my own friends, and have never looked back." As all the older-generation women interviewed knew that their move to Thailand would be permanent, it would seem that other women of their era who did not expect to stay permanently have already left, with or without their husbands.

Those new-comers who were not prepared for a long-term move have all said that had they known they would be here so long, they would have done things differently and would have made more of an effort. Vanessa expected to be here less than a year: four years later she says,

Ideally I would have worked for a bit so we could afford to move out (they lived with the in-laws), and also I would have liked to study the language had I known we'd be here so long.

Thus, it seems quite clear that those who knew they would be here for a long period of time, if not permanently, made more of an effort to get involved in their new environment by learning the language, getting a job, and/or joining social groups.

Indeed, half of the new-comers who did not expect to live here so long, are still expecting and waiting to return home in the near future and are feeling somewhat in limbo. The other half are beginning to feel that perhaps there is no longer a likelihood of returning in the near future and are thus finding ways to get more involved.*

Role of Children

For many of the women who felt lonely living in Thailand, a child was both a source of comfort and a social outlet, as well as a chain that kept them bound to their homes. For once a child is born there is more pressure for the wife to stick with the marriage and accept her situation as, "once the foreign wife bears a child, who by virtue of its percentage 'belongs' to a

* As with many of these issues, it would be interesting to contact these women again in ten years time to see who remains!

local society, she is no longer quite as free to reject or ignore local society." (Imamura 1990:173) Indeed, children were the main reason for all the dissatisfied older-generation wives to stay with their husbands and/or in Thailand.*

Almost all of the older-generation women had children within the first 2 years of marriage, as did two thirds of the new-comers. Often the decision to have a child was in appreciation (conscious or not) of the wife's social isolation. (Imamura 1990) In general, children facilitated the mothers position in the broader society by helping with communication and giving access to social outlets, but age-generational differences in the functions of these variables can be seen. Age-generational differences in the children's own experiences of acceptance by Thai society can be seen to affect their relationships with their mothers. Due to embarrassment of being *luuk-khrueng* the older-generation's children did not wish their mothers to be seen with them at school, and the older-generation women tended to speak Thai with their children. In addition, with little in the way of social outlets, most older-generation women found their children to be their close friends, confiding and trusting in them above anyone else. In contrast, the new-comers' children are now an envied minority and most of the new-comers tend to rely

* Many women have stayed in their marriage/in Thailand 'for the sake of the children'. In the past Thai law did not allow a child to leave the country without the Thai father's permission, and in case of a divorce, the law used to favour the father as the guardian, thus many women, had little choice: if they wished to keep their children, they had to keep the husband too!

Interestingly, while bringing-up the children was thought to be a possible area of conflict between husband and wife, this issue did not arise in the interviews. Thus the role of the children will be considered in the light of facilitating their mothers' position in external relationships and with the broader Thai society.

on them as translators, and base their social activities with other mothers from their children's playgroups and schools.

However, for foreign wives needing to attain some acceptable social status, that of motherhood is the most publicly recognisable and which also commands high respect within Thai society. Imamura notes that,

with the norms and values of mothering so value and emotion laden, discrepancies from the host society standard can be the cause for the most deep-rooted marginality, a marginality which is objective when the host society defines the foreign wife as a poor mother, and subjective when the foreign wife views local mothering norms with distaste. Yet, mothering is also a mechanism which reduces marginality, because it provides a further local link and a commitment more permanent than marriage. (Imamura 1990:180)

Thus, the children's perception of their own minority status will be seen to affect the children's language skills and cultural identity and in turn affects their relationships with their mothers. The influence of both mother and child's minority statuses will be seen to have affected each generation's marginal position in different ways. However, for both generations, children often facilitated the acceptance of the farang wife by the extended family.

Children, Mothers and the Extended Family.

Children were often a major factor for parents-in-law to accept their foreign daughter-in-law. Queen

Saowabha, though the most furious at her son Prince Chakrabongse's marriage to a foreigner in 1906, softened to welcome her daughter-in-law upon the birth of her grandson. Even King Chulalongkorn, who long refused to see his grandson, finally relented and fell in love with the little boy, and it is suggested that had he lived longer he would have finally met his daughter-in-law. (Chakrabongse 1943, 1957 and Hunter & Chakrabongse 1994) Many of the women interviewed echoed such sentiments. Betty said she was pregnant the first time she visited and called the pregnancy her 'insurance policy'. She did not expect her mother-in-law to accept her, but knew that no woman could refuse a grandchild! Thus children were a way of establishing a woman's social status as well as ensuring a relationship with the in-laws.

However, as previously seen the relationship with the in-laws was not always smooth. Interference from the in-laws regarding childrearing was a common problem. Alice complained that she was never given any 'clout' as a mother by her in-laws and they would do what they liked with her children whether she approved or not. For example, they would wake the children up when she had sent them to bed, or give them sweets when she was punishing them.

In addition, interference from the Thai family often affected the relationship children had with their mothers. Sharon said she had always intended to speak English with her children, but when she went to work, the Thai influence from her in-laws became more dominant, there was one stage when he [her son] asked a question in English and I answered him in English and then my in-laws said 'no, no' and the Thai word for it, and I got the feeling that he's going to grow up believing I'm telling him lies

everytime I say something to him so I stopped speaking English from that moment on. However, reluctance on the child's part to speak English and his relationship with his mother was most often influenced by teasing at school.

Children's Marginality

Many of the older-generation's children were bullied and ridiculed at school, often mistaken to be the results of illegitimate relationships during the Vietnam war. As Weisman discusses in her paper on the position of Amerasian children in Thailand,

Thai-Amerasians are painfully aware and constantly reminded that they are 'different' from other Thais and most have a strong desire to be accepted by other Thais as 'really Thai'.

(Weisman 1987:20).

As a result, tensions arose and many of the older-generations' children felt ashamed of their farang mothers, and often refused to speak English. Liza's son would not let her take him to or from school because he was often teased for being farang and was made to feel ashamed of her. Though this upset her, she did not want to aggravate the situation and so never visited his school. Catherine's son got told off by one of his teachers for 'dying his hair' and was sent outside the classroom. Over half of the older-generations' children had problems with being *luuk-khrueng* at school compared with only one of the new-comers. Such reports of the long-timers' children being teased at Thai schools, and even picked on by teachers have made many new-comers loathe to send their children to Thai schools. Most of the new-comers send their children to International

schools while the others are still too young to go to school at all. The results of this age-generational difference in choice of schools will be shown to be socially and linguistically significant.

Schooling

Schooling was often a point of concern for the women as the choice of schools naturally influences the child's position in the society. As Imamura suggests,

On the one hand she [the mother] wants her child to be accepted as any child; on the other, her experiences of a different system of education may lead her to question the authority of the teacher and the time or other demands the school system places on her. (Imamura 1990:181)

However, the majority of the older generation had no choice but to send their children to Thai schools. Despite the teasing, this facilitated the children's Thai language skills and the opportunity to mix with other local children.

In contrast, the majority of new-comers send their children to International schools where they receive little in the way of Thai language instruction, or familiarity with local Thai children. Many new-comers are worried about the social affects as well as the financial burden of sending their children to International schools. Tracy's daughter has found it hard mixing with the children of expatriate families at her International school. She feels many of these children are very competitive about material things (e.g. chauffeur driven cars, personal cars and mobile phones at high school) which, coming from a local family her

daughter does not have access to. Her daughter used to think that they must be very poor because they didn't have these things and feels an outsider because her father is Thai and they don't live an expatriate lifestyle. Thus, the problem of acceptance and 'fitting-in' occurs in either local Thai or International schools. Advantages and disadvantages can be seen in both, and whether the age-generational difference is simply due to the increased number of International schools and thus increased choice for new parents, or a deliberate action to associate with other 'international' people as opposed to struggling for acceptance within a closed Thai environment would be worthy of further research.

Children's Language Skills

As well as affecting the child's social acceptance, attending Thai or International schools also influences the child's linguistic abilities. While the teasing of the past has now turned into admiration, *luuk-khrueng* are not only considered to be beautiful, but are also expected to be clever and able to speak both Thai and English fluently. However, this is not always the case. While only half of all the children are said to be bilingual, age-generational differences reflect the effects of a variety of social changes on the child's linguistic abilities and cultural identity.

Due to a combination of many factors such as teasing, interference from the in-laws, and no choice of schools, most of the older-generation women did not speak English with their children who are now only fluent in Thai. In addition, these children often facilitated their mothers own need and efforts at learning Thai. Of

the older-generations' children, less than half are said to be bilingual, and most of these only became bilingual after a period of studying abroad. Half speak Thai only, although two thirds of their mothers are English teachers!

Though many of the older generation intended to speak English with their children, only those who made a special effort succeeded. Special effort was needed to overcome the various obstacles of social pressures mentioned above. Margaret says she only ever spoke English to her sons because she knew that if they had known she could speak Thai they wouldn't have bothered learning both languages, so she used to pretend that she did not understand them if they spoke Thai. This made it difficult at times as she had to pretend she could not understand other people when they spoke Thai to her. She says,

I never spoke Thai to the children to the point that two things happened with the older one. Now all his life he had never heard me speaking Thai to the servants and one day the servant came in and said something to me in Thai and he translated it for me because if he said something to me in Thai I pretended not to understand him. So English became our language - I never used Thai with him and he never used it with me. Then, when he was about 11 we went to the States and at an airport there was an Equatorial African with that blue-black skin which he had never seen before and he said something to me about it to which I replied in Thai 'we'll talk about it later'. Well the poor boy was more upset about that and told me not to talk like that again [not to talk in Thai]. He was most upset. We still don't talk Thai to each other although I guess it

slips into a sentence when we can't think of a better word, but subconsciously.

While the majority of the older-generation speak Thai with their children the reverse is true of the new-comers who all speak English with theirs. Consequently none of these children automatically have good language skills. Fewer than a quarter of the new-comers' children are said to be bilingual, fewer than this speak Thai only and more than half speak English only. Such a difference is due to change in a combination of many factors. The new-comers' children do not face the same kind of teasing as in the past and as most live in separate households there is notably less interference from the extended families. In addition, many of these children go to International schools and some were born and spent the first few years of life outside of Thailand. However, children learn fast and are becoming useful interpreters for the new-comers, allowing their mothers to get by without learning much Thai at all.

That age-generational differences were found in all the variables concerning the children's social position, reflects many changes in Thai society and consequently in the roles children have played in these Thai-farang marriages. While women of all generations have focused their lives around their children, by sending their children to Thai schools the older-generation were entering a purely Thai social arena, while new-comers have entered into an 'international' society from as early as children's playgroups. Even so, neither group feels comfortable in the Thai or International communities. In addition, many of the new-comers' children were born, or have lived part of their lives in their mother's home country, giving them greater connection with their 'farang' identity than children in

the past. However, the current popularity of *luuk-khreueng* in the entertainment industry has been a most influential factor in reducing the child's insecurity and shame of his identity. Does this change in public acceptance suggest that is there now more of a place for, *farang* and *luuk-khrueng* in Thai society? While social pressures have been seen to affect the child's language skills and social identity, what effect does speaking Thai have on the mothers' own social integration?

Women's Language Skills

All of the older-generation women speak Thai well, compared with less than half of the new-comers. Margaret, who has been in Thailand over forty years, says she knows of many girls who had married Thai men and come to live in Thailand, but who did not learn Thai and have already left.

In general and across the years they were usually quite young and didn't have college degrees, and probably wouldn't have really known how to go about it. If no one in the family had enough English to help them, then they would have to learn the basics, but the husbands, without exception, were not helpful at all in the language learning process.

Unfortunately, except for those women who had been on Peace Corps training, all the older-generation women had to learn Thai through trial and error, and even though most of them can speak Thai fluently now, less than half can read and write. In contrast, while there are language schools available for the new-comers to study Thai, many have not felt the need to learn.

While most of the women interviewed could speak some Thai, not surprisingly some speak better than others. Obvious reasons for this are that some women are naturally better than others at learning languages while some may be more interested or motivated than others. What factors influence a woman's motivation to learn Thai? A few of the interviewees suggested that perhaps some women might consciously or subconsciously not speak Thai as a means of maintaining their difference and/or superiority over Thais, particularly by teaching their native tongue, usually English, which Thais need to progress in their careers. In addition, as the husbands were generally said to have been unhelpful in this area, saying that their wives did not need to learn Thai, it was suggested that this might be the husband's way of maintaining control and superiority over wife, or at least maintaining her dependence on him.

Though the first factor is beyond the scope of this thesis, the subject of motivation and differentiation as well as the husbands' lack of encouragement help to reveal the effects of language skills on the women's integration process into Thai society.

Role of Husbands in Language Learning Process

Christine says her first few months here were very difficult as she could not speak the language and she felt very dependent on her husband which she did not like. However, her husband did help a little by taping the sounds of the alphabet onto a tape for her, which was more than most husbands did! While the husbands were said to have been generally unhelpful in this area, most

of them were fluent in English and hence did not have any problems themselves communicating with their wives. However, this does not necessarily mean that they relished their wives' dependence on them to communicate with non-English speaking Thais. Indeed, a wife relying on her husband to translate for her all the time could eventually cause a strain in the relationship. Likewise, it is commonly not considered advisable for one spouse to teach another any skill, from speaking Thai to driving a car!

Language as a Means of Differentiation

Fran, a new-comer, believes that some people teach English as a means of maintaining their difference and a sense of superiority.

English was not their love, teaching, or English, were not their love or passion, not the thing that they wanted to do with their lives, but it was in a sense a way of staying superior in being foreign and not being Thai, in 'you have to learn my language' and 'I get paid for being different and not being a part of you'.

Although this may apply to many of the English teachers here in Bangkok it may only have applied to one of the women interviewed who has finally got a different job. The other women who teach English are all fluent in Thai, and enjoy their teaching very much, indeed that is why some of them came to Thailand in the first place. So while this may be a valid observation, it does not apply to the women interviewed in this thesis.

Motivation for Language Learning

Motivation to speak Thai was much higher amongst the older-generation who, if they wished to join in any social activities had no choice but to learn the language. When Catherine first came nearly 40 years ago, the majority of educated people who could speak English were men but she said that if she spoke to them her husband would get jealous and the Thai women would look down on her. Living up-country with no other farang nearby, and with young children at school, she had to quickly learn to speak Thai, although there were no schools or home-study kits to help her.

In contrast, like other new-comers, Helen's Thai is minimal, but she admits that if she thought they would be here longer she would make more of an effort to learn. Likewise, Mandy says she would like to learn Thai and feels that if she did it would be appreciated by her husband's family. But, as all his family speak English, and she stays home to take care of the children or take them to English language play groups, she says her world here is an English speaking one and thus she has little opportunity or motivation to learn at the moment. However Fran says, "I can't imagine people can live in a country and not speak the language."

Learning Thai

That most of the women who are fluent in Thai have been here for more than 13 years, suggests that it was more necessary for the older-generation to learn. However, a few new-comers suggested that it may also

indicate how difficult the Thai language is! Despite the fact that language schools and home study kits are readily available today, Vanessa suggests that this difficulty is exasperated by the fact that more Thai people are learning to speak English, giving less chance, or need for farang in Bangkok to practice their Thai. She finds this most frustrating, for even when she tries to speak Thai in a public place, there is always someone (Thai) around to come and help, to practice, or show-off, his English. Fran also gets annoyed,

when I go out and speak to people, like in a cab or something and the driver says 'Oh how come you can speak Thai?' I say, 'Excuse me, do 3 year olds speak Thai? - so why can't I?'

Likewise, Margaret a long-timer who speaks Thai fluently, says when she speaks Thai outside her home she gets one of two reactions,

one is that they are so busy looking at my face that they have not heard a word that came out of my mouth and assume that I spoke English and they can't understand me. The other is amazement that I can speak, although that is much less because there are so many foreigners who can speak Thai now.

However, while Thais seem to find it difficult to accept that farang can speak Thai, for some of the new-comers this is a self-fulfilling prophecy!

Because there are now many language schools offering Thai classes, new-comers who are interested can now study Thai, as opposed to 'picking it up' as the long-timers had to. These schools can be seen as another indication of increased Thai-farang social interaction. However, as mentioned earlier, the pressure for the new-comers to learn Thai is no longer there, and thus the motivation can easily wear-off. With many more Thais

speaking English, including family members and most of the new-comers surrounding themselves with farang anyway - either at work or in social clubs, together with the fact that there are so many more farang women living, working, studying, and travelling in Bangkok now, many new-comers do not see the need to learn Thai at all!

Benefits of Speaking Thai

However, most of the older-generation believe that learning the language is the key to understanding people and how they think. Christine said that she and her husband had had a lot of misunderstandings when they lived in America and only now that she can speak Thai can she look back and see where they were both coming from. "They were not literal misunderstandings but 'that's not what I meant' when the words come out wrong [it] sounds like criticism when [its] meant to be a suggestion". She says that knowing both languages can help build and maintain a much greater understanding of each other which improves the marriage relationship.

Pat also states that speaking Thai is an asset which allows one to pick up on all the intricacies of life. You are no longer dependent on other people telling you what they feel is or is not important for you to know. She says that a lot of foreigners complain about the culture and communication gap, but actually its just a language gap.

Thais may not tell you something because they've been talking about it already and forget that you may not have picked up on it. They don't know what's important to you and think they've told you enough. They forget you can't pick up the

intricacies and foreigners forget that Thais don't see them as intricacies! This happens in any cross-language communication and thus if you want to know what's going on, then you need to learn the language.

Margaret also insists that knowing the language makes a big difference. "The language helps tremendously, you can hear someone tell a story one way, and that person repeat it in another way and you learn a lot about people like that..." Christine concludes that women who take too long to learn the language are doubly isolated: from their own support system back home; and from developing any new system here as they are prevented from making many new friendships and/or fitting in with their new family and social environment. Sharon says that working in a Thai office forced her to speak Thai and become involved in the community.

Women's Occupations

Work outside the home is an important source of contact with society, personal identity, and meaning in life ... To participate in the labor force means to participate in the broader society outside the family. (Fox and Hesse-Biber in Imamura 1990:183)

As previously mentioned, the older-generation women had to work at sometime or other to supplement the family income because their husbands were on low government wages, or received controlled family economic support. Even Liza, who married into a very wealthy family, had to work to pay for her son's education and her husband's gambling debts, despite the family's wealth, because

their money was all tied up in land and debts! While the older-generation women initially needed to work, many continued working because they enjoyed the social contacts and identity outside the home that it provided. Liza said that starting work was the best thing that happened to her as it got her out of the house and in touch with other people. She could earn good wages and met a lot of other farangs. However, other women resented the fact that they had to work and could not stop whenever they wanted. As much as she loves her job, Janet was disappointed that she could not afford to give it up when she had children or now when she would like to retire, as she has always been the major bread-winner of the family. Thus, even if they enjoyed their work, the older-generation were not in a position to choose or give it up, a luxury many of the new-comers can now enjoy.

In fact, the new-comers have the economic advantage of being able to choose whether to work, as well as a greater choice of positions available compared with the older-generation who had to do whatever they could find. Indeed, many new-comers are just waiting for the right opportunity to come along. Sarah is relieved that she can afford to choose what kind of work she wants to do, "if it's too far, not interesting and doesn't pay well, then I won't bother taking it".

It is interesting to note that women of both generations have been able to pursue and further careers that otherwise might not have been open to them in their own country! As Imamura discovered, employment opportunities are often better than in the wife's home country. Many women from both generations have managed to progress in their careers more than their qualifications might have allowed them to 'back home' and see this as one of the only real advantages of living in

Thailand. Sharon says it was good for her to get a job soon after she arrived for not only did it force her to learn Thai and mix with Thai people but she has climbed up in a career she would never have had the opportunity to enter at home.

However, a few women from both generations have been disappointed that they have not been able to pursue the careers for which they had trained such as nursing. Like others, Sally says she studied hard to be in her profession and finds it rather frustrating that she can not do it here. She does not want to teach or anything, but wants to find something related to her training. However, Sally is happy that she is able to spend time with her children and friends - an option which was not available for the older-generation women who had to find work.

While many of the new-comers' wives do not need to work, as the long-timers did, the two thirds of new-comers that are working are all employed in jobs that they enjoy. Even if the financial motivation is there, the desperation is not, and quite a few have chosen to work solely for the social outlets and financial independence it provides. Alison believes her work has helped her a lot, as she has kept her independence and has her own entree into social circles, which she feels is healthy for her relationship with her husband. While many of the new-generation are not working, enjoying time at home with their children and at associated play groups, most of them hope to work when the children go to school for the social outlets that it would provide. Mandy admits that she misses the financial independence of her own income and would like to work again at some point, but says she is enjoying her time with the

children and her friends so it is not a priority for her at the moment.

Social Outlets and Support Networks

As other farang women were hard to find and as previously mentioned Thai friendships were often of a different nature, the pool of potential friends was often limited, particularly for the older-generation. In addition, the older-generation women's husbands did not include them in their social lives and thus as their need for friends was seldom met many women relied on their children for social support. Employment offered not only financial rewards, but provided these women with social contacts and a degree of independence. However, age-generational differences reveal that the older-generation were more socially isolated and financially insecure than the new-comers, affecting their experiences and perceptions of work and friendship.

The majority of all women interviewed lamented that they missed their friends and family the most, and half of the older-generation women said that they have had a lonely life. Alice never knew many other farang women and has never had any close friends here and says that on reflection she did miss that a lot but, "the way of socialising is not the same over here - you can't just pop round to someone's house for a coffee - but of course now I'm used to it." Other older-generation women said that despite knowing many people, they did not have any 'good' friends. While Pat has built a close circle of farang friends she says the traffic is so bad that she does not see them often! So, even when friends were made, some women's social life was virtually non-existent

due to traffic and transportation problems. While some, like Alice, have survived without close friends, most women emphasised that having friends was very important, particularly to have someone in the same position as themselves, ie a farang woman married to a Thai man. However, the pool of potential friends was limited for the older-generation and the physical ability to pursue such friendships difficult for all.

In addition, Thai men were often said to be very possessive and many did not like their wives to go out alone. Many of the older-generation women complained how possessive their husbands were. Some said it was impossible for them to go out, and out of the question to have any kind of conversation with another man, without their husbands getting upset. Though many of the new-comers also feel their husbands are possessive, few take much notice of it. While they do not want to aggravate their husbands, they will not be prevented from talking to someone if they want to! Is this a sign that farang women are more independent than they once were, and/or that Thai men are less possessive and more trusting than before? In addition, the older-generation couple usually shared a social life in the woman's home country, but once they moved to Thailand, the wife was often left to her own devices. However, the new-comers husbands continued to include their wives in their social lives, which seems to reflect a change in Thai male/female roles and thus a change in the Thai husband's attitudes towards his wife. Even though Sally, a new-comer, was lucky that her husband and his friends did not exclude her from their social lives, she still did not have any friends of her own for the first 18 months in Thailand.

Though some of the informants were horrified by stories of other women who had lived in Thailand more

than a year or two before meeting other farang women, this seems to have been quite common for women of both generations. Betty, a new-comer, says she was very lonely during her first 3 years in Thailand as she only had her son and husband (when the latter had time) to talk to and did not know any other farang women. She had had a baby within a few months of arriving and did not expect to stay here long but, once she realised that they would live here indefinitely, she joined a few social groups and also began taking Thai lessons. She likes the fact that she does not have to work, so apart from the initial loneliness, she is now quite happy to be here. For Sarah, the first few months were difficult but after she started to study Thai and got involved in other groups she says her first year here ended up like an extended holiday. She created her own circle of friends (mostly of Thai-farang marriages) and now she also has a job. She says the secret is to keep very busy.

Social Outlets Available

The opportunities to meet other foreign women and build social networks are much more abundant than just two decades ago - traffic permitting! Women throughout the world are more independent and many more travel for work, study and/or pleasure than ever before, and as previously noted, the number of foreign women married to Thai men has also increased. As a result, there is a greater pool of potential friends and notably more support systems and social networks available today than there were twenty years ago. Formal and informal clubs and associations have sprung up around Bangkok catering for all kinds of foreigners living in the city. But the

situation was quite different for the older-generation women who had very few outlets available to them.

Older-generation

Though farang women have been marrying Thais for almost a century, their numbers remained small until only a few decades ago. There were no formal groups or associations and contact with other farang women was very limited. However, in response to the increase of farang women married to Thai men in the 1970's, the Community Services of Bangkok (CSB) first started a club for foreign 'Wives of Thais', which was developed from previous informal groups. As suggested in the Culture Shocked Marriages paper, "as normal outlets for hostility and frustrations are less available to the farang wife, the need for a sympathetic and impartial ear is more acute." (Culture Shocked Marriages nd:16) Indeed, Margaret describes the foreign Wives of Thais group and the ones before it as 'bitching sessions' simply,

because no one knew anything better than to let the women vent their frustrations, which helped a little because there was no one else they could vent to - they needed some outlet - but that was really all it was. Some people got turned off and threatened by that and never came again.

She says that unfortunately no one had the knowledge or experience at that time to help these women.

Margaret also said that these older-generation women were often afraid to form close groups,

they had heard enough talking to know that some of the stories were terrible and they didn't want to know about the possibilities. They didn't want

to hear about it and they didn't want to start watching their husbands - waiting for it to happen to them!

While friendships did occasionally form and people met outside the group, this was not that common because she says there had not been many people around to 'choose' from. Eventually though, transportation limited the numbers and this group burnt out.

New-comers

The CSB group was later revived and now exists independently under it's present name of 'Women Across Cultures' (WAC) and includes women from all nationalities married to Thai men. Helen says that in this group, we usually try to avoid moanings, we're all quite positive really. We've given up moaning about the husbands its just the daily living in Bangkok really - sharing information.

She continues that, "The WAC group is for people who have just come here because it provides something, otherwise they find there is nothing." In addition to WAC, The Bangkok Women's Forum and other social groups including playgroups and church groups, provide the opportunity to meet other farang women living in Thailand under varying circumstances. Most of the new-comers can now surround themselves with other farang women, particularly those married to Thai men. Sally, a new-comer, has a close circle of farang friends and says that they can all talk about anything and have got close very quickly as they have a lot in common; they are all married to Thais, have small children, and have only been in Bangkok 3 or 4 years. However, she and other women admitted that their

present happiness may be short lived if any in their group of friends move away.

Making Friends

While the opportunities to meet other women has improved, the chances of friendships forming are not guaranteed. Many women from both generations described the difficulties of finding someone they had something in common with. Sally says she and her friends do not have much contact with the older-generation women or expatriates. She says,

older women [married to Thais] are too Thai - they speak Thai to their kids and seem too well integrated and have lost their own identities. Expatriates are snobby and seem to think you have leprosy if you're married to a Thai.

Other women said that they felt tired of 'making' friends as so many then left and moved on. Helen who has been living in Thailand for 4 years, but spent many years living in a neutral country with her husband explained,

I don't actually have that many ex-pat friends, mainly for the reason, people are always coming and going - and anyway, being married to a Thai, we don't actually have a lot in common with ex-pat women who are probably here with their foreign husbands, company deals, live in Sukhumvit. Their lives are different from what we have to put up with. We don't necessarily have the same amount of money as they have, so on a social basis, my husband has nothing in common, no reason to associate with them, and I just don't have many ex-pat friends.

Sharon also commented that,

it is such a lot of effort to build up a friendship and then just to go over night and try to find friends again - I sort of gave up - its not worth the effort anymore - I've got a few friends who are married to Thais, but we just see each other now and then, that's just about it.

However, wives were not the only ones to find making friends difficult. Helen commented that her husband has had a difficult time finding friends as he had studied overseas since he was young and it is now difficult for him to get into the social 'networks'. Mandy also thinks it has been difficult for her husband, because he grew-up abroad and doesn't speak Thai very well, "it has been hard for him in a lot of ways and he doesn't have any close friends who understand that, but he is not a very social person, and doesn't have much time anyway."

Thus, while it took most women a few months or years to make social contacts, the work opportunities and social outlets available now have greatly improved the situation for the new-comers. With the greater mobility of farang women and ever increasing numbers of them moving to Thailand their marginality is decreasing, but how accepted do these women feel by Thai society?

Women's Perceptions of Their Acceptance by Thai Society

Most of the older-generation said that while they have made the greatest effort to conform they will never feel accepted as Thai.* On the other hand, while most of

* While we will see the reasons for the older-generation to wish to be accepted 'as Thai', it must be

the new-comers have not felt the need to be Thai, half of them said they did not feel accepted. While acceptance by the Thai general public is the major issue of this chapter, that many women did not feel accepted by other farang was also seen to emphasise their minority position. There was little age-generational difference in the women's reactions to public reminders of their minority status. Nor was there any difference between the generations in the factors which were anticipated to influence their acceptance, namely language, behaviour, religion, and physical appearance. However, age-generational differences can be seen in the women's perceptions of their marginal position and the desire to be accepted.

Just under two thirds of all the women said they did not feel accepted, while a third felt accepted and the remainder (new-comers) were not really concerned about it. In general, most women feel that they are constantly being watched and judged by everyone from their husbands and in-laws, to bus-drivers and strangers on the street. Margaret described the situation when she first came to Thailand in 1953.

It was like being in a zoo, a gaped mouth staring at you - they'd call people out to come and look at you, it was quite bad in the old days. I don't know why, there was never any unpleasantness in the stares but you just felt like you were some kind of strange animal, alien - I occasionally got to the point where I'd say something like, 'do you come from 'khaw din'?* Have you never seen people?' But even if I spoke Thai they'd assume they couldn't understand me -

remembered that as none of these women went through the socialisation process of growing-up in Thai society this desire is bound never to be realised and could only lead to disappointment.

The Thai name for Dusit Zoo.

I still get that 'in restaurants, its quite annoying!

She says that now it has changed,

I was stared at a lot, collected tails of children and grown-ups looking at you before, but that was innocent curiosity, but now - there's still a lot of that, but I also see a lot of resentment just because I'm a foreigner, which of course upsets me because I think of myself as Thai.

However, only a few women really seem to think that they are completely accepted. Pat a long-timer says, "Thais are so tolerant - I don't know of any other culture where people accept you for who you are. Thais are very accepting." Janet adds, "Thai friendliness has made it easy - they don't expect you to make all the effort, they will meet you half way." Karen, also a long-timer says that,

On very rare occasions I've felt prejudice against me, but not often. Mostly I'm surrounded by an ocean of Thai people who are very warm and wonderful! I know some people have been made to feel very alien and unwelcomed and have just packed-up and gone home.

Though a few women agree that Thais are a tolerant people, many have found the constant reminders of being called 'farang' in public places quite distressing. And as Margaret described, the situation was more intense for the older-generation women. Age-generational differences can be seen in the women's perception of their marginal status and their needs to conform and be accepted.

Women's Marginality

As previously seen, the older generation women faced greater social and familial pressure to conform to Thai behaviour, learn the language and 'be Thai'. Sally a new-comer said of the older-generation women, "they're so Thai, they've lost their own identity." Indeed, Liza has been here for nearly 30 years and lamented that in a way she became 'too Thai', "I even thought like one" meaning that she never stood-up for herself and let her husband and his relatives 'walk over' her. After making so much effort, these women naturally felt more frustration at not being accepted as Thai. As previously noted, a farang who has not been brought-up in the Thai culture would rarely (if ever) be as accepted 'as Thai', but in desperation at their marginal position the delusion seemed to offer these women some hope. With fewer farang women in Thailand over 20 years ago, the older-generation farang wife was in a more marginal position than the new-comers are now, and as Imamura found, a foreigner's, "deviations tend to be more readily observable and more likely to be sought out than those of locals." (1990:176) Thus, while the pressure for the older-generation women to conform and 'fit-in' was greater, at the same time any deviations would have been more noticable thereby aggravating, rather than helping their predicament.

In contrast, with more farang living in Thailand, and simultaenous change in Thai society, the social pressure for the new-comers to conform and learn Thai was less intense, and thus the desire to 'be Thai' was no longer an issue. As a result it would appear that the new-comers are more able to be 'different' and the idea of acceptance is now one of being themselves. Though

every effort to 'act Thai' is always appreciated, young Thais nowadays are trying to mimick what they perceive to be 'farang' ways, and thus there is more freedom for the new-comers to behave more naturally. This may reflect a change in Thai expectations of, and tolerance to, farang behaviour. However, while the new-comers feel less pressure to be accepted as Thai, they would still like to be accepted by Thais. To what extent can and do these women really fit in Thai society? Is there a place for them in Thai society or will they always be regarded as 'farang'? What are the criteria for accepting non-Thais into Thai society?

General Public Acceptance

Although the majority did admit that they felt accepted by close friends and relatives, many said that they have learnt to accept that outside that circle they will never be 'one of the crowd'. Margaret has been here nearly 40 years and says,

Generally I feel accepted, by people who know me, the family and people, but those outside of that circle, well outside of that circle no one is automatically accepted. I'm sure no one outside would think of me as Thai.

Christine, a new-comer adds,

By the family, yes I feel 100% accepted, but by others, even at work I feel like *khaw nok na!* I have finally accepted that I won't be accepted as Thai outside my home environment, but I still get annoyed at times.

However, as Thai society itself is full of ethnic minorities, what criteria are used to determine the acceptance of an individual in the main social order?

According to Weisman in reference to Basham, It has been said that Thailand has traditionally welcomed as "Thai" -- presumably after an appropriate period of residence in the country -- anyone who can speak Thai, who behaves in a "Thai" manner (including not only the following of traditional social customs and graces but also, very importantly, the profession of allegiance to the Thai state and its monarchy), and who follow Theravada Buddhism (although, as Buddhism is a traditionally tolerant religion, there is some flexibility with respect to this point for followers of other religious faiths). (Weisman 1987:4)

Unfortunately, the findings of this research show that these three factors: language, behaviour and religion did not facilitate the interviewees acceptance by Thais.

Effects of Religion on Acceptance

As many women were not particularly religious, the question of religion did appear to be an important factor in any of the issues discussed in this thesis. Contrary to Basham's suggestion, religion was not a significant factor of acceptance. In fact for Sharon, being Buddhist has made her feel more of a minority. Sharon converted to Buddhism 9 years ago and always accompanies her husband and family on religious visits to the temple. However, she dislikes the attention that she receives at the temples and finds it even harder to accept the official policy that she has to pay the farang entrance fee when accompanying her family to see the Emerald Buddha at The Grand Palace. Indeed, any non-Thai/non-Asian Buddhist would face the same differentiation which

suggests that religion does not affect racial discrimination.

While being Buddhist does not appear to make one accepted, not being Buddhist does not seem to affect a farang's marginal position either. This may reflect the suggestion that Buddhism is tolerant towards other religions. However, one woman interviewed felt that her religion posed a problem with her in-laws. Teresa believes that her husband's family did not really object to her religion, but were upset that her husband had converted to her religion. This suggests that tolerance may be shown to people of other religions and families may accept non-Buddhist daughter-in-laws, but perhaps there is not so much tolerance towards Buddhists who convert to other religions.

Effects of Language on Acceptance

Linguistic skills were initially expected to make a difference in acceptance patterns but an equal number of women in this research who speak Thai fluently say they feel accepted/unaccepted. Janet has lived in Thailand nearly 30 years, is small, dark haired and speaks Thai fluently. She feels she is totally accepted because she can speak Thai. She gave an example of when her parents came to visit her and the neighbours' children ran home shouting "Aunty's got farang in her house" referring to her parents as farang but not her! However, others who speak Thai fluently describe their frustration in public places where people, "presume you are speaking English and don't expect to understand you!"

Effects of Social Behaviour on Acceptance

Other considerations, such as social behaviour also seem to have little uniformity. Liza, a long-timer says that after 30 years of living in Thailand, she has tried hard to adapt her behaviour and is tired of being farang, being different and not being accepted. She says she is always watched, judged and criticised and says that as a farang she is always expected to act like one. However, as Thais categorize farang into one group, they do not really distinguish the different cultural backgrounds of farang and thus, when a farang woman is expected to behave like a 'farang', she is never exactly sure how a 'farang' should behave, as she was always being judged by different people with different expectations.

However, Liza continues that if she 'acts Thai' or does something remotely 'Thai', like sit with her legs tucked neatly under her, or eating Thai food, then Thais will say, "isn't she *keng**?" However, she is still a farang who is trying to be Thai. While some women may see this as a ready sign of approval, others who have been here longer like Liza, suggest that it is simply a sign of Thai superiority, a condescending attitude that only a *keng* farang could possibly be like a Thai! Thus, as the women feel that their behaviour is constantly being judged, and interpretations differ, this factor does not guarantee approval or acceptance.

* Clever. In reference to someone who is able to do something well.

Effects of Physical Appearance on Acceptance

The only consistent factor found among the interviewees in relation to acceptance was the colour of their hair. Weisman and Klausner have both noted that Thais use physical differences to distinguish among themselves, and have long been colour conscious with light skin commonly seen as a sign of status and beauty in Thai society. (Klausner nd:38, and Weisman 1987:2) Even M.R. Narisa Chakrabongse, whose grandfather was a son of King Chulalongkorn, said in a recent interview with the Outlook section of the Bangkok Post newspaper:

I can remember a Thai saying to me once, 'I like the colour of your hair'. I burst into tears, because all I wanted was to have black hair and dark brown eyes. I desperately wanted to look Thai. (Bangkok Post 27/12/94)

Many other *luuk-khrueng* are reported to have this problem (Weisman 1987) and thus the likelihood for full-blooded farang to face discrimination would be even greater.

Two thirds of the older generation women with dark hair say they feel accepted as do over half the of the new-comers with dark hair even though not all of the latter speak Thai well. However, none of the women with blonde, brown or red hair from either generation feel accepted, even though half of them speak Thai well! Tracy is small with blonde hair and has lived in Thailand over 20 years but is upset that people still treat her like a farang and their house is referred to by local people as 'the farang house'.

As Thai hair is uniformly black, a brown or fair headed farang will obviously stand out in a crowd. Catherine has lived in Thailand nearly 40 years, speaks

Thai fluently, is quiet and graceful, and has blonde hair. She says that she really misses "being able to go about your own business. Being free to do things without being watched - go for long walks in the fresh air, with no one watching and no one judging you!" And June, a tall, slim new-comer, with pale skin and platinum blonde hair who speaks a little Thai says, "By the family I feel accepted, but obviously I stand out and am always being stared at - it used to make me cry and feel trapped, but I find it quite amusing now!"

Reactions to Public Reminders of their Marginality

Indeed, as previously noted, the most common reminders for farang that they are different come from the general public. Despite Thais being more familiar with farang on the streets, people still tend to stare and call out 'Farang! Farang!' which seems to frustrate most of the farang women at one time or other. Diane says that "sometimes Thais stare at you and that - sometimes they call you farang and I think of course I'm farang, I can tell by myself - but I don't usually get upset." However, the reactions of the farang women to this attention vary as shown below, and may also reflect their overall attitude to being here, as well as any underlying problems in their marriages:

Some woman always get annoyed but perhaps they are not happy here anyway! Vanessa dislikes the attention and says,

The biggest drawback of living in Thailand is being pointed out as a farang all the time - there's no opportunity to just live your life

without people watching your every move and commenting on it.

And Jane thinks that the way Thais stare is very impolite, "its like they can be rude to you in a way they would never be with other Thais."

Some women just get annoyed if they happen to be upset by something else already, they are hot and tired, and/or stuck in the traffic. Others, and those in a good mood can ignore it easily or laugh at it! As Mary says, "they're going to do it anyway, so why worry about it!"

However, some women take the attention more seriously and see it as purely racist behaviour. They compare the situation with their home countries wherein they would be arrested for such remarks against, for example, African-Americans.

Acceptance by Other Farang

However, if Thais are being accused of racist attitudes, then it is important to note the reactions of other farang towards these women, across the generations. Karen, as mentioned, has faced little prejudice from Thais but said that her greatest difficulty was, "being accepted by my own people! I've received a lot of prejudice from my own American countrymen when they know I'm married to a Thai."

Alison also noted the reaction of other farang towards her when they know that she is married to a Thai and said,

Foreigners see it as strange. Talk about foreigners being more inclined to show what they

think, they are less polite and they think its odd that a foreign woman is married to a Thai man. I think a lot of them think that. Mainly the men, the women are not so critical in their response. And sometimes they tend to be patronising to my husband - but its not a problem, these people are obviously not our friends so why worry!

She thinks that some of them consider her husband to be a male version of a bar girl, "it gets him down at times, but he knows that those kind of people aren't worth worrying about."

Margaret a long-timer, also commented that the reaction of other foreign women she meets here is quite cool when she mentions her husband is Thai. She explains that,

there is a lot of sexual jealousy in both directions - Thai women resent Thai men marrying foreigners and there's a lot of American men who resent American women marrying foreigners. It doesn't seem to be so bad now, Americans are not as isolated psychologically as they were, but I can remember times when I was with a group of Americans and someone would ask what my husband did and I'd tell them and mention that he was Thai - then there would be a big 'OH' - and they obviously had nothing further to say after that.

Sarah noted that expatriates say very bad things when they hear you're married to a Thai and she knows some women who don't tell people now, because of the reaction they will get.

Their (expatriates') attitude towards you changes. Most only deal with Thais who are their maids or drivers, or subordinates at work - its a

class thing and they don't realise the different classes in Thai society - they just look down on you.

Betty says that as a fat kid she was always the butt of jokes in her all-white neighbourhood at home, and so she feels more accepted and less of a freak being called 'farang' here than being called 'fat and ugly' at home! Thus it would appear that these women are subject to discrimination by their own people and not just by Thais, making them marginals in both social groups.

Chapter Summary

While age-generational differences did not arise in the degree of acceptance, age-generational differences were found in the women's perceptions of their marginality. This difference in perception of the need to be accepted reflects changes in the farang women themselves as well as the effects of socio-economic development in Thailand and increased Thai-farang relations on the position of such women living in Thailand today. While the older-generation had few close friends or social outlets, their desire to be accepted by the general public was more intense. With little sense of independence or individual social identity, these women were prepared to change their behaviour and ways to take on a new 'Thai' identity in a futile attempt to be accepted 'as Thai'. In contrast, with increased work opportunities and social outlets now available, and the husband's tendency to share a social life with his wife, the social situation for the new-comers has greatly improved. As a result, the new-comer can surround herself with other women in the same situation, gain her

own identity at work, and feel accepted in many other social situations which reduces her need to be accepted by the larger Thai society. With the greater mobility of farang women and ever increasing numbers of them moving to Thailand their marginality is changing, if not decreasing. However, there may still be a long way to go before these women can, as Imamura suggests, amass enough force to be accepted as a social group in their own rights.

In this chapter we have seen how children, work, language skills, and social networks are factors that have helped the women gain an identity and social status, and age-generational differences found in the effects of these factors revealed socio-economic changes in Thai society.